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# Priests, pirates, opera singers, and slaves: séga and European art music in Mauritius, "The little Paris of the Indian Ocean"

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY  
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Dissertation

**PRIESTS, PIRATES, OPERA SINGERS, AND SLAVES:  
*SÉGA* AND EUROPEAN ART MUSIC IN MAURITIUS,  
“THE LITTLE PARIS OF THE INDIAN OCEAN”**

by

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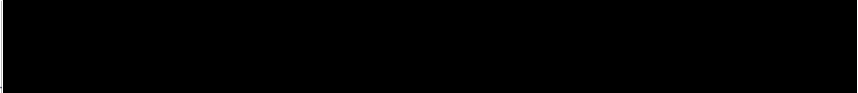
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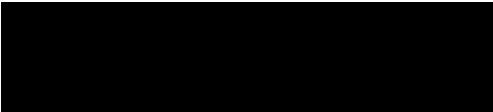
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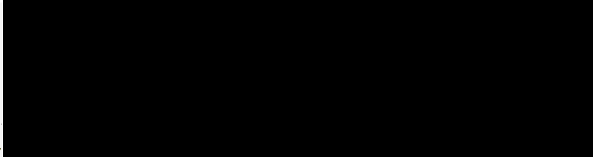
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Finally, to my parents and ten siblings, it would not have been the same without any of you.

**PRIESTS, PIRATES, OPERA SINGERS, AND SLAVES:  
SÉGA AND EUROPEAN ART MUSIC IN MAURITIUS,  
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(Order No.                    )

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**ABSTRACT**

This dissertation comprises a musical history and ethnography of musical culture on the island of Mauritius in the southern Indian Ocean. It details two interrelated performance traditions, examining the history and practice of European art music on the island in parallel with that of an endemic song-and-dance tradition called *séga*. Mauritius, once a notorious nest of pirates and privateers, was a famous overseas haven of French culture during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Wealth from trade, war, and piracy fueled a rich cultural scene that featured the latest music from Western Europe. Visitors to “The Little Paris of the Indian Ocean” also encountered *séga*, a percussion-driven music based on improvised songs and dances that developed amongst the island’s African and Malagasy slaves. Today, *séga* is an integral part of the Mauritian tourism industry and is prominently featured in government cultural and educational programs.

The general format of the dissertation is a musical history of Mauritius from its first human settlement in 1638 to the present day. It draws extensively on unpublished

archival documents and on travelogues, letters, and diaries from visitors to provide specific details about the extent and nature of musical practice in Mauritius. It is also informed by historical newspapers, contemporaneous literature, and by recent discoveries in Mauritian archaeology. The narrative of the past half-century of Mauritian musical and cultural history takes the form of a musical ethnography and draws upon numerous interviews and on field research conducted in Mauritius from 2011-2012. The dissertation also includes a detailed study of music in contemporary Mauritian society, with special reference to the use of *séga* in nation-building policies, identity politics, the tourism industry, and in public education.

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## List of Abbreviations

AOM	Archives-Nationales d’Outre-Mer de France, Aix-en-Provence
AN-France	Archives-Nationales de France, Paris
BL	British Library
BN-Arsenal	Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Arsenal
BN-Paris	Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris
CIO	French East India Company (Compagnie des Indes Orientales)
EIC	British East India Company
IFM	Médiathèque–Institut Français de Maurice
MNL	National Library of Mauritius
MNA	National Archives of Mauritius
NA UK	National Archives, United Kingdom
UMICH	University of Michigan
VOC	Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie)

## **Spelling and Translation**

Quotations given in their original language retain the spelling of the source materials. Many of the sources used in **chapters 2, 3, and 4** predate the modern standardization of French and English dictionaries, resulting in some archaic usages and unusual spellings in titles, quotations, and other details. Modern Mauritian French is also based primarily on the eighteenth-century French spoken by the island's Breton settlers, creating a similar divergence from the metropolitan language to that seen with Québécois French. All quotations that have been translated by the author of this text have been placed in Modern American English. All translations from French sources are by the author unless otherwise noted.

## I. Introduction



Figure 1 - Location of Mauritius<sup>1</sup>

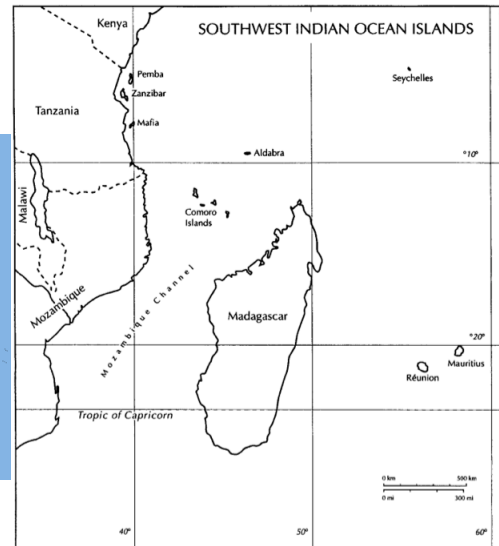


Figure 2 - Islands of the Southwest Indian Ocean<sup>2</sup>

This dissertation comprises a musical history and musical ethnography of Mauritius, an island in the southern Indian Ocean. Although Mauritius is almost unknown to Americans today, during the Age of Sail the island was one of the most important ports of call in the East Indies Trade. This status brought great wealth to the island and nurtured two vibrant musical traditions: imported European art music, and an endemic song and dance tradition called *séga* that developed amongst the island's imported slaves. The rich musical offerings in Mauritius were renown amongst travelers and sailors in the

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<sup>1</sup> Generated by the author from public domain materials according to the All-Permissive No Attribution License (APNAL).

<sup>2</sup> Lee Haring, *Stars and Keys: Folktales and Creolization in the Indian Ocean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), xxvi. Mauritius is the easternmost island in the lower right-hand quadrant.

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, are documented in dozens of travelogues, and have inspired numerous works by prominent figures in French poetry and literature.<sup>3</sup> Both of these musical traditions occupy important roles in Mauritian society today, with *séga* in particular having been adopted as the national culture of Mauritius and as the principal branding element of the island's tourism industry.

*Séga* music and dance originated in Mauritius and have been exported to Western Europe and East Africa via emigration and the world music market. Mauritian *séga* has no known direct antecedents and is the progenitor of the present-day song and dance traditions also called *séga* in the Agalega Islands, the Comoros Islands, La Réunion, Rodrigues (a dependency of the Republic of Mauritius),<sup>4</sup> and the Seychelles.<sup>5</sup> Mauritian expatriate communities foster overseas havens for Mauritian *séga* in Australia, France, South Africa, and the United Kingdom, maintaining the practice through community

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<sup>3</sup> For example, *séga* and European art music are prominent elements in Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's novel *Paul et Virginie* (1787) and in Alexander Dumas, *père's* novel *Georges* (1843), both of which are set in Mauritius. Charles Baudelaire's collection of poetry *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) contains several poems inspired by his visit to Mauritius, notably the famous "Invitation au Voyage." The poems "Harmonie du Soir" and "La Musique" from this same collection most likely depict music and dancing in Mauritius. See Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Letters of Charles Baudelaire: The Conquest of Solitude*, Rosemary Lloyd, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), xiii, 22, 208.

<sup>4</sup> The *séga* of Rodrigues is often claimed to be a more ancient tradition than that of Mauritius. This claim is mythological: Rodrigues was first colonized by settlers and slaves from French Mauritius, entirely evacuated during the Napoleonic Wars, and then resettled by a new group of settlers and slaves from Mauritius. The music tradition in Rodrigues has, however, preserved several European influences that have largely disappeared from Mauritius, such as dancing waltzes and mazurkas and using the accordion in *séga*.

<sup>5</sup> Another offshoot *séga* tradition was formerly found in the Chagos Islands; the total evacuation of the island's population by Great Britain has since dispersed the Chagossians to the United Kingdom and Mauritius; Chagossian *séga* is no longer considered especially distinct from Mauritian *séga*, although references to Chagos and Chagossians are common in Mauritian *séga* today.



dance classes and mixers, through regular dances at Mauritian club-restaurants, and hosting Mauritian musicians on concert tours. *Séga* has also been a popular club music genre in the Indian Ocean islands and East African coast since the late 1970s. Today, *séga* is the most prominent cultural symbol of Mauritius domestically and abroad.

Traditional *séga* combines improvised song and dance with a vocabulary of percussion accompaniment; today, *séga* songs occupy a continuum ranging from wholly improvised to pre-composed and may incorporate a diverse array of instruments from around the world. Traditional *séga typique* exists side-by-side with numerous hybrid genres that mix *séga* with varying degrees of influence from Western popular musics. *Hôtel séga* first developed to present “accessible” versions of *séga* to tourists using familiar Western instruments, eventually developing into a distinct subgenre with its own history and traditions; a growing demand for “authenticity” by tourists in the 1990s triggered a revival in historically informed performance. This revival did not displace *hotel séga*, however, and many hotel resorts in Mauritius feature touristic culture (*hôtel séga*) and more authentic cultural tourism (*séga typique*) on alternate nights or even within a single performance.<sup>6</sup>

*Séga* is ubiquitous in Mauritius today. A traveler to Mauritius might see *séga typique* at a beach party, catch a *hôtel séga* performance combining traditional instruments with a Western four-piece band at a resort, hear school children beating out *séga* instrumentals on bus seats with empty soda bottles and spoons, and dance at a club

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<sup>6</sup> The authenticity of the latter examples will be discussed in chapter 6.

to recorded *séga* using full Western instrumentation. CDs of Mauritian *séga* can be easily bought across the Indian Ocean basin and overseas in London and Paris, the latter two catering to expats and audiences who see Mauritian *ségatiers* engaged in European performance tours. Dozens of new *séga* albums are produced commercially in Mauritius each year<sup>7</sup> – an impressive feat in an island whose population numbers only 1.2 million inhabitants. The ubiquity of *séga* in Mauritian society is reinforced by its central role in public education curricula across the island of Mauritius since the 1980s and by government financing for *séga* festivals. *Séga* itself was the central element in an ambitious (and largely successful) social engineering scheme to create a “national identity” common to all Mauritians. The success of this program and parallel private-sector efforts in the tourism industry ensures that even first-time visitors unfamiliar with Mauritius will be introduced to Mauritian *séga* en-route through mediums such as in-flight videos and magazines.<sup>8</sup>

The widespread popularity of *séga* in Mauritius today overshadows the other major musical tradition for which the island was famous for centuries: imported European art music. Although some study has been made of a few historical accounts of *séga* in Mauritius, no prior study has attempted a musical history of the island or a history

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<sup>7</sup> This number is suspected to be much higher (i.e., in excess of one hundred new recordings annually) due to incomplete industry data and lax copyright registration.

<sup>8</sup> A review by the author of more than three-dozen English, French, and German travel guides produced since the 1970s found that each listed *séga* dancing as an indispensable part of the experience of visiting Mauritius. While *séga* has been an important component of the traditional culture, it was not always as ubiquitous as it is now.

of its European art music.<sup>9</sup> This omission is surprising in light of how frequently music in Mauritius was remarked upon in print by visitors in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the latter period including much-read personages such as Charles Darwin and Mark Twain. At the height of Mauritius' European art music tradition in the nineteenth century, Mauritian-born composers such as Francis Thomé found great success in France, incorporating *séga* elements into waltzes and symphonic works. In the post-emancipation era, travelers listening to *séga* songs and *séga*-influenced work songs frequently recognized melodies from symphonies, band music, and popular operas; sung and whistled recitations of these foreign musical works (including the original lyrics, in the case of operas) also formed part of the musical repertoire of amateur *séga* singers. This blind spot in extant *séga* scholarship can be traced to an overdependence on a small selection of the printed sources.<sup>10</sup>

## Overview

A central concern of this dissertation is to remedy this oversight and to explain how a rich and diverse musical tradition that could dazzle European socialites and weary world travelers alike emerged in a small corner of the Indian Ocean, sustaining this reputation for centuries. This exploration is divided into five chronological chapters that

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<sup>9</sup> There are several volumes concerning the history of theater performance in Mauritius; these studies treat spoken and sung theater identically and often omit musical details from their sources.

<sup>10</sup> The research for this dissertation was greatly facilitated by advances in the digitization of books, journals, newspapers, and library catalogs. In recent years, digitization efforts have greatly lowered access barriers to rare books from the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.

collectively explore music in Mauritius from its first human colonization to the present day. Each chapter includes a discussion of the scholarly sources specific to the period, including its key secondary literature.

European music was first brought to Mauritius by Dutch colonists in the seventeenth century and is documented in a variety of previously unanalyzed sources, including letters describing visits by English pirates who engaged in communal music making with the astonished colonists. The story of music in Dutch Mauritius (1622-1710) is the focus of chapter 2, which chronicles this relatively unknown period in the island's musical history and contextualizes it within the Age of Exploration and seventeenth-century geopolitics and trade. This chapter also analyzes documentary clues and other factors in the early genesis of *séga*, identifying evidence that the practice developed during the Dutch colonization of Mauritius and not in the later French period as has been suggested.

The history of music in French Mauritius (1722-1810) is described in chapter 3. It identifies key and previously undiscovered events leading to the emergence of a European art music tradition on the island, and uncovers previously unrecognized details on *séga* from the early French period. The chapter explores geopolitical factors in the rise of these music traditions in Mauritius, demonstrating how trade rivalries and armed conflicts by European powers contributed to the rise of Mauritius as “The Little Paris of the Indian Ocean,” a major military base and center of culture discussed in the British Houses of Parliament and in the French Royal Court. It also makes several connections to the scholarly record on the history of *séga* and theater on the island, and documents the

start of a long history of interrelation and cross-pollination between *séga* and European art music, a connection not recognized or explored in previous academic literature. The chapter also explores the role of music as a status symbol in Mauritian society, particularly with the introduction of opera, and music's position and usage in this increasingly multiracial society.

Chapter 4 describes music in Mauritius during the first century of British rule (1810-1910), following the island's conquest by a British expedition during the Napoleonic Wars. It chronicles the use of opera as an early medium of protest against British rule, the use of the island's musical attractions to draw talented British civil servants, and the subsumption of distinct Malagasy and African elements into a more unified Créole *séga* tradition. It explores issues resulting from the emancipation of slaves in Mauritius and how this emancipation affected European art music on the island and brought *séga* into public view. The chapter also examines migration issues related to music, including an exploration of how Indian and Chinese immigrant workers became participants in the consumption of European (art music) and Créole (*séga*) culture.

Chapter 5 examines music in Mauritius from the turbulent period just before the First World War to the period before the launch of the Mauritian independence movement (1911-1965). It identifies factors in the decline of *séga* and European art music on the island in the face of demographic awakenings, wartime disruptions, and democratic reform. The chapter includes detailed descriptions of major musical events during this time frame, including the arrival of Jewish war refugee musicians on the island during the Second World War and the emergence of the *séga salon* tradition in the

aftermath of the war. It concludes with a critical examination of the broad musical overview of Mauritius written by Iswarduth Nundlall in 1957, adding corroborating details and explanations along with comments on how the trends described therein continued in the following decade.

Chapter 6 is a musical ethnography of music in modern Mauritius, tracing the history of European art music and especially *séga* on the island from the run-up to independence to the present day (1965-2012). It draws extensively on fieldwork conducted in Mauritius from 2011-2012 and on separate interviews with British, French, and German tourists who have visited the island. The topics that it examines include: *séga* as a medium of protest; dynamics of power in the performance of music in postcolonial Mauritius, especially the roles of government financing and French cultural diplomacy; a government-led social engineering program to “invent” a national culture based on *séga*; the development of the Mauritian tourism industry;<sup>11</sup> and the use of *séga* as part of the Mauritian government’s cultural diplomacy programs. It includes an examination of several representative sites and organizations within Mauritius and discusses important hybrid music genres such as *chutney* and *seggae*.

## **About Mauritius**

The focus of this dissertation concerns musical practices on the island of Mauritius, the eponymous main island of the Republic of Mauritius. The Republic of

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<sup>11</sup> For further information on “invented” traditions, see Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

Mauritius is an island state located in the southern Indian Ocean; the island of Mauritius lies due east of Madagascar, in the Mascarene Islands archipelago.<sup>12</sup> The republic encompasses Mauritius Island, the semi-autonomous island of Rodrigues, and two small, outlying atolls (Cargados Carajos and the Agalega Islands). Mauritius Island delineates the geographic scope of this dissertation; Rodrigues has its own distinct (but related) cultural identity, whereas the outlying atolls are so sparsely populated as to be statistically insignificant.<sup>13</sup> Although English is officially the language of government and dominates higher education, most of the population speaks Mauritian Kreol,<sup>14</sup> a French-derived pidgin with English, African, Hindi, and Bhojpuri loan words.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The island of Mauritius is located at 20° 17' S, 57° 33' E.

<sup>13</sup> Although both atolls may see considerable seasonal tourism, their resident populations are quite low. The Agalega Islands have roughly 300 permanent residents, and the Cargados Carajos claim fewer than a hundred transient fishermen. The advent of recordings and satellite radio has erased most of the musical differences on the outlying atolls noted by observers during the 1970s. Rodrigues, located 348 miles away from Mauritius and possessing a larger population than the atolls (38,000), still retains the use of some traditional instruments that have since disappeared from Mauritian *séga*.

<sup>14</sup> “Kreol” can be used to refer to the language or its associated culture (including *séga*), whereas “Créole” is used today to refer to Mauritians of mixed European and African heritage (Créole-Mauritians). Mauritians of (claimed or actual) pure European descent are usually referred to as Euro-Mauritians, Franco-Mauritians, or (colloquially) *les blancs* (“the whites”). The spelling “Kreol” is particular to Mauritius and not to other contexts in similar islands or societies. Older sources on Mauritius may refer to Mauritian Kreol as “Creole,” inciting exactly the confusion that the “K” spelling is intended to avoid.

The Mauritian Kreol language and Caribbean Creole varieties are mutually intelligible to varying degrees. In my interactions with speakers of Caribbean Creoles in Mauritius and at scholarly conferences, I found that basic greetings were easily understood but that detailed conversations quickly became difficult. Most French and Caribbean Creole speakers that I encountered were able to have at least a general idea of the messages in *séga* song lyrics, especially if printed lyrics were provided.

<sup>15</sup> The oft-referenced numbers given by the CIA World Factbook are misleading at best, as most of the population is bilingual or trilingual. Most other estimates describe Mauritian Kreol as being spoken by more than 90% of the populace. Hindi, Bhojpuri, English, French, and Mandarin Chinese are significant languages for private use; most of the news media available for

Mauritius Island is the heart of the Republic of Mauritius, comprising ninety-two percent of the land area and housing ninety-seven percent of the population. Its 970 square miles (roughly half the size of Rhode Island) are home to 1.2 million inhabitants (twenty percent greater than Rhode Island, or roughly the same population as the state of Hawaii), most clustered in urban centers around the island. A rich colonial and migratory history has produced a diverse mix of Afro-Malagasy, Asian Indian, Chinese, and European culture. The current population is roughly seventy percent Asian Indian; twenty-five percent African or Creole; three percent Chinese; one percent Caucasian; and one percent Malay, Sri Lankan and emigré. Although there are strong American, French, and Indian cultural influences, *séga* is both the sole endemic cultural practice and the one that most Mauritians identify as “theirs”.

The national motto of Mauritius, *Stella Clavisque Maris Indici* (“Star and Key of the Indian Ocean”), refers to the great strategic importance of the island in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century geopolitics. French warships and privateers exploited Mauritius’ strategic location on the Europe-East Indies trade routes to challenge British command of the high seas and capture richly laden trading ships. Squadrons operating from Mauritius reversed the balance of the war in India in several of the Anglo-French Wars of the eighteenth century,<sup>16</sup> and the commercial losses inflicted by Mauritian

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consumption is in Hindustani, English, or French. Bhojpuri and Mandarin-language newspapers also circulate.

<sup>16</sup> An expedition to India by Mahé de la Bourdonnais in 1746, for example, used ships and soldiers from Mauritius to lift the British siege of Pondicherry and capture the strategic city of Madras, reversing a string of French losses.



privateers on the India Trade were a major factor in the British decision to begin peace negotiations during the American Revolution.<sup>17</sup> This prominence and the wealth derived from it fueled rapid growth and nurtured the conditions that ultimately fostered European art music and *séga* traditions.

Today, Mauritius is much more famous for its beautiful beaches and *séga* music than its military history, but it has re-emerged as a major regional financial and business hub linking South and Southeast Asia with Southeastern Africa. Although the island was the subject of dismal predictions of ethnic strife, economic stagnation, and instability in its early postcolonial years, four decades of independence have established it as one of the most stable and democratic states in the African collective. The island nation's remarkable sustained economic growth since the 1980s ("The Mauritius Miracle") has made it the subject of numerous World Bank and International Monetary Fund studies, leading the economist Joseph E. Stiglitz to pen a 2011 article suggesting that the United States imitate elements of Mauritian policies.<sup>18</sup>

The most prominent music tradition in Mauritius for much of its history was built around imported art music from Western Europe. Works by French composers dominated

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<sup>17</sup> The estimated value of the prize ships taken by Mauritian privateers during the five years of French participation (1778-1783) in the American Revolutionary War exceeded the total tax income of Great Britain in 1782. See Stephen Conway, *The British Isles and the War of American Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 51; Richard B. Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen, and Indentured Laborers in Colonial Mauritius* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 20.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph E. Stiglitz, "The Mauritius Miracle: What can the United States Learn from this Tiny Island Nation?" Slate.com, posted 7 March 2011, [http://www.slate.com/articles/business/project\\_syndicate/2011/03/the\\_greatest\\_country\\_on\\_earth.single.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/business/project_syndicate/2011/03/the_greatest_country_on_earth.single.html). Some of the conditions that enabled this prosperity have multiple tie-ins with the island's cultural polices that will be discussed in chapter six.

the island's music scene for most of the eighteenth century; war booty and conquest introduced British music in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although substantial amateur music making and semi-professional musician communities developed, the Mauritian concert and theater scenes have been historically dominated by visiting artists from Europe (mostly, but not exclusively, from France). Most of these artists arrived as part of visiting performance troupes that presented symphonic concerts, spoken plays, vaudevilles, and full-fledged operas during limited seasons; over the centuries, some of these troupes have taken up a more permanent residence on the island. During the nineteenth century, opera reached a high level of ubiquity in Mauritian society as a valued entertainment for all social classes, resulting in the adaptation of opera songs and melodies into the realm of *séga*, producing many recognizable *contrafacta*<sup>19</sup> and derivative tunes.

The content of *séga* songs has historically emphasized either of two themes: socio-political matters, or the affairs of love and sex. During the pre-Emancipation era, slaves gathered illicitly at night to sing and dance *séga* by firelight. Although these gatherings were chiefly concerned with love and courtship, slave owners feared that they might also include songs advocating violence and rebellion, and sent armed bands with dogs to patrol the countryside and break up these gatherings.<sup>20</sup> Court transcripts testify to the actual existence of seditious and revolutionary *séga* songs in the eighteenth and early-

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<sup>19</sup> A *contrafactum* is a musical setting in which the original text is replaced by another text with little or no musical alteration.

<sup>20</sup> Patrick Beaton, *Creoles and Coolies; or, Five years in Mauritius* (London: J. Nisbet & Co., 1859), 70-71.

nineteenth centuries,<sup>21</sup> but amorous lyrics dominated the genre from the emancipation of the island's slaves in 1834 into the Twentieth Century. Only in the 1960s, during the run-up to Mauritian independence and the rise of Afro-Mauritian and Créole-Mauritian political engagement, did socio-political themes return to the forefront.

The explicitly amorous and sexual content of *séga* love songs, thrust into the public sphere by the emancipation of slaves in Mauritius in 1835, brought this musical and dance practice in conflict with the Catholic Church. Following emancipation, a group of young French priests began a large-scale religious mission targeting the former slaves, an effort that devoted many sermons to attacking *séga* and associated vices. The communications between these priests and their religious superiors provide important details on the practice of *séga* in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, and fill in many gaps in the historical record. The Catholic Church's efforts in Mauritius to characterize *séga* as a degenerate policy eliminated its practice in many parts of the island before the modern *séga* revival began in the mid-1960s. Since independence (1968), the *séga* genre has greatly diversified, producing multiple subgenres and hybrid genres such as *seggae*, a fusion of *séga* and *reggae* that reached peak popularity during the 1980s and 1990s.

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<sup>21</sup> See Vijayalakshmi Teelock, *A Select Guide to Sources on Slavery in Mauritius and Slaves Speak Out: The Testimony of Slaves in the Era of Sugar* (Bell Village, Mauritius: African Cultural Center, 1995).

## Key Elements of Modern *Séga*

*Séga* has been promoted as the national culture of Mauritius since 1980, giving it extensive cultural penetration throughout the general populace. Most Mauritians learn to sing, play, and dance *séga* in informal childhood contexts, learning by imitating aural and visual examples. This initial contact is reinforced in the public school system, in which *séga* singing and dancing is an important part of the common curriculum at the elementary and middle school levels.<sup>22</sup> Few Mauritians learn *séga* through formal study; most musical and dance instruction is by demonstration and imitation. During my fieldwork, the most common paths cited for gaining advanced proficiency were to join an existing *séga* ensemble or simply to decide at a young age to specialize in an instrument when performing *séga* with friends. *Séga* dancing classes are sometimes offered for tourists, but do not normally enroll students from the local population – the students have no need for these classes.

With the exception of a few art and social dance compositions by European composers, *séga* performances have combined singing and dancing as inseparable elements. Although the songs may now be heard separately on recordings and dancing may use pre-recorded music, live performances of the music are almost always accompanied by some degree of dancing. In informal contexts where space or other

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<sup>22</sup> As might be expected, children tend to dance a simplified form of *séga*. During my observations of *séga* instruction in school contexts, this was in direct imitation of their teachers or recess supervisor's modeling of the (simplified) dance. Children usually learn the more elaborate steps, closer dancing, and extra hip movements that characterize the adult form on their own when they are around high school age.

logistical constraints prevent dancing, the musicians will usually weave, bob, or stomp in some approximation of the dancing, inserting the whoops and other vocalizations commonly made by dancers. The vocabulary of dance steps and gestures in Mauritian *séga* is largely fixed, with some variation due to *séga* ensembles of Rodriguan origin or heritage.<sup>23</sup> Hybrid *séga* subgenres such as Mauritian *chutney* (Hindi or Bhojpuri-language *séga*, sometimes used synonymously with the term *Bollywood séga*) and *séga mandarin* (Mandarin-language and Chinese-influenced *séga*) are the exception, and have introduced variations on steps and gestures that are inspired by or recall aspects of Bollywood and Chinese film, respectively.<sup>24</sup>

*Séga* songs are almost always vocal in nature. They were traditionally improvised, but currently exist in several forms: wholly improvised, partly improvised, and precomposed. The lyrics and general form of a hit *séga* song recording are usually canonized to a degree not found in the general repertoire. *Séga* is generally performed in three contexts: casually (often on the beach) by amateurs,<sup>25</sup> in commercial concerts, and in hotels and resorts. Although the exact makeup varies, a typical *séga* performance

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<sup>23</sup> Although Rodriguan and Mauritian *séga* ensembles often perform at the same events, their varying musical and dance styles remain largely distinct and separate.

<sup>24</sup> *Séga mandarin*, one of the newest subgenres of *séga*, began as a body of popular *séga* songs and only recently emerged as distinct subgenre after being featured in a medical-cultural exchange mission from Mauritius to China. This piece of cultural diplomacy, intended as an icebreaker for future tourism and medical partnerships, sent a Mauritian singer-physician on a performance tour of eastern China with a small group of *séga* dancers. The dancers were given *cheongsam*-inspired dresses in place of traditional *séga* costumes and incorporated parasol twirling into their gestures. The performances prepared for this tour (some of which were broadcast in Mauritius) established the basic style of *séga mandarin*.

<sup>25</sup> Mauritian children often play *séga* with improvised instruments while waiting in lines or at bus stations.

centers on three central elements: the *séga* instrumental ensemble, a singer, and one or more dancers.<sup>26</sup> The lead singer (usually but not necessarily male) may dance during instrumental breaks, in addition to interacting closely with the dancers during the course of a song.<sup>27</sup> Although *séga* instruments (especially the distinctive *ravane*) are common tourist souvenirs and *séga* dancing is very popular with tourists in hotels and clubs, tourists generally have little interest in singing *séga*.<sup>28</sup>

A typical *séga* song follows this form:

1. Instrumental
2. Verse (solo or call-and-response)
3. Instrumental (dance – may be omitted)
4. Chorus
5. Instrumental (dance)
6. Repeat 2-5 as long as time permits

Most *séga* songs today follow this basic form, using a rhythmic foundation created by a core group of traditional instruments. If the performance is of traditional *séga* (*séga typique*), the core group consists of three musicians playing percussion instruments of African origins: the *ravane*, a large tambourine-style drum; the *maravanne*, a bamboo

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<sup>26</sup> Purely instrumental songs are uncommon; those that exist follow the same form as *séga* vocal songs.

<sup>27</sup> Female dancers are most common; if male and female dancers are present, the lead singer will interact almost exclusively with those of the opposite gender.

<sup>28</sup> Much of this is likely due to a language barrier with Kreol lyrics. Although many French speakers can parse spoken Kreol, it can be very difficult to imitate due to the altered pronunciations and lack of formal grammar.

box filled with dried peas or seeds and shaken; and the steel triangle. The *ravane* plays the main rhythmic patterns and controls the tempo, the *maravanne* subdivides the beat to add energy to the texture, and the triangle is struck on weak beats. Performances of other *séga* genres or subgenres may incorporate additional percussion, as well as chordal and melodic instruments of Western design, sometimes replacing one of the core instruments with a Western one.<sup>29</sup>

The *ravane* is the lead instrument in *séga*; the *ravane* player usually starts each song, leads the tempo, and may also sing. The *ravane* is traditionally manufactured by stretching a goatskin over a round wooden hoop, fixing it with either glue or nails. Some manufacturers add three incisions in the side of the hoop and skin, inserting into each a disk-shaped small metal piece of



**Figure 3 – The traditional instruments of *séga*: the *ravane* (left), *maravanne* (right), and triangle (center).**

aluminum or tin;<sup>30</sup> these disks or jingles (similar to the zils of a tambourine) are held into the frame by nails but are otherwise left free to vibrate. *Ravanes* vary in size from

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<sup>29</sup> For example, maracas and egg shakers can be used in place of the *maravanne*, although the size of the *maravanne* allows a greater range of sound production than these other instruments permit. It is very common in *hotel séga* performances for a keyboardist using a mix of programmed tracks and live playing to provide the music while the rest of the musicians join the dancers in a general dance performance. It is rare to substitute for the *ravane*, which is used to lead the music or to provide a distinctly Mauritian element to an otherwise Western ensemble of instruments.

<sup>30</sup> Older examples of the *ravane* use a *cinq sous* (five cent) coin for this purpose.

twenty-five centimeters on the small end to seventy or more centimeters on the larger end.<sup>31</sup> Before playing, the *ravane*'s drumhead must be tensioned by heating it over an open fire, producing a brighter and tinnier sound than typical for Western drums. Because the goatskin drumhead stretches during performance, it must be retuned periodically over fire; some modern *ravanes* use a synthetic drumhead or chemically treated goatskin to avoid this problem.<sup>32</sup>

The *ravane* is usually played from a sitting position or using a footstool, with lower rim of the instrument sitting on the thigh. The wrist or edge of the left palm holds the rim and is used to make the weaker strikes, while the right hand is used to play accented beats with varying placements to bring out lighter or deeper sounds. The only published method book for playing the *ravane*, written by the noted *ségatier* Menwar, specifies six possible gradations of pitch area divided into three registers: low (three pitch areas, produced by striking the center of the drumhead with the left hand), medium (two pitch areas, produced by the right hand striking near the open edge), and high (one pitch area, with strikes by the left hand muffled by the action of holding the rim in place).<sup>33</sup> As many as six *ravanes* can be seen in unamplified performances; when sound amplification is used, normally only two of the *ravanes* are miked.

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<sup>31</sup> Since the *ravane* uses a single piece of skin from an adult goat, instruments between forty-five and sixty-five centimeters are the most common. Smaller examples with synthetic or treated leather drumheads have gained more popularity in recent years due to their portability and availability for quick use.

<sup>32</sup> According to Mauritian folklore and oral tradition, the normal duration of a *séga* song was formerly about half an hour – the length of time that a *ravane* could be played before needing to be retuned. On most days in Mauritius, a *ravane* can also be tensioned by leaving the instrument in direct sunlight.

<sup>33</sup> Menwar [Stéphano Honoré]. *Méthode de Ravane* (Mauritius, 1999), 24.



Playing the *maravanne* and triangle is much simpler than playing the *ravane*. Neither instrument provides the central, driving rhythm and each produces only two basic sounds: a shake or strike and a tremolo. The triangle, often crudely manufactured from a bent steel rod, requires the least skill and is often given to a small child



**Figure 4 - A *ravane* player from the touring performance art show *Mâ Ravan*.<sup>34</sup>**

or the youngest member of an ensemble. The *maravanne* is usually given to older children or young adults in family settings and to slightly less junior members of an ensemble. In contrast to *ravane* players, *maravanne* and triangle players tend not to sing in professional settings.

Each of these traditional instruments may be doubled or replaced by improvised instruments in informal contexts. The *djembe*, a drum imported from continental Africa, sometimes substitutes for the *ravane* despite its deeper sound. (In a nod to the primacy of the *ravane* and its distinctive sound, the *djembe* player usually takes a subordinate role if a *ravane* player is also present.) Empty gasoline cans – particularly those made out of plastic – are often used for the same purpose, and are common substitutes for the *ravane* in poor urban areas. The *maravanne* can be replaced by a partly filled plastic jar of sugar

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<sup>34</sup> 2009 publicity photo by Valerie Kohcz for *JOMBA!*

or sand; if none is available, even this can be improvised further using a larger soda bottle and beach sand. A pair of metal spoons – or, more ideally, a metal spoon and an empty glass bottle<sup>35</sup> – often substitutes for the triangle during an impromptu *séga* jam session at the beach.

More modern *séga* ensembles may add Western instruments to the traditional core ensemble or replace the traditional instruments outright with others that fill the same essential function. During an impromptu performance heard on the outskirts of an urban slum, a group of three high school-age boys played *séga* on a single guitar: one person used the side and top of the guitar as a drum (in place of a *ravane*), another strummed chords to provide the accents of the *maravanne*, and a third plinked the strings between the guitarist’s chord hand and the guitar’s head with a metal key to fill the role of the triangle. In a performance at a hotel, it would not be uncommon to see a group of several *ravanes*, a *maravanne*, and a *triangle* bolstered by an acoustic guitar, an electric bass, a trumpet, and an electric keyboard. There are professional *séga* ensembles that do not use any of the traditional instruments at all, although this is the exception rather than the rule; usually at least one traditional instrument is present, even if it is no more than a single *ravane* in a large ensemble.

The relationship between percussion ensemble, vocalist, and dancer is captured in an old *séga* song tradition, according to which a (male) vocalist improvises verses in praise of a designated “princess” (female), who must respond to the music with dancing.

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<sup>35</sup> Most beer in Mauritius is sold in glass bottles rather than cans, making this component readily available.

Melodic instruments played only during introductions and virtuosic dance interludes, so as not to limit the singer's improvisations; over time, some ensembles were able to incorporate the melodic instruments in more active roles through practiced improvisation. During the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a variety of Western instruments entirely replaced the traditional melodic instruments of African and Malagasy origins that were formerly in use. Melodic instruments that are currently in vogue include the acoustic guitar and trumpet (for modern *séga* ensembles)<sup>36</sup> or the accordion and its electric keyboard imitation (for more traditional ensembles).<sup>37</sup>

The movements of *séga* dance are visually distinctive: sweeping and flailing arm movements, undulating hips, and a shuffle step in which the feet keep contact with the floor. Women wear flowing and voluminous dresses, whose long skirts are lifted and swung in billowing sweeps above the constant swaying of their hips. Men wear form-fitting garments (the better to highlight their sinuous motions) and hats that they wave while dancing around the women. A dance may be performed as an ensemble (in which it is choreographed and rehearsed to a known or repertory song<sup>38</sup>), or improvised (in which a designated leader improvises a dance solo to the accompaniment of call-and-response singing, and demonstrates the steps to be used by the other dancers.)

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<sup>36</sup> The Hawaiian steel guitar, a mainstay of progressive *séga* ensembles in the 1980s, has since gone out of fashion.

<sup>37</sup> The violin, found in many traditional ensembles during the early twentieth century, is now almost unheard of in *séga* performances.

<sup>38</sup> The twentieth century has seen an increasing number of songs "in repertoire," rather than extemporized, with the more famous songs in the repertoire comprising an informal canon. This is largely a product of the arrival of recording and broadcast industries in Mauritius in the 1960s. Song repertoires may be local, ensemble-oriented, or national (e.g., songs taught in schools, broadcast from recordings, etc.).

A major finding of my research is that *séga* originated during the Dutch colonial period and not (as is generally believed) in the French colonial period a century later. Under this revised history, it is clear that the history of *séga* actually began during or shortly after the third year of the first Dutch Settlement (1640). Dutch colonists, having settled the lushly forested but uninhabited island, imported eighty slaves from Madagascar to labor in the colony gardens. Many of these slaves escaped, fleeing to the island's interior and forming communities collectively referred to as the “shadow colony” or “shadow settlement” – an entity that would last in various incarnations for almost two hundred years, until the emancipation of the island's slaves in 1835. The inhabitants of the shadow colony, called *maroons* by Europeans, were the first practitioners of what would later be called *séga*.

The history of the shadow colony is filled with population exchanges and contact (both friendly and hostile) with the European settlements in Mauritius. Kidnappings, clandestine nighttime dances, and short-term fugitive slaves provided one mechanism for spreading *séga* from the *maroon* communities to plantation slaves. Deserters from the Dutch colony and passing ships provided another source of population influx. I use court transcripts, ships' records, and other primary sources to describe the mingling and cultural mixing that took place – including the mixing of European classical music with *séga*.

## General Notes on Sources

Each chapter includes a detailed description of the types of sources used and particularly notable primary and secondary source literature. No general musical history of the island of Mauritius is known to have been written prior to this dissertation, nor do any period-specific musical histories of the island exist. A few tourist-oriented pamphlets offer an abbreviated history of *séga*; these are generally unreliable and often quote legends and hearsay as fact. A handful of famous *ségatiers* from the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries have been the subject of book-length monographs by journalists;<sup>39</sup> printed sources on most musicians are limited to newspaper and magazine features. The extant histories of theater in Mauritius (musical and otherwise) have many defects and errors that are discussed as appropriate in the following chapters; efforts have been taken to verify sources and locate corroborating primary source documents whenever possible. The contents of chapters 5 and 6 have additionally been informed by fieldwork conducted in Mauritius from 2011-2012.

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<sup>39</sup> Several important biographies have written the Mauritian music journalist Sedley Richard Assonne: *Les Femmes du Séga* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Éditions de la Tour, 2009), a study of the careers and backgrounds of thirty-four female *ségatiers*; *Kaya: Autopsie d'une Légende* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Éditions de la Tour, 2009), a retrospective on the iconic *seggae* musician Kaya; and *Gérard Louis. Tout pour la Musique* (Rose Hill, Mauritius: Imprimerie H.S. 3, 2004), a biography of an influential *séga* singer-songwriter and record producer. A short biography of the *ségatier* Ti Frère [Alphonse Ravaton], one of the most important musicians in the *séga typique* revival, is included in Colette Le Chariter et al.'s anthology of Ti Frère's lyrics, *Ti-Frère: Poète du Quotidien* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Centre Culturel Africain, 1993).

A good introduction to *séga* in Mauritius circa 1990 is the volume *Sega: The Mauritian Folk Dance* by the anthropologist Jacques K. Lee;<sup>40</sup> although this work does not include content from most of the historical sources discussed in this dissertation, it is informed by the author's fieldwork conducted in Mauritius during the 1980s and provides a detailed historical snapshot from the perspective of his discipline. The same author's language guide *Mauritius: Its Creole Language*<sup>41</sup> also provides a convenient resource for parsing the Kreol lyrics of most *séga* songs. Key research into the folklore roots of *séga* lyrics and song content has been conducted by the folklorist Lee Haring, most notably including two volumes placing Mauritian folktales in a larger Indian Ocean island context<sup>42</sup> and a retrospective on the author's field research in Mauritius near the start of the twenty-first century.<sup>43</sup>

There is currently no standard agreement on the spelling of Mauritian Kreol words; there is no equivalent of the Académie Française to police the language. As a result, there are a variety of competing dictionaries circulating that offer different phonetic spellings and traditions of spelling certain words. Although the Google Translate service does offer a limited machine translation, the feature does not

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<sup>40</sup> Jacques K. Lee, *Sega: The Mauritian Folk Dance* (London: Nautilus Publishing Co., 1990).

<sup>41</sup> Jacques K. Lee, *Mauritius: Its Creole Language. The Ultimate Creole Phrase Book. English-Creole Dictionary* (London: Nautilus, 1999).

<sup>42</sup> Lee Haring, *Indian Ocean Folktales: Madagascar, Comoros, Mauritius, Reunion, Seychelles* (Chennai: National Folklore Support Centre of India, 2002); Lee Haring, *Stars and Keys: Folktales and Creolization in the Indian Ocean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

<sup>43</sup> Lee Haring, *Anu Koleksyonn Folklore Moris. Collecting Folklore in Mauritius* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Ledikasyon pu Travayer, 2001).

accommodate the normal variations in the spelling of Mauritian Kreol and is currently listed as eighty-two percent complete by Google; this author does not recommend it at this time for any scholarly use. Although there is a growing body of literature in Kreol, most Mauritians use Kreol primarily as an oral, rather than written, language. This can be seen in the packaging of compact discs intended for sale in Mauritius: these usually have no liner notes or printed lyrics included. Scholars looking for printed *séga* lyrics are advised to seek out foreign printings of Mauritian CD recordings, as these tend to have new inserts created to include the liner notes and printed lyrics normative for European markets.

### **Scholarly Relevance**

This document comprises the first detailed and scholarly musical history of the island of Mauritius. It will serve as a starting point and guide for future researchers investigating almost any aspect of Mauritian music from the first colonization of the island to the present day. Although the primary focus of this dissertation is on European art music and *séga* in Mauritius, it also assembles many important and previously overlooked details concerning Anglo-French military history and French colonial efforts and on the development of Indian and Chinese music practices on the island. This dissertation also contains the first narrative to connect musical developments in Mauritius with global geopolitics, tracing connections that can be further developed by cultural historians and diaspora studies scholars.

The information in this dissertation will be of particular interest to scholars investigating creolization; African, Chinese, Indian, and Malagasy diaspora studies; cultural tourism in island environments; overseas performances of French opera; pirates and privateers; and identity and cultural politics in postcolonial environments.

### **Notes on Field Work**

The primary ethnographic research for this dissertation consists of seven months of fieldwork conducted in Mauritius from 2011-2012. During this time, I sought out professional and amateur musicians, hotel industry workers and managers, teachers, tourists, and intellectuals to explore three initial questions: who performs and observes *séga* in Mauritius today, why is it performed, and what does it mean to them? While on the island, I expanded my research scope to include interviews and discussions with average Mauritians. During the course of my stay, I visited more than two dozen hotels and dozens of tourist attractions, saw scores of formal and informal music concerts and dance parties, and attended every major religious or music festival and public celebration that occurred. I was also engaged in library and archival research throughout my visit.

As part of this project, I also conducted fieldwork in the neighboring island of La Réunion in 2012 (four weeks divided into two trips), in London (one week in 2011), and Paris (one week in 2011 and one week in 2012). In Réunion, I attended music concerts and tourism events to explore how the use of *séga* in the Mauritian tourism industry differed from the use of *maloya* in Réunion, and to explore *Réunionnaise* perceptions of Mauritian *séga*. My fieldwork in London and Paris primarily consisted of meeting



Mauritian expatriates and the children of Mauritian expatriates so that I could compare their experiences and impressions of Mauritian music with what I experienced on the island. Due to the timing of my visits to London and Paris, I was not able to see any Mauritian musicians performing in those locations.

Some contextual fieldwork (mostly informal interviews) was conducted with tourists and travelers at airports and on flights and ocean ferries between 2010 and 2012. Due to the context, these interviews were of highly variable duration and content. The backgrounds of the tourists and travelers that I interviewed in these locations varied significantly: some (mostly in the United States) had never heard of Mauritius, some had visited it in the past, most wanted to visit Mauritius (especially if I provided a visual stimulus), and some were either about to visit or had just returned from visiting the island. The general goal of this contextual research was to examine and gauge outsider perspectives on Mauritius, particularly regarding *séga* and how it fit into Mauritian society. I was also very interested in whether or not tourists who had visited the island had participated actively in *séga* – either by dancing, learning how to play *séga* instruments or rhythms, or by purchasing or making *séga* recordings.<sup>44</sup>

Most of the interviews that I conducted arose from contacts that I made during my normal activities. A taxi ride and a conversation with the driver, for example, often led to a short interview on his musical preferences while the driver waited for his next fare (this

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<sup>44</sup> Most of the tourists that I met in Mauritius carried some form of video recording device, and many excitedly showed me cell phone and camcorder recordings that they had made of *séga* wherever they found it – beaches, bus stations, hotels, restaurants, and even street corners.

was generally assisted by my traveling during off-peak times).<sup>45</sup> Several taxi and bus drivers graciously invited me into their homes and offered to let me speak with their families and friends.<sup>46</sup> A few music lovers also allowed me to see and gauge their collections of LPs and audiocassettes, many of which are not otherwise available for public access. These avenues provided me with access to a wide variety of working-class Mauritians, ranging from young children to the elderly. Since storytelling is a tradition with strong roots in Mauritius, I was able to hear many stories from older Mauritians – stories that were offered without prompting and often provided the basis for follow-up questions about historical events and musical experiences.<sup>47</sup> Many men and women stuck in supermarket lines were also very gracious in indulging my questions.

An excellent way to meet Mauritians in a particular community is to attend a festival or concert in the area. During Diwali (the Hindu Festival of Light), for example, I visited the village of Triolet as a tourist and was invited into many homes, receiving several invitations to return later. Because the most public events in Mauritius begin an hour or more after the official start time, showing up at the published hour is also an excellent way to meet confused tourists and talk with event staff.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Taxi driving is a very male-dominated field in Mauritius; I did not meet or see a single female taxi driver during my stay on the island.

<sup>46</sup> I recommend bringing a token gift (e.g., a bottle of wine, a cake, or a melon) when visiting a Mauritian home; if you know or expect that children will be present, a handful of inexpensive sweets is a good present and icebreaker.

<sup>47</sup> It is through this mechanism that I was able to hear several first-hand accounts of the 1982 election from Indo-Mauritian women.

<sup>48</sup> Private caterers and security guards, for example, have to be prepared at the official time, despite the fact that most Mauritians attending the event will not show up until much later.

In addition to tourists and Mauritians from everyday society, I also sought out meetings with hotel and music managers, leaders, writers, and other intellectuals. In general, repeated phone calls (see Chapter 6) were the best means of obtaining a response; as my Mauritian hosts explained to me, the custom and pricing of telephone service on the island make follow-up calls essential. I was able to speak with many hotel managers and tour the facilities; many were also willing to grant me access to hotel performances and events, a privilege normally extended only to hotel guests. Most writers are happy to discuss their work, but finding author contact information can be very difficult; contacting the Mauritian Society of Authors (MSA) by telephone and in-person is strongly recommended. Many authors are increasingly found on Facebook and can be contacted through that medium. I had the least success with arranging meetings with university professors and politicians for reasons that will be discussed below.

Muritians in their twenties and thirties were often amenable to communicating via text message or Facebook, although it is polite to ask about text messaging in advance because receiving texts costs money for most Mauritian cell phone plans. Email was rarely an effective medium of communication: although university professors and politicians have publicly listed email addresses, checking email frequently is still not a common custom for most Mauritians. (Younger Mauritians often told me specifically to message them on Facebook and not contact them by email for this reason.) If email and phone contact is insufficient, visiting in person to make an appointment is a viable (and, if phone contact has previously been attempted, not impolite) option. Mentioning a

referral (e.g., “I was referred to you by Jean.”) during the initial exchange is suggested, irrespective of the medium of communication.

My initial scheme of field research was planned as a multi-sited ethnography, according to the principals advanced by George Marcus.<sup>49</sup> To this end, I selected four different sites in Mauritius as the objects of my research. These locations were the shantytown of Roche-Bois, the downtown area of the capital city of Port Louis, the village of Bambous, and the hotel-studded beaches of Grand Baie. After I arrived in Mauritius, I acquired independent means of transportation, significantly reducing transit times and allowing me to add many additional sites to the scope of my research. This, combined with the short tropical day and short hours of many Mauritian institutions allowed me to conduct parallel library, archival, and field research projects in conjunction with my original plans.

The ethnographic portion of my research went hand-in-hand with my library and archival research. I frequently learned about events of interest when reading current newspapers and event-related documents; reading historical materials often provided the catalyst for questions or suggested research topics to seek out. Conducting new research in the National Archives of Mauritius also provided conversation fodder when approaching Mauritian scientists and scholars, and having read the recent books of Mauritian authors was very useful in preparing for interviews. Library research –

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<sup>49</sup> George E. Marcus, “Ethnography In/Of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 95-117.

especially historical newspapers – was especially helpful in preparing for interviews with elderly Mauritians, as it allowed me to reference specific people and events of note. Conducting library and archival research also provided a regular but flexible schedule to work around when planning interviews, and by preplanning a number of different research projects I was able to conduct interviews and observations around the island in conjunction with work in nearby libraries and archives.

### **Preamble to the Historical Chapters**

The music of Mauritius is intimately bound up with the island's colonial history. Mauritius was completely uninhabited by humans before it was settled by Europeans; as a result, it possesses no "native" culture in the traditional sense. The dominant music traditions (those featured in the public sphere, in general and high society, and comprising the bulk of musical practice and performance) for most of its inhabited history have been drawn from Western Europe, brought by successive streams of Dutch, French, and British soldiers and settlers from their homelands. Of these various European traditions, European art music (particularly French opera and social dances) emerged during the eighteenth century as the leading music tradition on the island and retained this status for more than two centuries. In turn, the Malagasy and African slaves that the Europeans imported to the island developed their own song and dance tradition, *séga*, which has in recent decades become adopted as the official national culture of independent Mauritius, displacing European art music as the dominant musical culture.

European art music and *séga* collectively comprise the most visible and popular aspects of musical culture in Mauritius in the island's inhabited history.

The musical history of Mauritius, like its colonial history, was profoundly affected by the mercantile and geopolitical ambitions of its colonizers. The nation-states of the Netherlands, France, and Great Britain, along with their respective East India Company corporations – developed Mauritius as a pivotal base in a much larger competition whose weapons included global trade and warfare. This competition resulted in great expenditures of money and manpower in this small island in the southern Indian Ocean, providing the means, interest, and musicians to create a famous overseas center of European art music. This overseas center was of no more than regional interest under Dutch rule, but under French and later British development it became world-famous and enshrined in literature. The use of slavery (overt and indentured) that underpinned these mercantile and geopolitical ambitions in turn gave rise to *séga*, a song and dance tradition that is the most famous Mauritian music practice today.

These same mercantile and geopolitical concerns also gave rise to the great demographic change that has marked the last two centuries of Mauritian history and drastically altered its cultural landscape. The British expedition that conquered Mauritius in 1810 was mounted in response to the repeated and fervent entreaties of East India Company merchants whose ships were being captured by Mauritian privateers; and denying the use of the island as a naval base was a strong factor in the British Empire retaining the island at the Congress of Vienna negotiations in 1814-5. A desire among British Parliamentarians to limit the growth of the British East India Company's temporal

power led to the island's coming under Crown control and exposed the island to growing abolitionist sentiments in the British Empire.

The abolitionist policy pursued in the British Empire in the early nineteenth century was the direct cause of an additional injection of musical styles and darker skin color into the population of Mauritius. Although the Franco-Mauritians were promised the ability to retain their own laws and customs in the 1810 surrender agreement, in practice the British immediately began to implement curbs against slave trading. The legal abolishment of slavery in 1835<sup>50</sup> created a high demand for plantation labor, resulting in an ongoing mass recruitment of migrant laborers from overseas, principally from China and India. The specific mechanics of abolition, however, included the compensation of slave owners – a detail that helped perpetuate the long-term, ongoing economic and social dominance of the island by a European-blooded and Creole elite. Laws that regulated the movement of migrant laborers and restricted their practice of music and right of association were endorsed by the British colonial authorities.

A combination of cultural inertia, well-trodden patterns of social mobility, economic hegemony, and legal constraints contributed to the dominance of European culture (and European art music in particular) in Mauritian society long after the demographic balance had shifted away from the white and Creole population. This arrangement persisted well into the twentieth century, when the white population had

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<sup>50</sup> This emancipation affected most territories of the British Empire, but was not universal. All territories controlled directly by the British East India Company were specifically excluded from the emancipation, as were a few isolated (but strategically located), sparsely populated islands such as St. Helena and Ascension Island.

declined to less than one percent of the general population (from around fifteen percent at the onset of emancipation) and the Creole population to less than twenty percent (from around eighty percent at the onset of emancipation). The tiered hierarchy of Mauritian culture as the colony approached independence in the 1960s was not altogether different from that put in place by the island's original Dutch colonizers in the seventeenth century and refined by their French successors in the eighteenth.

This persistence of colonial factors means that any study of Mauritian music history is necessarily engaged with the island's colonial history. Despite the earnest efforts of many historians, there are still many legends and fabrications wrapped up and presented as facts in scholarly writing on Mauritian history, including in some of the scant historical literature on Mauritian music. As a result, this document will refer to archival sources whenever available, both to identify previously unnoticed details and to help identify and counteract misinformation.



## II. Music in Precolonial, Dutch, and Intercolonial Mauritius (1622-1721)

*Couroupas danse, zaco rie. ("When the snail dances, the monkey laughs.")*  
*Çouval napes marce av bourique. ("The horse doesn't walk with the ass," or,*  
*"Each should keep their proper place.")*

--Mauritian Proverbs<sup>51</sup>

This chapter describes the music of Mauritius before the French colonization in 1722. It analyzes musical practice in the island community as an artifact of European seafaring life and an integral tool of European colonization efforts during the seventeenth century. It presents newly discovered and recognized details on the use and practice of music in Dutch settlements on the island, as well as archival and archaeological findings that give insight into the origin and development of *séga*. This chapter also enumerates some of the factors behind the failure of Dutch colonization efforts, setting up a contrastive discourse in the following chapter on music's integral role in the successful and enduring French colonization of Mauritius.

The early colonial history of Mauritius is not well understood and is sparsely documented; an examination of archival and primary source documents reveals many gaps and errors in the extant literature. As a result, this chapter is constructed in the form of a historical essay surveying the history of Mauritius from precolonial times (pre-1622) through the larger Dutch Period (1622-1710) and the following intercolonial period (1710-1722). Descriptions of documented musical practices and episodes are inserted

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<sup>51</sup> Lafcadio Hearn, "*Gombo Zhebes*": *Little Dictionary of Creole Proverbs, Selected from Six Creole Dialects* (New York: Will H. Coleman, 1885), 17.

into the narrative as they occur chronologically, and suggestions are made about likely musical practices when incomplete information is available.

### **Sources on Dutch Mauritius**

Previous research into the history of Dutch Mauritius has been hampered by the scattered and fragmentary nature of the sources. In general, the history of Mauritius *before* the French colonization (i.e., before 1722) is detailed in a much more limited depth and breadth of sources than all periods thereafter. For example, the first Dutch colonization of the island predated the systematic and standardized keeping of detailed ship's journals. Many of the ships that called in Mauritius that *did* keep journals and other records were ultimately lost to storms, pirates, and other causes. Official records kept in Mauritius itself were often destroyed by devastating cyclones and by fire, along with the personal papers of several governors. These same factors also obliterated much of the archaeological evidence that might otherwise supplement research. No primary source documents from the Dutch colonization of Mauritius survive on the island today; those that have been preserved survive because they were either sent or were circulated in copy form overseas.

Sources from this period (henceforth referred to as “pre-French”) fall mostly into three general categories: travelogues, official correspondence and records, and personal journals. The travelogue was a popular genre of literature during the Age of Discovery; authors range from captains and sailors to merchants and scientists. Travelogues – generally adapted from personal journals kept and/or letters written during a voyage – are

often rich sources of detail, but must be checked against other sources of information. Because travelogues were published as a commercial genre of “trade” literature, many examples include interpolations, exaggerations, fabrications, and instances of clear and subtle prejudice. The travelogue written by the French Huguenot exile François Le Guat,<sup>52</sup> for example, provides a rare outsider account of life in Dutch Mauritius – but is not likely to be an unbiased source on the behavior and habits of the Dutch governor Roelof Deodati, who imprisoned Le Guat and his companions and exiled them to a deserted islet. Another well-known travelogue by Jacques Arago at first seems to corroborate earlier descriptions of slaves singing and dancing – but a detailed examination reveals these details to have been plagiarized from the earlier works.<sup>53</sup> Despite these potential drawbacks, travelogues comprise one of the most important sources of information on music and culture in Mauritius.<sup>54</sup>

Many useful details can be found in the correspondence and records of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and its employees. These materials – reports, orders, requests, etc. – contain a plethora of information related to the commercial and logistical enterprise of running a distant island outpost in the southern Indian Ocean. The periodic reports sent of ships calling and interactions with visitors contain several unexpected details on music. These sources are also not without issues of bias and selectivity; it was,

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<sup>52</sup> François Leguat, *Les Naufragés de Dieu. Aventure d'un Protestant et de ses Compagnons Exilés en Deux Îles Désertes de l'Océan Indien, 1690-1698* (Paris: Phébus, 1995)

<sup>53</sup> Jacques Arago, *Narrative of a Voyage Around the World, 1817-1820* (London: Treuttel and Wurtz, 1823).

<sup>54</sup> This importance is by no means confined to the pre-French period; travelogues are one of the most important sources on the French and early-to-mid-British periods.

for example, a common practice for each new governor of Mauritius to blame his predecessor and the forces of nature for innumerable failings to fulfill VOC directives – excuses often used for years after the transition had occurred. This correspondence does, however, provide the most consistent, ongoing chronicle of colony life and events available for this period. The formal reports of the governor and the colonial council are in many instances the only surviving documentation of events.<sup>55</sup>

Most of the surviving original VOC letters can be found in the voluminous VOC archives, now part of the Netherlands' General State Archives (*Nationaal Archief*) in The Hague. A larger body of letters has come down in copy form, preserved in the detailed VOC correspondence books of letters sent from and received in Batavia (modern-day Jakarta), Table Bay, and Amsterdam. These correspondence books sometimes omit or summarize details of the letters' contents, but also contain the texts of many letters whose originals did not reach the VOC headquarters in Amsterdam due to shipwrecks, piracy, and other factors. They also include contextually important letters from VOC officers in Table Bay and Jakarta pertaining to but not directed to Mauritius. The most complete set of overseas correspondence related to Dutch Mauritius is found in Cape Town (as part of the Cape Archives), but neither Cape Town nor The Hague possesses a complete set of

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<sup>55</sup> The authorship of specific letters is often unclear; when indicated, letters were signed variously by the current governor of the island, his secretary or assistant, or by a group of representatives from the island's Colonial Council.

correspondence books. Some extracts of the former have been translated into English and published in anthology format.<sup>56</sup>

A few personal journals kept by Dutch colonial officials in Mauritius are known to have survived, and are preserved variously in Cape Town, Jakarta, and The Hague.<sup>57</sup> When available, these journals often contain highly detailed personal observations about individuals and events, and serve as a useful counterpoint to the “official” record as expressed in dispatches from the island. The surviving journals were for the most part kept by VOC officers residing in the main Dutch settlement at Grand Port, and as a result have less detail regarding the more rural farmsteads – except in cases of criminal proceedings, which are usually documented in great detail. Further research may be able to identify additional surviving journals and personal papers, especially amongst the island’s governors who continued in VOC service after leaving Mauritius.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> H. C. V. Liebbrandt and Jan Anthony van Riebeeck, eds, *Précis of the Archives of the Cape of Good Hope* (series) (Cape Town: W.A. Richards, 1896-present).

<sup>57</sup> A small minority have also been translated and published, e.g., Hendrik Bernardus Thom., ed. *Journal of Jan van Riebeeck, Volumes I (1651-55) and II (1656-8)* (Cape Town: A.A. Balkema, 1892).

<sup>58</sup> The reader seeking further information on the pre-French history of Mauritius, especially the broader Dutch Period, is recommended to consult several resources. The best introduction to the two Dutch colonization efforts is P.J. Moree’s monograph *A Concise History of Dutch Mauritius, 1598-1710: A Fruitful and Healthy Land* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1998). Many of the events documented therein are analyzed from anthropological and cultural studies perspectives in Megan Vaughan’s monograph *Creating the Creole Island: Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Mauritius* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); the later chapters of this book examine culture and society in French Mauritius. The best general resource on music in European sea voyages during the seventeenth century is Ian Woodfield’s 1995 monograph, *English Musicians in the Age of Exploration* (Stuyvesant, N.Y.: Pendragon Press, 1995). Finally, a succinct introduction to European seafaring and colonization efforts can be found in Glenn J. Ames’ *The Globe Encompassed: The Age of European Discovery, 1500-1700* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2008).

## Precolonial History

The island of Mauritius has a relatively short history of human habitation. Cartographic evidence suggests that Arab or Malay sailors knew of the island as early as the tenth century CE,<sup>59</sup> but no traces of human habitation or visitation existed when the first European sailors first discovered the island in 1507.<sup>60</sup> This latter discovery (the first clearly documented in the historical record) found an island of beautiful sandy beaches, dense forests of timber, and abundant sources of food and water. These rich resources, combined with two excellent natural harbors and a strategic position along the Europe-East Indies trade routes, made the island an ideal candidate for settlement. These conditions and the activities that grew up because of them would eventually transform the uninhabited island into a major geopolitical pivot point in the eighteenth century – but no one visiting this island could have predicted this distant development or the attendant creation of one of the most celebrated European musical environments in the Far East.

Opportunistic European seafarers were quick to make use of Mauritius and its resources in more immediate ways. Until the currents and shoals of the Mozambique

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<sup>59</sup> As the original maps are no longer extant, there is an ongoing scholarly debate about whether or not elements of the first Portuguese map to show Mauritius – the famous *Cantino Planisphere* (1502) by Alberto Cantino – were copied from Arab charts. This controversy is largely irrelevant to the musical history of the island, as no evidence of an Arab or Malay presence on the island before the Portuguese discovery has emerged. For a succinct summary of the debate, see Vijaya Teelock, *Mauritian History: From Its Beginnings to Modern Times* (Moka, Mauritius: Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 2001), 22.

<sup>60</sup> The exact date of discovery is frequently given anywhere from 1500-1510 due to misreading sources and transmission errors. The cartographic evidence notwithstanding, there is no suggestion that Arabs, Malays, or any other group attempted to exploit Mauritius or even call at the island (barring the initial contact that placed it on these maps) before the Portuguese discovery.

Channel were well charted by Portuguese navigators (an endeavor that took much of a century and remained a closely guarded secret), it was much safer to avoid that shorter route and to steer out to sea, past the eastern coast of Madagascar. Mauritius lay upon that latter route and so was a natural place to use as a temporary, seasonal victualing station to take on fresh fruit, vegetables, and water.<sup>61</sup> Thick forests provided masts for shipboard repairs and firewood, and rich stands of ebony wood could be harvested for sale in Europe. These same attributes would allow Mauritius to become in turn a base for pirates, a colony for the Dutch East India Company, a French colony and naval base, and a prized English conquest.

### **Tracking a Cultural History**

One way of tracking the cultural history of Mauritius is delineating events according to changes in the island's colonial rule. This pattern of division according to temporal power is the most commonly used schema in historical studies of Mauritius. It is a useful organizational device, but belies the much more complex socio-cultural shifts that occurred during the French and British eras. According to this scheme, the first broad period is that of Dutch control, spanning from 1638 to 1710.<sup>62</sup> This era, along with the

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<sup>61</sup> Portuguese trade routes gradually shifted closer to the East African coast and away from Mauritius as their country established more bases and colonies along the Mozambique Coast. For further information, see M.D.D. Newitt, *A History of Mozambique* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995, 4-30.

<sup>62</sup> This grouping is a convenient agglomeration of a punctuated equilibrium; in fact, the Dutch presence was interrupted several times when the garrison was withdrawn to the more successful colony in Table Bay (South Africa) due to a lack of manpower and threat of famine. The final evacuation, begun in 1706, removed all of the colonists and most of the garrison in that

preceding precolonial period and the following intercolonial period, forms the focus of this chapter. The second era, that of French rule, runs from 1721 to 1810. The third era, that of British rule, spans from 1810 to 1968. The present era, that of postcolonial Mauritius, extends from 1968 to the present day.

Social and cultural changes in Mauritius do not coincide directly with political events; French culture (national, material, and non-material) in particular remains a resilient influence more than two centuries after the island was conquered and taken from France. A hybrid Franco-Mauritian culture effectively dominated British Mauritius for more than a century after the British conquest of the island – long after demographic changes had reduced the original population and its descendants to a small minority. This is not to say that it has been unaltered by the political actions and events initiated under British rule, as will be seen in Chapter Five, which examines the emergence of Indian and Chinese cultural identities. The Dutch period is comparatively simple, with no culturally significant variations in political control and a stratified social structure (see **Table 1**).

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year, although a diminishing contingent of soldiers lingered until 1710 and occasional Dutch ships continued to call at the island.



**Table 1 - Cultural and Political Divisions**

<u>Era</u>	<u>Years</u>	<u>Subdivisions</u>	<u>Period</u>	<u>Major Culture(s)</u> <sup>63</sup> (in order of predominance)
Dutch	16 <sup>th</sup> Century CE-1722	16 <sup>th</sup> Century CE-1638	Precolonial Period	n/a
		1638-1658	First Dutch Period	Dutch
		1658-1664	<i>Pétite Intercoloniale</i>	Dutch
		1664-1710	Second Dutch Period	Dutch
		1710-1722	<i>Intercoloniale</i>	Dutch
French	1722-1810	1722-1734	Early French Period	French
		1735-1767	La Bourdonnais & His Successors	French
		1767-1792	French Royal Period	French
		1792-1803	French Revolutionary Period	French
		1803-1810	French Imperial Period	French
British	1810-1968	1810-1835	Early British / Pre-Abolition Period	French
		1835-1880	Early-to-Mid-Immigration Period	French, British, Creole, (Indian, Chinese)
		1880-1910	Late Immigration Period	French, British, Creole, Indian, (Chinese)
		1910-1945	Post-Immigration Period	French, British, Creole, Indian, (Chinese)
		1945-1965	Activist Period	British, Indian, Creole, (Chinese)
		1965-1968	Run-Up to Independence	British, Mauritian, Creole, Indian, (Chinese)
Post-colonial	1968-present	1968-1972	Commonwealth Mauritius	Indian, (Creole, Chinese, Mauritian)
		1972-1980	Early Mauritian Republic	Indian, Creole (Chinese, Mauritian)
		1980-present	Modern Mauritian Republic	Mauritian, Indian, Creole, Chinese

<sup>63</sup> “Culture” in this context refers to collective acts such as language use, performance of music and dance, consumption of literature and other media, etc.

## **Dutch Colonization, Communal Music, and the Shadow Colony (1638-1706)**

*Your Honors should know by experience that trade in Asia must be driven and maintained under the protection and favor of Your Honors' own weapons, and that the weapons must be paid for by the profits from the trade; so that we cannot carry on trade without war, nor war without trade.*

– Jan Pieterszoon Coon, c. 1614<sup>64</sup>

The Dutch colonization of Mauritius is conspicuously omitted in most of the extant cultural histories of the island.<sup>65</sup> Many historians state that the various Dutch settlements on Mauritius between 1638 and 1706 were too small and underdeveloped to support any cultural activities of note.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, they reason, the impact of any activities that might have existed at the Dutch settlement would have been entirely negated by the complete and final evacuation of the Dutch colony prior to the island's colonization by the French East India Company in 1721. This conception of Dutch Mauritius as an ephemeral cultural chasm is incorrect and ignores the large human presence the VOC left behind.

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<sup>64</sup> Amiya Kumar Bagchi, *The Politics of Underdevelopment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 70.

<sup>65</sup> A notable exception is Meghan Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island: Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Mauritius* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005). This volume compares the social problems in Dutch Mauritius with those in the later French colony.

<sup>66</sup> See Jacques K. Lee, *Sega: The Mauritian Folk Dance* (London: Nautilus, 1990); Catherine Servan Schreiber, *Histoire d'une Musique Métisse à l'Île Maurice: Chutney Indien et Séga Bollywood* (Paris: Riveneuve, 2010).

A close examination of Dutch colonial records and other primary source materials reveals several episodes that suggest that a significant culture of music making existed in Dutch Mauritius and that musicians played an important function in this small colonial society. Details from these episodes can be used to ground hypotheses about music making in Mauritius in light of extant scholarship on musical activities in the Dutch colonial empire and amongst European seafarers during the same period. Together, these explorations of music not only demonstrate that music had a strong functional and aesthetic value to the Dutch colonists but also provide insights into several odd and colorful episodes in the island's history. They show that communal music making in Mauritius was a strong and compelling attraction to visitors – with the notable inclusion of a large group of pirates that twice visited the island, much to the distress of the authorities.

It is true that the communities of soldiers and settlers who partook in this music making did ultimately depart from Mauritius and that the particular European musical performance tradition they represent on the island came to an end. Their activities serve as important antecedents for music making in the subsequent French colonization and provide an opportunity to explore the ramifications of and justifications for the reasons that the French authorities cultivated music to such a high degree. As will be demonstrated in Chapter 3, music was used in French Mauritius to attack a major problem that had plagued Dutch Mauritius: poor personnel retention.

Each of the European East India companies faced significant personnel challenges in manning their overseas outposts and operations during the seventeenth and eighteenth

centuries. Local labor, where available, was generally considered unreliable and often lacked the necessary technical expertise or language skills.<sup>67</sup> As a result, the East India companies recruited a multinational roster of personnel in Europe and shipped them around the world. Assuming that these personnel survived the multi-month passage to the Indian Ocean (facing storms, pirates, and epidemics of malaria, scurvy, and other diseases) and the high incidence of tropical diseases at final destinations, these men (and in the seventeenth century they were without exception all men) were only bound to their respective employers for limited-term contracts, at whose end the companies were legally obligated to provide return passage. Retaining a skilled worker after their initial contract term avoided or delayed this expenditure while avoiding the new transportation costs of engaging a replacement – but reaping this benefit required that the employer be able to provide significant incentives for staying – something that many smaller posts, such as Dutch Mauritius, did not.<sup>68</sup>

Problems retaining colonists and other personnel limited the Dutch East India Company's worldwide operations but particularly in Mauritius. This smaller settlement, generating limited local revenue, lacked the manpower to build and maintain a lasting social support structure and a colonial infrastructure against the ravages of storms and an aggressive tropical climate. Although the population and garrison of Dutch Mauritius

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<sup>67</sup> For additional information see Michaël Deinema, "A Maritime Society: Friendship, Animosity and Group Formation on the Ships of the Dutch East-India Company" (unpublished manuscript, 2003), [http://www.academia.edu/attachments/4756798/download\\_file](http://www.academia.edu/attachments/4756798/download_file).

<sup>68</sup> For additional information on compensation and labor retention in the VOC, see Claudia Rei, "Incentives in Merchant Empires: Portuguese and Dutch Labor Compensation" (unpublished manuscript, 9 February 2011), <http://mpira.ub.uni-muenchen.de/28712/>.

swelled during times of war, the human and capital benefits of this presence were temporary and evaporated during peacetime. War with rival European powers and trading companies was an expensive proposition for the VOC, and in times of peace the Company aggressively reined in expenditures. This made the security and viability of the Mauritian settlement overly dependent on the changing fortunes and priorities of the VOC, contributing to the eventual abandonment of Mauritius. When the development of the VOC colony in Table Bay (today's Cape Town, South Africa) and improvements in seafaring reduced the perceived utility of a base in Mauritius, the Company moved to close the Mauritian outpost.<sup>69</sup>

By contrast, an important officer in the later *French* East India Company settlement recognized that structured music offerings would create an environment that would attract and retain skilled labor and families. Musical activities and performances were used and advertised as occupational benefits, part of a package of incentives used to help encourage soldiers and workers on limited-term contracts to stay permanently on the island.<sup>70</sup> (This was especially true with specialized workers, agricultural experts, and engineers who had been transported across the world at company expense.) Both the Dutch and French colonies drew on their European heritage of folk and art music to

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<sup>69</sup> VOC officials in Batavia, apparently tired of the frequent demands to subsidize the Mauritian station and the failure of Mauritian authorities to produce requested goods and supplies, separately wrote the Seventeen in 1705 to suggest evacuating Mauritius. VOC officials in Table Bay, which depended on Mauritius for vital lumber, disagreed. "To the Seventeen at Middleburg, 27 May 1705," reprinted in H. C. V. Leibbrandt, *Précis of the Archives of the Cape of Good Hope. Letters Despatched, 1705* (Cape Town: W.A. Richards & Sons, Government Printers, Castle Street, 1896), 295-7.

<sup>70</sup> This will be discussed in detail in chapter 3.

entertain their populations, but the different means and extent to which they employed music had a strong influence on the future of the respective colonies.

The long-term Dutch contribution to Mauritian culture does not end with this abstract spiritual debt. As will be demonstrated, the Dutch importation of slaves was instrumental in creating the conditions that gave rise to the musical practice now known as *séga*. The traditional historical narrative recalls the negative environmental damage left by the Dutch in Mauritius: the extinction of the Dodo, the introduction of rats and other invasive species such as feral cattle and Java deer, the near-complete harvesting of ebony forests, and so forth. This narrative overlooks the selective (if unintentional) benefit of these changes to the island's growing population of escaped slaves, who were provided with a wide variety of game animals to hunt, farms on freshly cleared land to raid for foodstuff, and (after the final Dutch evacuation) a large population of formerly domestic dogs which they could catch and train as guard dogs to warn them of approaching patrols in the middle of *séga* dances and other gatherings.

Dutch colonial authorities imported large numbers of Malagasy slaves to Mauritius, many of whom soon escaped to distant and interior parts of the island. The resulting “shadow colony”<sup>71</sup> of escaped slaves survived numerous attempts to destroy it, remained resident on the island after the Dutch evacuation, and was large and aggressive enough to seriously trouble the first decades of French settlement. A handful of anecdotes testify to music making by these escaped slaves during the Dutch period and the interim

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<sup>71</sup> I offer this new appellation to replace the nonstandardized nomenclature for this somewhat amorphous group.

period; the *maroons* (escaped slaves)<sup>72</sup> of the shadow colony were also known to be in contact with (new) slaves imported by the French colony during the period in which the first recorded anecdotes of *séga* emerged.<sup>73</sup>

The history of Dutch Mauritius given in this document illustrates the great and particular *functional* importance of music during the Age of Exploration. It shows the use of music in everyday life and labor on ships and among working parties, gives examples of musical interchange between different nationalities, and testifies to the development of musical culture in extremely adverse conditions. It reveals a strong concern for music held by Dutch colonial authorities and shows that the *séga* song and dance tradition that survives today has its roots in the early years of Dutch rule. It also demonstrates that escaped slaves who inhabited the island from Dutch times were responsible for preserving and transmitting the practice of *séga* for almost two hundred years of colonial history.

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<sup>72</sup> The term *maroon* is derived from the Spanish word for fugitive, *cimarrón*; its connotations vary throughout the world and, indeed, over time in Mauritius. During the period of Dutch rule, *maroon* was used to refer to any runaway slave. During French and British rule, distinctions were made based on the length of time a slave was absent without leave, whether or not (if captured and/or put on trial) they returned to their owners voluntarily, and whether or not they engaged in banditry or other violent acts. In its Mauritian contexts, the term *maroon* is racially loaded and almost always (excepting a few Indian and Malaysian slaves) refers to a runaway slave of at least partial African or Malagasy descent.

<sup>73</sup> This will be explored in detail in chapter 3.

## The Dutch East Indies Company

The permanent human settlement of Mauritius began in 1638 with the founding of a colony by the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC), but its history of human contact is much longer. The earliest known maps identifying the island's general location are Arab charts dated to the tenth century CE; no other documentary or archaeological evidence suggests that Arab navigators settled, exploited, or



**Figure 5 - The logo of the Dutch East India Company.**<sup>74</sup>

even explored the island in any detail. The earliest documented visit was also the first visitation by Europeans: a Portuguese expedition in 1507 that discovered the island. Word of Mauritius' location and resources from this initial contact spread slowly through Dutch, English, and French maritime circles, and over the next century European ships called irregularly at the island to replenish their water supplies, harvest the ebony forests, hunt deer and tortoises, and repair storm damage.

The Portuguese made no immediate move to exploit the resources of Mauritius on a regular basis. At first, this was because there was no clear need to do so: they enjoyed a commanding lead in the East Indies trade and almost a century of uncontested domination in the Indian Ocean before English and Dutch merchants began to challenge their hegemony. Securing an uninhabited island to deny it to rival nations did not figure greatly in Portuguese policies, which were focused on gaining more direct profits from

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<sup>74</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:VOC.svg>. Used under the Creative Commons 3.0 License.



trade and taxes. While they made use of Mauritius, their colonial efforts were designed around a simple strategy: reducing transit costs and finding the shortest, safest route to India. Once this goal was achieved, the island's importance to the Portuguese nation dropped to merely occasional and incidental.

The Portuguese strategy to achieve this goal was two-pronged. First, they established bases in East Africa along the Mozambique Coast, using treaties and military threats to gain access and control over existing port cities. Second, they launched a systematic effort to chart the weather and hydrography of the Indian Ocean and the Mozambique Channel, which offered the shortest overseas route to India. Many navigators steered east of Madagascar to avoid the lethal shoals, currents, and storms of the Mozambique Channel between Africa and the Great Isle, a course that brought ships to Mauritius but which could add as much as a month of expensive transit time. The success of these studies (the details of which were closely guarded secrets) allowed the Portuguese crown (via the Casa da Índia trading house) to establish an organized and strictly enforced calendar for sending trade fleets to India, with ships passing the East African coast in August (heading to India) or April (returning to Portugal) to take advantage of the prevailing winds and shorter passage along the Mozambique Channel.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Mabel V. Jackson Haight, *European Powers and South-East Africa: A Study of International Relations on the South-East Coast of Africa, 1796-1856* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1967), 9, 23-34.



by the other European powers whose merchant ships began increasingly to venture into the Indian Ocean in the late sixteenth century.

In 1598, a fleet of Dutch merchantmen returning from India was blown off course by a cyclone and made landfall at Mauritius. This naval expedition hailed from the United Provinces of the Netherlands, a nascent state that was now in full rebellion against the Spanish Empire. The Dutch population's conversion to Protestantism and the ongoing state of war with Spain led to a free disregard for the Treaty of Torsedillas by which Portugal claimed exclusive rights to the East Indies; this particular fleet was one of a growing number of privately-funded commercial expeditions to the Indian Ocean, and their discovery of Mauritius was fortuitous. The storm-battered fleet took shelter in the island's southeastern harbor<sup>79</sup> to repair the cyclone damage.

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<sup>79</sup> Grand Port, later the site of the main Dutch settlements and the French city of Mahébourg.



**Figure 7 - Dutch shore parties from Van Neck's fleet hunt birds and ride tortoises in Mauritius.<sup>80</sup>**

The fleet's commander, Admiral J. Cornelius van Neck, claimed the island for the United Provinces and named it Mauritius after Maurice of Nassau, the reigning Prince of Orange and Stadtholder of the nascent Dutch Republic. The records of this visit include

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<sup>80</sup> Johann Theodor de Bry and Johann Israel de Bry, eds. *Indiae Orientalis pars septim: navigationes duas, primam, trium annorum, a Georgio Spilbergio, trium navium praefecto, ann. 1601 ex Selandia in Indiam Orientalem susceptam, alteram, novem annorum, a Casparo Balby, gemmario Veneto, anno 1579 ex Alepo Babyloniam versus & inde porro ad regnum Pegu usque continuatam, continens: omnium, quae illi quidem ad annum 1604, huic vero ad annum 1588 usque acciderunt, commemoratione, regum item, locorum* (Frankfurt: Wolfgangi Richteri, 1606). The De Brys also created the engravings used in this volume.

the first substantive and detailed accounts of the island's geography and resources. At this time, the Dutch Republic controlled no bases in southern Africa or in the southern Indian Ocean, and Mauritius offered an unusual combination of not one but two excellent natural harbors, easily accessible sources of fresh water, and thick forests that could provide replacements for broken masts and dwindling stocks of firewood. Inland expeditions discovered thick stands of valuable ebony trees remaining, with abundant fresh meat available in the form of thousands of tortoises placidly wandering the seashore and large flocks of birds unaccustomed to the need for self-preservation. This rich and rare combination of resources, Van Neck recognized, not only allowed a ship or fleet to rest, repair, and resupply, but also to use the island as a long-term rendezvous point for convoys to assemble for the return passage to the Netherlands. This latter attribute was especially important when ships sailing together for protection found themselves scattered by storms.<sup>81</sup>

The fleet led by Admiral Van Neck was a limited-term, private commercial expedition. The expedition's financiers were remunerated according to their investments at the end of the return voyage, and thus had no immediate financial interest in an expensive colonial expedition to garrison and colonize the island. The Portuguese expeditions into the Indian Ocean, by contrast, were regulated and partially financed by the Portuguese crown, and were organized with long-term financial returns in mind. This

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<sup>81</sup> Robert Parthensius, *Dutch Ships in Tropical Waters: the Development of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) Shipping Network in Asia 1595-1660* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 135-6.

resulted in the establishment of numerous trading stations and fortresses early on in their exploratory voyages. Because the Dutch initially took no actions to secure Mauritius, ships from other nations (mostly British and French vessels, plus the odd Portuguese ship off course) were free to call at the island and take on their own supplies and cargoes of ebony.<sup>82</sup> Their doing so did not go unnoticed in Amsterdam, as Dutch ships returning to the Netherlands brought news of increasing encounters with other nations' ships at Mauritius.

On 7 May 1638, a Dutch garrison arrived to for the first time lay claim to Mauritius in a tangible way<sup>83</sup> and to take control of its valuable supplies of ebony. This expedition was sent by the Dutch East Indies Company. This company was founded in 1602 to exploit the growing Asian-European spice trade made possible by the Portuguese trade expeditions of the previous century, consolidating a number of smaller, private ventures that had competed with each other.<sup>84</sup> The VOC was established as the first joint-stock company in the world, giving it access to financial capital far beyond the means of

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<sup>82</sup> Ships returning from the East Indies trade often had free space in their holds due to market conditions, limited capital for expenditures, or the normal consumption of supplies. A cargo of ebony wood provided useful ballast (lowering a ship's center of gravity and reducing its roll) and served as a trade commodity at the ship's destination; most merchant captains owned some portion of their cargo and used these additions to maximize their own personal profit from each voyage. Partial cargoes of lighter woods (e.g., sandalwood, also harvested in Mauritius) provided both ballast and extra buoyancy; in the case of leaks or cyclones, an otherwise doomed ship might stay afloat and continue its voyage thanks to such a cargo. *Ibid.*, 101, 108.

<sup>83</sup> Excepting the agreement on spheres of influence set forth by the Treaty of Torsedillas between Portugal and Spain, most of the symbolic claims of overseas territories made by European powers during the Age of Exploration had no weight. Colonization was the only way to secure territory and deny it to rival powers.

<sup>84</sup> The massive early profits of these endeavors were the result of breaking the Ottomon-Venetian spice monopoly in Europe, cutting out a wide array of middlemen.

previous, private commercial expeditions. It was also granted a monopoly by the States General of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, giving it full control and discretion over Dutch business and trade in the East Indies. A combination of shrewd diplomacy, European technology, and brutal strategy and tactics built the company into the largest and most powerful corporation in the world.<sup>85</sup>

A centerpiece of VOC expansion policy was to obtain direct control of valuable resources in the Far East. Much of the company's meteoric rise can be attributed to the appointment of Jan Pieterszoon Sanderz Coen as Governor General of the VOC in 1618.<sup>86</sup> Coen directed the company's conquest of Batavia (now Jakarta) and the island of Java, which became the capital of the VOC's overseas operations. Under his direction, company expeditions seized the Maluku Islands (the sole source of cloves) and the Banda Islands (the sole source of nutmeg), gaining full control over the production of these lucrative commodities. The revenues from the resulting vertically integrated monopoly were used to fuel further expansion.<sup>87</sup> Coen and his successors envisioned an ambitious

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<sup>85</sup> For additional information, see Femme Simone Gaastra, *The Dutch East India Company: Expansion and Decline* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2003).

<sup>86</sup> Coen was first appointed as Director General of the Veernigde Oost-Indische Compagnie in 1618 and retired in 1623. He was recalled from retirement and reappointed in 1624, serving until his death in 1629. For a detailed discussion of the man, his writings, and his personal role in the establishment of the Dutch East Indies empire, see Stephen R. Brown's *Merchant Kings: When Companies Ruled the World, 1600-1900* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2009), 7-56. For a more detailed study of the VOC's ongoing expansion and the strategic debt to Coen, see Femme S. Gaastra, *The Dutch East India Company: Expansion and Decline*, trans. Peter Daniels (Zutphen: Walburg Press, 2003).

<sup>87</sup> M.C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c.1300*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1993), 30.



expansion program that used conquest, diplomacy, and a network of colonial bases to secure supplies and sea routes.



Figure 8 - A world map produced by the VOC in 1635.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>88</sup> William Blaeu, *Nova totius terrarum orbis geographica ac hydrographica tabula* (Amsterdam, 1635). A student of Tycho Brahe, Blaeu was the official map maker of the Dutch Republic and (separately) the official cartographer of the Dutch East India Company.





The desire to control and fortify Batavia, however, took precedence and delayed the settlement of Mauritius. Batavia was the key to the production and trade of cloves and nutmeg, two of the most expensive commodities under the VOC's control. Although several VOC officials floated internal proposals to colonize and develop Mauritius before 1637, these proposals that were rejected by their superiors in favor of colonial investments in Batavia and its immediate surroundings. The Directors were at this point content to use the island as an unmanned water station and occasional source of ebony.<sup>90</sup>

This complacency disappeared suddenly in 1637, when rumors circulated in the Netherlands of an English plan to establish a permanent colony on Mauritius. This base would resupply English ships traveling to India and the Far East, and allow the English to harvest the island's ebony *en masse*. Later that year, the Directors of the VOC finally voted to authorize and fund an expedition to colonize and exploit Mauritius.

The colony envisioned by the Directors was a permanent commercial and victualing station on the trade routes from Europe to India and the Spice Islands.<sup>91</sup> The settlement was charged with a long list of essential tasks:

1. garrisoning Mauritius,
2. denying access to rival powers,
3. providing food for the garrison and visiting Dutch merchantmen,

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<sup>90</sup> Several private parties in the Netherlands proposed plans to settle the island in the 1620s and 1630s, but the VOC used its state-granted monopoly to veto these proposals. See General State Archives, The Hague, VOC-archive, inv.nr. 148, resolutions *Heren Zeventien*, 10 September 1635 and 26 November 1637.

<sup>91</sup> Modern-day Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

4. collecting ebony wood and ambergris, and
5. growing cash crops such as tobacco to support Dutch trade in the region.

This was an ambitious list of tasks for the twenty-five men first budgeted by the VOC, but they were only the vanguard of a larger group to be supplied by men transferred from each passing VOC ship. (This illustrates both the logistical costs of ferrying colonists across the world and the VOC's reluctance to make a large financial and capital outlay dedicated solely to the establishment of the colony. This desire to limit their financial and logistical outlays characterized the VOC's plans for Mauritius from the beginning, and severely hampered efforts to build a large and self-sustaining colony. These restraints forced several developments with a strong influence on the cultural and ethnic development of the island's population.

### **Arrivals**

On 6 May 1638, the Dutch vessel *Maan* arrived in Mauritius after a four-month voyage from the Netherlands.<sup>92</sup> The ship anchored near the southeast corner of the island, just off the southeast harbor (present-day Mahébourg). The next day, twenty-five settlers drawn from the ship's complement disembarked to begin construction of a wooden fort, the first permanent structure erected on the island. The *Maan* lingered to witness the initial construction of the settlement before continuing on to Batavia to resume its normal commercial activities.

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<sup>92</sup> The *Maan* sailed from Amsterdam on December 31, 1637, and called at the Cape Verde islands en-route. See P. van Dam, *Berschryvinghe van de Oostindische Compagnie*, Book II, Part III, edited by F.W. Stepel (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1939), 581.

This small group of settlers initially found Mauritius as benevolent and rich as the magical island described in travelogues circulating in Europe.<sup>93</sup> The island was beautiful and filled with the stereotypical ingredients of an idyllic existence: fruit, game animals, fish.<sup>94</sup> Wood and fresh water were plentiful, so no great exertion was required for everyday life; there were no large predators to guard against; and the land was mercifully free of the Guinea worm and other parasites found on the African mainland. The responsibility for exploiting of this perceived paradise was given to twenty-four soldiers and sailors under the leadership of *Opperhoofd*<sup>95</sup> Cornelis Gooyer, a native of Amsterdam.

Gooyer's men were drawn from the crew complement of the *Maan*: twelve soldiers and twelve sailors.<sup>96</sup> The inadequacy of their initial numbers to the task of securing the island was soon made apparent when the French merchant vessel *Saint Alexis* made landfall at Mauritius on June 8, 1638. The ship would ultimately stay for six

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<sup>93</sup> No fewer than four sailors from the 1598 convoy wrote published accounts of their visit, the first travelogues to describe Mauritius.

<sup>94</sup> Although no permanent settlements were constructed on the island before 1637, it had for decades been frequently visited by Arab, British, Dutch, and Portuguese merchant ships taking on supplies of water and cargoes of valuable ebony wood. Many of these visitors wrote published letters and travelogues of their visit, which circulated (often in translation) throughout Western Europe. See: P. J. Moree, *A Concise History of Dutch Mauritius, 1598-1710: A Fruitful and Healthy Land* (New York: Kegan Paul International, 1998), 16-24.

<sup>95</sup> This rank translates as "Chief" or "Commander," although the position was in practice equivalent to "Governor."

<sup>96</sup> The original garrison is sometimes listed erroneously as "twenty-five convicts," a conflation with later arrivals from Batavia. The composition of the 1638 colonists is given in a letter dated July 30, 1638 from Cornelius Gooyer to the VOC Directors. This "muster roll" lists each colonist by name, noting their profession, rank or trade, place of birth, and wages. For Gooyer's letter, see the General State Archives, The Hague, VOC-archive, inv.nr. 1127, f.602. For an English translation of the list, see Moree, 100.

months in the northeast of the island as its crew harvested ebony, providing the catalyst for the first documented episode of musical activity on the island. The French crew was reportedly quite surprised to see the French sailors were reportedly surprised to encounter a Dutch garrison, but after the normal introductions the *Saint Alexis*'s captain, Salomon Gouerte<sup>97</sup>, asked for Gooyer's permission to send hunting and fishing parties ashore. Gouerte stated that his only interest in visiting Mauritius to replenish his ship's stocks of water and victuals, in light of which Gooyer acceded to the French captain's request. The next day, however, the *Saint Alexis* sailed up the coast and anchored near a large stand of ebony trees, its crew disembarking to establish a logging camp – much to the surprise of the Dutch soldiers who were stationed there.<sup>98,99</sup>

After being notified by his soldiers of this unexpected development, Gooyer traveled overland to personally deliver his protest at the French captain's deception and politely request that the French captain and his complement leave. The request was politely refused, whereupon Gooyer decided that his orders did not *explicitly* provide guidance or authorize the use of force in case of such a development, and duly drafted a letter to the VOC Directors in Amsterdam.<sup>100</sup> He did not, in any case, have sufficient

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<sup>97</sup> Also given as “Solomon Goubert.”

<sup>98</sup> There is a strong likelihood that the presence of eight Dutch soldiers – a full third of Gooyer's complement – in that coastal region was a proactive (if ineffective) move to guard or log that very concentration of ebony.

<sup>99</sup> Pierre Van Den Boogaerde, *Shipwrecks of Madagascar* (New York: Strategic Books Publishing, 2008), 117-18.

<sup>100</sup> L.S. Gooyer to the Directors of the Company of the Indies. Mauritius, 31 July 1638. Reprinted in French translation in Roland Bonaparte, “Le Premier Etablissement des Néerlandais à Maurice,” *Revue Historique et Littéraire de l'Île Maurice: Archives Coloniales* 3, nos. 45-6 (1890): 516-18, 530-33.

force at hand to make more than a token verbal protest, and deferring to future orders while expressing this protest appears to have been the most rational response given his limited means.

In spite of the French intrusion and intransigence, the relationship between the Dutch settlers and their visitors does not appear to have been adversarial. On the contrary, members of the Dutch garrison made the difficult overland journey from the southeast harbor many times to visit the French logging camp. The Dutch soldiers spent weeks at a time in the camp of their French visitors, engaged in convivial singing, music making, and dancing.<sup>101</sup> The ninety-seven men of the *Saint Alexis* were doubtless a welcome diversion for the lonely Dutch garrison – many of whom were normally scattered across the island in small group or solo assignments.<sup>102</sup>

This sort of multinational mixing, including group entertainments and musical activities, was very common amongst seventeenth-century seafarers. A typical VOC ship's complement during this period crew included English and French sailors among the Dutch majority, and Germans from neighboring states in the Holy Roman Empire frequently filled out the roster of soldiers; sailors in the VOC fleet and private Dutch merchantmen were frequently conversant (to varying degrees) with Dutch, French, and English, as well as a common polyglot naval slang borrowing from the same

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<sup>101</sup> Moree, 27-8; C.E. Van Kesteren and Veler Medewerking, eds, *De Indische Gids: Staat- en Letterkundig Maandschrift, Zeventiende Jaargang I* (Amsterdam: J.H. De Bussy, 1895), 871-73.

<sup>102</sup> Van Den Boogaerde, 117-8; Woodfield, 232-33.

languages.<sup>103</sup> When ships and their crews encountered each other on friendly terms in Far East ports and on distant islands, they were even known to engage in dancing and shared musical exchanges, even in times of tension between their respective companies and nations.<sup>104</sup> In this light, the interaction with the *Saint Alexis*'s crew would have been considered unusual only for its duration.

The personnel records of the Dutch colony do not provide a clear picture of the musical proclivities of the colonists: although they sometimes identify trumpeters and drummers (the two main types of signaling musicians on VOC ships in the seventeenth century), this is often a distinction of a higher pay grade, as journeymen musicians were often hired and paid as ordinary sailors. Such journeymen often sailed for a single round-trip voyage to the East Indies before leaving VOC service, whereas those listed on the ships' rolls as "drummer" and "trumpeter" enjoyed higher wages and were more likely to remain with their ship and captain and train the less experienced musicians.<sup>105</sup> Evidence of this appears in both VOC and British East India Company records from the 1620s, where company officials endorse it as a cost-saving measure. By the eighteenth century, this measure was standard practice on VOC ships, whose rolls list fewer dedicated musicians (that is, those listed as "drummer" and "trumpeter") and paid as such.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> For more information on naval slang in the seventeenth century, see: John Smith and Kermit Goell, *A Sea Grammar: With the Plaine Exposition of Smiths Accidence for Young Seamen, Enlarged* (London: John Haviland, 1627).

<sup>104</sup> Woodfield, 63.

<sup>105</sup> Woodfield, 36, 168.

<sup>106</sup> The Dutch fleet that reached Mauritius in 1598 included a large number of English musicians, but the practice of hiring their English fellows from across the Channel declined steeply as the British and Dutch East India Companies formed a sharp rivalry. Woodfield, 19.

The original complement of colonists included one Harmen T. Sandersz van Rossem, a native of Utrecht identified as a military drummer.<sup>107</sup> An inventory of equipment prepared by Gooyer lists the tools and weapons of each sailor and soldier, including Van Rossem's "drum with accessories." His lack of musket and bandolier confirm that music was his dominant profession, although he was (as were most military drummers of the time) also equipped with a sword.<sup>108</sup> Van Rossem's role was extremely important in the exploration of Mauritius: the sound of a drum or trumpet was needed to signal the time, send messages, and provide a rallying sound for hunters and explorers to return to the encampment.<sup>109</sup>

The specific identification of Van Rossem as a musician does not mean that he was the only musically inclined member of the small colony, and it is important to note that Gooyer's list does not cover personal possessions. The participatory, communal culture of shipboard entertainment amongst sailors and soldiers on Dutch East Indiamen included concerted, folk, and improvised music;<sup>110</sup> groups and individuals also partook in devotional psalm singing and other religious music. Many nautical traditions included ceremonies with music and songs for special occasions such as Christmas and crossing the equator, musical customs with which most of the crew would have been familiar.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> An abridged version of this roster is reproduced in Moree, 100.

<sup>108</sup> Moree, 27.

<sup>109</sup> Woodfield, 126.

<sup>110</sup> Surviving personnel rosters show that the VOC employees in Mauritius were drawn from most of the major cities of the Netherlands, making a more specific folk music tradition impossible to infer.

<sup>111</sup> Woodfield, 85-6; Ketting, 255.



The colonists' personal effects almost certainly included the sailor's whistles, recorders, rattles, and other simple instruments common amongst crews on extended sea voyages. Some amongst the initial group of settlers or their successors are likely to also have had access to and experience with the viols, violins, fifes, and other instruments that frequently show up in descriptions of amateur music making on these ships.<sup>112</sup> Wills compiled before seagoing voyages testify that even ordinary, career seaman on these voyages might possess fiddles, citterns, bagpipes, and harps.<sup>113</sup>

The VOC eventually delivered on its plans to progressively enlarge the initial settlement with men from the Netherlands. The *Roch*, sailing from Amsterdam, deposited fifty men (including a religious preacher) on the island in September 1638; the *Meerman*, also out of Amsterdam, added another thirty in May of the following year. Attrition plagued the nascent colony, however: by the time a new governor, Adrian Van der Stel (1605-46) arrived on 8 November 1639, the garrison had shrunk to eighty men due to deaths and transfers. To augment this group, Van der Stel brought seventy men from Batavia: forty diseased invalids and the rest mostly drawn from the courts and jails of Batavia. In a perverse twist, the Governor-General in Batavia, Van Diemen, demanded seventy healthy men from Mauritius to replace the seventy invalids and convicts.<sup>114,115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> The colonists also need not have owned instruments personally at the start of a voyage; accounts, records, and archaeology all confirm that many ship captains and officers kept chests of instruments (sometimes including replacements) that were available. Woodfield, 13-6, 169-70.

<sup>113</sup> Woodfield, 84-5.

<sup>114</sup> Vaughan, 8.

<sup>115</sup> The rapid expansion of the VOC severely taxed its European human resources in the East Indies. Rather than recruit foreigners or spend valuable capital on slaves, the Company

Van der Stel had no choice but to comply to his superior's orders; whatever the musical proclivities of the arrivals, this wholesale disruption of the population is not likely to have improved *any* musical practice on the island (or anything else, for that matter).

Deaths and transfers continued to plague the Dutch colony. In April 1641, despite several infusions from the Netherlands, the colony was again only eighty men in size – many of them newly or chronically afflicted by tropical diseases. Even the healthy members were disgruntled and unproductive; with the exception of meat from the island's abundant hunting grounds, the colony was forced to rely on visiting ships for supplies. As attrition and disease continued to shrink the colony, another blow was struck: the Governor-General in Batavia began regular recalls of men from Mauritius for reassignment to other colonies. In response to Van der Stel's protests, the Governor-General authorized him to "replace them with as many slaves as he needed."<sup>116</sup> This decision to introduce slavery would prove to be a key factor in the development of *séga* music.

Van der Stel set out for Madagascar at once. By July 1642, he had made contact with a tribal leader in northeast Madagascar, negotiated a treaty to supply manufactured goods in return for slaves (even leaving two of his men to supervise a "factory" under native operation), and purchased and transported one hundred and five slaves back to

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developed plans to use Mauritius as a convalescent home for recovering sailors and colonists, and as a place of exile to put Batavia's convict population to work. Neither plan was very effective.

<sup>116</sup> Moree, 30-1.

Mauritius.<sup>117</sup> It is highly probable that musicians were included in this expedition to the Great Isle: music not only played an important part of normal shipboard functions and signaling, but was also essential in “exercising the cargo” and thus minimizing slave mortality during the transoceanic passage.<sup>118</sup> As a career employee of the VOC, Van der Stel would doubtlessly have also been familiar with the value of music in trade negotiations with tribal leaders, as this utility had been recognized by European traders in the previous century and was promoted as policy by the cost-conscious managers of the various East India trading companies.<sup>119</sup>

The use of music to lubricate trade negotiations with tribes in the southern Indian Ocean occurred on two levels. First, musical performances or demonstrations were used to open any sales or treaty negotiations. Second, simple musical instruments such as whistles, bells, and rattles were purchased as inexpensive trade goods in Europe or in India and then sold at a high price to the Europeans’ African and Malagasy trading partners, who greatly valued their musical properties. Music, it was understood, both entertained and impressed the natives at very little cost to the Europeans; the sale of these small an inexpensive-to-acquire instruments epitomized the “buy low, sell high” merchant spirit. This dual commercial use of music in the region was introduced by Portuguese trading and slaving expeditions during the sixteenth century, and by the

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<sup>117</sup> Moree, 31; Vaughan, 8-9.

<sup>118</sup> Johannes Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600-1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 233. Inducing slaves to move during periods of exercise helped reduce the incidence of disease and death; see below for additional details.

<sup>119</sup> Woodfield, 168.

following century it was commonplace advice for Dutch, English, and French ship's captains traveling to and from the Far East to keep supplies of bells on hand.

Van der Stel's negotiations with Filu Bucon, the "Coninck van Antongil" ("King of Antongil Bay"), are thus likely to have opened in the typical fashion – that is, with a musical display by the Europeans. His expedition would not have included the large professional string and wind consorts that had accompanied early Dutch and English tours of the Far East – these were artifacts of the previous century – but he did have access to drummers and trumpeters. These resources would have sufficed to create the bombastic display of "trumpets sounding, drums beating" that was understood to impress and entertain a tribal leader, allowing Europeans to reduce the number of expensive gifts changing hands.<sup>120</sup> Filu Bucon was sufficiently convinced to grant Van der Stel several concessions, including an agreement to supply slaves exclusively to the Dutch – a measure that ostensibly secured yet another source of valuable commodities for the VOC. (Like most such treaties, the adherence was another matter entirely.)<sup>121</sup>

The exact ethnicity and origins of the slaves purchased in this transaction have not been recorded but the general details can be discerned. The Dutch believed that the slaves

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<sup>120</sup> This use of music to create a strong positive impression before trade negotiations (whether over slaves, foodstuffs, or other trade goods) continued into the eighteenth century. Hendrik Frappé, Willem van der Lint, Pieter E. Westra, and James C. Armstrong, *Slave Trade with Madagascar: The Journals of the Cape Slaver Leijdsman, 1715* (Cape Town: Africana Publications, 2006), 103.

<sup>121</sup> A French translation of the treaty document between Van der Stel and Filu Bucon can be found in Alfred Grandidier and Guillaume Grandidier, eds. *Collection des Ouvrages anciens concernant Madagascar, Tome VI: Ouvrages ou Extraits d'ouvrages anglais et hollandais. Complément (1598-1741)* (Paris: Union Coloniale, 1913), 19-21. Although the treaty specifies some details on the care, gender composition, and transportation of the slaves for sale, it is unlikely that the document was adhered to in any great extent.

they acquired were Malagasy in origin, and there is no evidence to suggest that this belief was incorrect. There is also no evidence that the eighteenth-century market phenomenon of slaves from Portuguese Mozambique being sold in Madagascar and advertised as Malagasy slaves was in existence at this time. Filu Bucon most likely acquired the slaves as a result of a war with a neighboring tribe; inter-tribal conflicts to capture slaves and cattle were very common in Madagascar during this period, and remained so until the mid-nineteenth century.

The utility of musicians in a slave-buying expedition did not end with the negotiations: on the return passage, music was needed to accompany “exercising the slaves,” when the slaves were removed from the confines of the ship’s hold and induced to dance. Without this important movement and exercise, mortality rates during the return passage skyrocketed, a phenomenon that was well understood from the Portuguese slaving expeditions of the preceding century. The Trans-Atlantic slave ships run by the VOC’s sister corporation (the WIC) purchased African drums to use when exercising these slaves,<sup>122</sup> but there is little evidence to suggest that VOC slave ships did likewise; most anecdotes of VOC slave ships refer to flutes and fifes being used for this purpose. Barring unusual circumstances, the slave-buying expeditions that supplied Mauritius were made using a ship attached to and crewed by the Dutch colony, so any such musicians would have come from the colony itself.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid; Dena J. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 9-16.

Slavery was not the easy solution the Governor-General envisioned. Barely a week after landing, a total of fifty-two (49.5%) of the new slaves had escaped into the island's interior. Van der Stel and his men made frantic efforts to recapture the escapees, but their exertions recovered a mere eighteen. Worse yet, their increased vigilance failed to prevent more slaves from escaping during the coming months.<sup>123,124</sup> These ongoing escapes sapped the colony's pool of manpower; with continual demands from their VOC superiors for more ebony and increased agriculture, the governors were forced to make repeated slave-buying expeditions to Madagascar. Because the Dutch colonists never entirely solved the problem of new slaves escaping, each expedition inadvertently added to the growing population of fugitive slaves hiding in the island's interior.

The main Dutch settlement and its buildings were located on the southeast side of the island, overlooking the southeast harbor. Despite the establishment of some outlying farms, the Dutch (and their slaves) were still largely confined to small pockets of the island, making it easy for escaped slaves to vanish into the interior or distant regions. The Dutch had some general idea of the regions that these *maroons* frequented thanks to their game-hunting expeditions into the interior, but actual contact was limited. Eventually, however, the Dutch deduced that some of the fugitive slaves had set up a sort of shadow

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<sup>123</sup> Moree, 31.

<sup>124</sup> Vaughan, 9.

colony, gathering in communities concentrated in the interior and along the island's northwest coast, on the shores of the northwest harbor.<sup>125</sup>

The shadow colony was an odd reflection of its Dutch counterpart. It included escaped slaves, a growing number of children born to the escapees, and even Europeans who deserted from the Dutch colony and from passing ships.<sup>126,127</sup> Despite its moniker, the shadow colony does not appear to have ever developed large community associations, but the sheer number of *maroons* was quite troubling to the Dutch – as was evidence that many of their own slaves had verbal contacts with *maroons*. Some of these escaped slaves lived semi-nomadically near the main Dutch settlement at the southeast harbor, periodically raiding it at night (sometimes with cooperation from non-escaped slaves) to commit arson and steal food supplies and alcohol.

*Maroon* raids were only one of the many issues facing the Dutch colony in Mauritius. Passing cyclones demolished its buildings, erased gardens, and even swept the cemeteries away with torrential floods. Its population of soldiers, settlers, and company employees swelled and ebbed erratically according to the fortunes of war and storms.

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<sup>125</sup> The reefs and sandbars that partially enclose the harbor would have provided excellent fishing conditions.

<sup>126</sup> The persistent agricultural problems of the Dutch colony doubtlessly contributed to the exodus of European convict-settlers – many of who had volunteered for service on the island to escape imprisonment in Bantam (or, later, Table Bay) – into the interior, where they could freely hunt, fish, and harvest fruit.

<sup>127</sup> A similar situation existed in Jamaica in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, where *maroon* communities also played an important role in the history and culture of the island. The “free towns” of Jamaica were eventually recognized by the government and integrated into the larger colony in acceptance of the status quo. See Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica: or, General Survey of the Antient and Modern State of That Island, in Three Volumes*, Vol. III (London: T. Lowndes, 1774), 420-29. Events in Mauritius would follow a different pattern.

When the shrinking Dutch colony attempted several times to wipe out the “shadow settlement” during the 1650s, it was unable to muster sufficient manpower to comb the island’s vast interior.<sup>128</sup> Anti-*maroon* patrols caught the occasional fugitive slave, but more often discovered no more than small, abandoned villages of huts and fisherman’s shanties. Tantalizingly, the sound of drums and singing could be heard in the hills (especially near Port Louis, with the nearby mountain range), but the thick forests made it difficult to locate the sources.<sup>129</sup>

Battered by cyclones, threatened by famine, and terrified of *maroon* attacks, the Colonial Council in Mauritius voted to evacuate the colony entirely in 1658, joining the more prosperous settlement established in Table Bay (modern Cape Town) just six years earlier. Although they burned many of their buildings to prevent their use by visitors from rival nations, the twenty years of settlement left an island that was ecologically transformed.

The temporary colonization left the flora, fauna, and inhabitation of the island significantly and permanently altered. The Dutch had introduced sugar cane and pepper plants; cleared large tracts of forest; introduced dogs, cats, pigs, cows, rats, Java deer, and Crab-eating macaques that became feral; and transported to the island a wide assortment of escaped Malagasy slaves that now constituted the shadow colony. The introduced

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<sup>128</sup> Vaughan, 10.

<sup>129</sup> These forests became a sort of bogeyman in their own right, with many letters giving accounts of men lost for hours, unable to find their way out, and of the ease with which *maroons* disappeared within them. The dense concentration of forest was only gradually cleared by the later French and English settlers by burning.



animals multiplied rapidly, especially the rats: hordes of rodents repeatedly threatened food crops and contributed to the extinction of the Dodo bird.<sup>130</sup> The island abandoned by the Dutch was less hospitable to agriculture than it had been before, but it remained an ideal environment for fishing, hunting, and gathering – in other words, perfectly suited to supporting the nomadic, hunter-gatherer lifestyles adopted by escaped slaves.

### **Inside the Personnel Records**

Most details of musical life in Mauritius during the first Dutch settlement must be inferred from short descriptions and ancillary sources. The personnel rolls of the colony show that at least one professional musician was always included in the garrison, even at its smallest size. The size of the garrison and the size of the colony as a whole varied according to the interest of the VOC directors. During periods when the VOC sensed a prospect of war, more than a hundred soldiers were present on the island; these complements included several drummers and trumpeters. In times of relative peace, the VOC – perennially short on manpower – stripped soldiers from the garrison for reassignment to other colonial endeavors; if a large number of soldiers was removed at once, they would be accompanied by a proportional number of musicians.

Studies of the use of drums and trumpets in VOC ships and colonies make it clear that these musical instruments were used for signals and communication throughout daily

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<sup>130</sup> The Dodo is arguably Mauritius' most famous resident and is today a major element of Mauritian iconography. For more on the Dodo, see Clara Pinto Correia's *Return of the Crazy Bird: the Sad, Strange Tale of the Dodo* (New York: Copernicus Books, 2003). Correia's study interweaves colonial history, firsthand accounts, and a narrative of the ecological history of Mauritius during the colonial period.

life. Drummers and trumpeters fulfilled near-identical roles on VOC ships and were in fact interchangeable among ships whose complements included only one musician.<sup>131</sup>

A study of the inventories of tools and weapons assigned to each man shows that they were not normally assigned work tools or firearms like the other soldiers, who were frequently called on to support the colony as hunters and workmen.<sup>132</sup> Given the colony's persistent manpower shortages and often demanding governors, this suggests that musicians were able to practice their profession regularly. (Other soldiers of similar ranks were issued tools and are frequently mentioned in dispatches for participating in regular activities such as logging, hunting, structural repair, and trimming the jungle.) Many – sometimes all – of the musicians assigned to the colony were drummers. This role, combined with their apparent lack of assignment to other duties, suggests that the soldiers of the garrison retained a military structure of the day in which drum signals were used throughout to indicate actions and events.<sup>133</sup>

Drumming was also a musical activity in the shadow colony: the Dutch colonists and sailors from ships calling at the island reported hearing the sound of drums in the afternoon and evening. The Europeans who stumbled across *maroon* huts and campsites

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<sup>131</sup> Ralph Henssen, "The Use of Trumpet on Board Ships of the Dutch East India Company," *Reprints from the International Trumpet Guild Journal*, ed. Elisa Koehler (January 2011): 27-37.

<sup>132</sup> The list of equipment in Moree, 24, 100 (sword, instrument, and instrumental accessories) is typical.

<sup>133</sup> This was most likely a rope tension drum (which could include a snare) of the type commonly depicted in seventeenth-century Dutch paintings and engravings. It was used in contexts ranging from military garrisons and merchant ships to civic bands and workshops. One such drum is depicted in Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* (1642), Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Ian F. Finlay, "Musical Instruments in 17th-Century Dutch Paintings," *The Galpin Society Journal* 6 (1953): 52-69.

found crude drums made with stretched animal hide and instruments made from hollowed gourds.<sup>134</sup> References to bits of song wafting through the hills and forest also fill letters and diaries from the first Dutch colonial period. When Dutch sailors and colonists eventually returned to Mauritius, they found ample evidence that the *maroon* community had thrived in their absence.

One innovation of the Dutch settlers from the original colony bears special mention: the development of *arrack*, an alcoholic liquor made from sugar cane. *Arrack* production was the singularly consistent success of Mauritian agriculture during the Dutch colonial period. This crude but potent beverage was appreciated by colonists, sailors, and escaped slaves alike. Colonists were repeatedly reprimanded for growing sugar cane for *arrack* in lieu of food crops; visiting sailors traded food and goods for the drink; and *maroons* raided the Dutch settlements regularly for women and alcohol. *Arrack* continued under the later French period as the lubricant of (hostile) settler-*maroon* and (amorous) slave-*maroon* interactions.

### **Interval**

*Our English friends told us that last year a Dutch privateer carrying a French commission, which had been pirating in the Red Sea, had reached St. Helena via Mauritius, and had removed from the latter island 40 Netherlanders who had some time previously been saved from two Dutch vessels wrecked there.*

*--Cape Colony Journal, on the wreck of the Arnhem*<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> A comparison of these descriptions with later accounts of *séga* instruments will be made in chapter 3.

<sup>135</sup> Jan Anthony van Riebeeck, ed. *Précis of the Archives of the Cape of Good Hope: Journal, 1662-1670* (Cape Town: W.A. Richards, 1901), 45.

During the interval between the first and second Dutch occupations of Mauritius (1658-1664), visiting ships and shipwrecked sailors were constantly aware of the island's remaining inhabitants. The sound of drums and singing echoed from the island's hills and forests, while shore parties discovered groups of huts, smoldering fires, and other signs of recent inhabitation. The evacuating Dutch settlers made no effort to recover the remaining *maroons*; with the departure of the Dutch, a large number of escaped slaves, deserters from the colony, and their descendants remained in the island's interior.<sup>136</sup>

Not all of members of the shadow settlement wished to stay hidden. A few deserters and Malagasies escaped the island by enlisting on ships that stopped to harvest the now-unprotected ebony forests.<sup>137</sup> Others visited the temporary logging camps established by visiting ships, trading game meat and *arrack* for tools and other food supplies.<sup>138</sup> This period of relative freedom persisted until 1664, when a new Dutch

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<sup>136</sup> Despite shackling slaves and convict-colonists alike, the Dutch were never able effectively to prevent slave escapes and desertions. As many as half of the slaves gained from each trading expedition would be lost to marronage in a matter of months, and few of them would ever be recaptured. The population of the "shadow settlement" (scattered individuals, small groups, and villages) is likely to have numbered several hundred at the time of the first Dutch evacuation.

<sup>137</sup> The ravages of scurvy and other diseases ensured that European merchant ships in the Far East were always in search of new sailors. Language was no significant barrier: a Dutch East Indiaman might pick up Malagasy crew in Madagascar, Malay sailors in Jakarta, Malabars in India, and Europeans who had deserted other ships in any point of call. French pirate ships and merchant vessels calling in Mauritius during the first Dutch settlement often left with Dutch convict-settlers or *maroons* added to their crews.

<sup>138</sup> The duration of the *arrack* trade suggests that at least one pocket of the shadow colony operated a distillery. This need not have required sugar cane cultivation, as enterprising Dutch settlers managed to distill the beverage from sources as varied as palm sap and sweet potatoes. See: P.J. Barnwell and Auguste Toussaint, *A Short History of Mauritius* (London: Longmans and Green, 1949), 29.

colonial expedition arrived in Mauritius; unfortunately, no surviving records give specific details on any musical activities during this period.

### **The Dutch Return**

*Lastly, there is Titus of Bengal, late servant of the convicted junior merchant, Willem Brand, banished by sentence at Batavia for life to Mauritius.*

--*General Journal of the Cape Colony*, 11 July 1696<sup>139</sup>

The decision to evacuate the Dutch colony in Mauritius in 1658 was made unilaterally by the colonial governor, the *Opperhoofd* Abraham Evertszoon.<sup>140</sup> The Directors of the VOC disagreed with this decision; as they learned of it too late to overrule the action, they settled for reprimanding Evertszoon. The Directors then took their customary delay before voting in 1663 to organize a new expedition.<sup>141</sup> This second settlement would last from 1664 until 17 February 1710.<sup>142</sup>

The Second and Third Anglo-Dutch Wars (1665-1667, 1672-1674) convinced the Directors that a strong colonial garrison was required. The second colonization of Mauritius was much larger than the first, often having more than three hundred European adults (plus children and slaves). The main settlement in Grand Port was considerably enlarged, with the colonial fort supplemented by numerous outlying buildings. The large

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<sup>139</sup> H. C. V. Leibbrandt, ed. *Précis of the Archives of the Cape of Good Hope: Letters Despatched, 1696-1708* (Cape Town: W.A. Richards, 1896), 45.

<sup>140</sup> Evertszoon's correspondence, preserved in the Dutch National Archives, is notable for its highly descriptive pessimism.

<sup>141</sup> This tardy action was spurred by increasing tensions with England, on the eve of the Anglo-Dutch war. See P.D. Hollingworth, "Population and Change: Three Centuries of Mauritian History," in *The Indian Cultural Review* 30, no. 1 (1968), 22-27.

<sup>142</sup> The exact date of arrival in Mauritius is missing from the surviving records.

garrison of professional soldiers and the increased number of families allowed more opportunities for cultural life on the island.

During the seventeenth century, the wealth and efflorescence of the Golden Age of Dutch Prosperity enlivened cultural life in the Netherlands. Cultural activities clustered around two common centers: the *rederijkerskamer* (a “chamber of rhetoric” analogous to the Italian oratory hall, used for literary readings, discussions, and lectures) and the *schutterij* (the barracks or meeting hall of the town militia). The second Dutch settlement of Mauritius in Grand Port lacked a dedicated *rederijkerskamer* but possessed a large barracks. The garrison records suggest that a military band of at least a dozen musicians was available for most of this period. With a large barracks hall abundantly supplied in firewood, the long night in Mauritius (10-12 hours year-round) would have afforded ample time for performances in the evening. As the garrison size drew down after the Third Anglo-Dutch War, more space in the barracks hall would have been available for other colonial activities.<sup>143</sup> Discussions of sermons and literature are known to have taken place in the main settlement.

The commercial success of the VOC during this period was matched by a growing richness of life in many of its colonies. As transient workers were replaced or supplemented with permanent settlers, many colonies came to feature elaborate and regular displays of amateur music making that attracted the attention of visitors. *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën* (1724-6), a mammoth eight-volume study of the VOC’s East Indies

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<sup>143</sup> The chapel in the main settlement may have also served in this capacity.

possessions, describes numerous concerts that its author, François Valentijn, observed and played in during his long career with the VOC. The colonies in Table Bay and Batavia – which supplied many of the soldiers, Company workers, and settlers in Mauritius during the second Dutch period – had particularly renowned concerts and chamber music making by amateur musicians of all social classes. Many privately- and Company-owned slaves were also taught to play “in a masterly fashion on all instruments” and group singing was widespread.<sup>144</sup>

European musical life in Mauritius is not likely to have approached the heights of Table Bay and Batavia, where the VOC’s best talents and resources were employed. Valentijn, who served in Table Bay, Batavia, and Amboina, arrived in the East Indies at the age of 19 with both a violin and a harpsichord. In each location, he was surrounded by music lovers and invited to play in numerous amateur concerts and ensembles. The demand for European instruments of skilled manufacture (such as his violin and harpsichord) by the Dutch colonists greatly outstripped the limited supply in the East Indies, and Valentijn eventually lost both of his instruments to less scrupulous musicians. Even deprived of them, however, he was still able to take part in concerts and musical sessions by singing and borrowing others’ instruments.<sup>145</sup>

The second Dutch colonization of Mauritius included a large number of *vrijburgers* (Dutch settlers not in the employ of the VOC). The *vrijburgers* established

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<sup>144</sup> François Valentijn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën* (Amsterdam: Linden Dordrecht van Braam, 1724-6), vol. 4, part 2, 98-107. Cited in Ian Woodfield, *English Musicians in the Age of Exploration* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1995), 247-48.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

farming estates around the island, acquired slaves and hired their own workers from abroad, and raised large families. Many *vrijburgers* arrived from Table Bay and Batavia, having saved enough capital laboring as workers and merchants to buy and settle their own estates in Mauritius. It is likely that these settlers brought some of the amateur music making of these more developed colonies when they moved to Mauritius.

### **Pirate Tourism**

One of the most curious incidents in Mauritian history testifies to the music making interest and abilities of the island's *vrijburgers*. On 7 January 1702, the pirate ship *Speaking Trumpet* ran aground and shipwrecked off the coast of Mauritius, stranding a group of one hundred and seventy well-armed pirates under the leadership of the Englishman John Bowen<sup>146</sup> on the island.<sup>147</sup> The outnumbered and thoroughly intimidated Dutch garrison decided to entertain the pirates, offering them food and entertainments (presumably including music) over a period of two and a half months. At one point, the promise of a large festive celebration was used to try and lure the pirates into an ambush in the central lodge/barracks building, where they could be killed *en masse*; this scheme was scuttled by the fact that only fifty of the pirates attended the

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<sup>146</sup> "Jan Boin" in Dutch sources.

<sup>147</sup> "To the Seventeen at Amsterdam," 24 January 1703. Reprinted in H. C. V. Leibbrandt, *Précis of the Archives of the Cape of Good Hope. Letters Despatched, 1696-1708* (Cape Town: W.A. Richards & Sons, Government Printers, Castle Street, 1896), 795.



event. (Whether this was due to the pirates' caution or prior dispersal across the island is unclear.)<sup>148</sup>

The visit by the crew of the *Speaking Trumpet* to Mauritius was largely benevolent: aside from the consternation of the Dutch governor and his garrison, the *vrijburgers* appear to have welcomed their visitors with open arms and shops. The pirates paid for their food, drink, and other purchases with silver and gold coins (in contrast to the paper scrip favored by the VOC) and policed themselves to control drunkenness and prevent any incidents. After the failure of the lodge ambush, the governor, Deodati, was at loss for alternatives and granted the pirates' original request: to purchase a ship from the colony so that they could leave the island.<sup>149</sup> Having passed much of the summer in the Southern Hemisphere in Mauritius, enjoying the local amusements, alcohol, and nature, the crew of the *Speaking Trumpet* overhauled the proffered vessel and sailed off into the distance on 24 March 1702.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> [Mauritius to Table Bay], 5 September 1702. Reprinted in S. V. D. Stel, *Précis of the Archives of the Cape of Good Hope. Letters Despatched: 1702*, ed. H. C. V. Liebbrandt (Cape Town: W.A. Richards, 1898), 308-09.

<sup>149</sup> [Mauritius to The Seventeen at Amsterdam], 24 January 1703. Reprinted in S. V. D. Stel, *Précis of the Archives of the Cape of Good Hope. Letters Despatched: 1703*, ed. H. C. V. Liebbrandt (Cape Town: W.A. Richards & Sons, Government Printers, Castle Street, 1899), 216.

<sup>150</sup> This "ship" – originally built as a lumber barge and in severe disrepair – was overhauled and lengthened by ten Dutch feet in order to accommodate the pirate complement on the high seas. The necessary work was undertaken by the crew of the *Speaking Trumpet* using materials furnished by the Dutch colony, with the ship and all of the requisite building materials purchased for 600 Rds of silver (which Deodati noted was greatly in excess of the dilapidated hulk's value) and four slaves valued at 50 Rds apiece. Colonial Council Resolution of 20 March 1702, reprinted in Albert Pitot, *T'Eylandt Mauritius. Equisses Historiques, 1598-1710* (Port Louis, Mauritius: 1905), 300.

The crew of the *Speaking Trumpet* left an island economy well stimulated by gold and silver specie and “enriched” by forty-two men that they left behind (twelve English and thirty “Moorish” or Arab prisoners, all of whom were quickly put to work). Before departing, several amongst the pirate crew announced their intent to return to Mauritius at a later date, after the pirates obtained a more suitable and seaworthy vessel. In response, the Colonial Council hastily requested weapons and more soldiers from Batavia and Table Bay, even exchanging convict-colonists for passing VOC employees to bolster their ranks.<sup>151</sup> These preparations proved an inadequate deterrent when the crew of the *Speaking Trumpet* returned two years later (in yet another vessel), on 6 February 1704, and their particular interests became clear.

This time, John Bowen and his crew (now numbering some two hundred men of mixed European and African composition) moored their new ship in the Northwest Port.<sup>152</sup> This position appears to have been chosen deliberately: not only was it on the opposite side of the island from the main Dutch settlement, but it was also close to two of the more distant *vrijburger* farming estates. These particular *vrijburgers* not only had ample edible produce for sale,<sup>153</sup> but three additional features of great attraction: tobacco for smoking, their own distilleries for making arrack from potatoes, and lively household music making. The captain and crew from the *Speaking Trumpet* would have been known of this location and its opportunities from their original visit; they had, in fact, stopped

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<sup>151</sup> [Mauritius to Table Bay], 5 September 1702. Reprinted in Stel, *Précis of the Archives of the Cape of Good Hope. Letters Despatched: 1703*, 308-9.

<sup>152</sup> The future Port Louis.

<sup>153</sup> Vaughan, 16.

there in March of 1702 (after their departure from the Southeast Port and the Dutch settlement) to purchase supplies.<sup>154</sup>

At the end of this second multi-month visit, the governor wrote to Table Bay complaining of the *vrijburgers*' behavior, noting that the price of tobacco had tripled, that they were unduly hospitable to the pirates (with whom they were acquainted from the prior visit), and that he had written them several reprimands for their repeated cavorting, singing, and dancing with the pirates.<sup>155</sup>

What sort of music would have been performed at the *vrijburger* households? The members of this household spent large times in isolation, with only an individual or family/household unit together except at deliberate social gatherings. This environment would have encouraged the practice of both solo and chamber music, as is recorded on many VOC ships and settlements during this period. Likely instruments include the smaller members of the viol family, flutes, recorders, fifes, and simple percussion instruments, all of whose presence in similar VOC environments is well documented.<sup>156</sup> It is unlikely that any colonists had access to large instruments such as the harpsichord

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<sup>154</sup> Pitot, *T'Eylandt Mauritius. Equisses Historiques*, 300.

<sup>155</sup> Moree, 91. Although several of the Dutch governors of Mauritius were accused of excessive cruelty and abusing their powers, the incidents involving the *Speaking Trumpet* are the first recorded attempts to censor musical activities in Mauritius. The fact that the *vrijburgers* were engaged in musical activities with the pirates was incidental; it was their association and friendliness with the pirates that the Dutch governor, Roelof Deodati, sought to curtail.

<sup>156</sup> Woodfield, 246-8.

brought by Valentijn to Jakarta, as his ownership of one in that more prosperous colony was considered unusual.<sup>157</sup>

The use of published scores of airs, dance suites, and even trio sonatas in other Dutch island colonies of similar size suggests that these genres were in the potential repertoire, plus the normal assortment of folk music and sea songs common to seafarers and sea travelers. Whatever military complement remained on the island would have contributed its own drums, fifes, and/or trumpets, plus any attendant repertoire, but by the time of the *Speaking Trumpet*'s visit the military complement had declined drastically in size from its peak during the Anglo-Dutch wars. By 1704, the diminished signaling complement could not spare a trumpeter or drummer for the watchers stationed to spot for potential pirates; the governor was forced to place a "good swimmer" at this post who would have to cross the river to relay warnings in case of emergency.<sup>158</sup>

Music was a social activity for many of the colonists and soldiers of the garrison, and apparently one that they looked forward to greatly. Several of Deodati's (many) complaints about the colonists and soldiers under his command are indictments against their wasting time on frivolous liberties such as playing cards and playing music.

*Opperhoofd* Deodati's own preferences for music appear to have leaned towards the more

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<sup>157</sup> A harpsichord was, in fact, so much in demand in Batavia that Valentijn's landlady separated him from it not long after his arrival. Valentijn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, vol. 4, part 2, 105. Cited in Woodfield, *English Musicians in the Age of Exploration*, 247.

<sup>158</sup> Colonial Council [of Mauritius] to Table Bay, 15 October 1704. Reprinted in Stel, *Precis of the Archives of the Cape of Good Hope: Letters Received, 1705*, 356.

ceremonial and functional, especially with military drills – the latter interest being most evident after the first visit by the *Speaking Trumpet*'s pirate crew.

The last recorded performance of music in Dutch Mauritius was organized by Abraham Momber van de Velde, Deodati's successor as *Opperhoofd* and Governor. Momber, having been overwhelmed by numerous cyclones, ordered a military parade to mark the second evacuation of the Dutch settlement. According to custom and the prevailing military practice of this time, the parade would have been accompanied by drums and fifes or trumpets. This election of pomp and circumstance turned disastrous when the cannon salutes fired at its close accidentally set fire to the main lodge, burning it down along with all of Momber's possessions. It was an unexpectedly flamboyant and final end to Dutch colonization and music making in Mauritius.<sup>159</sup>

### **Maroon Pressure**

The second Dutch colony in Mauritius was larger and (at least initially) more prosperous than its predecessor. It soon enjoyed the same relations – that is, hostile – as its predecessor with the *maroons* of the shadow colony. The new Dutch settlers lost a smaller percentage of slaves annually than their predecessors but were still forced to mount regular slave-buying expeditions to replenish losses from deaths and *marronage*. (Many slaves died and suffered injuries from *maroon* robberies and arson.) The large number of soldiers and settlers hunting for game around the main settlement in Grand

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<sup>159</sup> Pitot, *T'Eylandt Mauritius. Equisses Historiques*, 345-8.

Port pushed back the frontiers of the shadow colony, and by 1680 *maroon* raids were mostly restricted to theft from storehouses, attacks on the livestock, and raids on the supplies of *arrack* that the colony was now producing for export. Although many *vrijburgers* reported confrontations and incidents with marauding *maroons*, the Europeans' firearms made the attrition largely one-sided. Murder, when it was recorded, was usually the result of confrontations between marauding *maroons* and slaves. Every year, however, slaves and even disgruntled company servants were caught and tried for arson and theft.

This uneasy coexistence lasted for many years, with the Dutch making no concerted effort to wipe out the *maroons* – many of whom, judging by the small number of attacks and the large number of escaped slaves, appear to have lived peacefully away from the Dutch-controlled areas. The Dutch, for their part, were happy to avoid the dense forests of the interior. The Frenchman François Le Guat, writing before his imprisonment in Mauritius, remarked:

*In the middle of the country, in a plain surrounded by mountains, there is a wood which it is very dangerous to enter...the whole forming an inextricable labyrinth, and without affording any fruits to support the unfortunate wanderer who might be lost in it. A former Commandant of Mauritius, and his attendants, remained in this forest upwards of four days without tasting food, when they fortunately discovered an opening.*<sup>160</sup>

More than one expedition from the Dutch colony got lost in the forest when pursuing

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<sup>160</sup> Charles Grant, ed. Grant, Baron Charles. *The History of Mauritius or the Isle of France and the Neighbouring Islands from their First Discovery to the Present Time, Composed Principally from the Papers and Memoirs of Baron Grant who Resided 20 Years in the Island.* (London: W. Bulmer and Co., 1801), 143.

escaped slaves, returning home only after prolonged and fruitless wanderings. The densest forests acquired a mythical and monolithic reputation early on in the Dutch colonization,<sup>161</sup> becoming a sort of No Man's Land that the settlers only reluctantly passed into. This resulted in most of the settlers (with the exception of the most active hunters) preferring to only traverse the well-worn paths and the lands immediately around their settlements. The thick forest only gradually lost this reputation in the subsequent French rule as systematic logging and the use of fire for land clearing pushed the forests back. As a result, large areas of the island's coast and interior were ceded *de facto* to the runaway slaves.<sup>162</sup>

The uneasy and reluctant co-existence of the Dutch settlers and the shadow colony was ultimately disrupted by Mother Nature. In the last two decades of the second Dutch settlement (1690-1710), a trifecta of disasters began to strike the colony with frightening regularity: crop failures, hordes of rats, and devastating tropical cyclones. To make matters worse, the VOC began to withdraw the expensive military garrison just as conditions in the colony deteriorated in the face of nature's assault. As the number and scope of armed patrols declined, the void was filled by the *maroons*, whose raids, arson, and thefts pushed closer and closer to the heart of the colony.

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<sup>161</sup> Vaughan, 9.

<sup>162</sup> Stel, 168.

## The End

*A violent hurricane, which shook the most solid buildings, tore up large trees from the earth, and destroyed the harvest in Mauritius, blew away, like so much straw, their wretched habitations from the rock, and they had no other shelter but such as its cavities afforded them.*

– François Le Guat, 1695<sup>163</sup>

Many personal letters from the Dutch colonists during this period suggest a growing atmosphere of dread. They were painfully aware of the growing liberty with which *maroons* raided their settlements, and of their growing inability to defend themselves. As one colonist observed, writing to a friend in the Cape Colony at Table Bay,

*Eleven years ago some slaves escaped, and because of the impenetrable forests could never be recaptured. Some children have been born to them, and they have made the roads very unsafe . . . Last year they even set fire to the house situated five hours west of the Lodge.*<sup>164</sup>

After repeated attacks on residences, the dwindling garrison attempted several punitive expeditions into the interior, but by now it lacked the manpower to remove the threat. At the same time, a growing number of slaves took advantage of the disturbance to escape and join the ranks of the *maroons*. As an English visitor in the last years of the colony noted,

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>164</sup> H. C. V. Liebbrandt, ed., *Précis of the Archives of the Cape of Good Hope: Letters Received, 1695-1708* (Cape Town: W.A. Richards, 1896), 27. The presence of female slaves was due to deceptions made by slave merchants in Madagascar, who made great efforts to disguise children and women and sell them as men. The Dutch usually did not discover these deceptions until afterwards; its frequent mention in trade documents indicates that this was an ongoing problem. A 31 October 1696 letter from the Dutch Colony in Table Bay, for example, requests that a local potentate “see that their [the slaves’] strength, age and sex be properly notified, [and] that we may not, as has often happened, receive women instead of men.” “To the King of Madagascar,” 31 October 1696. Reprinted in Ibid., 31-2.



*Divers[e] of their slaves, disliking both work and food and wages fled into the mountains and though thereby they little bettered their condition, yet many of them are thereby freed from servitude. Some of these miserable people were again attacked [and recaptured] and are now voyagers toward Batavia,<sup>165</sup> yet upwards of thirty men, women and children are so hid and fenced in the mountains that they cannot be recovered, notwithstanding the commander's utmost industry for their apprehension.<sup>166</sup>*

With the Dutch colony deteriorating rapidly, the author held no illusions about the colonist's prospects of victory, concluding, "*in all probability they [the maroons] may become the populace and masters of this rugged island.*"<sup>167</sup>

The traveler's prediction came true, and the Dutch presence on Mauritius came to a definitive end on 17 February 1710, when the last colonists from the second colonization were removed to the larger and thriving colony in Table Bay. It was a rare reversal at the peak of the VOC's political and economic power in the Far East. Before departing, the Dutch razed all of their structures and fortifications, leaving behind only ruins where estates, factories, and warehouses once stood. The *maroons* of the shadow colony were the masters of Mauritius.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> I.e., sent to Batavia for trial and imprisonment; the colonists could not afford to maintain a large prison.

<sup>166</sup> P.J. Barnwell, *Visits and Despatches, Mauritius, 1598-1948* (Port Louis: Standard Printing Establishment, 1948), 32.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> The decision to evacuate the colony was made in 1706, but soldiers from the garrison remained on the island until 1710. The shadow settlement received its final addition from the Dutch in the last days of the colony, when a male Dutch settler fled into the interior with two female slaves owned by another settler.

### **The *Niederlander* Legacy**

The Dutch abandonment of Mauritius brought their colonial music traditions on the island to a close. The colonists relocated to Table Bay were blended into the larger there colony; no evidence suggests that their integration changed musical life in that large colony in any fashion other than the mundane. The cultural legacy of the VOC in Mauritius lay in the people left behind: escaped slaves bought in Madagascar, their descendants, and European deserters from both the colony and passing ships. In the eleven years between the end of the second Dutch settlement and French colonization, the *maroons* of the shadow colony banded together into communities with a size and organization far greater than ever glimpsed by the Dutch.

In 1721, the first French settlers set foot in Mauritius; their largest settlements were quickly raided by separate bands composed of as many as fifty *maroons*. Although the number of escaped slaves had outnumbered the second Dutch settlement in its last years, the *maroons* never had dared to band together *en masse* to challenge their former masters. In the decade following the final Dutch evacuation several organized and tight-knit *maroon* communities coalesced: communities that were sufficiently large and stable to organize and mobilize dozens of armed men to carry out organized and coordinated raids. As the French explored Mauritius and pushed back against *maroon* attacks, they observed hints of *maroon* society and culture, including fragments of what would later be called *séga*. It is from their experiences and observations that a detailed understanding of the *maroon* music and culture that developed during Dutch rule can be gleaned.

### **III. Music in French Mauritius: The Creation of “The Little Paris of the Indian Ocean” (1721-1810)**

The story of music in French Mauritius provides fascinating insights into eighteenth-century European geopolitics and the mechanics of colonization and French colonial culture. European art music became a major factor in the development of the colony, used to attract and retain valuable personnel ranging from soldiers and scientists to pirates who were convinced to abandon their trade for civilian life. This same music helped attract ships and sailors from an uncommonly diverse mix of nations, drawing with them a large commercial traffic that briefly made the capital of Mauritius one of the most prosperous and cosmopolitan ports in the Far East. These musical resources were even channeled into military ends, averting a British invasion and helping to organize the French soldiers and sailors who battled British and British-allied forces in India and the Indian Ocean. Mauritian music was an important and highly influential factor in the numerous Anglo-French wars of the eighteenth century.

Not all music in Mauritius related directly to war, of course, and the story of music on the island is much larger than that of international conflicts. An examination of the history of European art music in Mauritius presents numerous fascinating case studies that illuminate our knowledge of the global spread of culture,<sup>169</sup> the deliberate

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<sup>169</sup> For most of the history of French Mauritius, the spread of European and European-based culture follows a center-to-periphery dissemination model with the production of drama, music, and literature occurring in metropolitan France and later spreading to Mauritius. This pattern of cultural dissemination was disrupted during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic

engineering of colonial culture and society, the dynamics of immigration and integration, and social politics. Important episodes describe the construction of colonial and slave identities, moderate interpretations by colonists of the ideas and ideals of the French Revolution, and social engineering projects that prefigure the postcolonial endeavors of the twentieth century. Numerous colorful and memorable anecdotes abound to enliven the general narrative.

The story of music in French Mauritius is not limited to European art music, however. While European (primarily French) music dominated the social world of the European colonists, the island's swelling population of African, Malagasy, and Creole slaves practiced *séga* song and dance. The endemic *séga* tradition appears to have originated amongst the members of the "shadow colony" of escaped slaves and refugees left in Mauritius after the final Dutch evacuation of the island.<sup>170</sup> Both the European art music and the *séga* music of Mauritius were of great interest to visitors, and descriptions of Mauritian music fill numerous examples of popular and scientific literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These descriptions, coupled with details from archival records, allow for a detailed ethnographic study of the origin and evolution of

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Wars, when the island was largely cut off from metropolitan France and began to both develop its own cultural offerings and absorb cultural streams from Great Britain (mostly via privateer captures) and the United States. The development of *séga* during this period, by contrast, is an example of an entangled transcultural world in which multiple streams of arriving slaves were mixed with the island's existing slave community. See Christiane Brosius and Roland Wenzlhuemer, *Transcultural Turbulences Towards a Multi-Sited Reading of Image Flows* (Berlin: Springer, 2011), 8-11.

<sup>170</sup> See chapter 2.

*séga* as an instance of African and Malagasy diaspora culture.<sup>171</sup> The current usage and prominence of *séga* in Mauritius today, particularly in its schools and tourism industry,<sup>172</sup> give additional impetus to such a study.

The current chapter takes the general form of a historical narrative following music through the history of Mauritius under French rule (1721-1810). The main narrative is chronological; occasional diversions are taken to document and comment on important aspects of and factors related to music that would be drowned out within a strict chronology. It is informed by numerous archival documents from England, France, and Mauritius; by letters, journals, and travelogues found in American, British, French, and Mauritian libraries and archives; by an extensive review of contemporary and secondary literature; and by recent findings in Mauritian archaeology.

### **Sources on French Mauritius**

Most archival documents related to Mauritius during the French Period are found in the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer in Aix-en-Provence, France, and in the Mauritian National Archives in Coromandel, Mauritius. In most cases, the original copies of colonial records have been retained in the Mauritian National Archives, with a more limited set transmitted in copy form to France. Many of the originals in Mauritius are in an advanced state of decay due to the tropical climate, however, and the presence of more

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<sup>171</sup> For additional information on African and Malagasy diaspora culture in the Indian Ocean region, especially concerning Mauritius and its neighbors, see Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya and Richard Pankhurst, *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003).

<sup>172</sup> See chapter 6.

legible duplicates in France is invaluable. A significant number of documents also exist only in copy form in France due to fires, cyclone damage, and archive purges in Mauritius. Some documents (most notably ships' journals and some copies of colonial records) sent to France were intercepted *en route* by British naval vessels and are stored in the National Archives of the United Kingdom in Kew Gardens, UK.

The archives of the French East India Company are primarily stored in the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer; some related documents can be found in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France-François Mitterand in Paris.<sup>173</sup> A number of documents related to Mauritius during the French Revolution are also stored in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal in the same city. Some civil and military records and the personal papers of General Decaen are housed in the Bibliothèque Municipale de Caen in Caen, France.

Censors' copies survive of opera scores and libretti for opera performances in Port Louis from the French Revolution through the mid-twentieth century. These copies, which are said to include lists of all cuts and modifications made for performances, were formerly stored in the Archives-Municipales de Port Louis. They have recently been transferred to the Conservatoire-François Mitterand<sup>174</sup> in Quatre Bornes, Mauritius, but are not currently available for public access. Claudie Ricaud, the Director of the Conservatoire-François Mitterand, is currently conducting a scholarly study of the censors' copies.

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<sup>173</sup> The French East India Company will sometimes hereafter be referred to by its shortened French appellation, "La Compagnie" ("The Company").

<sup>174</sup> The Conservatoire François-Mitterand is the national conservatory of music in Mauritius, with one central campus and six satellite locations as of March 2012.

Most British documents about Mauritius from this period can be found in the National Archives of the United Kingdom and in the British Library in London. The central records of La Compagnie's rival, the British East India Company, are housed in the India Office Records and Private Papers collection at the British Library; these include several strategic assessments of the island, comparative data on trade, and descriptions of Mauritius written by British agents. Transcripts of British parliamentary debates about Mauritian privateers can be found in the numerous published records of the Houses of Parliament, especially the volumes classified under "Proceedings" and "Debates."

A few other repositories deserve mention. The National Library of Australia in Canberra, Australia, contains an extensive collection of Mauritianiana including a large collection of rare books and unpublished manuscripts related to the island. It also possesses several important letters by the British explorer Captain Matthew Flinders; Flinders was imprisoned in Mauritius from 1803-10 and his letters provide many details of Mauritian social life and amateur music making on the island. Most of the rest of his original letters are stored in the Carnegie Library in Curepipe, Mauritius. The Peabody-Essex Museum Library in Salem, Massachusetts contains ship's journals from several vessels that stopped in Mauritius during and after the American Revolution. Numerous American universities have also acquired scattered letters and journals related to Mauritius.

Period literature, largely comprising travelogues, provides the most detailed font of information on social life in French Mauritius. The arrival of the French Revolution on

the island spurred the introduction of several newspapers and newsletters on the island, as well as the keeping of detailed minutes of meetings by the Colonial Council and other new organs of representative government. Auguste Toussaint's *Early Printing in Mauritius, Reunion, Madagascar* (Amsterdam: Vangendt, 1969) contains an appendix listing every book known to have been published in Mauritius prior to the British conquest in December 1810. Auguste and Adlophe H. Toussaint's expansive *Bibliography of Mauritius, 1502-1954; Covering the Printed Record, Manuscripts, Archivalia and Cartographic Material* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Esclapone, 1956) remains the most comprehensive (if only *mostly* exhaustive) listing of period literature on Mauritius and literature on Mauritius in general.<sup>175</sup> Brief but important additions to the list of Mauritian periodicals (through 2012) can be found in Robert Furlong's article "Les Revues Littéraires Mauriciennes: Socle d'une Francophilie Historique," *Loxias* 37 (2012), <http://revel.unice.fr/loxias/index.html?id=7070>. A number of subject-specific annotated bibliographies are also available, but none providing specific coverage on the music of Mauritius.

## **Background to the French Colonial Period in Mauritius**

The Dutch evacuation of Mauritius took place in a general atmosphere of retrenchment by the Dutch Republic. The death of William III in 1702 left a leadership

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<sup>175</sup> The National Library of Mauritius currently maintains the country's national bibliography series, published under the series title *National Bibliography of Mauritius*. Volumes listing works published from 1996-2000, 2001-2003, and 2004-5 have been published in the past decade. Works published in the interval from 1955-95 and from 2006-present have yet to be described in a comprehensive bibliographic format.



vacuum in the United Provinces, with the office of Stadtholder lying vacant for the next forty-five years. The resultant retreat from an aggressive foreign policy was mirrored in the actions of the Dutch East India Company, which discarded the expansionist and monopolizing policies of Jan Pieterszoon Coen<sup>176</sup> in favor of more conservative activities and investments. This left an opportunity for the VOC's French counterpart, La Compagnie Française des Indes Orientales, to make new inroads into the East Indies trade. One of these inroads was the French colonization of Mauritius in 1721.<sup>177</sup>

The "French East India Company," as it is generally known in English, was established in 1664 to consolidate French trade with the Far East. The brainchild of Jean-Baptiste Colbert, then a rising star in the royal ministries, La Compagnie was organized as a joint-stock company with its initial funding granted by Louis XIV. Flush with this initial capital, the corporation successfully colonized the island of Bourbon (modern "Réunion") just one year after receiving its charter, giving France a toehold in the southern Indian Ocean a mere day's voyage from Mauritius.<sup>178</sup> Although Bourbon lacked a natural harbor, the combination of fertile volcanic soil and the large-scale introduction of slavery soon produced a fast-growing colony with regular agricultural surpluses.<sup>179</sup>

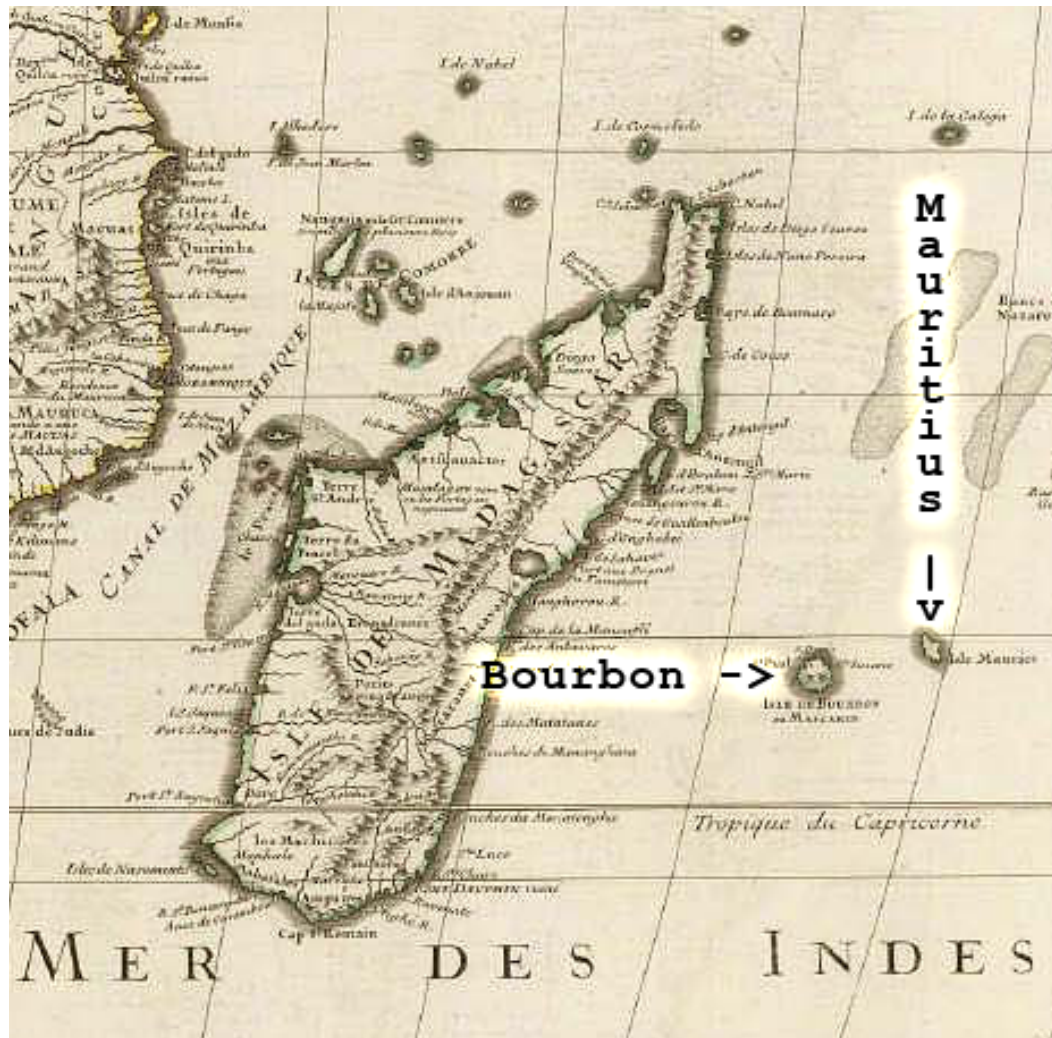
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<sup>176</sup> See chapter 2.

<sup>177</sup> The French captain Guillaume Dufresne d'Arseel stopped at the island in 1715 and claimed it in the name of the French East India Company, but the company took no actions to exploit the island until 1721.

<sup>178</sup> Bourbon/Réunion is located southwest of Mauritius. The distance between Port Louis in Mauritius and the anchorage of Saint-Pierre in southern Bourbon (the closest anchorage then in use) is about one hundred and fifty miles.

<sup>179</sup> Despite Île Bourbon's proximity to Mauritius, the rivalry between the VOC and La Compagnie prohibited commercial relations between the two as a matter of course. Prior to 1721,



**Figure 10 - Location of Mauritius and Île Bourbon/La Réunion<sup>180</sup>**

Whereas the Dutch settlements in Mauritius fluctuated in size according to VOC investments and defense priorities, Bourbon grew steadily; unlike its Dutch rival, La

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there was only irregular contact between the two sister islands, almost always of an accidental or hostile nature.

<sup>180</sup> Image generated from Guillaume de Lisle, *Carte du Congo et du Pays des Cafres. Par G. De l'Isle de l'Academie Royale des Sciences. A Paris, chez l'Auteur sur le Quai de l'Horloge, avec Privilege, Janvier 1708.* Guillaume de Lisle, *Atlas de Géographie* (Paris: Guillaume de Lisle, 1731), 83.

Compagnie was very successful in attracting settlers from its home country. These men from metropolitan France set up vast plantations on Bourbon, engaged in concubinage with their slaves, summoned wives and families from France, and/or married emancipated Africans.<sup>181</sup> The steady growth of the colony in Bourbon was funded in large part by proceeds from the cultivation of coffee, a highly profitable cash crop in the seventeenth century that could be sold in both Far Eastern and European markets.<sup>182</sup> This gave La Compagnie strong local human, financial, and agricultural resources to sustain the colonizing expeditions to Mauritius that began in 1721.

The French East India Company and its predecessors had actually attempted to colonize Mauritius several times before 1721. As Bourbon did not possess a natural harbor (the modern harbors are all artificial), ships were forced to anchor offshore where they were exposed to the full force of storm-driven currents that could smash them against the rocky shoreline and coastal shoals. Without a harbor, a ship was also highly vulnerable to “cutting out” expeditions by pirates and rival navies.<sup>183</sup> The first French colonization effort, sent before word reached France of the first Dutch colonization, turned back after meeting the island’s garrison. The second, launched when the island was thought to be abandoned, was similarly deterred by another surprise encounter with

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<sup>181</sup> Excepting polygamy, these actions were by no means mutually exclusive, as attested by numerous sermons and travelogues.

<sup>182</sup> Bourbon’s volcanic soils and highland interior is unusually well suited to coffee cultivation.

<sup>183</sup> This was demonstrated several times during the Napoleonic Wars, when captured British ships were recovered by cutting-out parties that were able to row up to the unprotected ships at anchor.

Dutch soldiers. The final evacuation of Dutch Mauritius provided a new opportunity for La Compagnie to seize the island and finally gain a protected anchorage to use as a waystation in the French East Indies trade.

Unfortunately for La Compagnie, word of the Dutch evacuation reached France in the middle of the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-14). The advent of peace several years later coincided with the expiration of the French East India Company's fifty-year monopoly on the French Far East trade. The resulting competition and falling profits drove La Compagnie to near insolvency, and it was only after several mergers and the granting of a new monopoly in 1719 that it returned to financial health.<sup>184</sup> This flirtation and merger with its competition ultimately proved invigorating for the reorganized corporation, however, and it sent a record number of ships to the Far East in 1720.<sup>185</sup> The normal demands of refitting and repairing these ships stretched the limited naval facilities at Bourbon to their limit; the next year, orders were drafted for a locally organized expedition from the island to take control of and colonize Mauritius as a second island base for La Compagnie.

On 24 December 1721, a group of settlers arrived from Île Bourbon to establish a colony on Mauritius, which they renamed Île-de-France.<sup>186</sup> They soon established two main settlements in Mauritius: one on the western coast along the harbor now known as Port Louis, and the other on the southeast coast along the harbor of Grand Port (the same

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<sup>184</sup> Hermann Kulke, *A History of India*, 5th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 224.

<sup>185</sup> Jeremy Black, *From Louis XIV to Napoleon: The Fate of a Great Power* (London: UCL Press, 1999), 91.

<sup>186</sup> "Mauritius" will now be used exclusively in place of Île-de-France.

place formerly occupied by the main Dutch settlement). Port Louis was the natural choice for the main French base, as it faced Île Bourbon and was nearer to it.<sup>187</sup>

The proximity to its sister colony allowed the French colony in Mauritius to grow quickly. After less than a year of settlement (1722), the French colony numbered 190 Europeans and 648 African slaves, more than double the peak population of the Dutch settlements during peacetime.<sup>188</sup> An initial small group of African slaves was brought over from Bourbon, but the soaring demand for labor required the importation of large numbers of new slaves from Madagascar and the Mozambique coast. As all slaves technically remained under the ownership of La Compagnie during this period, they could be employed for large-scale land-clearing projects to create space for vast plantations of sugar cane and other food crops.<sup>189</sup> As with the Dutch settlements, much of the sugarcane harvest was soon diverted for distilling *arrack*.

### **Rumblings of *Séga* and Slave-*Maroon* Relations**

The arrival of the French and the prosperity of their new colony did not go unnoticed by the island's other inhabitants: large numbers of *maroons* raided the settlements, often in sizable groups. In 1724, the governor Denis de Nyon wrote to his

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<sup>187</sup> Sailing to Grand Port, the harbor at which the main Dutch settlements were constructed, would have added two or more hours' voyage due to the maneuvers required. Grand Port was also smaller, possessed of reefs and sandbars that were more difficult to navigate, and required more favorable wind conditions to exit.

<sup>188</sup> Alfred North-Coombes, *A History of Sugar Production in Mauritius* (Mauritius: Mauritius Printing Specialists [Pte] Ltd., 1993), 141.

<sup>189</sup> The use of fire for forest clearing dramatically accelerated this work.

superiors of a large band of “fifty *maroons*” that was terrorizing the colony.<sup>190</sup> The *maroons* sought food, alcohol, weapons – and the company of both genders. The (voluntary and involuntary) abduction of plantation slaves was a frequent scourge to the French settlers. A mass breakout of slaves was uncommon, since the *maroons* do not appear to have been interested in emancipation by force of arms. Instead, the *maroons* kidnapped men and women for companionship, often scouting for slaves of a similar ethnic (and hence language) background during the day and then abducting them at night.

*Maroonage* in French Mauritius was a very different phenomenon than *maroonage* in places such as Jamaica and Palmares (Brazil).<sup>191</sup> In these other cases, *maroons* created large permanent settlements with organized governments – governments that not engaged in negotiations and conventional wars with European colonial powers. Organized slave-freeing expeditions and the harboring of escaped slaves by the *maroons* triggered organized military retaliations by the colonial authorities, leading to a series of wars that eventually overcame the *maroon* communities in Jamaica and Palmares.<sup>192</sup> Despite a few fanciful and speculative portrayals by French writers, there is no evidence

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<sup>190</sup> AN: C4/1: De Nyon to La Compagnie, 22 September 1724. This group mounted daring daylight raids on the scattered French settlements and robbed travelers. Killings were rare but the loss in property, supplies, and food was considerable.

<sup>191</sup> The maroon communities in Jamaica and Palmares were two of the largest, longest-lived, and most famous maroon communities in the world. Each successfully defended itself for several decades against attacks by European colonial forces before finally succumbing to conquest. For information on the Jamaican maroons, see Mavis Christine Campbell, *The Maroons of Jamaica, 1655-1796: A History of Resistance, Collaboration & Betrayal* (Granby, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1988). For an English-language introduction to the Palmares maroons, see Robert Nelson Anderson, “The Quilombo of Palmares: A New Overview of a Maroon State in Seventeenth-Century Brazil,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 28, no. 3 (1996): 545-566.

<sup>192</sup> A single one of the five *maroon* towns of Jamaica, Accompong, has survived into the present day. The other four were conquered and destroyed in the Second Maroon War (1795-96).

that the shadow colony ever reached the advanced state of government and social coalescence seen in Jamaica and Brazil. Instead, the largest *maroon* communities in French Mauritius appear to have consisted of fewer than one hundred individuals, with the typical large community numbering around fifty men and women.<sup>193</sup> Numerous smaller bands also existed, often gathered around a single strong or charismatic individual. The relatively small size of the *maroon* communities in Mauritius allowed them to exist in much closer proximity to French plantations and villages than their *maroon* counterparts elsewhere, and to take advantage of geographic features such as concealing hills, sunken valleys, and caves to conceal their places of residence.

The small size of *maroon* communities in French Mauritius and their frequent close proximity to European settlements are but two of the special traits that marked *maroonage* in French Mauritius. Two others are almost unique to the island: a very high percentage of slaves who engaged in short-term *maroonage* and an almost-as-high percentage of short-term *maroons* who returned voluntarily to their masters. According to one estimate, as many as half of the island's slaves *marooned* over a three year period, mostly for periods of less than a month; at the same time, the highest recorded rate of *maroon* captures accounted for only 1.7 percent of the island's slave population per

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<sup>193</sup> It is both possible and likely that larger *maroon* communities existed in Mauritius during the Intercolonial Period, and that these communities dispersed as a matter of practicality as the French colony expanded.

year.<sup>194</sup> This discrepancy is not the result of imperfect figures – it is a reflection of the extent to which short-term *maroonage* was part of Mauritian slave culture and society.

The majority of slaves who *marooned* from their plantations engaged in *marooning* as a transitory activity, mixing with their fellow *maroons* (some of whom were long-term or “grand” *maroons* of a more permanent sort) for a limited interval before returning to plantation life. Most slaves who *marooned* joined *maroons* that they already knew; where recorded, they almost always communicated using various Malagasy dialects (which were mutually intelligible to vary degrees) or Mauritian Kreol (a *patois* derived from simplified French and the main language of communication between slaves and their masters or slaves of different origins). In many cases, male *maroons* and female slaves appear to have met at the nighttime celebrations with *séga* music and dancing that were organized by the permanent *maroons*. *Maroons* approached plantation slaves during the day, enticed the slaves to join them for an evening celebration, and in some cases followed this activity later by either abducting the slaves or enticing them to *maroonage*.<sup>195</sup>

The earliest detailed accounts of Mauritian *séga* date from the first decade of the French colonization. By the end of this decade, evidence suggests that *séga* was being

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<sup>194</sup> This is the percentage of the total slave population captured in the act of *marooning* in 1806, when the largest number of *maroon* hunters in the island’s history was employed to catch runaway slaves. This huge disparity between short-term *maroonage* rates and capture rates is typical. Only a tiny fraction of short-term *maroons* became long-term *maroons*. See H. Prentout, *L’Île de France sous Decaen, 1803-1810* (Paris: Hachette, 1901), 143.

<sup>195</sup> The testimony of female slaves accused of *maroonage* is often contradictory as to how they met the (male) *maroons* that they accused of kidnapping them. See, for example, MNA JB 4: Procédure Criminelle, 1741-1746, especially 9 September 1746.



practiced by groups of slaves in all areas of the island, a very rapid transmission in a place with primitive roads and legal limitations on the movements of slaves. Furthermore, new slaves (being the property of the French East India Company) were typically assigned upon arrival to new plantations on the periphery of the existing settlements. The relative isolation and diverse origins of the new slaves does not appear to have been a significant barrier to the rapid transmission of *séga* to newcomers.

This transmission of *séga* was facilitated by fundamental differences in the behavior of escaped or *marooning* slaves in Dutch and French Mauritius. In Dutch Mauritius, an escaped slave voluntarily returning to his or her master or mistress was a very unusual phenomenon. In French Mauritius, on the other hand, this was commonplace. This was partly due to the forcible abduction of slaves by some *maroons* and partly due to the stability and opportunities (e.g., permanent shelter, more regular food rations, particular social bonds, etc.) that plantation life offered compared to the semi-nomadic *maroon* existence. Many of the *maroon* communities purchased food and alcohol from sympathetic plantation slaves or (if they did not have friendly contacts) raided the plantations for the same purpose.

The chief danger of the *maroon* life was being recaptured; the French soon organized regular patrols to scour the countryside near Port Louis, looking for runaway slaves. If a slave returned voluntarily, their master might punish them lightly and not report the matter to the magistrate. If an anti-*maroon* patrol recaptured a slave, however, the laws of La Compagnie mandated a series of brutal and escalating punishments –

unless a case of hostile abduction was offered and accepted by the court.<sup>196</sup>

Unsurprisingly, hostile abduction was the most common alibi given when slaves were recaptured or returned to their masters voluntarily.<sup>197</sup>

This close contact and proximity is documented in the trial transcripts of slaves accused of marooning and by the reports of hunters and anti-*maroon* patrols. In 1722, French patrols regularly came across semi-permanent huts of the same sort discovered by visitors in the 1660s and by Dutch patrols in the last decades of Dutch colonization. As the French settlements and plantations grew, however, building these structures became a liability for *maroon* communities, which either moved to more distant locations or took other measures. Large groups of fifty or more *maroons* settled in large caves in the mountains and on the coast; smaller bands inhabited smaller caves and rudimentary shelters in the hills, mountains, and forests. The expansion of the plantations into the hilly interior, driven by cooler climates and undeveloped land, put *maroons* and slaves into close proximity in conditions where the local terrain favored a quick escape to a hidden valley or the shelter of the opposite side of the hill.

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<sup>196</sup> The penalties for *grand marronage* (“long-term” *marooning*) were quite severe. One ear was cut off for the first offense, the other ear for the second, and death prescribed for third-time offenders. In practice, the death penalty was rarely exercised due to the high value of any slave, being replaced by a heavy iron collar around the slave’s neck. Banditry, murder, and assaulting a European person were *usually* the only crimes that would lead to a slave’s execution. Vijayalakshmi Teelock, *Mauritian History: From Its Beginnings to Modern Times*, rev. ed. (Moka, Mauritius: Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 2009), 127.

<sup>197</sup> Some slaves returned voluntarily after periods of as long as three years, weary of their *maroon* companions or the associated lifestyle. This was not an action taken lightly after such a long absence, as the chance of losing an ear was high.

## Constructing the “Little Paris”

Previous research on cultural life in Mauritius during the early stages of the French colonization has been heavily dependent on two types of sources: travelogues from visitors and court transcripts from the trials of recaptured slaves accused of “flight from their rightful masters” and other (mostly violent) crimes. These provide important outsiders’ perspectives (from travelers on Mauritius and from court officials on the recaptured slaves) but little perspective on the regular cycle of entertainments or its development. Many of these latter details *are*, however, buried in the business correspondence of the French East India Company. This correspondence contains a surprising level of detail in anecdotes hidden in building status reports, accounts of military action, and other mundane records.

The first explicit mention of European art music in Mauritius is found in a 1736 letter reporting the status of military fortifications being constructed for the French East India Company. Its author, Jean-François Charpentier de Cossigny *père*, was a career military engineer in the service of La Compagnie, and often worked details about colony life into the body of his official reports. (His previous assignments had evidently gained him several friends in the company’s metropolitan offices, as these reports are chatty to a degree not found in any other official reports and dispatches from this period.) In a letter dated Christmas Day, 1736, Cossigny notes with unaccustomed excitement the arrival of a Seigneur Gaucher and his wife from nearby Bourbon with their daughter:

*The girl was very likeable and sang quite prettily. She had [unfortunately] lacked the voice to stay [for more than a few years] at the Opera in Paris, where she had*

*tested herself [and her fortune] in many performances before returning to Bourbon [with her family].*<sup>198</sup>

Cossigny was not unfamiliar with the subtleties of European art music; his personal correspondence (as above, generally buried in official letters and reports) includes numerous discussions of and allusions to music and the theater. Some of his letters even include running commentary on the latest artistic entertainments in Paris – no mean feat when the transit time for letters was several months. Thus, when he expressed his opinion of Mademoiselle Gaucher’s singing, he did so as an informed connoisseur possessing an education and a cultivated taste.<sup>199</sup> The other colonists evidently shared his positive assessment: when an affair was discovered between Mlle. Gaucher and a missionary priest and a scandal broke out, they resolved the matter by sending the *priest* back to France and retaining Mlle. Gaucher.<sup>200</sup>

The presence of Mlle. Gaucher appears to have been a catalyst for the development of music on the island. A letter from Cossigny just two years later reports that he had constructed a cabaret modeled “after one of the cabarets of the Languedoc Canal”<sup>201</sup> at the request of the island’s new governor, Mahé de Labourdonnais.<sup>202</sup> As no other singer is described in his letters from this period, this cabaret-theater appears to have been constructed expressly to feature Mlle. Gaucher, though it seems to have also

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<sup>198</sup> Cossigny to M. Le Controleur. Isle de France, 25 Dec 1736. AOM C/4/2.

<sup>199</sup> Cossigny’s comments suggest that Mlle. Gaucher had a *soubrette* soprano voice; *soubrette* roles of this period were typically young, attractive, and flirtatious characters, which fit perfectly with other observations about her.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid. This colorful episode and the reasons for the priest’s sudden departure are, amusingly, omitted from the missionary records in AOM 249 MIOM/3.

<sup>201</sup> The Canal Royal de Languedoc is now known as the Canal du Midi.

<sup>202</sup> Cossigny to M. Le Controleur. Isle de France, 25 Oct 1738. AOM 204 MIOM 3.

been used for amateur theater performances (themselves common on Indiamen voyages)<sup>203</sup> and instrumental concerts.<sup>204</sup> The timing of Mlle. Gaucher's arrival and the construction of the cabaret also suggest that her arrival may have guided the governor's decision to import musicians and instruments from metropolitan France, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

### **Visitor Accounts**

Travelogues in the eighteenth century were written by a much wider variety of authors and travelers than the preceding century. This broadening of authorship can be attributed to the general increase, security, and regularity of trade: the traditional authors (sailors and naval officers) were joined by explorers, merchants, administrators, and even spouses. With the fall in printing prices in eighteenth-century Europe, they were an inexpensive and popular form of literature, and the rapid development of outposts involved in the India trade drove a regular demand for new works, and letters from overseas could be conveyed through the mail systems of the various East India companies. The extended voyage to the Indian Ocean gave travelers ample time to write letters to friends and family describing the exotic sights seen at each port of call; these

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<sup>203</sup> Woodfield, 87

<sup>204</sup> The existence of this performance venue (usually described as a theater) was long believed to be spurious, but is confirmed by Cossigny's 25 Oct 1738 letter. The discovery of a copy of the letter in the French East India Company's correspondence books validates the earlier chronicle by Seymour Hitié and disproves the narrative advanced by Antoine Chelin. For this debate, see Seymour Hitié, *Le Théâtre à Maurice depuis son Origine jusqu'à nos Jours, 1788-1915* (Port Louis, Mauritius: The General Printing and Stationery Cy. Ltd., 1917) and Antoine Chelin, *Le Théâtre à l'Île Maurice: son origine et son développement* (Port Louis, Mauritius: The Mauritius Printing Company, Ltd., 1954), 1.

letters could later be collected afterwards, printed, and sold as an inexpensive, unbound pamphlet.

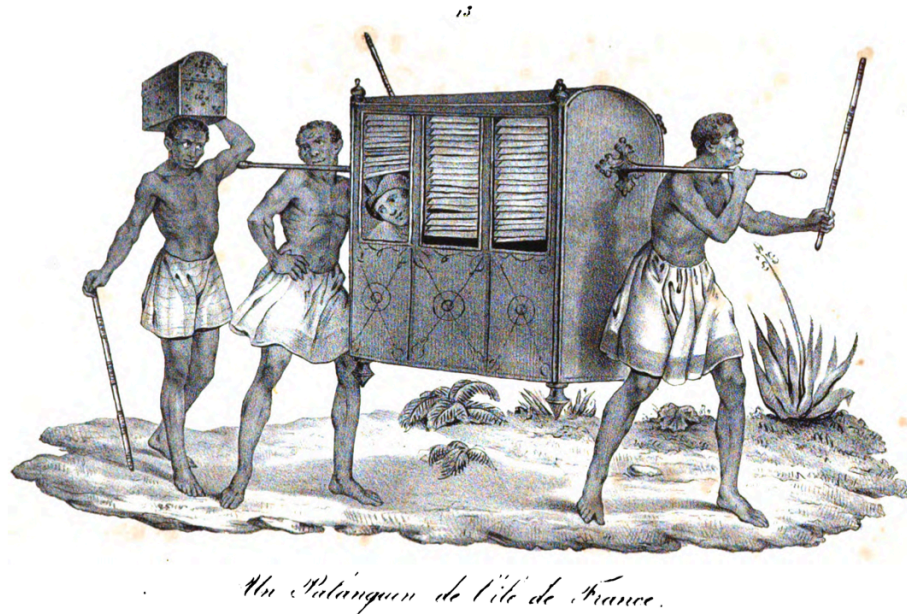
Eighteenth-century travelogues describing Mauritius were penned by English, Dutch, or French authors – a selection that reflects the national character of merchant ships calling at Port Louis. (Spanish traffic was restricted by the Treaty of Torsedillas, and ships had to travel around Cape Horn or via Panama, whereas the Portuguese by now made all-but-exclusive use of the Mozambique Channel between Madagascar and Africa on the transit to India and the East Indies.<sup>205</sup>) Their observations are varied but detailed, naming specific forms of dances and music found in the plantation halls, salons, and drinking houses of Mauritius.

A visitor to Mauritius in the early and mid-eighteenth century would have encountered a broad variety of music of European origin and influence. There were military marches on the parade ground and public square; quadrilles, waltzes, and other European dances in the plantation halls; the same dance genres and chamber music from Paris in the salon; and a wide spectrum of topical and popular songs (mixed with the odd opera aria, often in *contrafactum*) in the taverns and drinking halls. After the loss of the La Bourdonnais cabaret-theater to a cyclone, some taverns began hosting “spectacles” of storytelling and music in yards and drinking rooms. These spectacles were unstaged and

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<sup>205</sup> Merchant ships from Portugal could access the Portuguese colony and supply base in Mozambique (established in 1505). Port Louis, on the other hand, remained an open port to all nations, excepting times of war.

linked to current events: adventures (both real and fantastic) on the island and in ports of call further east were popular subjects.



**Figure 11 - Slaves carrying a palanquin and a slave carrying goods to market.<sup>206</sup>**

This European and European-styled music was popular with the island's white and mixed-race inhabitants and with free blacks aspiring to the same social circles. At the same time, a great deal of non-European music was audible throughout the streets of Port Louis and on the plantations. Visitor after visitor described with fascination how deeply singing was interwoven into the lives of the island's slaves. Sugar cane was cut to songs with solo verses and group choruses; slaves transporting goods to market in baskets on their heads sang in time to their steps. Even a palanquin passing through the streets was

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<sup>206</sup> Arago, 80.

lifted in the hands of slaves singing in chorus. These “choirs of song” left a deep impression on visitors but were noted with no more than a bored bemusement by the island’s long-term Franco-Mauritian residents.<sup>207</sup>

The Franco-Mauritians were more intrigued by the music that accompanied slaves’ nocturnal activities. Although plantation slaves were forbidden to leave the estates at night and banned from meeting with slaves owned by other masters (a measure imposed after a devastating slave revolt in Jamaica), it was common knowledge in the 1730s that many – some authors said most – slaves slipped away at night to attend firelight gatherings with other slaves. The same 1738 letter from Cossigny that describes his construction of the cabaret notes that he was aware of this practice and that he knew that the slaves he employed in construction projects gathered in this manner almost every night. This was, he remarked, an important part of their social routine and one of the ways the slaves received into their number the new arrivals from Mozambique and Madagascar. The activity does not appear to have bothered him in any way, and the letter notes that the slaves returned punctually for the start of each work day.<sup>208</sup>

Not all overseers looked so benevolently on their slaves’ nocturnal activities, and the authorities organized nighttime patrols of the countryside to search for runaway slaves. As a result, the late-night gatherings were carefully situated to take advantage of the irregular geography of the Mauritian interior, using the numerous hillsides and

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<sup>207</sup> See for example Pierre Brunet, *Voyage à l’Île de France, dans l’Inde et en Angleterre, suivi de Mémoires sur les Indiens, sur les Vents des Mers de l’Inde, et d’une Notice sur la Vie du Général Benoit Déboigne* (Paris: Imprimerie de Fain, 1825).

<sup>208</sup> Cossigny to M. Le Controleur. Isle de France, 25 Oct 1738. AOM 204 MIOM 3.



valleys to hide massive bonfires from view. This visual and physical interpolation did not stop the passage of sound, however, and it was a rare night for Franco-Mauritians on plantations *not* to hear snatches of singing and echoes of drumbeats carried by the wind.<sup>209</sup>

In contrast to the authorities (excepting rare examples such as Cossigny), many plantation owners tolerated these nocturnal excursions with relative nonchalance. The history of French Mauritius is replete with written complaints from the authorities that plantation owners habitually *did not* report slaves who had marooned until a month or more had elapsed, and that the statutory penalties for *marooning* were not being enforced by slave owners. Attempts to force this reporting and the use of prescribed corporal punishments were largely met with noncompliance, even after the imposition of steep fines for not reporting marooned slaves.<sup>210</sup> “Short-term” *maroonage* was so common that a separate category was eventually defined in law to describe the *grand marrons* (“Great Maroons”) that had marooned for six or more months.<sup>211</sup> Plantation slaves’ absence from their plantations at night, provided that they returned in time for work the following day, appears to have been treated as a non-event by most slave owners.

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<sup>209</sup> For example, see Bernardin de la Saint-Pierre, “Au Port-Louis; de l’Île de France, ce 25 Avril, 1769,” reprinted in Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Voyage à l’Île de France*, 188-200.

<sup>210</sup> See [Charles] Decaen, “Arrêt of 13 January 1804.”

<sup>211</sup> Ibid. For a summary of this anti-maroon law, see Vijayalakshmi Teelock, *Mauritian History: From its Beginnings to Modern Times*, rev. ed. (Moka, Mauritius: Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 2009), 126-27.

Slave movements were not limited to *marooning* or sneaking off the plantation at night. Although attrition among slaves was high and the plantation conditions often brutal, a slave who had earned his or her overseer's trust was free to travel unaccompanied for their owners' business.<sup>212</sup> A traveler on the road to Port Louis on any day but Sunday (which the slaves had off) could expect to pass numerous slaves on errands, transporting goods to market, or heading into the city to hire themselves out for the financial benefit of their owners. On Sundays, most slaves were free to travel as they pleased (also with the nominal authorization of their owners). In addition, slaves were only nominally restricted to their owners' plantations by night: in practice came and went as they pleased in between sundown and sunrise. Although the colonial authorities patrolled the roads at night, an experienced slave could easily slip across the countryside to meet with others at a predetermined location.

The rationale for these meetings was more than strictly social; according to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (1737-1814), the author of the most famous (and still in-print) travelogue about Mauritius, amorous assignations were foremost on the slaves' minds.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Statute required that slaves on their owners' business carry a signed pass. This was not strictly enforced and surviving examples of these passes are informal, non-standardized, and generally illegible.

<sup>213</sup> Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's letters to friends and family in France became the basis of his famous travelogue, *Voyage à l'Île de France, à l'Île Bourbon et au Cap de Bonne-Espérance, etc. Avec des Observations Nouvelles sur la Nature & sur les Hommes, Par un Officier du Roi* (Neuchâtel: L'Imprimerie de la Société Typographique, 1773). His even more famous novel *Paul et Virginie* describes a tragic love story set in Mauritius. The descriptive accounts of the island's natural beauty and its critical sketches of slavery echo many of the details from his letters. The novel itself has become part of the island's cultural heritage, and the doomed lovers are the subjects of countless poems and songs.

De Saint-Pierre visited Mauritius in 1769 and noted many aspects of slaves' everyday lives, including a description of their nocturnal gatherings. Although his account was penned almost fifty years after the founding of French Mauritius, it is consistent with the numerous small details of slave life scattered across earlier archival documents, and serves as a useful collation of this information and as a starting point for discussion. De Saint-Pierre was very interested in Mauritian slaves, their motivations, and their well-being, noting:

*Negroes are naturally playful, but after some time as slaves they turn melancholic. Only love seems to still conjure away their sorrows. They will do anything to get hold of a woman. If they can choose, they prefer women who have passed the prime of youth; they say "they make better soup."<sup>214</sup> **If their lover belongs to another master, they will travel overnight three or four leagues across rough terrain, just to be with her.** When they love, they do not fear fatigue or punishments . . . **they arrange to meet in the middle of the night and dance behind some boulders to the sad music of a gourd filled with dried peas.**<sup>215</sup>*

The description of the dancing, unfortunately, was not based on firsthand observation. As he and later writers noted, the slaves possessed trained dogs that could identify approaching patrols, warning the singers and dancers away.<sup>216</sup> De Saint-Pierre was thus forced to rely on his Franco-Mauritian friends and hosts for anecdotal accounts and details; as he could not personally confirm this information itself, it must be

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<sup>214</sup> This phrase is still in use in Mauritius as a double entendre.

<sup>215</sup> Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Journey to Mauritius*, trans. Jason Wilson (Brooklyn, NY: Interlink Books, 2003), 129. Emphasis added.

<sup>216</sup> Most plantation owners did not allow their slaves to keep pets; these dogs most likely belonged to *maroons* involved in these gatherings. The use of guard dogs by *maroons* to detect anti-*maroon* patrols is noted as early as 1727, suggesting that the *maroons* had re-domesticated some of the feral dogs left by the Dutch evacuation.

examined in light of other evidence. His frequently quoted statement that slaves traveled “three or four leagues” (8-11 miles or 13-17 kilometers) to attend these gatherings is faintly plausible but unlikely – and much further than what more informed accounts suggest.<sup>217</sup> The patrols sent to hunt for runaway slaves frequently discovered the remnants of fire circles much closer to the plantations, often just one or two leagues’ distance away if one traveled directly across the countryside. By way of comparison, slaves transporting produce from the inland plantations to the central market in Port Louis regularly carried heavy loads three to four leagues under heavy sun; an unburdened passage of half that distance (even by night) would have been much more reasonable. With a distance of just one or two leagues to travel, the long Mauritian night would have also given slaves ample time to rest, travel to, and return from these gatherings.

No explicitly first-hand observations of slaves’ secretive nocturnal gatherings survive, but select stories do suggest some incidences of boundary crossing. One of the most colorful (especially in light of the Mlle. Gaucher affair) is noted in a 1759 letter from one of the island’s missionary priests to his superiors in Paris. In it, Father Borgne complains that one of his fellows, the Abbé Tournillon, danced “with negresses” every night, an offense that Father Borgne deemed greater than the Abbé’s other “defects of

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<sup>217</sup> Bernardin de Saint-Pierre is most likely using the *lieu des Postes* (Post Office league) introduced in France in 1737, a unit equivalent to roughly 2.7 miles (4.3 kilometers). De Saint-Pierre, like most later travelogue writers, had the distance of three-to-four leagues suggested to him by plantation owners. This may have been the distance to reach the point by regular paths and roads, rather than cutting across the countryside.

character” such as causing disturbances in church services.<sup>218</sup> The scandalousness of this activity, however, should be measured against the standard set by their fellow priests during the same period, several of whom were notorious for their frequent drunken carousing, including wandering the streets naked at night while singing satirical songs.

Like many visitors to Mauritius, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre began his 1769 correspondence by remarking about the remarkable concentration of European culture that could be found in Port Louis; only later did his correspondence turn to the musical activities of slaves. By the time of his visit, Port Louis was justly famous not just as a watering hole and scenic destination, but also as the “Paris of the Far East,” a satellite of European music, literature and fashion. This metamorphosis from “watering hole” to a bastion of culture was initiated in 1735 by the first transformative governor of Mauritius, Bertrand François Mahé, la comte de La Bourdonnais.<sup>219</sup>

### **The Bourdonnais Innovations**

La Bourdonnais was a skilled administrator and a decorated military veteran. He had served La Compagnie in India as a military officer before continuing in the service of the Portuguese Viceroy of Goa.<sup>220</sup> La Compagnie induced him to leave Portuguese

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<sup>218</sup> Congrégation de la Mission, *Receuil 1504*: Father Borgne to Paris, 24 September 1759. Described in Vaughan, 163-4.

<sup>219</sup> La Bourdonnais served as governor from 1735-1748; although formally listed as governor from 1748-1751, he was inactive during these years due to his imprisonment and trial in France on charges of speculation. For a detailed study of his person and accomplishments, see: Étienne Buisson, *Le Mirage de l'Inde: la Dramatique Existence d'un Grand Français au XVIIIe siècle: Bertrand Mahé de La Bourdonnais* (Paris: Hachette, 1937).

<sup>220</sup> The Viceroy of Goa was the seat of Portuguese control in India.

service in 1735 by offering him the governorship of both Île Bourbon and Mauritius. Armed with this authority, La Bourdonnais was able to transform and expand Mauritius from a minor colony to a major naval base for war and trade.

The new governor's plans were many and varied. He encouraged trade, built roads and aqueducts, constructed a modern harbor at Port Louis, and built a colonial city around the harbor. He foresaw that the key to long-term growth was to create conditions that would convince Frenchmen to settle permanently (not just temporarily) in the colony, preventing them from departing with their wealth and experience. The earlier Dutch settlements were undermined by a high turnover of personnel: once soldiers and settlers finished their terms of service to the company, most collected their pay and departed for other opportunities. Since skilled personnel were expensive to train and transport, the governor made significant efforts to retain the settlers that he recruited, promoting the development of cultural activities and religious institutions.

The social agenda of the new governor included “social meetings and artistic recreations such as concerts, banquets and dancing parties with a view to establish community life,” and focused on Port Louis.<sup>221</sup> Before Labourdonnais, the spouses of plantation owners came rarely to that town except for Easter and dances. To build up attractions in the town and occupy a growing population displaced by the colonial wars between France and England, the governor requested that “fencing, dancing and music

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<sup>221</sup> Premlall Mahadeo. *Mauritian Cultural Heritage* (Beau Bassin, Mauritius: Gold Hill Publication Ltd, 1995), 14.

masters” be sent to the colony and made provisions for their employment.<sup>222</sup> Early on in this expansion program, the governor even commissioned the manufacture of instruments back in France and had them shipped to Mauritius at his own personal expense.<sup>223</sup> One result of these measures was to transform the soundscape of Port Louis; travelers noted the sounds of violins and oboes emanating from the houses as they walked through the city streets.<sup>224</sup>

La Bourdonnais’s efforts to build a thriving and self-sustaining colonial society were not limited to the purely musical sphere. A particular interest of the governor was to encourage marriage and the establishment of families to anchor communities. This was done through a combination of financial incentives (paying dowries) and by improving the pool of eligible partners. In pursuit of the latter cause, his agents brought over French and Creole women from nearby Île Bourbon and imported musically educated girls from convent schools in Brittany (the home region of La Compagnie, fortuitously experiencing an economic recession) to marry his settlers.<sup>225</sup> These efforts created a steady supply of and demand for cultural activities in Mauritius, and were sufficiently successful that they

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<sup>222</sup> Auguste Toussaint, *Port Louis: A Tropical City*, trans. W.E.F. Ward (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1973), 30.

<sup>223</sup> Bertrand-François Mahé de La Bourdonnais, *La Plume et l'Épée: Mémoires de Mahé de la Bourdonnais, 1740-1742*, Carnegie Library of Mauritius, ed. (Vacoas, Mauritius: Éditions Le Printemps, 2005), 42, 127.

<sup>224</sup> Toussaint, *Port Louis: A Tropical City*, 30.

<sup>225</sup> In this particular usage and context, “Creole” is used to describe people of mixed European and African or Malagasy descent. As will be seen later, the use and meaning of the term “Creole” evolves over the course of Mauritian history.

convinced some of the remaining pirates of Madagascar to retire from piracy and settle in Mauritius.<sup>226,227</sup>

In 1736, La Bourdonnais invited the Congregation of St. Vincent de Paul to promote Catholicism on the island and mandated church attendance for all.<sup>228</sup> The large slave population – already in a 5:1 proportion to the European settlers – was not excluded from this requirement, but there was little specific outreach to the slaves, who “took refuge in the cults, superstitions, music and customs of their native lands so as to maintain their cultural identity.”<sup>229</sup> Although most clergy on the island were assigned slaves, missionary outreach to slaves was limited in this period and actively discouraged by most slave owners. (The London Missionary Society, which was dedicated to emancipation, had more success in its work on the island in the early nineteenth century.)

La Bourdonnais’ social engineering transformed colonial life in Mauritius. His construction programs in Port Louis caused an urban migration, cementing the city’s status as the island’s urban and cultural core. In the words of a modern commentator,

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<sup>226</sup> Barnwell, 38-40. Barnwell incorrectly states that the pirates settled on Bourbon (rather than Mauritius) due to a misreading of a partial quotation in a secondary source.

<sup>227</sup> Most of the pirates who accepted these offers of amnesty in the late 1730s had spurned earlier offers, retorting that there was nothing that the French government could offer in Mauritius or Bourbon that they did not already have in Madagascar. The creation of a cultured society with high-class European musical entertainments changed this dynamic, and most of the remaining pirates retired to Mauritius in the course of just a few years.

<sup>228</sup> Mahdeo, 17. This group is sometimes referred to as the *Congrégation de St. Lazare*, after the Priory in which St. Vincent de Paul lived. See Bartholomew Randolph, “Congregation of Priests of the Mission” and Blance Mary Kelly. “Diocese of Port Louis,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vols. 10 and 12 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911). In addition to the moralizing benefits, the requirement to attend church may have been partly an effort to draw the plantation owners and their families into town more regularly.

<sup>229</sup> Mahdeo, 17.



*The seeds were already being sown for the “urban bias” that would characterize eighteenth-century Île de France. The earliest habitants were already migrating from Port South-East to the new center of government, attracted by the opportunities offered by construction. As a result the number of habitations [farms] under cultivation on the island actually fell between 1731 and 1735.*<sup>230</sup>

Despite this temporary drop in plantation agriculture, the overall population of the island soared. Only thirty-two years after the first French settler set foot ashore, the population included 3,163 European, 587 free blacks,<sup>231</sup> and 15,027 slaves – roughly 47 times the size of the Dutch colonies at their peak.<sup>232</sup>

The growth of the European colony inevitably created population pressures in the *maroon* bands in the interior. The growth of the slaves’ nighttime gatherings parallels the growth of this pressure, whereas court and patrol transcripts testify to the increased low-level confrontation between *maroons* and the settlers. Dedicated bands of *maroon*-hunters were formed, largely from the island’s Free Black community; although marauding bands of *maroons* troubled the countryside well into the 1830s, new runaway slaves increasingly congregated in Port Louis, where they could blend easily among Free Blacks and slaves hired out by their owners. With the exception of a few large bands of

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<sup>230</sup> Ly-Tio-Fane-Pineo, *Île de France, 1715-1756*, Vol. 1 (Moka, Mauritius: Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1993), 140

<sup>231</sup> Over time, Mauritius developed a “color bar” system similar to those of the French Caribbean colonies, wherein the full rights of citizenship were restricted to Europeans and mixed-race Creoles; the “free blacks” (emancipated slaves and their descendants) were barred from certain public offices and inheritances. Many of the “free blacks” (*noirs libres*) were also mixed-race, but were not considered Creoles so as to prevent them from inheriting from their European or Creole parents. This convoluted system underwent several legal evolutions before the British conquest, which added its own layers of discrimination. The color bar was not legally abolished until 1829. See Napal, 19-21.

<sup>232</sup> North-Coombes, 141.

marauders, the *maroon* communities were replaced by individuals and small groups, many of whom appear to have been involved in organizing the firelight gatherings.

The sugarcane-derived liquor *arrack* has been a popular alcoholic beverage throughout Mauritian history. It was a favorite target of *maroon* raiders throughout the Dutch period and lost none of this distinction during the French period. It was also an omnipresent feature of the firelight gatherings and consumed throughout the night amidst dancing and song. Because the supply of alcohol to slaves was tightly controlled, the coincidence of alcohol theft by *maroons* and these gatherings suggests that the *maroons* used these gatherings in part to mingle with and meet slaves of the opposite sex.<sup>233</sup>

*Maroonage* was a frequent worry of French settlers despite the colony's growth and prosperity. The ongoing conflict acquired the colloquial name *guerre intestine* and proved as difficult to root out as the tropical diseases that periodically afflicted the colonists. As one commentator described it,

*While patrols looked out to sea from its coastal fortifications, ever on guard against the possible approach of the enemy, in the center of the island the guerre intestine against maroon slaves continued to rumble on, throughout the century. As the island's forests were increasingly depleted (not least for the purpose of repairing war ships), so the possibilities for creating self-contained maroon communities also receded. The maroons of Île de France were forever on the move, often within earshot—the war against them was a guerilla war, erupting here and there unpredictably. But their continual unseen presence, their night raids and kidnappings, created considerable anxiety, just as they had for the Dutch and the very first French settlers.*

Despite the Franco-Mauritians' fears of rape and kidnapping, the *maroons'* attentions

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<sup>233</sup> Several examples of involuntary abductions (or claims thereof) resulting from meetings at these gatherings are preserved in the MNA Z 2b series.

were devoted primarily towards plantation stores and other Africans. An assault on a white Mauritian was certain to produce a large and extended crackdown by the aggrieved settlers; most reported thefts by *maroons* were from slaves on the road or from the plantation grounds. With the exception of the large groups of marauders, most *maroons* preferred to rob the plantations quietly by night, although incidents of arson were not uncommon. This transition created two opposite depictions of *maroons* in colonial literature: on the one hand there was the *maroon* bandit: large, violent, and threatening; on the other hand, there was the “noble *maroon*” seeking to peacefully coexist, stealing from the plantation only what was necessary to survive. Unsurprisingly, the *maroon* bandit was a feature in tavern songs, whereas the noble *maroon* appeared in Kreol songs sung by slaves. (Both would become features of later *séga* songs.)

### **Métissage**

The contrasting depictions of *maroon* figures in Mauritian drinking songs and slave songs illustrates the split perspective among different social classes. The *noirs libres* (free blacks) – emancipated slaves and their descendents – were not known for espousing abolitionist sentiments, especially given that many of the *noirs libres* became slave owners themselves.<sup>234</sup> Similarly, slave owners who emancipated their concubines and the children from concubinage did not usually support a general emancipation. The

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<sup>234</sup> Slave status did not necessarily make one sympathetic to *maroons*, either; most members of anti-*maroon* patrols and detachments were either slaves or *noirs libres*. For a detailed assessment of the *noirs libres*'s place in Mauritian society, see Megan Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island*, especially 235-48.

mixing or *métissage* in Mauritian society involved many barriers to social advancement, with wealth the normal path past such barriers.

Two different and musically insightful breaches of these social barriers came in 1748, when the War of the Austrian Succession spilled over into the Indian Ocean and touched upon Mauritius. La Bourdonnais took command of a fleet of French ships outfitted in Mauritius for an expedition against British forces in India; most of the island's soldiers joined the fleet complement. To further augment the ships' crews, La Bourdonnais hired four hundred male slaves from their owners, offering the sum of 12 sous per head and a bounty should a slave die or desert during the expedition.<sup>235</sup> These slaves by all accounts performed their duties excellently, and entertained the ships' crews with their work songs during the voyage; no problems were reported with their service or ability to follow naval signals (conveyed by trumpet or drum, as during the Dutch period), and La Bourdonnais' recruitment strategy was recommended for future naval endeavors.<sup>236</sup>

The second such breach occurred while the fleet and garrison were fighting in India, when a large British and Dutch invasion fleet appeared off the coast of Mauritius on 4 July 1748. Only a handful of French soldiers remained on the island to man the

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<sup>235</sup> Letter from M. David, Isle de France, 28 March 1748. AOM: 205 MIOM 5.

<sup>236</sup> AOM: 205 MIOM 5, Carton 151<sup>3</sup>. The importance of this manpower pool should not be understated; the decisive failure of British forces in the contemporaneous Battle of Cartagena de Indias (1741) was attributed in large part to the difficulty and delays in gathering personnel for the expedition. These delays caused the massive naval and army expedition to arrive at the start of the fever season, with disastrous consequences. See Russell F. Weigley, *The Age of Battles: The Quest for Decisive Warfare from Breitenfeld to Waterloo* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 198.

coastal defense batteries, which the enemy guns quickly silenced via offshore bombardment. A French official on the scene, M. Martin, wrote a despairing dispatch indicating that all was lost and fled the scene, along with most of the battery personnel.<sup>237</sup>

The situation was only salvaged by the quick intervention of M. de Sévigny, an engineer left in command of the island's defenses during the absence of La Bourdonnais and the fleet. De Sévigny quickly gathered a group of four hundred slaves from the nearby plantations, together with a handful of French soldiers and settlers. Only a handful of firearms were available, which he distributed to the Frenchmen; the slaves were armed with steel bayonets, which were available in sufficient quantities from the nearby military stores. No extra uniforms were on hand, but a search of the same military stores discovered a large quantity of golden epaulets, which were also disbursed to the slaves and attached to whatever garments they happened to be wearing.<sup>238</sup> This fake legion was marched in and out of sight of the Anglo-Dutch ships, creating the illusion of a large force of soldiers gathering. When the enemy began to disembark troops, De Sévigny moved his men into the abandoned batteries and ordered them to each beat their drum loudly as the invasion fleet's boats approached shore. The tremendous noise generated by four hundred drums convinced the landing parties that a massive force of soldiers awaited them, and they retreated back to the fleet; this scenario played out several times up and

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<sup>237</sup> M.S. Martin to M. David, 5 July 1748 and 10 July 1748. AOM: 205 MIOM 5.

<sup>238</sup> The steel bayonets and bright gold epaulets would have been very visible in the tropical sun, even at a distance; an accurate gauge of the Mauritian forces would have been thwarted by the distance involved and the limited quality of visual equipment available to the British force.

down the coast over the next several days, until the frustrated British fleet set sail for India on 10 July 1748. A force of slave drummers had saved Mauritius from certain conquest.<sup>239</sup>

This latter episode reveals a great deal about Mauritian slaves and the Europeans' awareness of the slaves' musical proclivities. M. Martin's letter states that he gathered all of the nearby slaves with great haste; there is no mention of any discriminatory recruitment to find those of musical ability, nor does his account suggest that time for such a measure was available. This large group – some four hundred slaves, collected primarily from the local plantations – was able to imitate military drumming with sufficient accuracy, volume, and ability so as to fool a large British and Dutch expedition. There are no indications that this drumming was taught or led in any significant way by the handful of French soldiers; the governor's report of La Bourdonnais' expedition corroborates this by indicating that the expedition to India had taken the entirety of the garrison and most of the trained volunteers, which would have included the musicians normally used for military signaling and drills. Furthermore, the slaves were able to obtain four hundred drums adequate to the task on very short notice, suggesting that they had personal instruments close at hand or could easily manufacture them. These all suggest that De Sévigny was not only well aware of the slaves' nocturnal expeditions to play *séga*, but also that this knowledge was of little concern to the slaves, as they neither

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<sup>239</sup> *Memoire sur la Tentative des Anglais pour s'Emparer de la Colonie par M. de Sévigny, Ingénieur*. 205 MIOM 5, Carton 151<sup>3</sup>, No. 11 (1748).

hid their ability nor their drums – in other words, that the practice of *séga* was tacitly endorsed.<sup>240</sup>

The success of this *ruse de guerre*, incidentally, enjoyed a long life in Mauritian lore and, as a tale of Mauritian shrewdness triumphing over overwhelming British superiority, eventually reached English ears. Most English soldiers considered the story a myth, but the tale survived at least through the British conquest of Mauritius; Captain Dugal Carmichael, one of the officers in the British military expedition that captured Mauritius in 1810, was familiar with it, although the account he knew included opposing cannon fire from the French positions.<sup>241</sup>

### **For Crown and Country**

*The ball honoring Saint-Louis is the most notable time of year [and it is] where everyone wants to appear in full glory. One prepares well in advance how to attract attention. India provides the most beautiful fabrics; China, also, its tribute. France's responsibility is for the fashions, the trinkets, and for the touch that brings it all together. One does not learn the prices of these things, one simply asks where one can find such and such an object.*

Le Chevalier de Mautort, 1780<sup>242</sup>

The 1748 expedition from Mauritius to India was one of the few overwhelming successes of French forces during the War of Austrian Succession (1740-8), capturing the

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<sup>240</sup> This tacit endorsement defies both the conventional wisdom on restricting the movements and activities of slaves and the legal code at the time, which banned slaves from traveling without written passes authorizing the slaves' specific errands.

<sup>241</sup> Dugal Carmichael, *Account of the Conquest of Mauritius: with some Notices on the History, Soil, Products, Defences, and the Political Importance of this Island, to which is Added, a Sketch, Explanatory of the Military Operations. By An Officer who Served on the Expedition.* (London: T. Egerton, Military Library, Whitehall, 1811), 28-9.

<sup>242</sup> Chevalier de Mautort, *Mémoires du Chevalier de Mautort: Capitaine au Régiment d'Austrasie, Chevalier de l'Ordre Royal et Militaire de Saint-Louis* (Paris: E. Plon, Nourrit et cie, 1895), 172.

city of Madras and relieving beleaguered French forces around the subcontinent. As a result, the French crown began to draft new plans for the next war immediately following the end of hostilities – plans that would make extensive use of forces built up and based in Mauritius. These plans were only partially complete when hostilities broke out again just eight years later with the opening of the Seven Years' War (1756-63). This conflict that was disastrous for France, which lost all of its North American territories, and the cost of war and related losses in India drove the French East India Company into bankruptcy.<sup>243</sup>

The conduct of the Seven Years' War exposed many limitations in the French military apparatus. The French Royal Navy squadrons operating out of Mauritius had enjoyed only middling successes in the Indian Ocean, where British naval forces continued to enjoy numerical superiority (albeit not on the same scale as in Atlantic waters). Privately financed privateers operating from Mauritius – often merchant ships refitted expressly for this purpose – had, on the other hand, reaped a rich bounty from captured English merchantmen.<sup>244</sup> French plans for the next war called for a massive, ongoing investment in their navy (not a commitment taken lightly, in light of the high government debt from preceding conflicts) and a major expansion of the naval facilities, garrison, and supply depots in Mauritius.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> AN C/4/15: Île de France 1763-1765.

<sup>244</sup> Vaughan, 53-5.

<sup>245</sup> A historical analogue is Great Britain's construction of a Royal Navy base in Bermuda after the American Revolution; this base also became a notorious nest of privateers.



The French East India Company's bankruptcy at the close of the Seven Years' War gave the French crown the opportunity to take legal and direct control of the island. Although royal warships had been based in Mauritius in the preceding conflict, La Compagnie was simply too cash-strapped to make the large infrastructure investments necessary to adequately support this presence, and the separate royal and corporate command structures had caused several problems.<sup>246</sup> The crown assumed the full debts of La Compagnie in return for the islands of Bourbon and Mauritius, and in 1767 the control of Île de France formally passed to the French government.<sup>247</sup>

This new period of royal control opened with a large infusion of capital and spending into the island economy. Large construction projects including new shipyards, docks, and factories for the naval base buoyed the island's industry; the establishment of a large permanent garrison and stationing of frigate squadrons provided a large and ongoing stimulation of the island's economy and its social scene. Colonists who had grown rich on the spoils of war and privateering looked for new means of spending their wealth, and consumer goods and luxuries from France became commonplace sights on its streets. The population of the island also boomed, growing from eighteen thousand

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<sup>246</sup> For example, the French East India Company did not habitually stockpile the large peacetime caches of weapons and supplies that the French Army and Royal Navy expected to draw on in times of war, for example. This caused severe supply shortages during the Seven Years and contributed to the malnutrition-driven epidemics that crippled the French fleet. See AN: C4/9, Correspondance Générale 1755-1757; AN: C4/10, Correspondance Générale 1758; and AN: C4/86: Île de France.

<sup>247</sup> The sale, formally taking place in 1765, was precipitated by the company's financial losses during the War of Austrian Succession (1744-8) and the Seven Years' War (1756-63) – both disastrous to the French colonial empire in India.

inhabitants (fifteen thousand of whom were slaves) in 1767 to twenty-nine thousand (twenty-five thousand of whom were slaves) in 1787.<sup>248</sup>

Mauritius flourished under this new government, which transformed Port Louis into the chief naval base of the French Royal Navy in the Indian Ocean. This investment included significant additions to the island infrastructure and other less tangible additions. Even before the formal change of control, the first school in Mauritius opened in 1764. Four years later, in 1768, a printing press began operating – the first recorded in the Southern Hemisphere.<sup>249</sup> With the French East India Company's loss of control came a lifting of trade restrictions, too, and more foreign ships began to call at the island.

This infusion of men, money, ideas, and prosperity buoyed island society, although the colonial authorities fretted about some of the directions that it began to take. The new printing press, for example, was ostensibly under royal control and could only be used after an authorizing permit was issued. In practice, it was used for a large volume of unauthorized print runs, to the extent that the officer in charge was issued formal warning. The citizenry of Port Louis, for example, found the printing press convenient for publishing the lyrics of satirical songs, which were posted in public areas – sometimes even on the doors of those being mocked.<sup>250,251</sup> The songs themselves were generally not

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<sup>248</sup> Hollingworth, 24.

<sup>249</sup> Auguste Toussaint, *Early Printing in Mauritius, Reunion, Madagascar and the Seychelles*, *The Spread of Printing – Eastern Hemisphere*, ed. Colin Clair (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 30.

<sup>250</sup> MNA: JB 22: Procédure Criminelle, 1775; Vaughan, 223.

<sup>251</sup> An amusing lawsuit regarding the singing of one of these songs is described in Vaughan, 223.

original musical compositions, but *contrafacta* to well-known tunes and popular songs, which might be identified on the poster or pamphlet containing the song lyrics.<sup>252</sup>

At the same time that the local police and censors struggled with unauthorized printings of song lyrics and singing of defamatory songs, officials back in France were concerned with how the growing colonial excesses might affect soldiers stationed on the island. The biggest excess that concerned them was the predilection for drink. In 1772, with the threat of war hanging in the air, Louis XVI dispatched a force of ten thousand men to the island; a census of Port Louis at that time identified 125 “drinking-shops,” which as noted above were places both for drinking and enjoying musical performances.<sup>253</sup> Three years later, on the eve of the American Revolution, a pair of royal inspectors was dispatched to prepare the colony and garrison for war with Great Britain. These inspectors confirmed the presence of “125 cabarets,” which they reported were very popular with the soldiery and a detriment to their state of readiness.<sup>254</sup>

The imminent state of war with Britain gave the royal inspectors M. Termay and M. Maillart the license to implement much-needed reforms – firstly by drastically reducing the number of cabarets in the capital, which through pursuit of various liquor

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<sup>252</sup> The authorship of these songs was always anonymous or pseudonymous, as the authors of satirical songs were subject to legal retaliations on charges of libel and defamation. This open satire, particularly of public officials and the colonial authorities, presaged the democratic and anti-royalist sentiments that would eventually manifest during the French Revolution.

<sup>253</sup> John Addison and K. Hazareesingh, *A New History of Mauritius* (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1984), 34.

<sup>254</sup> Report of 5 Feb 1775. AOM C/4/F 107-113 40, f. 4.

sale violations they whittled down to a mere three.<sup>255</sup> This drastic curtailment naturally caused a collapse in Port Louis's tavern entertainment scene, which had long been a target of moralizing tracts and sermons.<sup>256</sup> At the inspectors' prodding, the Governor M. le Chevalier de Cernay then deployed most of the soldiers on training exercises and maneuvers, further depriving the city of the shuttered businesses' former customer base.<sup>257</sup>

The sudden closure of the residents' and soldiers' favored live entertainment left a social vacuum that was filled by the establishment of society balls with their social dances.<sup>258</sup> In place of drinking songs and other cabaret entertainments, these balls (most organized by private citizens) offered concerted music to accompany dinner and dancing, particularly waltzes and quadrilles.<sup>259</sup> The largest and most popular of these balls was an annual affair organized by the royal governor, officially in celebration of Saint-Louis.<sup>260,261</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> Report of 18 Mar 1775. AOM C/4/F 107-113 40, f. 5.

<sup>256</sup> This moral surge coincided with the deep financial problems of the French monarchy and pressures to increase tax revenues from the colony. It is likely that morality proved a convenient distraction from the tax increases instituted in the same interval.

<sup>257</sup> Report of the Chevalier de Cernay, 1 July 1776. AOM C/4/F 107-113 40, f. 166.

<sup>258</sup> Albert Pitot, *L'Île Maurice, Esquisses Historiques I, 1810-1823* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Coignet Frères, 1910), 80.

<sup>259</sup> With thousands of soldiers on the island, only a small fraction of the common soldiery could attend any given social ball as a guest. As a result, an invitation to a ball became a prized reward and incentive for good behavior. Many of the soldiers were also distracted by increased training and deployments for military exercises.

<sup>260</sup> Auguste Toussaint, *Port Louis: Deux Siècles d'Histoire, 1735-1935* (Port Louis, Mauritius: 1936), 117.

<sup>261</sup> The annual fête honoring Saint-Louis (Louis IX of France) has a vaunted place in Mauritian history, with the secular celebrations often eclipsing the religious ones.

The governor's ball of 1780 is described in detail in the memoirs of Louis François de Paule Tillette, the Chevalier de Mautort. The Chevalier de Mautort was a career military officer in the French army and had arrived in Mauritius with his regiment in the same year. Just before that, his unit had been stationed on the borders of metropolitan France in the city of Landau, a station from which he had attended the opera and a courtly masked ball in nearby Mannheim at the invitation of the Elector, as well as the local society balls.<sup>262</sup> This recent experience in continental entertainments lends his account an uncommonly detailed and objective evaluation of Port Louis society.

The governor's ball of 1780 was an elaborate affair, incorporating a variety of functions. The celebration of Saint-Louis began in the morning with salutes fired by the naval artillery, and featured a parade including all the military units and administrative officials under his purview. Any members of the Order of Saint-Louis (including the Chevalier de Mautort, although he had not yet been inducted into this order) were fêted at a private luncheon, after which the other guests (including more than a hundred elegantly attired women from the city and surroundings) began arriving for the ball at four in the afternoon. The ball formally commenced with dancing at five in the afternoon, dinner began at ten, and was followed by more dancing.<sup>263</sup>

Several of the details that the Chevalier de Mautort does not list are just as important as those he does. None of the balls that he describes list the specific social dances; as his regiment had arrived on the island very shortly before the governor's ball,

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<sup>262</sup> Chevalier de Mautort, 84-9.

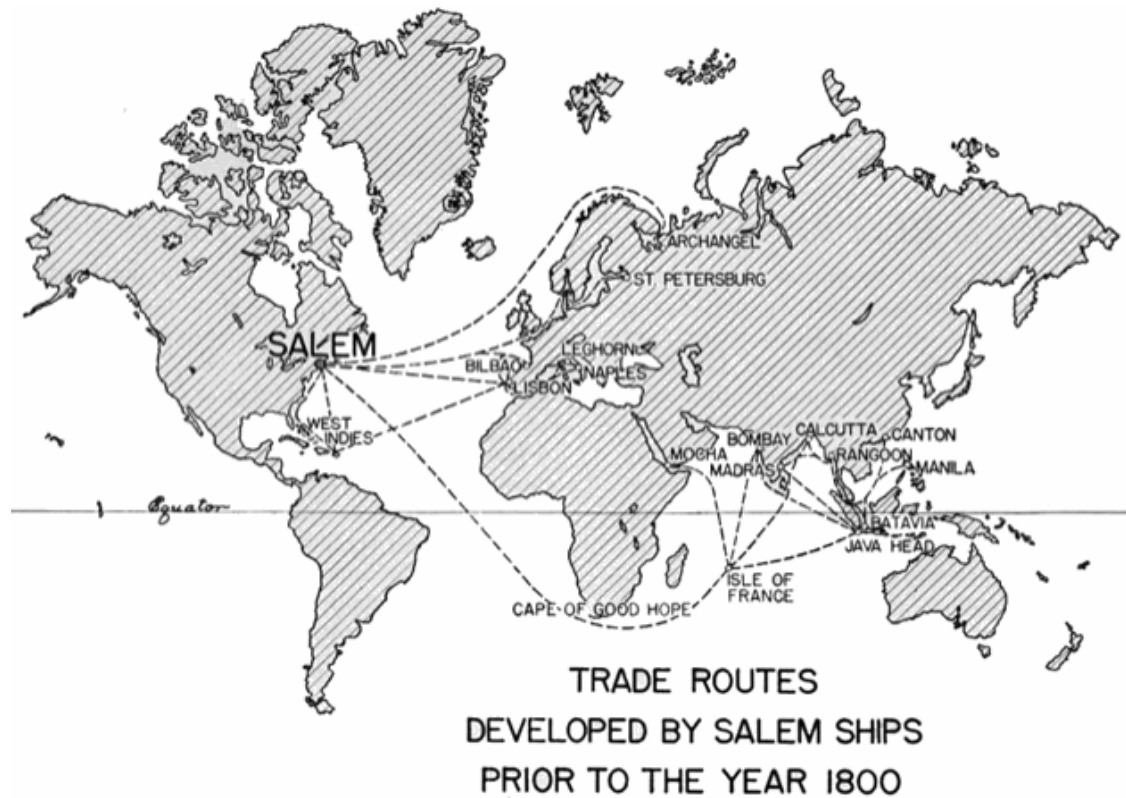
<sup>263</sup> Chevalier de Mautort, 173-4.

the soldiers arriving from metropolitan France appear to have been familiar with all of the types of social dances in use. This suggestion is in congruence with secondary sources that state that the latest fashionable dances from Western Europe (e.g, waltzes, quadrilles, cotillions) were popular on the island amongst all of the free classes. Similarly, he makes no comments about the musicians playing for the occasion, suggesting that the local regimental bands provided the music, as was the case at the balls he attended in Europe (and is also suggested by various secondary sources).<sup>264</sup> He describes the entire evening's affair as exquisitely well-done, well-organized, and luxurious, and marvels at the elaborate dress of the island women, which mixed exotic Chinese and Indian fabrics with French fashions and jewelry.<sup>265</sup> With these attractions, it is unsurprising that society balls were considered the most interesting, highest-class, and most prestigious entertainments in Mauritius.

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 84, 88.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 174.



**Figure 12 - Mauritius as a key port in the New England-East Indies trade following the American Revolutionary War.<sup>266</sup>**

The onset of the American Revolution had a surprising effect on the cultural landscape of Mauritius. The island's merchants rose entrepreneurially to the conflict at hand, refitting their ships as privateers and became the scourge of British shipping. Privateers operating from Mauritius eviscerated the British India trade, enriching the Mauritian ship owners and crews. The arrival of a prize ship in Port Louis was an occasion of public celebration, marked by a parade, public concerts, and dancing.<sup>267</sup>

<sup>266</sup> *Salem Maritime National Historic Site: Guidebook (1940).*

<sup>267</sup> Several detailed descriptions of these celebrations in the following conflict, written by a privateer, can be found in Louis Garneray, *Voyages, Aventures et Combats* (Limoges, France:

American privateers also made use of the island to dispose of prizes and take on supplies, sowing the seeds of a significant post-war trade, especially via merchant vessels from New England ports.<sup>268</sup>

This infusion of wealth produced a new *bourgeoise* that, like most of the *nouveaux riches*, sought to surround itself with the trappings deemed appropriate to its new station. Wealthy families sent their children to be educated in France, built grand mansions, and indulged in further expansion of their plantations; the proportion of slaves to Europeans almost doubled in this period. The large mansions and plantation houses of this period included large verandas that could be used for dinners and society balls, allowing private individuals to host their own massive social affairs.<sup>269</sup> The children of the new *bourgeoisie*, returning from metropolitan France, brought back the latest plays, novels, music and fashion. Once accustomed to the *accoutrements* of cosmopolitan Paris and Marseille, they were not about to relinquish their discriminating tastes. French merchant captains, sensing the opportunity, increased imports of these cultural artifacts *en masse*. The decade in Mauritius preceding the French Revolution was marked by an outburst of decadent consumption.<sup>270</sup>

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Eugène Ardant, 19<sup>th</sup> century *n.d.*). These descriptions have been heavily abridged and edited in later scholarly quotations.

<sup>268</sup> This was abetted by the French crown again declaring Mauritius a free port in 1784, the year following the end of hostilities. See: National Parks Service, *Salem Maritime National Historic Society: Guidebook (1940)* (1940).

[http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online\\_books/brochures/1940/sama/](http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/brochures/1940/sama/).

<sup>269</sup> The standard of comparison was almost always the Governor's Ball, at which the Chevalier de Mautort counted "more than a hundred women" in 1780.

<sup>270</sup> Unsurprisingly, this made Port Louis an even more appetizing port of call for many. A contrary perspective is supplied by the Admiral le Comte Pierre André de Suffren de Saint



At the same time, the general rise in education and discriminating taste allowed the Franco-Mauritians and their visitors to assess their island's other cultural tradition more critically. In their descriptions we find the key elements of *séga* attested by single individuals with firsthand experience, rather than composite narratives assembled from many sources. One visitor, Auguste Billard, sought out the firelight gatherings of slaves, determined to witness one personally:

“How many times have I fallen asleep to the songs of the blacks,” he writes. “To the melancholy<sup>271</sup> sounds of the *vali* [a lyre of two strings] and the *bobre* [an instrument similar to the tan-tam], which last until the very middle of the night!”<sup>272</sup> His account allows for a basic codification of these clandestine dances:

1. Large dances began late at the night, often starting at ten or eleven in the evening and lasting for several hours. Slaves typically rested for the hours immediately after work.
2. A large bonfire was mandatory. Group dancing moved freely around the fire.<sup>273</sup>

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Tropez, Bailli de Suffren. Suffren commanded a major naval and land expedition against British India during the American Revolution, and complained that the “gay social life” of the island made his soldiers “soft.” His refusal to revisit the island at the end of the India campaign set off a near-mutiny in the fleet, and Suffren was forced to bow to this pressure and stop in Mauritius. See: Charles Cunat, *Histoire du Bailli de Suffren* (Rennes: Imprimerie de A. Marteville et Lefas, 1852).

<sup>271</sup> It is important to note that the term “melancholy” refers to a reflective or thoughtful mood during this period, rather than its current association with sadness or depression.

<sup>272</sup> Auguste Billiard, *Voyage aux Colonies Orientales: ou Lettres Écrites des Îles de France et de Bourbon pendant les Années 1817, 1818, 1819 et 1820, à M. le Cte de Montalivet, Pair de France, Ancien Ministre de l'Intérieur, etc.* (Paris: L'Imprimerie de David, 1822), 119.

<sup>273</sup> See also: Jacques-Gérard Milbert, *Voyage Pittoresque à l'Île-de-France, au Cap de Bonne-Espérance et à l'Île de Ténériffe.* (Paris: Nepveu, 1812), 308. Milbert's voyage to Mauritius was a scientific expedition; trapped on the island by the British invasion, he was arrested as a potential spy and wrote his letters to France from a prison cell. By this point, the tenor of the Napoleonic Wars prevented most other Frenchmen from traveling overseas.

3. Locations were chosen in valleys and next to hillsides where the terrain obscured the firelight from view.
4. Singing and dancing were improvised and imitative, frequently using call and response for group songs and choruses.
5. Most songs were about love and courtship. Others told humorous stories and narratives.
6. Dancing was highly athletic and kinetic; the women in particular were known for their “serpentine” movements.

Despite the drinking that he observed, the slaves (and, presumably, maroons) were vigilant: watchmen and guard dogs were always posted to guard against roving patrols.<sup>274</sup>

Billiard’s detailed account of *séga* allows the reader to re-contextualize the accounts of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre and other early writers. It is clear that the general form of the outdoor *séga party* – the nighttime gatherings of slaves to sing and dance by firelight – was fixed as early as 1730, less than a decade after the French settlers arrived on the island. By this time, each of the standard instruments of *séga* observed in 1910 – the *ravane*, the *maravanne*, and the triangle<sup>275</sup> – were already in existence and ubiquitous, although their shapes and construction materials would be altered over the years. So, too, was the general character of *séga* dancing and its music.

The continuity of musical and dance elements suggests that the *maroon* communities of the “shadow settlement” played a strong role in the dissemination and standardization of musical practice among the slaves of Mauritius. The French settlers purchased slaves from Zanzibar, Madagascar, and Mozambique; each location’s slave markets drew from multiple diverse populations with distinct languages and cultures.

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<sup>274</sup> Billiard, 118-20.

<sup>275</sup> See chapter 1.

Since most slaves were assigned to a specific plantation upon arrival and then restricted to that general geographic location, it is unlikely that slaves alone could serve as the sole or primary transmission of conduit of *séga* around the island. (They could, of course, transmit it easily within the confines of a plantation community.) Interaction with the *maroon* communities already on the island – through abductions, nighttime gatherings, and even daylight visits – offers an explanation for the rapid dissemination of the practice of *séga* throughout the island.

This was especially true with plantations newly carved from the forest. These plantations were manned by slaves newly purchased from abroad, yet were soon observed to practice elements of *séga* by day despite laws prohibiting their interaction with slaves of other ownership. While officially at rest, slaves congregated at street corners and at the edges of fields, singing and dancing. Many crafted instruments to accompany their singing – either the *tam-tam* (a plucked bow with a hollow gourd attached as a resonator)<sup>276</sup> or the *maravanne* (a gourd or box filled with dried peas and shaken). When playing the *tam-tam*, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre noted, “[The slaves] extract from it a sweet sound that accompanies the songs they invent: love is the perennial subject. Girls dance to their lovers’ songs; spectators beat time and applaud.”<sup>277</sup>

It did not take the newly arrived slaves long to partake in the *séga* parties held under cover of darkness. As de Saint-Pierre wrote, “Night seems made for the blacks of

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<sup>276</sup> This is most likely the same instrument as the *bobre* used in Réunion and Madagascar today.

<sup>277</sup> Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, 128. These breaks ranged from a half hour for breakfast to two hours for dinner.

Africa who wait for the day's end to dance and revel . . . . [N]ight in these climates is finer than the day.<sup>278</sup>

## Opera, Revolution, and the Sans-Culottes

*The director, M. Laglaine, wasn't [the sort] of man to leave his troupe in idleness . . . the theater was set up on the poop deck, and we had comedy and opera twice per week, and music every day.*

--François Péron, Captain of the *Aigle* (c. 1790)<sup>279</sup>

News of the French Revolution reached Mauritius in January of 1790. The revolution's egalitarian ideas found fertile ground on the island and were embraced at first by the population at large. As in many French colonies, however, a very different political landscape emerged when the National Assembly and its successor, the Directory, attempted to emancipate the island's slaves.<sup>280</sup> This measure met with broad opposition, both from the whites and Creoles and from the free blacks (many of whom were themselves slave owners). When a military contingent from the *metropole* arrived in 1796 with orders to enforce the abolition of slavery, the irate colonists refused to let the troops disembark. The military expedition (despite having sailed halfway around the

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<sup>278</sup> Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, 83.

<sup>279</sup> François Péron, *Mémoires du Capitaine Péron: sur ses Voyages aux Côtes d'Afrique, en Arabie, à l'Île d'Amsterdam, aux Îles d'Anjouan et de Mayotte, aux Côtes Nord-Ouest de l'Amérique, aux Îles Sandwich, à la Chine, etc* Tome Premier (Paris: Brissot-Thivars, 1824), 188.

<sup>280</sup> Universal manumission in Revolutionary France actually originates from Léger-Félicité Sonthonax's attempt to quell the violent slave revolt in Sante-Domingue (Haiti) by proclaiming an end to slavery. The National Assembly ratified this act on 4 February 1794, applying it to all French colonies, much to the dismay of slaveowners.

world to reach Mauritius) was forced to withdraw in the face of this steadfast domestic opposition.

The Directory's Mauritius Expedition of 1796 was turned back with no shots fired, a peaceful outcome that was itself very unusual. A wave of *sans culottes* radicalism in the late 1790s also ended bloodlessly, with the principal instigators exiled back to mainland France.<sup>281</sup> Their ideas had found fertile ferment in the garrison and National Guard units, however, and additional contrivances were needed in 1798 to send these units, too, overseas.<sup>282</sup> Many of the National Guard members were convinced to enlist in privateer crews, where their aggression and revolutionary zeal could be put to productive use and their singing of reactionary revolutionary songs ceased to bother the populace or incite violence at home.<sup>283</sup> Fortunately for the colonists, the Directory was already too preoccupied by the Wars of the First and Second Coalitions to intervene further.<sup>284</sup> Mauritius was in effect cut off from metropolitan France from 1796-1802. During this interval, it was supplied only by commerce with nearby Bourbon, by visits from foreign

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<sup>281</sup> Exile was the preferred method of dealing with violent dissidents in the island. A small group of Jacobin radicals, for example, were also sent back to France after news reached Mauritius of the fall of Robespierre. See Vaughan, 232.

<sup>282</sup> The sympathies of the National Guardsmen in Mauritius were easy to detect, as the Guards marched through the streets of Port Louis singing *sans culottes*-associated songs such as "Ah! Ça Ira," (more commonly known as "Ça ira!"). See Andre Maure [Un Vieux Colon, pseud.], *Souvenirs d'un Vieux Colon de l'Île Maurice: Renfermant Tous les Évènements Qui Lui Sont Arrivés depuis 1790 jusqu'en 1837, Époque du Bill d'Émancipation ce qui Renferme une Période de 46 Ans* (La Rochelle: Typographie de Frédéric Boutet, 1840), 87-8, 179; Pitot, 146-47.

<sup>283</sup> Almost all of the violent incidents of the French Revolution in Mauritius were perpetrated by members of crowds singing these revolutionary songs. See Pitot, *L'Île Maurice, Esquisses Historiques (1715-1810)*, 146, 155-57; Antoine Chelin, *Une Île et son Passé, Supplément*, 101.

<sup>284</sup> These wars lasted from 1791-1798 and 1799-1802, respectively.

traders, and by a new generation of privateers that set out from its shores for the latest war with Great Britain.<sup>285</sup>

Before this breach with the *metropole* occurred, however, Mauritius acquired its first professional theater company, a troupe organized by Joseph Laglaine. Laglaine had previously visited the island in 1788 and 1789 while employed as a naval surgeon. During his first visit, he witnessed the annual Saint-Louis celebration; during the second, he observed a special celebration fêting a pair of visiting ambassadors from Mysore and raised subscriptions for a theatrical season.<sup>286</sup> The troupe, comprising some forty-five persons (including a fifteen-person orchestra), arrived on 20 May 1790 and gave its formal debut on 11 July 1790 with a performance of two *opéra comique* works: the one-act *Sylvain*<sup>287</sup> and two-act *Blaise et Babet*.<sup>288,289</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> Although Mauritius was far from self-supporting in this period, between 1793 and 1802 its enterprising merchantmen-*cum*-privateers captured 119 prizes from the British. This immense booty, valued at roughly two and a half million pounds, attracted Danish and American traders who supplied food, naval stores and other necessities. See: Toussaint, *Port Louis: A Tropical City*, 55-57.

<sup>286</sup> Vaughan, 223-24.

<sup>287</sup> The libretto for *Sylvain* was written by Jean-François Marmontel; its music was composed by André Grétry. It received its world premiere in 1770.

<sup>288</sup> The libretto for *Blaise et Babet* was written by Jaques-Marie Boutet de Monvel; its music was composed by Nicolas Dezède. It received its world premiere in 1783.

<sup>289</sup> Chelin, *Une Île et son Passé*, 92; Chelin, *Le Théâtre à l'Île Maurice*, 6.

The arrival of this well-trained and seasoned ensemble (which conducted nightly rehearsals and performances during its passage from France to Mauritius, much to the delight of the ship's passengers and crew) caused a stir, and its musicians were quickly recruited for all major events on the island involving music.<sup>290</sup> This troupe – twice devastated by plague and once reconstituted by joining with a similar troupe that was struck by plague in Bourbon – was responsible for

introducing a large body of opera melodies to the Mauritian soundscape. Many of these opera melodies were refashioned or reset for special occasions, such as the funeral of the popular governor General Malartic in 1793, when soloists from the opera company sang memorial songs setting new words to “the most beautiful pieces from *Roméo et Juliette*” (likely a French translation of Georg Benda’s opera *Romeo und Julie* [1776]).<sup>291</sup>

The success of Laglaine’s opera company did more than challenge the social ball’s primacy as the apex of social entertainment in Mauritius: it also pushed the



**Figure 13 - Title page to the libretto of *Sylvain*, an *opéra-comique* and the first opera documented as having been professionally performed in Mauritius.**

<sup>290</sup> Chelin, *Le Théâtre à l'Île Maurice*, 6-8.

<sup>291</sup> Maure, 53.

boundaries of racial and class divisions. The list of invited guests at a social ball was an essentially discriminatory measure; by contrast, opera performances (being strictly commercial affairs) were open to anyone who could afford a ticket. Upper, middle, and lower classes alike mixed in the gallery, irrespective of their racial background or means beyond the ticket price. This was much more in keeping with the ideals of the French Revolution than the exclusionary social ball – an association not lost on audiences, especially considering that the same ship that brought Laglaine’s troupe to Mauritius was also the first ship to bring *detailed* news and symbols of the revolution, including the tricolor cockade hat and revolutionary literature.<sup>292</sup> More than one writer has attributed the great success of opera in Mauritius in the 1790s to its ability to stir the “play of passions” during a time of political ferment.<sup>293</sup>

The path of the French Revolution in Mauritius avoided (for the most part) most of the excesses and bloodshed that stained ideals in metropolitan France; this comparative respite and calm allowed for some unusual attempts at egalitarian social engineering involving music. The first change in government was the establishment of an elected Colonial Assembly that assumed many of the powers formerly vested in the royal governor. The Assembly members were drawn from the upper classes of Mauritian

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<sup>292</sup> As discussed above, Mauritian society resisted many of the egalitizing reforms instituted by the French Revolution in metropolitan France, retaining legal discriminations against *noirs libres* and Creoles, especially in terms of inheritance. Since the theater in Mauritius was open to anyone who could pay the ticket price (even, potentially, slaves accompanying or with authorizations from their masters), it was one of the most egalitarian venues of Mauritian society.

<sup>293</sup> See, for example, Albert Pitot, *L’Île Maurice, Esquisses Historiques (1715-1810)* (Port Louis, Mauritius: E. Pezzani, 1899), (151-52).



society and contained several amateur violinists and keyboard players, which may explain the detailed interest that they took in also assuming oversight of Laglaine's opera company.<sup>294,295</sup> As the course of the revolution continued, opera and symphonic music came to be viewed by the council members as powerful forces to be channeled for public good, and ordinances governing this were eventually passed into law.

First, however, the Assembly ordered the granting of permits to Laglaine's troupe to create and operate temporary performance spaces. These impermanent structures proved insufficient for demand, so the opera company was later authorized to construct two permanent performing spaces: a concert hall and a theater. The Assembly appropriated a vacant lot for one structure and leased public parkland near the city center for the other.<sup>296</sup> After Laglaine's company took up residence in these spaces, the Municipal Council of Port Louis (which had taken over regulation of the company's performances) passed several rules regulating the content and presentation of music at theatrical performances:

- *All performances will begin exactly at 6:30 during the summer and 5:30 during the winter. These times must be mentioned in all posted and newspaper advertisements.*
- *The orchestra will play symphonies for one quarter of an hour before the raising of the curtain.*
- *Musicians may not leave the theater until a performance has concluded.*

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<sup>294</sup> This authority was later ceded to the Municipal Council of Port Louis when internal affairs became too distracting.

<sup>295</sup> Vaughan, 231. Voting at this stage was restricted to white male property owners, resulting in a Colonial Assembly of the same composition.

<sup>296</sup> This parkland, part of the *Jardins de la Compagnie*, occupied prime real estate in the center of Port Louis. A modern equivalent would be for a private theater to be constructed in the Boston Public Garden, taking up a third of the public space.

- *Unadvertised and unauthorized pieces are prohibited. All music must be approved by the censor.*
- *Moral subjects and behavior are required, and dishonesty forbidden.*
- *There must be one performance for the poor offered each winter and one performance for the poor offered each summer.*
- *Two unarmed guards must be present at every performance to guard against public disorder. The salaries for these guards will be paid by the presenting company.<sup>297</sup>*

There are some indications that members of the revolutionary government used their authority to mandate performances of their favored types of music via tools such as the above ordinance requiring the playing of symphonic music before a spoken play or opera. The results were striking for a distant island outpost and would have competed well with the offerings in many French provincial cities: music concerts seven nights per week, with operas or comedies staged twice per week – and all of these performances being organized by a single company.<sup>298</sup> The requirement that Laglaine’s company give two (the actual number was higher in practice) entirely free performances each year with admission reserved to the poor was an unusual and progressive action.<sup>299</sup> This use of government regulation ensured that “high culture” music was open to all free residents of the island, regardless of social status, racial background, or financial means.

### **Empire and Fall: The Twilight of French Mauritius**

*[Here] the taste for music and dance [in the white population] is spread throughout.*

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<sup>297</sup> Order of the Municipal Council, 23 January 1798. Quoted in Chelin, 88.

<sup>298</sup> Maure, 340-42.

<sup>299</sup> Chelin, 88.

--Pierre Brunet, physician (1803)<sup>300</sup>

*When tired of writing I apply to music, and when my fingers are tired with the flute, I write again till dinner. After dinner we amuse ourselves with billiards until tea, and afterwards walk in the garden 'til dusk. From thence till supper I make one at Pleyel's quartets.*

--Mathew Flinders (1804)<sup>301</sup>

In 1803, Napoleon – then First Citizen of the French Republic – took advantage of the Peace of Amiens to reestablish French control over Île de France and the rest of the Mascarene Islands. He appointed Charles Decaen as governor of Île de France, and promulgated a decree reestablishing slavery in the colonies. As a result, General Decaen was welcomed by the (white) populace with open arms, and he quickly dismantled the revolutionary instruments of government. His application of the Napoleonic Codes to local conditions included language emphasizing the different rights of full-blooded French citizens and others, and affirmed property rights concerning slavery.<sup>302</sup>

Decaen brought with him a military band of some skill, a body of soldiers to invigorate the social pool, and a wife with a penchant for entertaining.<sup>303</sup> His early tenure was marked with luxuries, with social standards rising to the point that traveler visiting in 1803 recorded, “Most people in the town are fond of music and dancing, but the luxury of the table is their predominant interest; in fact, most of them are ruining themselves with

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<sup>300</sup> Brunet, 28.

<sup>301</sup> Matthew Flinders, 18 May 1804. Reprinted in Sir Ernest Scott, *The Life of Captain Matthew Flinders, R.N.* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson), 348.

<sup>302</sup> Addison and Hazareesingh, *A New History of Mauritius*, 32.

<sup>303</sup> This filled the gap left by the expulsion of the army and National Guard units and their military bands. See Francis Patrick Flemmyng, *Mauritius; or, The Isle of France: Being an Account of the Island, Its History, Geography, Products, and Inhabitants* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1862), 80-85; Maure, 179.

their expenditure on luxury food.’’<sup>304</sup> Although this luxury did not last – war broke out again in 1804 – the renewed interest in music and education that he promulgated was more sustained. For seven years, the French military band was a popular and daily presence in the musical life of the colony, establishing a taste for marches and opera arrangements that continued under the later British occupation.<sup>305</sup> Although he made numerous changes to the laws of Mauritius, Decaen made no changes to the laws regulating the Mauritian theater, retaining the policy of making music available to all free residents of the island.

Under Decaen, the Mascarene Islands enjoyed a brief burst of renewed vigor as a nest of privateers. For five years, French frigates and privateers scoured the Indian Ocean, severely damaging Britain’s India trade. Their success attracted two successive British invasion fleets; despite the utter defeat of the first expedition in its invasion of Grand Port,<sup>306</sup> the second (and much larger) fleet succeeded in forcing the surrender of Mauritius on 2 December 1810. Mauritius, or Île de France as the French continued to call it, was the last of the French possessions in the Indian Ocean to fall, and the surrender marked a permanent end to French sovereignty on the island.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> Quoted in Toussaint, *Port Louis: A Tropical City*, 61.

<sup>305</sup> Decaen built on the free schools opened during the Revolutionary period, expanding the standard school curriculum to include grammar, drawing, math – and music. He also founded primary schools for free colored children and a military school. Mahadeo, *Mauritian Cultural Heritage*, 18.

<sup>306</sup> 20-29 August 1810 – the most crushing naval defeat suffered by the British in the entire Napoleonic Wars.

<sup>307</sup> For a detailed account of the campaign, see Stephen Taylor, *Storm & Conquest: The Battle for the Indian Ocean, 1808-10* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008).

The terms of surrender granted to General Decaen and his charges were quite generous: all soldiers were repatriated to France with their regimental standards and weapons, all property aside from identified plunder and seagoing vessels was protected



**Figure 14 - *Le Combat de Grand Port* (1837) by Pierre-Julien Gilbert (1783-1860).**

from confiscation, and the signatories agreed to allow and respect the continuance of the French language and laws on the island. The beloved military band brought by the French general returned to France, to be replaced by British military bands of less skill but new musical repertoire. For many years, the British military bands were the most popular element of the British occupation.<sup>308</sup>

One element of the population that did not survive the British occupation was the host of British (and predominantly Irish) soldiers and sailors who had deserted to the French cause. This group, numbering two companies of soldiers in 1810 (about five hundred men), had enlivened the Mauritian social scene since the unit's formation in 1804. As many of the Irish sailors had been forcibly drafted by press gangs from the Royal Navy, they were particularly vulnerable to what one British writer called "the

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<sup>308</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests this popularity cut across lines of race, class, and freedom. There are abundant criticisms of most aspects of British policy in period sources, but nothing but complimentary descriptions of the military bands' activities and performances.

combined fear of imprisonment, exile, and being cut off from alcohol.”<sup>309</sup> After deciding to defect, the deserters demonstrated their newfound commitment to the French cause by singing revolutionary French songs with their former captors, an action that came back to haunt them when the British conquered the island and shipped the deserters back to England to be court-martialed.<sup>310</sup>

In the 1814 Treaty of Paris, France reclaimed Île Bourbon and gave up the rest of the Mascarene Islands to Britain. Île de France/Mauritius was permanently lost to the British, who restored its older Dutch name to official practice. The inhabitants of Mauritius, now permanently cut off from their mother country, looked with askance at the new and feared trappings of British rule.

The era of French Mauritius is one of the most important and formative parts of the island’s musical history. Soldiers and sailors



**Figure 15 - *The Surrender of Mauritius Isle to the British in 1810*, by Richard Caton Woodville (1822-56).**

lured to Mauritius by its music and other entertainments provided a manpower pool that allowed France to contest with Great Britain for domination in India and the Indian

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<sup>309</sup> W. Owen, *Notes on the Isles of France and Bonaparte* (Unknown publisher, c. 1808). Quoted in Marina Carter, ed., *Kaleidoscopic Conquest: Mauritius – 1810* (Port Louis, Mauritius: National Library of Mauritius, Center for Research on Indian Ocean Societies, 2010), 15-6.

<sup>310</sup> NA UK: KB 8/89/2, 69.

Ocean throughout the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. The organized use of music was an integral factor in attracting and retaining the settlers and families that built one of the most vibrant cities in the French colonial empire, a city that earned the nickname “The Little Paris of the Indian Ocean.” Before French rule came to an end in 1810, Mauritius boasted theatrical and operatic offerings from Europe that could be found nowhere else in the Far East – a feat all the more impressive because much of the island’s musical and dramatic apparatuses were formed in the midst and disruption of the French Revolutionary Wars.

The European art music described above, although impressive, was not the only musical tradition to emerge from French control of Mauritius. The large-scale importation of slaves for plantation labor provided a population pool that mixed with the *maroons* of the shadow colony of the former Dutch Mauritius. From this *métissage* emerged what we now recognize as the *séga* song and dance tradition that would eventually become enshrined as the national culture of Mauritius. These two musical traditions, erected during less than a century of French rule, would eventually outlast British domination of the island and play key roles in forming the musical landscape of Mauritius today.

#### **IV. Music in Mauritius under the British Empire: the Status Quo in the Twilight Hours of Slavery and the Era of Immigration (1810-1910)**

*À l'Île de France, j'étais en pays compatriote, car les Anglais, en débaptisant cette terre, n'ont pas pu la dénationaliser. Mauritius est encore française. . . . **Port Louis est toujours le petit Paris**: luxe, modes, jouissances d'art, besoin de nouvelles, émotions politiques, tout y arrive de nos ports; rien de Londres ni de Liverpool.*

--Jules-Sébastien-César Dumont d'Urville (1834)<sup>311</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to chronicle the major developments and events in musical practice and performance during the first hundred years of British rule in Mauritius (1810-1910). This interval saw the use of European musical culture as a bridge between formerly warring factions, as a tool of French resistance against British colonial rule, as a status symbol in urban society, and as a marker of assimilation (or attempted assimilation). It also saw the transformation of *séga* from a covert and illegal practice to an act of public celebration after the island's slaves were emancipated. Emancipation brought with it Christian missionaries from Europe and migrant workers from India and China, with each group bringing (eventually, if not immediately) its own additions to the Mauritian soundscape and society. European art music in particular was associated with integration and assimilation, and its adoption and subsequent rejection by some immigrant groups is an important factor in the formation of Mauritius into a multicultural (rather than bicultural) island. As will be seen, diverse responses to assimilation pressures

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<sup>311</sup> Dumont d'Urville, *Voyage Pittoresque Autour du Monde: Résumé Général des Voyages et Découvertes. Tome Premier*. (Paris: Imprimerie de H. Fournier et Comp., 1834), 54. Emphasis added.



applied to slaves, former slaves, and British residents as well as the Chinese and Indian arrivals.

### **Introduction to the British Colonial Period in Mauritius**

The first century of British rule in Mauritius was a time of relative peace punctuated by episodes of domestic unrest. No wars directly troubled the island's shores during this period, although military units stationed on the island were sometimes employed in conflicts in India and continental Africa. This shift deprived the citizenry of the rapid wealth-making opportunities they had enjoyed through privateering during the Anglo-French wars, but also spared them the accompanying bouts of sudden inflation and the disruptive effects of blockades and other wartime trade interruptions. Unusually, Port Louis remained a free port after passing into British control, with trading access open to ships of all nations. The result was that Mauritius steadily became a busier center of trade under British rule than it had ever enjoyed as part of France.

The first hundred years of British Mauritius can be divided into three distinct periods, in which the musical soundscape of the island reflected larger social movements across Mauritius.<sup>312</sup> The first of these periods, the Early British or Pre-Abolition Period, spans from 1810 to 1835 – from the surrender of Mauritius to the legal end of slavery on

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<sup>312</sup> This system of delineation, although not without its drawbacks, is particularly useful as a starting point because of the massive changes in the human makeup and liberties of the Mauritian populations between 1810 and 1910. Some changes and additions to cultural practice were immediate (e.g., public *séga* performances after the onset of emancipation) and others trailed the arrival of new immigrant groups (e.g., the growth of traditional Chinese and Indian music practices decades after the initial arrival of these populations).

the island. It was characterized by the rise of sugar cultivation and the maintenance of the social status quo against British efforts to remake the island's social landscape through abolition. This period saw a general continuation of the musical traditions and practices of French Mauritius, with British military bands and musicians replacing their French predecessors in providing music at public and private events. Music and theater were closely interwoven in this period, and opera performances were co-opted as vehicles of protest against the British government on several occasions. A particular milestone was the establishment of a new permanent theater in Port Louis, which is still extant today.

The second period, the Early-to-Mid-Immigration Period, runs from 1835 to 1880 – from the abolition of slavery to the start of democratic agitation on the island. This period saw great demographic changes as the emancipated slaves fled the plantations and were replaced by migrant workers from India and China. *Séga* performances moved into the public eye, Christian missionaries evangelized the former slaves and introduced new hymnody, and an ethno-linguistic consolidation gradually merged the various mixed-race, Malagasy, and African identities into a broad Creole identity.<sup>313</sup> During this period, a new genre of *séga* song distinct from dancing and celebrations appeared in the new

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<sup>313</sup> The early stages of this creolizing process took place in French Mauritius, most visibly in the large portion of the *noirs libres* population that culturally imitated the mixed-race free (what the French settlers called “Créole”) and European-descended population. (This creolization process is thoroughly documented in Meghan Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island*.) As will be seen below, the meaning of the term “Creole” in Mauritian society shifted during the nineteenth century from an indication of racial identity to one of cultural identity mapped over a variety of racial combinations. A similar but more recent change in Creole identity conception can be seen in French Martinique during the late twentieth century. See David A. B. Murray, “The Cultural Citizen: Negotiations of Race and Language in the Making of Martiniquais,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (1997): 79-90.

agrarian and fishing communities founded by ex-slaves. English pianos became common sights in the markets of Port Louis, and both English and French concert and dance music filled the streets, dance halls, and music studios of the island. Near the end of this period, the opening of the Suez Canal and advances in steam-powered travel enabled traveling theater and opera troupes to visit the island on an annual or even semi-annual basis.

The third period, the Late Immigration Period, runs from 1880 to 1910 – from the start of the Mauritian self-governance movement to the end of large-scale Indian immigration and indenture. This period saw a cultural awakening within Indian and Chinese communities on the island, accompanied by public assertions of their identity through music;<sup>314</sup> the large demographic shifts of the preceding period were belatedly mirrored by the start of a cultural transformation. Large numbers of Indian migrant workers of both sexes settled in Mauritius during this period, assisted by a redistribution of agrarian land called the *grand morcellement*. Many Indian men sent for wives and families from their native lands, and the growing communities that resulted attracted immigration by priests and musicians, introducing several varieties of traditional Indian music to the island's soundscape. This period also saw a shift away from interracial marriage in the Chinese community, with Chinese men increasingly sending away to China for women to marry. These immigrant brides introduced many elements of

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<sup>314</sup> In both cases, the establishment of communities with long-term residents and wives from the place of origin served as a catalyst for a stronger assertion of parent cultures in the diaspora location. Although Indian and Chinese migrant workers first arrived in the 1830s, the shift from migrant communities to resident communities was a slow and gradual process taking many decades, especially as many early immigrants from these regions who settled in Mauritius married into (and were, to varying extents, subsumed by) the broader Creole community.

traditional Chinese culture to the Sino-Mauritian community, including traditional religious music that was employed with great vigor on Chinese holidays.<sup>315</sup>

### **Conquest and Liberation: Music under Early British Imperialism**

*“If the French were to get the Mauritius again[,] it would be a terrible thorn in the side of our East Indian trade?”*

*“I presume we should be obliged to take possession of it at any cost.”*

--Minutes of the House of Commons, Select Committee on Sugar and Coffee Planting (1848)<sup>316</sup>

The first musical celebration of the British conquest of Mauritius occurred not on the field of battle but in the harbor of Port Louis, where British prisoners were housed on a number of hulked ships. At the first approach of the British fleet, the red flag indicating “enemy in sight” was raised at every military position and on every ship in the harbor. At this sight, a captive naval officer recorded, a tremulous murmur swept through the British prisoners:

*Every musical instrument on board was put in requisition, some [players] of which began playing the ‘Downfall of Paris,’ others ‘Rule Britannia,’ & ‘God Save the King,’ in which the vocalists joined with all the power of their lungs. Others made drums of the tables and drumsticks of rulers or bars of chairs [–] with which & various other devices, a noise & confusion were produced which might have rivaled pandemonium itself.*<sup>317</sup>

An even greater burst of exuberant music making ensued when news of the French

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<sup>315</sup> Although Sino-Mauritian music traditions are largely outside the scope of this dissertation, this topic will be discussed briefly later in this chapter and in chapter 6.

<sup>316</sup> Minutes of 3 April 1848: House of Commons, Select Committee on Sugar Planting and Cultivation. See Parliament of Great Britain, House of Commons, *Reports from Committees* Volume 17, Part 3 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard College Library, 1848), 35.

<sup>317</sup> John Tapson, “Journal: 1806 April 25-1814 December 28” (unpublished manuscript) William L. Clements Library, The University of Michigan, 102-04.

capitulation reached the prison ships and the guards released the prisoners. The celebration took a dark turn, however, when the former prisoners on one hulk opened the alcohol stores and drunken carousers assaulted their former jailers. With a lynching feared, a nearby French frigate fired its cannons into the prison hulk, killing several of the celebrants and bringing the musical festivities to an abrupt and bloody end.

This regrettable incident was the first of several to mark the first year of the British occupation of Mauritius. Although the French military population was shortly transported back to France, in accordance with the articles of surrender, the new British establishment was soon occupied with a host of incidents to accompany the broad local opposition to its efforts to implement policies driven by Whitehall (e.g., to limit the slave trade, apply British commercial codes, and secure the island against rebellion). Relatively few of these incidents degenerated into armed violence, but altercations punctuated with fisticuffs – many linked to things sung or spoken in the theater – abounded. The resulting police investigations and newspaper coverage illustrate the ways in which the newly resident British officials and soldiery tried to integrate themselves into the island environment, and how music was used socially to alternately both ease tensions (by the British authorities) and rally opposition (by the French populace).

The conditions of the French capitulation included a clause guaranteeing the Franco-Mauritians' right to retain their own religion, laws, and customs. The general wording of this clause, however, gave rise to radically different interpretations by the Franco-Mauritian citizenry and the colonial authorities; consequently, the enactment of new laws by the British governors provoked considerable unrest among the inhabitants.

Despite *irredentist* hopes among the populace that Mauritius would revert back to France with the advent of peace, the British authorities were intent on permanent occupation from the beginning, so as to finally erase the “Pirate’s Nest” that had troubled their fleet and commerce in so many wars. This push for permanency was driven home early in 1811, for example, when the governor made access to certain government services contingent on colonists publicly signing an oath of allegiance to the British sovereign<sup>318</sup> – an action not required in many of the other Dutch and French colonies that had been conquered in the same conflict, and which were later returned to their previous owners.<sup>319</sup>

Two patterns of conflict emerged in this environment: one large-scale, involving legal changes made by the British administration, and the other small-scale, involving incidents between individuals or groups of individuals and representatives of the British establishment (usually involving sailors or the soldiery). Much of the former pattern of conflict revolved around the institution of slavery, which was strongly opposed by the Prime Minister’s office in Whitehall, but which even the colonial government found it could not do without in the near term. Faced with strong domestic opposition and a government apparatus that was itself dependent on the human resources of government-owned slaves, the first British governor compromised by formally banning the

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<sup>318</sup> Dayachand Napal, *British Mauritius, 1810-1948* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Hart Printing, 1984), 6-7.

<sup>319</sup> A similar oath of allegiance was required during the British occupations of Martinique from 1794-1802 and Maine (USA) in 1814.

importation of new slaves while leaving the domestic institution largely untouched.<sup>320</sup>

This compromise on the question of slavery pleased few, and the concession to the interests of Mauritian slave owners in no way inhibited the development of numerous small-scale conflicts between the British and French during social situations.

At first, it seemed that a smooth and peaceful transition might take place. The departure of Decaen's soldiers left a large void in Mauritian society, especially at high society events, and British soldiers and sailors were quick to assume the roles vacated by their French predecessors.<sup>321</sup> Officers were regularly invited to dinners and social dances; the presence of select enlisted men at these events (and their compensation for the same) suggests that they came accompanied by military musicians from the rank and file.<sup>322</sup>

This arrangement would not have been considered unusual, as the musicians from Decaen's expedition (including both the regimental bands and instrumentalists from the general rank and file) had quickly assumed these same roles themselves when they arrived in 1803.<sup>323</sup> The social thaw was far from universal, but the Mauritian reputation

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<sup>320</sup> Governor Farquhar and his officials soon discovered that they lacked the human and financial resources to conduct operations *without* the help of slaves, and thus made full use of the large pool of government slaves inherited from the French administration. This pool of slaves ranged from administrative clerks to personal servants to road workers and *maroon* hunters.

<sup>321</sup> The sepoy soldiers from the British expedition were quickly returned to India due to the high wages promised them for overseas service, their discomfort with the climate, and the risk of damage to the expeditionary fleet from the impending monsoon season. The British replaced the sepoys with white soldiers from the garrison in Table Bay, South Africa. NA UK: CO 167/4, Farquhar to Liverpool, 7 December 1810.

<sup>322</sup> This appears to have included both professional military musicians (signalers and members of the military bands) and amateur military musicians (i.e., regular soldiers with musical abilities.)

<sup>323</sup> A similar pattern can be seen in numerous British garrison towns in the home islands during the same period, and in stations with European soldiers in British India.

for hospitality carried the day, and many close friendships and amorous relationships quickly developed through these events.<sup>324</sup>

The ease with which Mauritian high society mingled with the British officers and administrators at these events is a testimony to the upper stratum of Mauritian society's fluency in English. As Matthew Flinders had discovered during his stay in Mauritius, many of the educated Franco-Mauritians not only read English fluently but also actively acquired and devoured the English books captured by privateers and sold at auction in Port Louis.<sup>325</sup> The daughters of upper class and bourgeoisie families often were educated in English and represented a generation that had grown up in a state of war with England, with a large portion of the island's circulating books supplied from captured English ships and by American traders. In addition, the islanders had enjoyed the company of the more than five hundred Irish soldiers recruited by Decaen amongst captured British crews and passengers.<sup>326</sup> The facility of communication at these events seems to have contributed to over-optimistic perceptions of bilingualism amongst the population at large, as linguistic barriers and false assumptions of mutual intelligibility played a part in numerous incidents.

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<sup>324</sup> British officers, unsurprisingly, were quite taken with the legendary beauty of Mauritian women. Despite the initial frostiness, many friendships also developed between British officers and their French liasons in the island's civil service. Since Britain and France continued to be at war until 1814, this growing intimacy with former enemies was a cause of concern for some British officers among the garrison. See: Carter, *Kaleidoscopic Conquest: Mauritius – 1810*, 175.

<sup>325</sup> As discussed in chapter 3, for much of the Wars of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, Mauritius was more regularly supplied with goods captured by privateers than by goods from metropolitan France.

<sup>326</sup> Henry de Poyen-Bellisle, *La Guerre aux Îles de France et Bourbon, 1809-1810* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1896), 89-91.



In March of 1811, just three months into the British occupation, a party of British soldiers and sailors attended the Port Louis Theatre for a performance of the opera *Azémia ou les sauvages*.<sup>327,328</sup> “La Marseillaise” was sung before the curtain rose on the evening’s production, in accordance with Franco-Mauritian custom since the early days of the French Revolution on the island. Less customary was what happened during the intermission between the first and second acts, when a British sailor appeared in the house of the theater with a violin. He began to play and sing the traditional British anthem “God Save the King,” causing the British soldiers and sailors present to promptly remove their hats and sing along. Seeing that the Frenchmen present had not removed their own hats in response to this tune, the British men began to accost them – in English.<sup>329</sup> A riot ensued, and the British government responded by seizing administrative control of the Port Louis Theatre, imposing censorship, posting public notices, and requiring that armed police officers or soldiers be present at every performance.<sup>330</sup>

Despite confrontations such as that of the March 1811 theater incident, the new British residents were not deterred from participating in the rich musical, theatrical, and dance offerings in Mauritius. Few overseas postings, after all, could offer such a depth of

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<sup>327</sup> Premiered in 1786, with a libretto by Ange-Étienne-Xavier Poisson de La Chabeaussière and music by Nicolas Dalayrac.

<sup>328</sup> Chelin, *Le Théâtre à l’Île Maurice*, 16-18.

<sup>329</sup> Albert Pitot, *L’Île Maurice, Esquisses Historiques I, 1810-1823* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Coignet Frères, 1910), 26-8.

<sup>330</sup> Chelin, *Le Théâtre à l’Île Maurice*, 19. This was in many ways a return to the time of the Revolution, when the Colonial Assembly had instituted similar requirements.

European high culture activities or such a large resident population of European descent to interact with.<sup>331</sup> Amateur chamber music making, for example, matched many British soldiers and civil servants with amateur musicians in the Franco-Mauritian community. The amateur concerts given by these small chamber ensembles (generally no larger than a quartet) were integrated into weekend coffee meetings and other less formal events in Mauritian society.<sup>332</sup>

The musical repertoire played by these British and Franco-Mauritian ensembles had more in common with each other than might otherwise have been expected. Despite two decades of near-constant war, Mauritius had enjoyed a surprisingly direct channel of access to British sources of sheet music and musical instruments. French music and instruments were carried to the island via the direct trade of French merchant ships; English music arrived by way of commerce raiding and trade through third parties.<sup>333</sup> After the British conquest of Mauritius, enterprising Franco-Mauritians enlisted their new friends to negotiate trade and business arrangements in England, some of which

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<sup>331</sup> The famous Mauritian hospitality and beauty of Mauritian women were also ameliorating factors.

<sup>332</sup> This was abetted by the long garrison terms preferred by the British government during this period due to transportation costs. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Suffolk Regiment, for example, was assigned to the island shortly after the capitulation of 1810 and remained stationed there until 1813. The same unit also served garrison duty in Mauritius from 1815-7 and 1837-47. See: H.G. Hart, *The New Annual Army List, Militia List, and Yeomanry Cavalry List, for 1898* (London: John Murray, 1898), 244.

<sup>333</sup> One of the French musicians with whom Matthew Flinders played chamber music, Madame Chazel, played a harpsichord captured from a British vessel and bought through the subsequent prize court. Marina Carter, *Companions of Misfortune: Flinders and Friends at the Isle of France, 1803-1810* (London: Pink Pigeon Press, 2003), 93. Neutral American merchant vessels were the largest source of third-party trade goods during the Revolutionary and Imperial periods.

concerned the purchase of books and articles related to music.<sup>334</sup> The British civil service establishment, for its part, exempted sheet music from import tariffs and set low licensing fees for businesses that manufactured and repaired musical instruments.<sup>335</sup> Mauritius' musical connection to Europe was fully restored in 1814 (less than four years into the British occupation) when Napoleon's abdication and the ensuing peace finally reopened regular lines of trade and cultural traffic between Mauritius and France.<sup>336</sup>

News of the Bourbon Restoration and the resulting tidings of peace reached Mauritius in late July 1814.<sup>337</sup> The British Governor, Robert Farquhar, proclaimed a public holiday accompanied by organized activities and celebrations by the colonial government and local authorities. The holiday and festivities were set for 25 August 1814, so as to allow a full month of preparation. This mass celebration, the official announcement read, would be marked "by the most glorious of [musical] concerts" and celebrated with the singing of the *Te Deum* at every parish church on the island at noon. In addition, the city of Port Louis would be illuminated at night for a period of three

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<sup>334</sup> Matthew Flinders, for example, was tasked by his friend Thomi Pitot to purchase a concert harp for the latter's sister-in-law. See Marie Serge Rivière, ed., *My Dear Friend. The Flinder-Pitot Correspondence (1806-1814) at the Carnegie Library, Mauritius* (Vacoas, Mauritius: Editions Le Printemps, 2003), 74.

<sup>335</sup> These measures persisted until the end of British rule; all imports of musical instruments for the regimental bands were also specifically exempted from import tariffs. See *Blue Book for the Colony of Mauritius, 1907* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Shopkeeper's General Printing Establishment, 1908), A5, A20-21.

<sup>336</sup> Even before this, French musical goods were available through London merchants, as the city served as something of a general clearing house for merchandise seized by Royal Navy ships and privateers. Although prices were subject to considerable variation, the plethora of commerce raiding on both sides sometimes yielded prices close to their peacetime norms.

<sup>337</sup> Albert Pitot, *L'Île Maurice, Esquisses Historiques I (1810-1823)* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Coignet Frères & Cie, 1910), 75.

consecutive days, so as to facilitate the celebration and revelry during the Mauritian winter.<sup>338</sup>

This coordinated singing of the *Te Deum* around the island was an overt political move by the governor, who employed the performances of the hymn as political propaganda. Although the *Te Deum* and Catholicism had never been suppressed in Mauritius as they had in metropolitan France, the Franco-Mauritian population had been swift to embrace the French Revolution; British authorities were well aware of and cautious of the strong Bonapartist sentiments among the general population. As a result, the singing of the *Te Deum*, thus, was announced as a celebration of peace and dedicated to the glorification of the reign of the newly installed (or finally recognized) Louis XVIII as King of France, with invitations issued to all ranks of society.<sup>339</sup> The long advance notice neatly sidestepped the normal excuses that would allow anti-monarchists to not attend, and the prospect of a public holiday and a large-scale concert of music were sure to marshal the interest of the population at large.

Farquhar's concerns about Bonapartist tendencies in the population were not unfounded. News of Napoleon's escape from Elba later that year elicited an altogether different outpouring of joy and celebration in Mauritius, much to the consternation of the British authorities. Conspirators in Mauritius and Bourbon plotted coordinated uprisings against the British soldiers, including a plan to ambush the garrison in its barracks. The

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<sup>338</sup> Robert Farquhar, *Proclamation du 30 Juillet 1814*. The full illumination of the city throughout the night was an especially rare and costly treat before the introduction of gas and electric street lamps.

<sup>339</sup> Pitot, *L'Île Maurice, Esquisses Historiques I (1810-1823)*, 78.

governor responded by bringing in armed ships and contingents of soldiers to keep an eye on the populace. With their ambush plot foiled, a band of four hundred well-armed Creole men assembled outside the city; when confronted by English regulars, however, they dispersed at the sound of the first trumpet blast.<sup>340</sup> This musical note ended the sole armed Franco-Mauritian uprising against British rule.

The sound of the trumpet conveyed the immediacy of British military power in a tangible way. By giving this loud, aural signal for their forces to charge, the British forces presented a threat of imminent violence to the would-be rebels before them. This convinced the rebels of the futility of armed conflict, and the British did not bother to pursue or imprison the plotters. Thereafter, Franco-/Créole-Mauritian resistance to British rule discarded violent conflict in favor of legal, political, and artistic avenues – including, notably, the theater.

## Theater and Society

*[On visiting Port Louis.] There is a very pretty little theater, in which operas are excellently performed, and are much preferred by the inhabitants to plays. We were also surprised at seeing large booksellers' shops, with well-stored shelves; music and reading bespeak our approach to the old world of civilization.*

--Charles Darwin (29 April 1836)<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> *Journal Asiatique*, Septembre 1816: 323-313. Quoted in Pitot, *L'Île Maurice, Esquisses Historiques I (1810-1823)*, 109.

<sup>341</sup> Charles Darwin, *Voyages of the Adventure and Beagle, Volume III: Journal and Remarks, 1832-1836* (London: Henry Colburn, 1839), 571.

The government's control of the Port Louis Theatre and the separate Performance Hall in Port Louis, both seized after the March 1811 riot, gave it a monopoly over the island's large-scale performance venues.<sup>342</sup> When the Great Port Louis Fire of 1816 reduced the Port Louis Theatre (along with an entire quarter of the city) to ashes, the loss of employment forced many of the island's professional singers and actors to emigrate to nearby Bourbon in search of work.<sup>343</sup> The Performance Hall itself was demolished two years later by a powerful cyclone that blew the building off its foundations.<sup>344</sup> Unfortunately, Governor Farquhar had been recalled to England in 1817, and in his absence the City Council of Port Louis refused to grant permits to rebuild either space. This effectively terminated the professional theater and opera tradition in Mauritius, and many of the actors and musicians left the island.<sup>345</sup>

A few amateur theater companies performed sporadic spoken plays, *opéra comique*, and *opéra lyrique* over the next several years, but these performances were irregular, generally mounted as charity benefits, and took place in temporary or improvised spaces. Farquhar returned to Mauritius in 1820, however, and authorized a considerable subsidy for building a new Port Louis Theatre. The new edifice – still standing today – opened on 11 June 1822 with a group of amateurs performing three

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<sup>342</sup> This control was *de jure* and not always *de facto*, as the theater was rented out for lectures and public meetings, many of which turned out to be critical of the government. However, the shuttering of the theater was usually reactionary and instituted after the offending event.

<sup>343</sup> *Gazette de Maurice*, 6 Septembre 1817.

<sup>344</sup> Antoine Marrier d'Unienville, *Statistique de L'Île Maurice et ses Dépendances, Suivie d'une Notice Historique sur Cette Colonie et d'un Essai sur l'Île de Madagascar*. (Paris: G. Barba, 1838), 64-65.

<sup>345</sup> *Gazette de Maurice*, 25 Avril 1818; 2 Mai 1818; 9 Mai 1818.

selections: a choral piece written for the dedication of the theater, the spoken play *La Partie de Chasse de Henri IV*,<sup>346</sup> and the one-act opera *Maison à Vendre*.<sup>347,348</sup> These amateur productions were generally well remarked upon, if not particularly distinguished in character.<sup>349</sup>

The promise of the new space (and its larger house, seating four hundred) was sufficient to convince Joseph Laglaine (founder and director of the first opera company to visit Mauritius) to travel to France and recruit a new professional theater and opera troupe even before the new Port Louis Theatre was complete. This latest ensemble was organized along similar lines to his previous endeavor, comprising both singers and instrumentalists recruited in Paris (although many had experience in regional theaters, provincial touring companies, and the like) and followed a repertory model. They also brought with them a new musical repertoire that showcased more contemporary songs, symphonies, and operas.<sup>350</sup> This fresh repertoire particularly distinguished this new

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<sup>346</sup> Premiered in 1760; script by Charles Collé. This was most likely performed with the chanson “Vive Henri IV!”

<sup>347</sup> Premiered in 1800; libretto by Alexandre Duval and music by Nicolas Dalayrac.

<sup>348</sup> *Gazette de Maurice*, 15 Juin 1822.

<sup>349</sup> As an illustration of the talents of the British amateurs, one need only examine the case of Theodore Edward Hook (1788-1841), a writer and composer who had more than a dozen plays, comic operas, and vaudevilles performed in London before being posted in Mauritius from 1813-1817 as the (well-paid) accountant-general and treasurer of the colony. Unfortunately, few details regarding the works he composed in Mauritius have survived. See Theodore Edward Hook and R. H. Dalton Barham, *The Life and Remains of Theodore Edward Hook* (London: Richard Bentley, 1877).

<sup>350</sup> Chelin, *Le Théâtre à L'Île Maurice...*, 25.

company from the amateur groups, which only rarely premiered new material on the island.<sup>351</sup>

Laglaine died in 1822, but many members of his last troupe chose to stay in Mauritius after his death. The Mauritian public attended the professional theater regularly and with enthusiasm, with some of the singers attracting a considerable base of supporters. One of Laglaine's successors was able to establish a subscription series in 1824, with the express goal of recruiting additional musicians from France,<sup>352</sup> allowing the company to tackle larger-scale musical works. The theater remained a lightning rod for scandal, especially with a few operas that trod on English sentiments, but in general the theater remained open except in times of plague.

The prominence of the Port Louis Theatre in island culture gave the singers and instrumentalists of its professional company a combination of high visibility and *cachet*. After the arrival of Laglaine's new troupe in 1822, theater musicians were soon regularly seen performing at official events, private dinners, important church services, and public spectacles. The theater orchestra did not displace the British military bands that had stepped into the social music-making functions of their French predecessors; indeed, military bands and the theater orchestra were often featured side by side at public spectacles. Instead, the members of the company comprised a new *élite* corps of

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<sup>351</sup> This is not to say that Laglaine's new company performed cutting-edge new music, as it was simpler and less expensive to acquire performance materials for older pieces.

<sup>352</sup> Isidore Lolliot, "Le Théâtre à l'Île de France," *Revue Historique et Littéraire de l'Île Maurice: Archives Coloniales* 2, no. 7 (1888): 88.



musicians who were well placed to capitalize on the professional opportunities developing in the increasingly affluent and prosperous Mauritian society.

During the early British period, the institution of theater in Mauritius – which, as stated before, included spoken plays, the hybrid *opéra-comique*, and the all-sung *opéra-lyrique*<sup>353</sup> – was increasingly viewed as a public resource of important value to society. Following the dissolution and bankruptcy of the last theater company descended from Laglaine’s 1822 troupe, there came a call for the government to provide a regular subsidy for the theater, along similar lines to the annual subsidies given to large theaters in London and Paris. Such a subsidy, it was believed, would not only safeguard the quality of productions but could also be used to entice a visiting theater company to settle permanently on the island. A successful public lobbying campaign led by the newspaper *Le Cernéen* culminated in the colonial government enacting a subsidy in 1834. As three visiting troupes from France had serendipitously arrived in Mauritius that same year and were splitting access to the Port Louis Theatre, a competition for the subsidy was arranged.<sup>354</sup> The winning troupe staged the operas *Robert le Diable*<sup>355</sup> and *Moïse*<sup>356</sup> to

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<sup>353</sup> Vaudevilles were occasionally offered by visiting French troupes.

<sup>354</sup> Albert Pitot, *L’Île Maurice, Esquisses Historiques IV (1833-1835)* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Revue Rétrospective de l’Île Maurice, c. 1916), 255-9.

<sup>355</sup> Premiered in 1831; libretto by Eugène Scribe and Casimir Delavigne, with music by Giacomo Meyerbeer. The Mauritius premiere was offered during the same year as the opera’s American, Dutch, Hungarian, and Russian premieres.

<sup>356</sup> Almost certainly *Moïse et Pharaon, ou Le passage de la Mer Rouge*, the 1827 French adaptation of Rossini’s 1818 opera *Mosè in Egitto*. Libretto by Luigi Balocchi and Victor-Joseph Étienne de Jouy, with music by Giacomo Rossini.

win over the judges and was invited to take up permanent residence in the Port Louis Theatre.<sup>357</sup>

This new permanent theater company was headed by le Comte Michel Adolphe de Fisticat, and had the advantage of having previously performed in Mauritius just two years earlier. De Fisticat's company originally reached Mauritius during a cyclical, multi-year tour of the French overseas colonies.<sup>358</sup> After playing in Réunion for several months, the company decided to try its fortunes on the conveniently located Francophone island just one day's sail to the east – a last-minute piece of planning that may have been driven by the logistics of communication rather than any long-range plan: two-way communication between Western Europe and Mauritius during the Age of Sail took a minimum of eight months under optimal conditions.<sup>359</sup>

Bourbon represented the nominal terminus point of a theatrical troupe touring the *French* colonies,<sup>360</sup> but troupes visiting that island frequently decided to try their fortunes in Mauritius as well.<sup>361</sup> Although the latter island was now a British possession, its theater audiences were primarily Francophone or bilingual, and Port Louis businesses enjoyed close commercial contact and communication with the French colonial cities of

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<sup>357</sup> *Le Mauricien*, 4 Juin 1834.

<sup>358</sup> Chelin, *Le Théâtre à l'Île Maurice*, 37.

<sup>359</sup> During peacetime, the regular commercial and passenger traffic between Mauritius and Bourbon during this period created a reliable mail service taking just a few days to exchange letters between their respective capitals.

<sup>360</sup> A typical tour might visit the Caribbean and French West Africa before continuing to Bourbon/Réunion, lingering at each stop for as long as ticket sales remained profitable. This sort of arrangement took advantage of the huge peacetime growth in overseas trade and shipping, allowing touring companies to book passage separately at each destination.

<sup>361</sup> If a performance tour in Mauritius was particularly long and successful, a company might also perform in Réunion again on the return passage to the Atlantic.

Île Bourbon. Bourbon had a longer tradition of theater performance, but Mauritius was not disadvantageous to a visiting troupe. It possessed a large, affluent, and passionate theater-going public that attended spoken plays, operas, and music concerts; a large and lavishly decorated theater administered by the government; and a concentration of the theater-going public in and around Port Louis, the island's sole urban center. The colonial cities of Île Bourbon were not only much smaller than Mauritius' Port Louis, but the only two that contained theaters in the first half of the nineteenth century (Saint-Denis and Saint-Pierre) were placed on opposite sides of the island, requiring sea transport to transfer sets and costumes from one location to another, an endeavor of comparable scope to transferring a theater company to Mauritius.<sup>362</sup>

The success of visiting troupes gave Mauritius a reputation back in metropolitan France for being very hospitable to visiting musicians. By the mid-1820s, retiring musicians of all sorts – singers, first-chair orchestra members, and even concert soloists – began to visit Mauritius as part of their retirement tours, advertising their availability for lessons and concerts in advance via the island's newspapers. These temporary visitors usually stayed for no more than 1-2 months before continuing passage elsewhere, but the lure of steadier employment drew others of lesser musical talent to the island as well. One

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<sup>362</sup> Kumari R. Issur and Vinesh Y. Hookoomsing, *L'Océan Indien dans les Litteratures Francophones* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 2002), 139-40.

of the best-documented examples of the latter is the story of the English musician William Castell, who lived in Mauritius from 1831-1832.<sup>363</sup>

William Castell was something of a ne'er-do-well, a second- or third-rank musician who jumped from one moneymaking music scheme to another. After gambling his resources unwisely on a large fundraising concert in London, he staged his own death and fled to France under an assumed name, leaving behind his wife, children, and debts. After living the undistinguished life of a private music teacher in Calais and accruing additional debts, Castell was drawn to Mauritius and its reputation as a haven for musicians; he duly wrote his wife that he would return after making his fortune and set sail for the island in the company of another woman.

Castell (now styling himself W. J. Cavendish de Castel) soon discovered that Mauritius was not the easy route to riches that he had imagined. Musicians of actual prominence from Paris and other major French cities had little trouble filling their time with amateur students, but Castell (despite his exaggerated self-styling) was an unknown quantity with no recognizable references. His past experience as a theater musician in London would not have been of assistance to him, given that he was living under a pseudonym, and his efforts to secure employment at the Port Louis Theatre were unsuccessful. Castell eventually began purchasing newspaper advertisements to advertise his availability as a private music teacher and “dancing master” (the latter an attempt to

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<sup>363</sup> Castell is the primary subject of a book-length monograph by Ann V. Beedell, *The Decline of the English Musician, 1788-1888: A Family of English Musicians in Ireland, England, Mauritius, and Australia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

capitalize on the islanders' long-running and ongoing craze for social dances and an imitation of other newspaper ads from the same time).<sup>364</sup> This latter scheme does not appear to have been particularly successful, despite the popularity of amateur music study and ballroom/social dances on the island.

Castell's last money-making musical scheme in Mauritius was more or less identical to his last one in London: he hired musicians to stage a lavish concert, and tried to appeal to *English* patriotism by staging a concert of works entirely by *English* composers. This scheme was announced in a provocative letter sent anonymously to and published by the newspaper *Le Cernéen*, which responded with a scathing and mocking critique the following day.<sup>365</sup> The concert scheme collapsed, and Castell soon departed to Australia in search of better fortunes, fleeing his local debts. In typical fashion, he blamed others for the failure of his scheme.<sup>366</sup>

Castell complained that the French musicians who preceded him to Mauritius held a virtual stranglehold over employment at the theater (itself no surprise), and had conspired against him to shut him out of other performance and teaching opportunities. No documentary evidence has emerged to support this allegation, especially as more distinguished musicians (albeit mostly French natives) seem to have had no trouble securing employment while visiting the island. Castell's employment situation is also not likely to have been improved by his working under a pseudonym, his having arrived

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<sup>364</sup> Beedell, 236-37.

<sup>365</sup> *Le Cernéen* was not the most fortuitous choice of a venue, as it had strongly pro-French leanings and was often critical of the British colonial administration.

<sup>366</sup> Beedell, 229-30.

during a period of social unrest due to rumblings about emancipation, or the closure of the Port Louis Theatre in 1822 amidst strikes and riots protesting the visit of the royal agent John Jeremie (the latter having been sent to Mauritius to compose a proposal for abolishing slavery).

The example of the soprano singer Madame Sallard, by contrast, illustrates one of the more successful career arcs of a European musician who came to Mauritius. She arrived on the island in 1822 as part of Laglaine's new troupe, and was married to another singer in that same company. After establishing herself as a favorite with Mauritian audiences, she enjoyed a multi-decade career as the island's preeminent *prima donna*, and sang leading roles in a wide variety of operatic productions. This status made her very much in demand as a voice teacher, and many of her voice students were the daughters of wealthy Mauritian families. Her singing engagements outside the theater ran the gamut from solo recitals and participation in *soirées musicales* at the island's masonic lodge (La Triple Espérance), to consecrations and memorial songs at state funerals,<sup>367</sup> and are not atypical of the range of musical opportunities enjoyed by French musicians who took up residence on the island during the British era.

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<sup>367</sup> One of her clients, the well-to-do merchant Christian Wiehe, not only engaged Madame Sallarde to teach singing lessons to his daughter in 1840 and 1841, but also to give a series of six concerts with local musicians at the Triple Espérance in the latter year. See Johann Wiehe and Stéphane Sinclair, *Christian W. Wiehe (Île Maurice, 1807-1878): Sucre & Raffinement* (Bell Village, Mauritius: Jacques Wiehe et Stéphane Sinclair), 70, 364.

## Religious Disputes and Missionary Music

The clause that guaranteed the Franco-Mauritians' right to retain their own religion, laws, and customs obligated the British colonial government to assume certain obligations from its French predecessor. For example, the salaries of (French) Catholic priests on the island had been paid by the government since the French Revolution, when the Colonial Council confiscated lands owned by the Catholic Church in Mauritius.<sup>368</sup> The British administration, inheriting these lands, likewise assumed a legal obligation to pay Catholic parish priests a statutory rate. Successive governors regulated this expense by the simple expedient of denying entry papers to French priests, while also paying British-born priests working on the island a third more compensation.<sup>369</sup>

Limiting the number of French Catholic priests on the island had more than purely financial benefits to the government. First, the government's efforts to restrict the slave trade continued to provoke unrest among the (free) populace, and Governor Farquhar was wary of any catalyst that could light unrest into active rebellion, especially after the demonstrations during the Hundred Days.<sup>370</sup> Second, the Prime Minister's cabinet in Whitehall had its own interest in missionizing and converting the island's

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<sup>368</sup> This was the result of legislative compromise, as the measure to confiscate the church lands was controversial among the general populace and in the Colonial Council.

<sup>369</sup> Amedée Nagapen, "British Rule and the Evolution of Christian Pluralism," in *Mahatma Gandhi Institute Conference on 'The British Legacy,' 6-9 May 1997: Papers presented* (Moka, Mauritius: Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1997), 11.

<sup>370</sup> News of Napoleon Bonaparte's escape from exile in Elba (1814) set off large demonstrations across Mauritius, forcing the British authorities to send to India for help. In response, Lord Moira (the Governor-General of India) dispatched an additional six hundred soldiers from India to the island to suppress the rebellions. Napal, *British Mauritius, 1810-1948*, 13.

heathen slaves to Anglicanism, and opposed similar activities by rival denominations.

This evangelization was headed by the London Missionary Society (LMS), which found little success in its efforts to convert the free black and slave populations; many of the missionaries turned their efforts upon arrival to the British soldiery, who were reportedly attracted to almost any vice imaginable in the hot, temptation-filled climate of Mauritius.

These missionary priests established several Anglican parishes on the island, but the mostly Anglican British population always remained small in relation to the mostly Catholic Franco-Mauritian communities. These missionaries are likely to have promoted the Anglican hymnody typical of LMS-trained and sponsored ministers and to have taught this hymnody to their congregations by ear, with the aid of a hymnal or hymn pamphlet for reference. No extant records are known to provide any significant detail on these priests' musical activities or on the resources regularly employed for liturgical music in Anglican parishes during this period.

### **Malagasy Culture in Mauritius during the Early British Period**

Direct sources on *séga* from the pre-emancipation British period do not suggest any significant change in the practice under this early phase of British rule. This is not surprising: British authorities maintained anti-*maroon* patrols, enforced pre-existing French laws against the free movement of slaves (especially by night), and even encouraged the creation of new plantations that made full use of slavery. Although there is little in the way of new information from sources that specifically describe *séga*, there is significant information in sources about elements of Malagasy culture in Mauritian

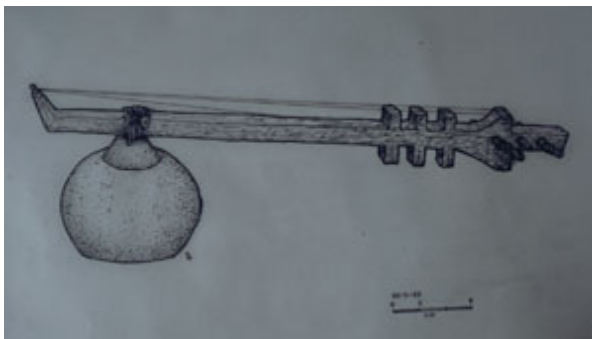


society during the Early British Period. Many of these documents provide information about language use, courtship habits, musical instruments, and other details that were likely (and sometimes demonstrably) involved in the music and practice of *séga*.

Multiple sources testify that strong elements of Malagasy culture were in use in Mauritius from the beginning of the French era through the early-to-mid-British period. Almost all of the Dutch colony's slaves were purchased in Madagascar, and French slave expeditions also preferred to buy their slaves from local potentates on the island. Cattle, rice, and other comestibles could be purchased in Madagascar for sale in Mauritius and for provisioning the newly bought slaves during the return passage; the voyage was also considerably shorter than the return passage from Portuguese Mozambique, the next closest center of the slave trade. Slave buyers in Mauritius generally preferred Malagasy slaves, although the realities of the overseas slave trade occasionally resulted in slaves from the African continent being imported to Madagascar, taught a dialect of the Malagasy language, having their heads shaved according to a Malagasy tribal pattern, and finally sold to Mauritian slaving expeditions as "Malagasy" slaves.

Although numerous dialects of the Malagasy language existed during this era, the degree of mutual intelligibility was sufficiently high that most records from the time refer to a single Malagasy language; occasionally, a merchant or priest might request a slave or free black interpreter with expertise in the dialects of a particular region. Once in

Mauritius, first-generation<sup>371</sup> slaves from Madagascar were regularly witnessed mingling with other first-generation slaves. Several trials of accused *maroons* include notes about slaves speaking to each other in their native dialects, or being attracted to each other through the singing of Malagasy songs. Early accounts of *maroonage* also attest that the “black” members of the shadow colony (themselves almost entirely drawn from Madagascar) were able to communicate easily with the newly imported French slaves,<sup>372</sup> who in that early period were also being imported exclusively from Madagascar or from that island via Bourbon.



**Figure 16 - Illustration of a traditionally constructed *jevy voatavo* from Madagascar. The resonating gourd (usually a hollowed calabash with the bottom cut off) is visible on the left.**



**Figure 17 - A modern *valiha* from Madagascar, approximately 90 centimeters in length. Some nineteenth-century examples were double this length.<sup>373</sup>**

<sup>371</sup> In this context, “first generation” refers to individuals who were born overseas and later shipped to Mauritius and not to the liberty of their parents.

<sup>372</sup> Congrégation de la Mission 1504, f. 83: Borthon and Igou, 10 November 1728.

<sup>373</sup> Conrad Keller, *Madagascar, Mauritius and Other East-African Islands. With 3 Coloured Maps and 64 Illustrations*, trans. H.A. Nesbitt (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., Lim., 1901), 74.

Some evidence also exists that Malagasy instruments were also carried and used in public view by some slaves. During the reactionary period of the French Revolution, a Malagasy slave in Port Louis was charged with threatening white citizens with a stick, and successfully defended himself by stating that the “piece of bamboo” he carried was a Malagasy violin.<sup>374</sup> Although the description “Malagasy violin” initially suggests a *jejy voatavo*, which is commonly referred to as such in other literature, that type of instrument includes a resonating gourd – something noticeably absent in the trial description and a physical feature that might have been less likely to appear as threatening to the concerned citizenry. A closer match to the description in the trial transcript is the *valiha*, a type of plucked zither built around a resonating bamboo tube. As the trial proceedings and deposition were conducted in French (as opposed to the slave’s more familiar Malagasy or Kreol),<sup>375</sup> it is unsurprising that the slave did not use a more specific term when identifying the instrument.<sup>376</sup>

The use of the Malagasy language appears to have been strongest amongst first-generation slaves, as this was the only segment of the population for which Malagasy interpreters were sometimes employed during criminal proceedings.<sup>377</sup> A more regular source of employment for these interpreters was the Mauritius-Madagascar trade, for

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<sup>374</sup> MNA: JB 80 Procédure Criminelle, 1794, Tribunal d’Appel, 8 pluviôse, contre Cherubin. Cited in Vaughan, 121-2.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid.

<sup>376</sup> Before the large-scale introduction of Western violins and other instruments to Mauritius, the *valiha* was alternately described as a “Malagasy violin” and a “Malagasy guitar.” It is generally played as a plucked instrument today, but some of the smaller examples were also historically played as bowed instruments.

<sup>377</sup> See, for example, the MNA: JB 80 series.

which professional interpreters (mostly Malagasy by birth) were hired separately for each expedition. Many of these interpreters began as slaves being hired out by their owners, and used money earned through these and other pursuits to purchase their freedom. Even after attaining manumission, many formerly enslaved interpreters continued to work in the general Madagascar trade and in the (closely linked) slave trade as well.<sup>378</sup> Despite this, however, the long-term linguistic vector among the African, Creole, and Malagasy inhabitants of Mauritius was a consolidation towards Kreol (among slaves and most *noirs libres*) or French (among the socially-mobile *noirs libres* and those involved in overseas commerce).

Two cases highlight the different socio-linguistic directions that the Malagasy took in Mauritius. The first is the case of Princess Betsy, a Malagasy woman of royal birth who married a French merchant and eventually settled in Mauritius. The second is the case of Prince Ratsitanina, a Malagasy nobleman who was imprisoned and exiled to Mauritius, leading to the notorious “affaire Ratsitane.”

“Princess Betsy,” or “Madame de Forval” as she was more formally known, was the daughter of Ratsimilaho, a famous eighteenth-century king in Madagascar.

Rasimilaho, the son of a notorious pirate and a Malagasy woman, united the

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<sup>378</sup> Inter-clan and inter-village raiding was a common practice in Madagascar during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and was used to obtain the cattle and slaves that were then sold to Dutch and French traders. This frequent, low-level warfare diminished in the late eighteenth century as local kings consolidated their power, causing periods with low inventories (so to speak) of slaves. This caused Malagasy rulers themselves to purchase slaves from slave traders in Portuguese Mozambique, which they then resold to French and (before 1807) British merchants. For more information on the Madagascar slave trade, see Arne Bialuschewski, “Pirates, Slavers, and the Indigenous Population in Madagascar, c. 1690-1715,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 38:3 (2005): 401-25.

Betsimisaraka people and led them to military hegemony over a large portion of the island. The Princess “Betsy” (a corruption of her tribe’s name) intervened in an altercation between her father and the French trader M. Grenville de Forval, reportedly saving the Frenchman’s life and causing him to marry her in gratitude. After several years’ reign as queen in Madagascar, she eventually immigrated to Mauritius with her husband, became fluent in French, and became a noted landowner and fixture of fashion and high society in Île de France.<sup>379</sup>

Madame de Forval represents the social apex of integration into Franco-Mauritian society, with a non-white acquiring land, wealth, and other social markers, including arts patronage.<sup>380</sup> The discourse at this level of society was primarily in French, and facility in that language (as opposed to Mauritian Kreol or Malagasy) was essential for entry. A similar pattern can be seen in the many other instances of Creole or *noir libre* (“free black”) men and women who accumulated land, wealth, and slaves after manumission: although Mauritian Kreol was the most common language in parlance on the island, spoken French still reigned supreme as the language of the upper classes.

The British occupation and the subsequent infiltration of English complicated the island’s linguistic environment, but it did not seriously threaten the lofty position of the French language during the first century of British rule. The articles of surrender guaranteed that legal documents and official government proceedings remained in

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<sup>379</sup> Vaughan, 105-7.

<sup>380</sup> She was also a very popular subject in British magazines (e.g., *The Annual Register*, *Walker's Hibernian Magazine*, *The Antananarivo Annual*, *The Ladies' Museum*) with stories about her circulating in syndication throughout the nineteenth century.

French, and the upper classes continued to send their children to England and France for education.<sup>381</sup> The upwardly mobile had a strong social incentive to discard their older linguistic trappings, and the rate of Malagasy transmission from parents to children does not appear to have been high at any level of society. Many of the “first generation” Malagasy slaves and manumitted slaves clung to their linguistic heritage, however, as illustrated by the “affaire Ratsitane” of 1821-1822.

On 24 November 1821, a British ship arrived in Port Louis to offload a special human cargo: the Hova prince Ratsitanina, a political prisoner. Ratsitanina was a Hova nobleman, general, and warlord, well known and respected in Madagascar. Earlier that year, however, he had fallen out with the Hova king during a military expedition, and was convicted of attempted regicide. Ratsitanina’s status as prince protected him against capital punishment, preventing King Radama Manzaka from executing him outright; instead, Ratsitanina was exiled to Mauritius, where the British authorities quickly incarcerated him in the *Bagne*, a civil prison near the harbor, in conditions approximating house arrest. (The British authorities had in fact been courting King Radama for some time, hoping to erase the French influence on the island, establish more trade relations, and enlist the Malagasy king in stamping out the slave trade.)<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> The British authorities did not attempt to change the language of government to English until 1847. This move, announced on Bastille Day of that year, was so unpopular that the population boycotted a social ball hosted by the governor’s wife. Napal, *British Mauritius, 1810-1948*, 22.

<sup>382</sup> For a detailed exploration of the “affaire Ratsitane,” see Pier M. Larson, “The Vernacular Life of the Street: Ratsitanina and Indian Ocean Créolité,” *Slavery and Abolition* 29, No. 3 (September 2008): 327-59, and Pier M. Larson, *Ratsitanina's Gift: A Tale of Malagasy Ancestors and Language in Mauritius* (Réduit, Mauritius: University of Mauritius Press, 2009).

News of the arrival of a Malagasy prince in Port Louis sent a murmur through the island's Malagasy-speaking population. Some of the slaves who worked in the city on behalf of their owners had even known Ratsitanina in Madagascar, before the fortunes of war had resulted in their capture and sale to slave markets in Mauritius.<sup>383</sup> Others were attracted by the chance to meet a high-ranking Malagasy chief or simply out of curiosity. As the conditions of Ratsitanina's imprisonment did not prohibit him from receiving visitors, he received a steady stream of guests.

On 18 February 1822, after less than three months' imprisonment in Mauritius, Ratsitanina escaped the *Bagne* at night, fleeing east from Port Louis to the slopes of Le Pouce (a nearby mountain), accompanied by a small group of Malagasy slaves. His intentions appear to have been to steal a boat and sail back to Madagascar, but word of his reputation and popularity amongst the Malagasy slaves, apprentices,<sup>384</sup> and ex-slaves fanned fears that he was planning a slave revolt.<sup>385</sup> A group of Franco-Mauritian citizens formed a militia (much to the discomfort of the British authorities) and led an expedition that captured Ratsitanina and twenty-six slaves on 23 February 1823, just five days after his escape. Each of the imprisoned men were quickly tried, condemned to death, and executed.<sup>386</sup>

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<sup>383</sup> Larson, *Ratsitanina's Gift*, 29.

<sup>384</sup> Apprenticeship in Mauritius refers to a type of indentured servitude imposed on slaves "liberated" from slave ships. Apprentices were bound to an employer (often the colonial government) for periods as long as fifteen years, during which time they were expected to learn a useful trade.

<sup>385</sup> Antoine Chelin, *Une Île et Son Passé, Supplément* (Rose Hill, Mauritius: Editions de l'Océan Indien, 1982), 139.

<sup>386</sup> Napal, *British Mauritius, 1810-1948*, 9.

The court records and transcripts of Ratsitanina's trial contain the only surviving testimonies *by* Malagasies *about* Malagasy music making in Mauritius during this period. Many of the slaves and apprentices deposed by the court spoke about how much they had enjoyed not only meeting and speaking with a Malagasy *prince* (Ratsitanina), but also the opportunity to sing. Multiple testimonies echoed the nostalgic delight that this impromptu, *ad hoc* community enjoyed while singing familiar tunes and songs from their now-distant homeland.<sup>387</sup>

This testimony speaks to the resilience of the Malagasy language in the civic environment of Port Louis, but also to the dislocation, discombobulation, and cultural isolation that Malagasy slaves experienced after their transportation to Mauritius. Slave markets usually separated individuals from their constituent families or tribal units, and whatever new friendly, family, or community ties they constructed did not necessarily provide the means or impetus for recreating these aspects of their old communities. Ratsitanina's arrival served as the catalyst for gathering these scattered individuals and joining them in an act of musical revivification – but the act of singing these songs together was ultimately ephemeral.<sup>388</sup>

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<sup>387</sup> Larson, *Ratsitanina's Gift*, 29.

<sup>388</sup> The majority of Ratsitanina's guests did not partake in the alleged rebellion and thus survived the "affaire Rastitane" unharmed. Despite this, there is no evidence to suggest that they resumed their experience of shared Malagasy music-making at a later date.



## Abolition and Immigration

The musical landscape of Mauritius was significantly altered by the formal abolition of slavery in 1835. *Séga* was transformed overnight from a covert, nighttime practice to an activity practiced with great vigor in public view. Migrant workers were imported from China and India to work on the sugar cane plantations, replacing the former slaves, and these immigrants gradually introduced traditional music from their own native cultures to the island. Throughout this new period of immigration, however, European art music continued to occupy the cultural apex of society, and socially mobile people of every racial combination participated in this culture. The *crème-de-la-crème* of Mauritian society remained essentially Eurocentric in its orientation and frowned on *séga* and the emerging immigrant music traditions from Asia as primitivisms.

This era of immigration, spanning from 1835-1910, is marked by rapid social and economic change. First, Mauritius experienced a large capital inflow from emancipation: in contrast to many other national emancipations, the British Slavery Abolition Act of 1833<sup>389</sup> compensated slave owners in the British Empire via a regionally allocated government fund. This compensation money, paid in silver specie, provided the soon-to-be-former slave owners<sup>390</sup> with a large amount of capital to invest or use to retire – so much so that one protest *against* the Act was that slave owners would be paid more than they had expended to buy slaves. The net result was a dramatic increase in available

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<sup>389</sup> 3 & 4 *Gulielmi IV c. 73*.

<sup>390</sup> Compensation was paid in advance of emancipation in Mauritius.

capital without the inflationary spikes that had accompanied sudden capital infusions from printing money or privateering in the past.

This provided the island's more affluent residents with the money both to hire workers from overseas (who were reluctant to accept paper money from a distant destination) and to invest in capital improvement projects. These latter projects would come to include improved sugar refineries, distilleries, canals, and even railroads – investments which, combined with the introduction of fertilizers, dramatically increased the productivity of the Mauritian sugar industry. The industry, however, required manual labor that the soon-to-be-former slaves were reluctant to provide.

The abolition of slavery in Mauritius was not the direct result of any policy, leadership, or initiative by those on the island. Plantation owners protested and managed to stop all domestic attempts to abolish slavery during the first two decades of British rule, although the slave trade itself was made illegal and required progressively more-convoluted legal fictions to continue. (Many new slaves were transshipped from the Seychelles Islands with forged papers, or introduced gradually as “crew” of fishing boats.) Instead, the eventual abolition was the result of growing anti-slavery sentiment in the British Empire and the catalyst of the Baptist War in Jamaica in 1831.

The Baptist War (1831-1832) was the largest slave uprising in the British West Indies, ultimately involving as many as twenty percent of Jamaica's three hundred thousand slaves. The “war” was fervently covered in newspapers throughout the British Empire, and led to a number of reactionary measures by Mauritian plantation owners worried about a sympathetic revolt. Anti-slavery activists in the British Parliament seized

on the public outcry concerning the revolt and its suppression to pass the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. With some exceptions, slavery was banned throughout the Empire, and the enforcement date for the Act to take effect in Mauritius was set to February 1, 1835.

The former slaves in Mauritius, once emancipated and freed of indentured “apprenticeships,”<sup>391</sup> abandoned the plantation environments in droves. Many sought out friends, family, and employment in the capital city of Port Louis (itself a longtime haven for marooning slaves). Others left *en masse* for the island’s remaining rural districts, particularly the coastal regions, Le Morne, and the Rivière Noire. A small number continued to work on the sugar cane plantations, but almost always in supervisory or service roles. On the plantations the former slaves were replaced by the growing stream of Indian workers, and in the urban environment of Port Louis they were increasingly replaced by Chinese immigrants who filled the small-business vacuum left by ex-slaves moving to the countryside.

These changes had the cumulative effect of removing a large portion of the former slave population from the cultural orbit of Port Louis. While many slaves had never been in its orbit to begin with, the high degree of urban flight in the city’s former

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<sup>391</sup> Slaves in areas of the British Empire affected by the Anti-Slavery Act of 1835 were formally assigned to “apprenticeships” of five years’ duration with their previous masters, starting from the date the Act went into effect in their respective regions of the Empire. (The territories of the British East India Company were exempt.) The term of apprenticeship was eventually reduced in most cases to two years’ duration due to popular protest.

slave demographic exacerbated this cultural isolation.<sup>392</sup> Fashionable urbanites of all distinctions partook in the island's European high culture – concentrated in Port Louis, but also manifested in the balls and social dancing found at estates around the island – while the rustic villagers indulged in *séga* and rustic Kreol songs.<sup>393</sup>

Emancipation itself was greeted by what many Franco-Mauritian observers called a “frenetic” celebration and “outpouring” of *séga*. Ex-slaves congregated in small and large groups for ecstatic singing and dancing that could last several days, gathering at impromptu locations ranging from the side of the highway to fields and even city streets. These gatherings were fueled by food and alcohol, and veiled references suggest that sexual intercourse at these events was very common.<sup>394</sup>

These outpourings of music and dancing were a source of great interest to locals and visitors, who could now finally witness *séga* practiced openly by day and by night. Their descriptions, although often informed by travel to Madagascar and other overseas

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<sup>392</sup> Some plantation owners experimented with importing Chinese workers in the 1830s, but the results were not satisfactory to either party. Much more successful was a program that encouraged immigration of Chinese entrepreneurs from other British colonies; within a generation, these immigrants dominated the shops and restaurants of Port Louis, many of which had formerly been maintained by slaves working for their masters.

<sup>393</sup> The popularity of French folk songs, drinking songs, and other “low” forms of entertainment does not appear to have ever recovered from the mass shuttering of the Port Louis cabarets and drinking houses in the 1770s. Although they did not entirely disappear from Mauritius, they became increasingly fringe entertainments after the arrival of Joseph Laglaine's opera company in 1790.

<sup>394</sup> This idea was even picked up in the heated debate over emancipation. In an 1830 apologist tract defending slavery, an anonymous author argued that if emancipation was enacted, “The slaves will at length rush to their saturnalian orgies [i.e., *séga* dances] with a ferocious joy, and to excesses too horrible to describe, and at which you even would be terrified, if you [emancipists] had hearts to feel!” Anonymous, *Representation of the State of Government Slaves and Apprentices in the Mauritius: With Observations, by a Resident who has Never Possessed Land nor Slaves in the Colony* (London: James Ridgway, 1830), 81.

destinations,<sup>395</sup> follow clear models and stereotypes dating back to the eighteenth-century descriptions of slave music by Bernardin de la Saint-Pierre in his *Voyage à l'Île de France, à l'Île Bourbon et au Cap de Bonne-Espérance* (1783).<sup>396</sup> The qualities of particular slaves and types of music or dance were lumped into stereotypes of “Malagasy” and “Mozambiquan” traits, in full ignorance of the great diversity of ethnolinguistic and tribal groups sold under those labels in slave markets.<sup>397</sup> By the late eighteenth century, slaves collected in Central and even West Africa were sold as “Mozambiques” in the slave markets of Portuguese Mozambique, and were even transshipped to Madagascar for resale – where they were advertised as Malagasy slaves due to French planters’ preference for this ethnicity.)

The “golden age of *séga*” lasted roughly two decades after emancipation, an interval long enough to accrue a very long record of noise complaints in the Mauritian National Archives as some among the citizenry tired of *séga* performances in the city and near their plantation homes. As the last generation of slaves began to die off, however, it became clear that their descendants did not practice this old tradition with the same fervor as their parents. The disappearance of ancestral languages and culture in this group is generally attributed to a combination of Western education and the evangelization efforts

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<sup>395</sup> Many writers of Mauritian travelogues spent considerable time Madagascar and described the Malagasy music they saw there in great detail. Two of the more famous examples of this are Antonie Marrier d’Unienville, who was also the author of a lengthy treatise on Madagascar, and Vincent Ryan, who oversaw missionary activities in Mauritius and Madagascar, spending many months in the latter.

<sup>396</sup> See chapter 3.

<sup>397</sup> This stereotyping persisted throughout the era of slavery and continued for decades after the end of the slave trade.

of Christian missionaries (both of which tended to minimize and denigrate African and Malagasy heritage).<sup>398</sup> The result was a gradual collapse or coalescence of disparate African and Malagasy identities into a general “Creole” identity.<sup>399</sup>

The development of this composite Creole identity was an ongoing process, and only in the late 1850s did the term “Creole” come to designate all persons with some degree of African or Malagasy heritage. Back in 1838, Antoine Marrier d’Unienville (a Franco-Mauritian scholar, amateur opera composer, and the Chief Archivist for the colony) could still write of “Creole” as a distinct identity within a spectrum of cultural affinities. “The blacks,” d’Unienville noted, comprised “Creoles, Malagasies, and Mozambiques – [all of whom] passionately love music and dance.”<sup>400</sup> To him and his contemporaries, “Creoles” were still distinguished not so much by their skin color but by their preference for European fashion and culture.<sup>401</sup> They were, d’Unienville added, were particularly fond of European music and European dancing, they frequented balls and other opportunities for social dancing and were easily moved by their passions for “the charms of music or the dramatic arts.”<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>398</sup> Jocelyn Chan Low, “De l’Afrique Rejetée à l’Afrique Retrouvée? Les ‘Créoles’ de l’Île Maurice et l’Africanité,” in *Revi Kiltr Kreol* 3 (October 2003): 42; Edward A. Alpers, “Creolization and Identity among ‘Mozambiques’ in Mauritius and Brazil,” in *Ibid.*: 38.

<sup>399</sup> Alpers, *Ibid.*, 36-8.

<sup>400</sup> D’Unienville, *Statistique de l’Île Maurice et ses Dépendances*, 293.

<sup>401</sup> In this context, “Creole” refers to those of mixed European and non-European (African, Malagasy, or even Asian Indian) heritage. This is in contrast to its general usage in the French Caribbean, where the term is used to describe those of mixed or full European ancestry who were born in the tropics.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

D'Unienville's observations capture a diverse society just a few short years after emancipation reached the island. At the time that he was writing, the former plantation slaves enjoyed many new rights concerning freedom of movement and association but were still legally bound as "apprentices" to their former owners. This involuntary continuation of their employment would have caused many of the social constructs of slave society to continue in evidence on and around the plantations. His observations are also made using the delineations of assumed provenance recorded by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre and his predecessors, assigning different characteristics and music to those perceived as Malagasy and Mozambiquan in origin.

The popular stereotype of Malagasy slaves in Mauritius described them as eternally melancholy with longing for "The Great Isle" of Madagascar. D'Unienville ties into this tradition directly with his description of what he calls Malagasy music and dancing in Mauritius:

*The music of the Malgache [sic] holds a character of melancholy; their dance is grave and very graceful: their favorite instrument is the maravanne, [and] the sound sad, in all likelihood recalling memories of their childhood...these effects can be compared to those produced among the Swiss [by] their famous Raux des Vaches [sic].*<sup>403,404</sup>

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<sup>403</sup> The "Ranz des Vaches" is a traditional Swiss song, known especially for being played on the alphorn. D'Unienville most likely knew of the melody in part through its quotation in Rossini's opera *William Tell*, which had premiered in Mauritius in 1833 and was quite popular with the local military bands. Alternatively, he might have learned of it via the section titled "Ranz des Vaches" in the third movement of Berlioz's *Symphony Fantastique*. There are no indications that the latter work was performed in Mauritius before the publication of D'Unienville's volume, but the first piano transcription (by Franz Liszt) of *Symphonie Fantastique* was published in Paris in 1834 and likely reached Mauritius soon thereafter. The likelihood of its arrival is increased significantly by the low production rate of just one-to-two new symphonies per year in France in this period. See Ralph Locke, "Paris: Centre of Intellectual

His characterization of the music of Malagasy ex-slaves as melancholy is likely inaccurate, but fits within more than a century of stereotyping French scholarship. Similarly, his description of Mozambiquan ex-slaves' music and dancing conforms to long-held Mauritian stereotypes of Mozambiquan vulgarity and hypersexuality mixed with expert musicality:

*Everything in the music and dance of the Mozambiquan announces the gaiety and force of the grotesque follies; an extraordinary suppleness, and a more or less exaggerated lasciviousness form their dances, which they do not stop until absolutely exhausted. They have extremely good hearing, and their songs – which are accompanied by a bobre (a sort of guitar with a single string, strung by a bow attached to a hollow calabash) and a tam-tam (a sort of drum struck with the hands) – are of a perfect cadence and very harmonious.<sup>405</sup>*

D'Unienville's description of the so-called Mozambiquan and Malagasy music identifies two of the three traditional *séga* instruments still in use today: the *maravanne*, a bamboo shaker-box; and the large, circular, tambourine-like *ravane* (here identified as a *tam-tam*, which was used as a generic word for any drum during this period). Modern performance practice in Mauritius suggests that the third instrument that he describes, the *bobre*, was used in the subordinate percussive role given to the triangle (the third traditional *séga* instrument that remains in common use) today.<sup>406</sup> If D'Unienville's

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Ferment [1789-1852],” in *Man and Music: The Early Romantic Era, Between Revolutions: 1789 and 1848*, ed. Alexander L. Ringer (London: Macmillan, 1990), 63.

<sup>404</sup> D'Unienville, *Statistique de l'Île Maurice et ses Dépendances*, 295.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

<sup>406</sup> The *bobre* is still found in Mauritius, mostly in the fishing villages on the southern shore; it is used as a percussive rhythm instrument, playing the same beat patterns as the triangle.



distinctions are accurate, then what is currently recognized as the traditional instrumentation of *séga* is the result of the distinct and separate Malagasy and Mozambiquan music traditions merging together in Mauritius.

D’Unienville also describes improvisation as a feature of some Mozambiquan singing. “The Mozambiques,” he writes, “[both] men and women, create some works [of music] that are not structured as [traditional] songs. [Instead,] the words are composed on the spot to a subject that’s either on their [the group’s] minds, or that is pounded out by the master of music; to this [subject], everyone responds in chorus.”<sup>407</sup> This call-and-response format using improvised verses is also now considered a fundamental element of traditional *séga*.

In addition to the general descriptions above, D’Unienville describes only a single specific type of non-Western dance: *séga*. “Tschiéga,” as he transliterates it, is described as the only non-European dance that Créoles with their love for European culture would indulge in. Although they normally preferred contradances and waltzes, he notes, they do dance *séga* – what he calls the most popular and most lascivious “of all the dances of the black nations” – for special occasions and events. He does not describe how long *séga* has been in fashion among this group but implies that it is widely known and practiced among the Creole community.<sup>408</sup>

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<sup>407</sup> D’Unienville, *Statistique de l’Île Maurice et ses Dépendances*, 295.

<sup>408</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

## Changing Patterns of Musical Transmission

The observations recorded by D'Unienville depict the era of slavery, capturing a sense of the Mauritian soundscape after *legal* emancipation had occurred but before *practical* emancipation had come to pass. This distinction underlies an alternate explanation for what the historical record has described as a steep drop in the popularity of *séga* after a few years of exuberant post-emancipation celebrations (i.e., shortly after D'Unienville's account).<sup>409</sup> An examination of census data, however, shows that this drop corresponds to the massive population redistribution that accompanied the end of most of the forced apprenticeships.<sup>410</sup>

While D'Unienville was making his observations, most of the ex-slaves were still employed and resident on the island's plantations. Once the apprenticeships came to an end and they were granted freedom of movement, however, most of the plantation workers dispersed to seek out new homes and found new communities. The change in setting and living conditions ensured that these new communities (and their accompanying *séga* gatherings) were significantly smaller than the plantation communities that preceded them. The massive gatherings that D'Unienville described

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<sup>409</sup> Beaton, *Creoles and Coolies: or, Five Years in Mauritius*, 88.

<sup>410</sup> Some ex-slaves were able to save money and buy an early freedom from their apprenticeships; most were freed in 1839 after protests and demonstrations. Slaves liberated from intercepted slaving ships during the 1820s and 1830s were not as fortunate, as they were forcibly enrolled as government apprentices employed by the Mauritian government. Government apprenticeships were extended affairs with little chance of appeal; many government apprentices were forced to serve out terms of as many as fifteen years, providing the colonial authorities with a captive labor force. The last government apprentices did not complete their apprenticeships until the late 1840s.

were an artifact of the twilight period of slavery in Mauritius and enabled by the lubrications of food and drink supplied by plantation owners.<sup>411</sup> After the end of slavery and apprenticeships, the former slaves not only dispersed but the absolute size of the former slave community and its descendants also fell year-after-year for more than a decade.<sup>412</sup>

Plantation slavery on tropical islands in the nineteenth century was characterized by a high mortality rate and short lifespans among the slaves. Mauritius had always required regular infusions of fresh slaves to compensate for these factors, especially as the periodic epidemics inevitably afflicted malnourished slaves the hardest. The steadily increasing acreage under cultivation also created a steady, long-term increase in the demand for labor, a demand which was met for the first two decades of British rule by purchasing slaves from other British-controlled territories and by smuggling in slaves. Farquhar had turned a blind eye toward much of the illicit slave trade during his administration, but later governors were neither as liberal nor forgiving towards captured slave traders. By 1830, British efforts to extirpate the Indian Ocean slave trade slowed Mauritius' population infusion from Africa and Madagascar had slowed to a tiny trickle –

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<sup>411</sup> D'Unienville, *Statistique de l'Île Maurice et ses Dépendances*, 296-98.

<sup>412</sup> Between 1837 and 1846, for example, the number of African-, Malagasy- and Creole-descended people on the island declined 6.2%. Mde Nwulia, "The 'Apprenticeship' System in Mauritius: Its Character and Its Impact on Race Relations in the Immediate Post-Emancipation Period, 1839-1879," *African Studies Review* 21, no.1 (1978): 100.

mostly Africans from captured slave ships that the government forced into long, multi-year “apprenticeships.”<sup>413</sup>

The suppression of the slave trade had repercussions on both music and language in Mauritius. Since the use of ancestral languages on Mauritius was primarily a first-generation practice, the use of Malagasy and African tongues on the island plunged as the older generations died out. Up until the mid-1850s, priests from the London Missionary Society frequently requested Malagasy-language hymnals<sup>414</sup> and bibles from London; after that point, these materials were only requested for missionaries working in Madagascar, as the surviving Malagasy-speaking population in Mauritius had dwindled to negligence.<sup>415</sup>

The declining usage of Malagasy and other ancestral languages amongst the consolidating Creole demographic was accompanied by an increase in the influence of European art music in the same group. Although the majority of the former slaves had

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<sup>413</sup> For a more successful example of this, see the case of Henry Chaloupe, a Malagasy slave liberated from a captured slaving ship in 1810. He was “apprenticed” to a British colonial official for fourteen years, during which he saved up money to buy, manumit, and marry two separate Malagasy slaves. (The first died after only a few years of marriage; saving up to buy the second took him only one additional year.) He eventually rose to the position of “chief sucrier” at a large sugar estate and acquired property and another slave. Satyendra Peerthum, ed., *Forbidden Freedom: The Life Experience of the Liberated Africans in 19th Century Mauritius During the Slave Era (1811-1839)* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Nelson Mandela Centre for African Culture), 12-13.

<sup>414</sup> These were probably reprints made in London of the Malagasy hymnal of 1828 by David Griffiths and David Jones, which used those two missionaries’ standardized system of writing Malagasy with the Roman alphabet.

<sup>415</sup> The drop in demand cannot be attributed to an oversupply or sufficiency of Malagasy-language hymnals in Mauritius; earlier correspondence and shipping records indicate that termite damage necessitated frequent replacements of the hymnals used by LMS congregations. See Pier M. Larson, “Ocean of Letters: Abolition and Literacy in an Indian Ocean Diaspora” (unpublished manuscript, 2008, <http://www.yale.edu/glc/indian-ocean/larson.pdf>), 33.

migrated from the plantations to rural farming and fishing villages, a large number had moved to Port Louis, attracted by friends, family, and all of the working and business opportunities of the urban center. This brought them into close proximity to the two main fixtures of European art music on the island: the Port Louis Theatre and the garrison's military bands. This proximity opened up an avenue of transmission for melodies from symphonies and operas to enter the melodic vernacular of *séga*.

### **Public Music**

*The language of Mauritius is a very Babel of tongues. Besides French, English, and Creole, Tamil, Bengali, and Hindustani, and many other languages and dialects of India, Malagasy, and Chinese are spoken all over the island. . . . Creole [Kreol] is the solution in which all these diverse lingual elements meet together and combine; the common ground to which the ancient Indian or elegant European tongues descend for the necessities of working daily life.*

--*The Dublin Review* (1880)<sup>416</sup>

The colonial city of Port Louis possessed three prominent and distinguished patches of urban greenery: les Jardins de la Compagnie, a botanical garden created by the French East India Company; the lawn in front of the Hôtel du Gouvernement (the city hall);<sup>417</sup> and the Champ-de-Mars, a military parade ground to which a race track was added after 1812. These were important public spaces in a city with few other parks or open spaces within its limits, and each was used for musical performances. Most balls and large dinner gatherings in the city took place either in the Hôtel du Gouvernement

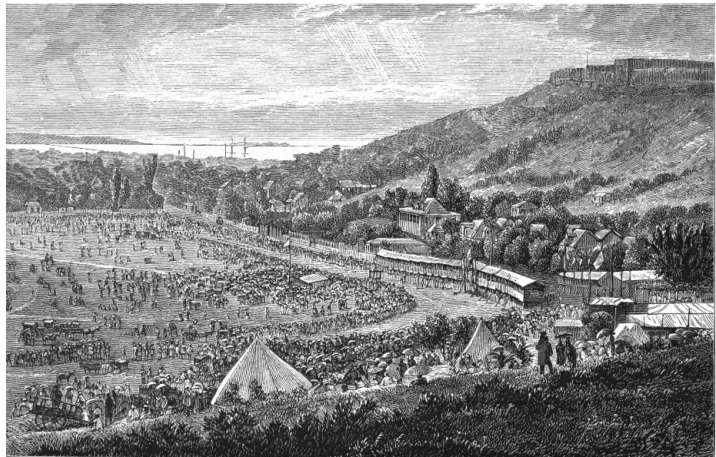
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<sup>416</sup> [Nicholas Patrick Wiseman?], "Mauritius," in *The Dublin Review* Volume 86 (January 1880): 15.

<sup>417</sup> This area is now Victoria Plaza and is divided by streets.

itself or in the open air of its expansive lawn, and the theater constructed by Laglaine's first theater company in 1790 was located in les Jardins de la Compagnie. The Champ-de-Mars was a special space because of its especially vast expanse of greenery (the largest in the city) and because of its use most days of the week for military parade-drills with music.

The Champ-de-Mars in the nineteenth century was no more than a large field of grass; the modern expanse fits a track of one mile's circumference – even after the construction of bleachers and other facilities within the



**Figure 18 - The Champ-de-Mars c. 1870.**<sup>418</sup>

original acreage. The combination of shade from nearby trees and the greenery made it a relatively cool and comfortable spot in an urban hotspot, and it was a favored place for residents and visitors to take morning and afternoon walks. Sunday afternoon promenades on the Champ-de-Mars began at six in the evening and continued late into the night, accompanied by music from one of the garrison regiments' military band.<sup>419</sup>

This field was therefore a place where the general populace became familiar with the music of the military bands. These bands did not only play martial music, however.

<sup>418</sup> Pike, *Subtropical Ramblings*, 83.

<sup>419</sup> D'Unienville, *Statistique de l'Île Maurice et ses Dépendances*, 259-60.

The stream of visiting theater/opera companies was also a dependable source for new band repertoire, as these companies (as was typical in the period) sold scores and libretti for the works that they performed. Even if a new opera was not staged, selected choruses or arias from theater or opera concerts frequently made their way into the military bands' repertoire via sheet music that was available for purchase.<sup>420</sup> A hit song or opera piece could quickly become a standard feature of band music, both for a functional purpose (the chorus "Allons, allons, march', march'" from *La Fille du Régiment* was used for parade drill more than a decade before a full staging of the opera reached Mauritius) and for performance music. Because symphonic and opera numbers were disseminated to the general populace in this fashion, access to this kind of music was not governed strictly by attendance at the theater or concert hall.

Interest in this European art music by the Franco-Mauritian, British, and (broadly construed) Creole populations is well documented. The music appears to have been less of interest to the Sino-Mauritian and Indo-Mauritian communities, except for the limited numbers who chose to adopt the traits and habits of Franco-/Créole-Mauritian society.<sup>421</sup> The working-class Creole community embraced operatic and symphonic melodies with a passion, memorizing the major themes from whole works and incorporating them into

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<sup>420</sup> As was typical for the period, sheet music was often sold by the touring theater and opera companies themselves.

<sup>421</sup> There were many attractive reasons for those who chose to settle permanently to assimilate; adopting Franco-/Créole-Mauritian cultural consumption habits offered opportunities to overcome inequalities in power and status by attaining membership within a common ingroup determined by these habits. Matthew J. Hornsey and Michael A. Hogg, "Assimilation and Diversity: An Integrative Model of Subgroup Relations," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 4 (2000): 146-47, 153.

work songs. Patrick Beaton, a Presbyterian minister from the Church of Scotland who was stationed in Mauritius from 1851-1856, observed, “There is always a large circle of blacks listening to the music,” and that the street children – “those gamins that seem as indigenous to the streets of Port Louis as to those of Paris” listened raptly and moved along with the music during the band concerts at the Champ-de-Mars.<sup>422</sup>

Talking about music was a popular pastime in mid-century Port Louis, particularly among what many would have called the idle youth. The *jeunes gens* (“young men”), Beaton noted in 1859, liked to hang out in front of the theater “dressed in exaggerated imitation of the most recent Parisian fashions,” discussing the details of the most recent opera performances, using “all the airs of accomplished dilettanti.”<sup>423</sup> Even the urban poor could discuss the outdoor public concerts, and a deepening conception of music as a public service led to several efforts to improve access for the poor. The apex of this musical social-work movement occurred in the 1870s, when the Municipal Council of Port Louis set aside one hundred tickets – equivalent to one-sixth of the Port Louis Theatre’s seating – from each opera performance, for use free of charge by the poor and infirm.<sup>424</sup>

Beaton also took note of the Creoles’ prodigious aural memories, noting, “When a new piece of music has caught the popular ear, it is no unusual thing to hear it whistled from beginning to end with perfect accuracy by boys who have only heard it once or

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<sup>422</sup> Beaton, 88-89.

<sup>423</sup> Beaton, 32.

<sup>424</sup> The Port Louis Municipal Council was by now both the administrator of the theater and the censorship authority for all works to be presented on its stage.



twice.”<sup>425</sup> This extended not just to short songs or movements of a work, but even to entire operas; he recounts hearing a band of workers performing Donizetti’s opera *Lucia di Lammermoor* from beginning to end, with each member singing their segment in sequence. “Each one,” he noted, “had his part, waited his turn, and struck in with a precision and correctness that might have done honour to a well-trained orchestra.”<sup>426</sup>

What Beaton termed an “African orchestra” acquired its repertoire through oral transmission, learning whatever music was popular and publicly performed. This particular opera had received its Mauritian premiere in 1847 and was revived by another troupe in 1850, shortly before Beaton’s arrival; the workers would most likely have learned the principal melodies from the military band and repeated them with scat singing except for the best-known songs and choruses.

According to Beaton, this sort of recreational music making by workers on the job was actually encouraged by their employers, who knew that the alternative without singing would mean “more chattering and laughing than work.”<sup>427</sup> These impromptu performances closely followed the tempi of their source material; watching a group of tailors, for example, Beaton remarked, “It was amusing to observe the stitching increasing or diminishing in rapidity with the time observed in the opera, and the perfect gravity with which these blackbirds ‘warbled forth their woodnotes wild.’”<sup>428</sup> Although

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<sup>425</sup> Beaton, 89.

<sup>426</sup> Beaton, 89.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid., 89-90.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid., 89. Beaton quotes a passage about William Shakespeare from John Milton’s *L’Allegro* (1631).

slower sections of music were also accompanied by slower work, this was compensated for by the employees' increased focus on their work when accompanied by music, and by the extra speed that they worked at when singing up-tempo music.<sup>429</sup>

Beaton's observations, published in 1859, also document the shift from traditional music practices (including *séga*) towards European art music or to a traditional music that appropriated idioms and melodies from European art music. He notes that the use of traditional instruments had fallen so steeply out of fashion that he saw them used only a handful of times during his five years in Mauritius (1851-56). In their place, working-class Creoles across the island favored the violin and the cello, on which he noted, "Many of them are no mean performers."<sup>430</sup> Within the capital city, on the other hand, the piano was the most popular instrument due to its role as a status symbol and marker of "respectability" among urban dwellers.<sup>431</sup>

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<sup>429</sup> The popularity of generally upbeat *opéra-comique* on the island would have shifted this balance strongly in favor of up-tempo music.

<sup>430</sup> Beaton, 90.

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-6.



**Figure 19 - Port Louis c. 1870.**<sup>432</sup>

The piano had become one of the most popular instruments in Mauritius under British rule, with D'Unienville and his contemporaries noting with fond affection how the sounds of these instruments filled the streets of Port Louis in the afternoon and evening. These instruments came from British and French piano factories, particularly the London firm of John Broadwood & Sons Ltd., which would appear from newspaper advertisements to have been the most popular brand in Mauritius throughout the nineteenth century. The ubiquity of the piano and its role as a status symbol, however, did not mean that maintenance or musical proficiency corresponded to usage in Beaton's time. On the contrary, many of the pianos were in poor tuning and worse disrepair

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<sup>432</sup> Pike, *Sub-tropical Rambles*, 57.

(termite damage being a particular problem), which did not stop their owners from using them. Nor, it seems, did the lack of playing skill possessed by many piano owners. “The noise that is made by these tinkling old imposters,” Beaton wrote, “especially in the evening, when that noise is accompanied with the howling of all the dogs in the neighbourhood . . . might form an appropriate concert at a witches’ Sabbath.”<sup>433</sup>

This plague of piano cacophony, heightened by the post-emancipation surge of migration to the urban center, was cut short by a more literal sort of plague when an epidemic of malaria scourged the island from 1866-1868. The urban poor were particularly hard-hit, and a large portion of the (then primarily Creole) urban populace fled the city for the hilly interior of the island, where they believed the altitude and breezes would protect them from the “miasmas” thought to cause the disease.<sup>434</sup> Many of the “tinkling old imposters” bemoaned by Beaton – pianists and pianos alike – were victims of the plague, either felled directly or abandoned and later destroyed. Nicholas Pike, the US Consul in Mauritius from 1866-1872, described in stark terms the silencing of the urban soundscape during the epidemic. “Song and laughter had ceased,” he noted in his memoirs. “Port Louis was once remarkable for the number of pianos heard in every street in an evening, from the Erard's grand<sup>435</sup> and semi-grand to the humblest cottage

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<sup>433</sup> Ibid., 106. The normally temperate Reverend Beaton explained this remark as having been informed by his experience living next to two such households.

<sup>434</sup> This was not an entirely erroneous assumption, as the cooler, hilly climate of the interior was less hospitable to the mosquitoes that transmitted the disease. It was not until 1897 that role of mosquitoes as the disease vector for malaria was identified.

<sup>435</sup> The Érard firm was a well-known manufacturer of harps and pianos, with workshops in London and Paris; European concert pianists throughout the nineteenth century favored Érard

instrument.”<sup>436</sup> To describe the transition from this light-hearted musical atmosphere to the heavy (and audible) pall of grief, Pike quoted Ecclesiastes, writing, “At this time it was literally ‘The daughters of music were brought low, and the voice of mourning was heard through the streets.’”<sup>437</sup>

In the three years of plague, successive seasonal waves of malaria killed an estimated seventeen to twenty percent of the population of Mauritius, with the highest death toll in Port Louis. The combination of plague and plague-driven flight caused the population of the capital to drop by half. Many of the survivors who could afford to do so settled in the villages of Curepipe and Rose Hill in the interior, taking advantage of the new railway system developed in the 1860s.<sup>438</sup> The upper and middle class in particular took advantage of this new system (first developed for sugar transport, but soon opened to passenger traffic as well),<sup>439</sup> and by the mid-1870s the growing towns had become

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grand pianos due to the pianos’ state-of-the-art mechanisms. The possession of an Érard grand piano in Mauritius was a conspicuous sign of wealth.

<sup>436</sup> Pike, *Sub-tropical Rambles*, 105.

<sup>437</sup> Pike, 105. This is an abbreviated partial quotation of Ecclesiastes 12:4-5.

<sup>438</sup> Henry Sampson, ed., *The Dumpy Book of Railways of the World* (London: Sampson Low, 1956), 168. The belief that these towns’ elevation would protect the inhabitants from plague was true, albeit for the wrong reasons: the cooler climate of the hilly interior deterred the mosquitoes that spread malaria and the separate water supplies helped guard against the mass contamination that spread cholera.

<sup>439</sup> Several businesses developed to cater to this well-educated commuter demographic, including a members-only lending library for railway passengers. By 1870, commuters could (for the modest fee of two shillings per month) become members of Snelling’s Railway Circulating Library, borrowing or purchasing books and music scores. This allowed patrons to check out scores before seeing a performance or even (for certain classes of tickets) practice music in their train cabins. See John B. Kyshe, ed., *The Mauritius Almanac and Colonial Register: 1870* (Port Louis, Mauritius: E. Dupuy and P. Dubois, 1870), 366.

affluent commuter suburbs of Port Louis.<sup>440</sup> This demographic shift would have important ramifications for the Port Louis Theatre in the early twentieth century, as theater audiences after the Great Plague of 1866-1868 were increasingly drawn from these commuter suburbs and not from the city itself.<sup>441</sup>

The exodus to the interior had a marked effect on the soundscape of Port Louis, with the relocation of much of the Western music-making population exposing the traditional music practices of the Indian and Chinese immigrant communities. These practices had begun to take root in Port Louis as far back as the 1830s, when some of the first workers to complete their indenture migrated to the city, but they tended not to spill into public view except during religious feasts and secular celebrations such as their respective New Year festivities. (European visitors and residents documented these activities with great annoyance and many disparaging comments about the strange conceptions of “music” held by the newcomers, plus a few formal noise complaints.)<sup>442</sup> The redistribution of land following the Great Plague altered the balance between the more established European and Creole residents and the more recent immigrants from Asia, allowing the newer residents to acquire large plots of land and use them to establish

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<sup>440</sup> P.D. Hollingworth, “Population and Change: Three Centuries of Mauritian History,” in *The Indian Cultural Review* (January 1968): 26-27.

<sup>441</sup> The geographical separation of the Port Louis Theatre from its audience base was not a problem until nighttime rail service was curtailed during the First and Second World Wars. The Port Louis Theatre was cut off from eighty percent of its audience (including the more affluent sections) and was essentially shuttered for the duration of these conflicts. These interruptions spurred the construction of a new theater in Rose Hill that co-opted the Port Louis Theatre’s audience and financial support. The closure of the Mauritian railway system in the 1960s made it less impractical for suburban audiences to visit Port Louis at night and caused the Port Louis Theatre to sink into neglect and disrepair. See chapter 5 for additional information.

<sup>442</sup> Beaton, 84, 105; Pike, 171.

more formal and visible institutions.<sup>443</sup> Many previously integrated (or, more accurately, squashed-together) neighborhoods became predominantly or exclusively Indian or Chinese during the post-plague period, reducing the intervention of civic authorities drawn by noise complaints.

One of the cultural institutions established by the Chinese community of Port Louis following the plague was a Joss temple. This multi-purpose building, located on a one-acre lot near the northern edge of the city, included rooms that were set aside for gambling *and* (on particular nights) the performance of plays, pantomimes, and operas in Chinese.<sup>444</sup> Few details of these performances have survived other than those recorded by Nicholas Pike, who recounts a performance of a new Chinese opera written by two Sino-Mauritian residents: the book and lyrics by “Mr. Ahong, a doctor and opium-dealer in the country,” and the music by “Mr. Ching-tang, a dealer in snook<sup>445</sup> and cocoa-nut oil in Port Louis.” This opera featured a cast of five singers and was accompanied by traditional Chinese instruments – listed by their Western analogues as “two gongs, two triangles, two Chinese fiddles, four cymbals, two guitars [elsewhere described as ‘two mandolins’], and two kettle-drums.” The entire performance was well received by the

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<sup>443</sup> A steep drop in Port Louis real estate prices continued for many years after the Great Plague. Pike, 71.

<sup>444</sup> Pike, 170; 177. The dialect of Chinese used in these operas was most likely Hakka or Hokkien.

<sup>445</sup> A type of fish.

audience and was evidently part of a lively performance tradition mostly patronized by the Chinese residents of Port Louis.<sup>446</sup>

The quality of this Chinese opera performance was hailed by Pike, who pronounced it a first-class opera,” and complimented the talent of its (all-Chinese) cast of local singers as “celestial”. These were not the praises of an empty enthusiast; Pike, an educated and cultured man, was also a regular attendee at the performances in the Port Louis Theatre, where he noted the general decline in quality with distaste. Describing the singers and actors of visiting French troupes, he wrote simply and tersely, “I cannot say much in favour of those I have heard.”<sup>447</sup> The theater’s English performances appear to have done little better; previously offered regularly by amateur troupes and praised in the press, the English-language offerings had by the 1870s declined to mere irregular entertainments given by the officers and men from the garrison regiments. About these, Pike had even less to say, politely declining to comment beyond the fact that such performances were well attended.<sup>448</sup> Overall, it appears that the quality of European theater offerings of all sorts declined in Mauritius in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Several factors were at play in the much-remarked decline in the quality of the theater offerings in Mauritius. The decline of amateur theater in Port Louis was linked to the twin shocks of the Great Plague and the relocation of its surviving constituents and

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<sup>446</sup> Pike, 173-7.

<sup>447</sup> Pike, 61.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid.



participants; for the most part, members of the now well-established Indian and Chinese populations simply did not patronize European entertainment to a significant extent. The decline of the quality of professional theater appears to be linked to a more technological cause, as the deterioration (as measured by published and informal reviews) aligns with advances in transoceanic travel due to the adoption of the steam engine<sup>449</sup> and (after 1871) the opening of the Suez Canal. These advances drastically reduced the long travel times that entrepreneurs like Joseph Laglaine had used to hone their recently-assembled troupes into the well-trained companies that had distinguished themselves in former times. With transit times from Europe to Mauritius dropping in half from the 1830s to the 1860s (from four-to-six months to two-to-three) the key element – rehearsal time during the voyage – was simply not available to the same extent that it was prior. Furthermore, the advances in steam travel promoted the growth of an overseas French theater circuit, in which troupes left France to play in the French Caribbean islands, French West Africa, La Réunion, and Mauritius. This further subdivided the voyage to Mauritius into short segments; as a period of downtime was normal after each stop, this left comparatively little actual time for rehearsal.<sup>450</sup>

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<sup>449</sup> The steam engine entered into common use after 1824 and was increasingly adopted over the course of the nineteenth century; the first steam ship constructed in Mauritius launched in 1827. Sailing ships carrying commercial cargoes continued to operate through the end of the First World War, during which they enjoyed a brief vogue due to coal rationing. Antoine Chelin, *Une Île et Son Passé, Supplément*, 143; John Joyce, “The Globalization of Music,” in *The Global History Reader*, eds. Bruce Mazlish and Akira Iriye (New York: Routledge, 2005), 225.

<sup>450</sup> The contrast is particularly visible because Joseph Laglaine was especially diligent in his rehearsal efforts, which were much appreciated by the crew and passengers of the ships that carried his various troupes. See François Péron, *Mémoires du Capitaine Péron: sur ses Voyages aux Côtes d’Afrique, en Arabie, à l’Île d’Amsterdam, aux Îles d’Anjouan et de Mayotte, aux Côtes*

The drop in rehearsal times affected not just the quality of the performances, but also the quantity and variety of the repertoire presented. The theater and opera seasons presented in Mauritius increasingly resembled those of a stock repertory company, with few new works presented despite the turnover between troupes. During the 1873 theater season, for example, only four of the thirteen operas presented were local premieres. Nine of the repeating works had been presented at least a decade prior, with half of those having been presented multiple times in the past decade. Only two of those local premieres were actually recent compositions, with the other two works with Mauritian premieres having had their Parisian premieres in the 1850s.<sup>451</sup>

This professional decline does not seem to have immediately affected the practice of amateur music making in Mauritius, or to have hampered the commercial viability of visiting theater troupes. Rather, Pike opined, Mauritian students spent too much time on musical pursuits – so much so that he deemed it impossible for a typical student to acquire a full and proper education (i.e., one up to the standards of British education in Europe or the American educational system), for want of free time. The local students, he remarked, “go in too much for long recitations (for which they have marvelous memories), music, and embroidery, and other things that make a show, to leave room for a solid foundation [to their education].”<sup>452</sup>

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*Nord-Ouest de l'Amérique, aux Îles Sandwich, à la Chine, etc.* (Paris: Brissot-Thivars, 1824), 105-06.

<sup>451</sup> Robert Furlong, “Essai d'une Chronologie des Interpretations d'Art Lyrique à Maurice,” accessed 9 November 2011, [http://www.operamauritius.com/2009/artlyrique\\_mru.php](http://www.operamauritius.com/2009/artlyrique_mru.php).

<sup>452</sup> *Ibid.*, 455.

This enduring amateur interest in music on the island translated into a steady market for music-related goods, particularly pianos and sheet music. In the 1880s, this interest drove a plan to organize a conservatory of music on the island, with fundraising and governance committees established and an advertisement for faculty placed in a London music periodical.<sup>453</sup> This scheme fell apart amidst an economic recession caused by slumping worldwide sugar prices, however, and corresponding problems with fundraising. A formal conservatory of music was not established on the island until 1987.

Despite the existence of numerous amateur chamber ensembles and several orchestras composed of amateurs, amateur musicians did not play a regular role in the major civic events marked by music. In the late 1800s, government ceremonies, holidays, and major Christian feasts still depended on military bands to provide music. During Nicholas Pike's stay in Mauritius, for example, the Feast of Corpus Christi (Fête-Dieu) included a grand procession from the Cathedral of St. Louis through the streets of Port Louis to the Champ-de-Mars, with one of the military bands providing "the most solemn music" to accompany the event.<sup>454</sup> Whenever the garrison was deployed overseas, as during the Sepoy Rebellion (1857-9) and the Second Boer War (1899-1902), civic music in Mauritius was considerably diminished.

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<sup>453</sup> G.L. "Formation of a Musical Conservatoire in Mauritius," *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* 23, no. 477 (1882): 621.

<sup>454</sup> Pike, 447-49.

## The Twilight Years of Immigration and the Eve of the Great War

*Went ashore in the forenoon at Port Louis, a little town, but with the largest variety of nationalities and complexions we have encountered yet. French, English, Chinese, Arabs, Africans with wool, blacks with straight hair, East Indians, half-whites, quadroons – and great varieties in costumes and colors.*

--Mark Twain (1894)<sup>455</sup>

The largest and most lavish musical event in Mauritius before the island's independence was a grand celebration of the coronation of Edward VII. Although some small festivities and letters of congratulation had marked the coronation of the previous monarch, Queen Victoria, the intervening sixty-three years had seen a dramatic rise in the island's prosperity. In 1901, at Edward VII's ascension to the throne, Mauritius was not only a lynchpin in the Indian Ocean trade, but also the greatest sugar producer in the British Empire, excepting only the Dominion of India as a whole. Grand celebrations were planned throughout the British Empire for the new monarch's coronation.

The coronation celebrations in Mauritius were originally scheduled for 12 July 1902,<sup>456</sup> two and a half weeks after the date selected for Edward VII's coronation ceremony at Westminster Abbey.<sup>457</sup> The new sovereign was afflicted with appendicitis just two days before the planned coronation, however, which delayed events until his

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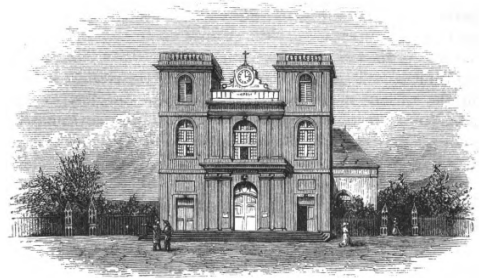
<sup>455</sup> Samuel Clemens, *Following the Equator: A Journey around the World by Mark Twain* (Hartford, CT: The American Publishing Company, 1898), 617.

<sup>456</sup> A.F. Arokion, *Repertoire of the Coronation Festivities in the Eastern Suburb, Made in English and French by A.F. Arokion. At the Request of Mr. Jos. Mazère, President of the Committee*. Mauritius: Storekeeper General's Printing Establishment, 1903.

<sup>457</sup> Sidney Lee, *King Edward VII: A Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1927), 102-9.

health and recovery had been assured.<sup>458</sup> This gave the coronation committee in Mauritius extra time to prepare the local celebrations, which were rescheduled to occur on the new coronation date. As a concession to the governor's desire to attend all of the major festivities in Mauritius, the local celebrations were then split between two separate days, with coronation celebrations in Port Louis and its environs occurring on 9 August 1902 (the same day as the actual coronation in England) and additional festivities in the eastern suburbs on 19 August 1902.<sup>459</sup>

The governor's annual ball on 18 July 1902 was the first celebration in Mauritius to be dedicated to Edward VII's ascension. Originally scheduled to follow the coronation festivities, the event was already planned and invitations issued before the monarch's illness, and proceeded after his recovery had been reported via telegraph. This ball was an especially lavish affair, with seven hundred invitations issued and a notable use of the new electric lighting system to light up the city streets that evening.<sup>461</sup>



**Figure 20 - The Catholic Cathedral of St. Louis in Port Louis, circa 1870.<sup>460</sup>**

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<sup>458</sup> Ibid.

<sup>459</sup> Arokion, 6.

<sup>460</sup> Pike, *Subtropical Rambles*, 70.

<sup>461</sup> [Anonymous], *The Coronation Celebration Festivities in Mauritius and Rodrigues* (Port Louis: The Mauritius Printing Establishment, 1902), 10-11.

The main celebrations in Port Louis began with Masses of Thanksgiving offered at the city's Catholic and Anglican cathedrals. The service began first at the Catholic Cathedral of St. Louis, with a *Te Deum* Mass<sup>462</sup> sung at 9:45 a.m. with the governor and most of the island's ranking civic and military officials present.<sup>463</sup> At the end of this service, a long formal procession of officials snaked across town to the Anglican Cathedral of St. James, depositing all of the same officials for another *Te Deum* Mass at 11 a.m.<sup>464</sup> At 12:30 p.m., at the formal conclusion of the Anglican service, a 101-gun salute was fired from the Citadel of St. Adelaide that overlooked the city, the sound of cannon echoing through the city streets. At 3:30 p.m., a joint review of all of the available naval and military forces on the island began at the Champ-de-Mars, a sizable event by itself that would have also included parades and martial music.<sup>465</sup> That night, all of the major public spaces in the capital were illuminated by electric light, with two military bands from the garrison playing music from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m.; these bands were stationed in front of the waterfront Quay and in front of the Port Louis Theatre, respectively, with

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<sup>462</sup> The *Te Deum* Mass tradition originated in France in the late seventeenth century, when elaborate public ceremonies including a Mass with a singing of the *Te Deum* entered into regular use to mark important public announcements and celebrations. Distributions of food and outdoor processions became associated with the *Te Deum* Mass in the eighteenth century. See Daniel Roche, *France in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 269-70; James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 68-70.

Two distributions of food associated with the coronation festivities are known to have taken place in the eastern suburbs: a general distribution to four hundred poor citizens and a small distribution to the children's choir. Arokion, *Repertoire of the Coronation Festivities in the Eastern Suburb*, 6-7.

<sup>463</sup> *The Coronation Celebration Festivities in Mauritius and Rodrigues*, 15.

<sup>464</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, 15-16. The two cathedrals are only half a kilometer apart, with a fairly direct street route (six blocks and two turns).

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, 17.

their last selections of music timed to coincide with the launching of fireworks from the Citadel.<sup>466</sup>

This elaborate pomp and pageantry in the capital region was completely outshone by the massive undertakings for the celebrations in the eastern suburbs, whose prosperity and concentration of resources now competed with the capital. This satellite celebration centered on the Catholic Church of St. Francis Xavier in Rose Hill, the largest church on the island; its 2,000-seat capacity was almost equivalent to that of the cathedrals of St. Louis (1,500 seats) and St. James (600 seats) combined. The weekly attendance at St. Francis Xavier also exceeded the combined total of both cathedrals, and its size and situation near a crossroads and the railway line made it a natural choice as the nexus for the eastern celebrations.<sup>467</sup>

Details of the preparations and arrangements for the coronation festivities in the eastern suburbs of Mauritius are preserved in a booklet by one of the civic members of the planning committee, prepared for the governor and ultimately sent as a gift to Edward VII.<sup>468</sup> This booklet not only describes many of the individual musicians and personages present, but also the logistical arrangements required for the coronation. The booklet, details of which are confirmed in local newspaper coverage, describes preparations that employed significantly more performers than the capital's celebrations.

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<sup>466</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>467</sup> [Anonymous], *Blue Book for the Island of Mauritius: 1900* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Government Printing Establishment, 1901), S2.

<sup>468</sup> Arokion.

The eastern suburbs' festivities formally began early in the morning of Tuesday, 19 August 1902, with the ringing of church bells throughout the region. At 8:15 a.m., the band of the 19<sup>th</sup> Madras Infantry (one of the regular garrison units stationed in Mauritius, and the favored regimental band for government-sponsored events) led a military honor guard in a procession through the streets of Rose Hill to the Church of St. Francis Xavier. At 8:45 a.m., the bells of St. Francis Xavier rang again to announce the arrival of a procession of priests gathered throughout the island, led by the Catholic Bishop of Mauritius. Around 9 a.m., the governor arrived, received the presentation of arms by the honor guard, and was greeted by the band playing the national anthem "God Save the King." The governor's own procession to the church entrance was accompanied by a choir of more than seven hundred schoolchildren singing the coronation hymn "O King of Kings, Thy Blessing Shed," by E.A. Price.<sup>469</sup>

The bishop's entry into the church signaled the start of a new selection of music within the building itself, led by a mixture of professional and amateur musicians. The first musical selection was a singing of *Domine Salvum Fac*<sup>470</sup> by Frank Feuilherade (a skilled amateur singer) and a full choir. This was followed by a delivery of the *Pater*

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<sup>469</sup> Ibid., 8; "Coronation Festival Music," *The Musical Times and Singing-Class Circular* 52 (May 1, 1911): 345-9.

<sup>470</sup> From the description, this is most likely the *Domine Salvum Fac* from Arthur Sullivan's *Festival Te Deum* (1872), a work with a well-known prior connection to Edward VII. Sullivan's *Festival Te Deum* was composed to celebrate Edward VII's recovery from typhoid fever earlier in 1872 and premiered in a celebratory concert at the Crystal Palace. See "Crystal Palace Concerts: Announcement of the Concert to Celebrate the Prince of Wales's Recovery," *The Times*, 29 April 1872; "Thanksgiving Festival at the Crystal Palace: Review of the Concert to Celebrate the Prince of Wales's Recovery." *The Times*, 2 May 1872. Its composition to celebrate an earlier recovery by Edward VII would have made the piece particularly apt.



*Noster* by Louis Niedermeyer – sung by the celebrated local opera singer Eduoard Berger – and the *Ave Maria* by Luigi Cherubini – sung by Martha Feuilherade (Frank Feuilherade’s daughter and a skilled *debutante*). After these preliminary pieces of music were completed, the main liturgy began with a singing of the *Te Deum* Mass that alternated passages sung by the bishop, a choir of more than two dozen clergy drawn from the area, and the separate full choir assembled for the service. The main ceremony concluded with a liturgical blessing and a procession out of the church; the band from the 19<sup>th</sup> Madras Infantry led the procession, playing Percy Godfrey’s Coronation March.<sup>471</sup>

This elaborate musical celebration was followed by a number of smaller events. The first of these, an outdoor reception, retained the services of the 19<sup>th</sup> Madras Infantry Band for a final engagement, lasting until about noon; the band played opera tunes and festive songs to the applause of the crowd.<sup>472</sup> Following this, the governor was transported to a private luncheon, which according to custom would have been accompanied by live music. The hundreds of children from the children’s choir were treated to their own reception at which they repeated their singing of the coronation hymn, and at which a band of amateur musicians provided dance music for three hours.<sup>473</sup> The general citizenry enjoyed a general celebration outdoors, for which several

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<sup>471</sup> Arokion, 8-10. This was the Mauritian premiere of Godfrey’s prize-winning Coronation March, which was published that same year and widely advertised in Britain for use with coronation events.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>473</sup> Ibid., 10.

neighborhoods had been decorated with special electric lighting, Venetian lanterns, and a revolving fountain installed for the occasion.<sup>474</sup>

In addition to the main celebration in Port Louis on 9 August 1902 and the eastern suburbs' celebration in Rose Hill on 19 August 1902, nineteen other, smaller municipal celebrations took place between 9 August and 11 October. Most of these celebrations involved the singing of a *Te Deum* in the local parish church; several of these also featured concerts by military bands or children's choirs, albeit on a much smaller scale than the primary events.<sup>475</sup> One of these celebrations, in a gesture towards one of the island's more recently arrived communities – Muslim Indians<sup>476</sup> – consisted of a procession to a Port Louis mosque<sup>477</sup> – again headed by a military band.<sup>478</sup>

The large scale of the coronation celebration in the eastern suburbs of Mauritius was a reflection of the demographic shift in the island. The Franco-Mauritian and Creole population base now concentrated in the interior provided the bulk of the island's amateur musicians and its music audiences. Since most of the rapid growth in the interior communities was around the main passenger rail line that ran southeast from Port Louis to Mahébourg, the inhabitants of the new rail commuter suburbs such as Rose Hill and

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<sup>474</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>475</sup> [Anonymous], *The Coronation Celebration Festivities in Mauritius and Rodrigues*, 10-26.

<sup>476</sup> This group, a small minority within the larger stream of Indian migration, historically restricted its musical activities to religious devotional music. As a result, music from the Muslim Indian community was generally absent from parades, civic festivals, and other events despite a generally high participation in these same events.

<sup>477</sup> The Jumma Mosque, still extant and operating today, was built in 1852 and greatly expanded in the 1890s to occupy an entire city block. The mosque was (and remains) the center of the Muslim community in Port Louis.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid., 18.

Curepipe could use the trains to access Port Louis for work and entertainment. (The rail service offered special late-night service for opera productions and symphony concerts, with the trains timed to accommodate the end of the performances.)<sup>479</sup>

The rail connection was key to the growth of these communities, especially in an island with a relatively undeveloped road system.<sup>480</sup> The population of the eastern commuter suburbs could enjoy the cooler climate, larger spaces, and their amateur music making in the comfort of their home neighborhoods – while still availing themselves of the employment and entertainment opportunities of the capital.<sup>481</sup> The rail system also provided an easy means of collecting hundreds of school children from these communities and bringing them together for the grand celebration.<sup>482</sup> Since these communities were relatively united in their interest in music making,<sup>483</sup> the municipal

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<sup>479</sup> Lilian Berthelot, *Rose-Hill: La Ville qui Se Souvient* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Diocèse de Port-Louis, 1990), 26.

<sup>480</sup> In 1894, Mark Twain described the train journey from Port Louis to Curepipe (the farthest commuter suburb and approximately twenty-six kilometers away) as taking two hours during the day, when passenger and commercial traffic competed on the same rail lines. As commercial trains did not run at night, the special night service trains for returning theater patrons could cover the same distance in a much shorter time, especially as new and improved locomotives entered into service. By 1914, advances in locomotive technology had cut the daytime journey to one hour. Clemens, *Following the Equator*, 315; Allister Macmillan, ed. *Mauritius Illustrated: Historical and Descriptive, Commercial and Industrial. Facts, Figures, & Resources* (London: W.H. & L. Collingridge, 1914).

<sup>481</sup> Most commuters purchased monthly rail passes which allowed them to take one round trip per day, including the specially chartered night-time train service that accompanied night-time performances in Port Louis. Complete pricing information on distances and rail passes can be found in the annual *Blue Book for the Colony of Mauritius* series published by the Storekeeper's General Printing Establishment.

<sup>482</sup> The students were all drawn from communities within a half hour's walk or rail journey from the event location.

<sup>483</sup> As discussed above, these suburbs were home to much of the island's middle and upper classes and provided the bulk of the concert and theater audiences on the island.

schools were able to co-opt classroom and after-school time to prepare and rehearse their students for the children's choir.

Other elements of the musical forces employed in the eastern suburbs' coronation celebration were directly related to the population base and its proclivities. For example, the large population of churchgoing Catholics (primarily Franco-Mauritians and Creoles) in this area supported a correspondingly large number of parish churches in the region, from which some two-dozen priests were drawn to comprise one of the *three* choirs used at the Church of St. Francis Xavier on 19 August 1902. The organ used in the church was also loaned from the house of a private citizen, organs being particularly expensive instruments to transport to and maintain in the tropical environment of Mauritius.<sup>484</sup> In the church ceremony itself, two of the three featured soloists *and* the director of music were technically amateurs – albeit amateurs who performed regularly in the area<sup>485</sup> and had honed their skills to a sufficiently high caliber to allow them to sing challenging repertoire alongside professionals.

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<sup>484</sup> See, for example, Amédée Nagapen, *Paroisse de Notre-Dame-des-Anges, Mahebourg: Bicentenaire 1806-2006* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Best Graphics, 2006), 105-6.

<sup>485</sup> During the visit of the Duke and Duchess of York one year prior (August 1901), for example, one of the entertainments offered to the visiting royals was a dinner concert featuring piano, vocal, and violin performances by five local amateurs – one of whom was an important Mauritian judge. By all accounts the performance was of high quality and a great success, being well received by the Duke and Duchess. See: J.O. Bijoux, *Souvenir de la Visite Ducale: Île Maurice, Août 1901* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Imprimerie du 'Standard,' 1901), 29.

## Epilogue to the First Century of British Rule

The sumptuous musical performances staged in Mauritius in 1902 for the coronation of Edward VII represent the high watermark of the European art music tradition in Mauritius. Although other coronations would be celebrated in the decades before the island achieved its independence, none would come remotely close to the high level of civic engagement and public use of music exhibited for this occasion.

Notably absent from the 1902 coronation celebrations were any contributions from the more ethnically tinged music traditions in Mauritius. Although Chinese and Indian contingents of musicians had joined the (Gregorian calendar) New Year's celebrations in the late nineteenth century, they were still almost entirely unrepresented at many formal events, with their musical contributions devalued and often derided by officials. This was due in part to the Anglo, Franco-Mauritian, and Creole domination of the Mauritian government and civil service, which privileged European instruments and art music; aside from the odd piece of music setting



**Figure 21 - A 1902 caricature of Edward VII by *Vanity Fair*.<sup>486</sup>**

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<sup>486</sup> “His Majesty the King. Sovereigns Series, Number 25,” included in *Vanity Fair* 19 June 1902. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:King\\_Edward\\_VII\\_Vanity\\_Fair\\_19\\_June\\_1902.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:King_Edward_VII_Vanity_Fair_19_June_1902.jpg). Used under the Creative Commons 3.0 License.

*séga* tunes, the musical influences of the island's slave heritage were also ignored. These cultural separations would start to break down in the following decade as the Indo-Mauritians became more active politically and the Sino-Mauritian community began strongly to exert its cultural identity<sup>487</sup> with activities in public spaces<sup>488</sup> and the cultural public sphere.<sup>489</sup>

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<sup>487</sup> Although the Sino-Mauritian community had always displayed certain Chinese cultural practices (as discussed above), these were mostly discrete activities within the confines of the Chinese Quarter of Port Louis. As the twentieth century progressed, the Sino-Mauritian population developed a stronger and particularly Chinese identity as men from the existing community began to marry spouses from mainland China. The rise of this trend in marriage practice was accompanied by increased participation in Chinese folk religion practices, public celebrations of Chinese holidays, and other activities that migrated from the private to the public sphere. See Marina Carter and James Ng Foong Kwong, *Abacus and Mah Jong: Sino-Mauritian Settlement and Economic Consolidation* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 145-48.

<sup>488</sup> E.g., lion dances, parades, and street festivals that spilled out of the Chinese Quarter.

<sup>489</sup> See Liana Giorgi, Monica Sassatelli, and Gerard Delanty, eds., *Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011), especially Motti Regev, "International Festivals in a Small Country: Rites of Recognition and Cosmopolitanism," 108-23.

## V. Peaks and Declines: Sociocultural Fractures, *Séga*, and the Road to Republic (1911-1965)

*Throughout the First World War the island's participation was paradoxically greater than it had been during the colonial wars of the nineteenth century, even though its strategic significance had lessened since the imperial wars of the eighteenth century.*

--Ashley Jackson, *War and Empire in Mauritius and the Indian Ocean* (2001)<sup>490</sup>

The general character of European art music and *séga* in Mauritius for much of the early-twentieth century was one of punctuated diminution. Military, professional, and amateur music making of all sorts dwindled in the face of war mobilizations and economic declines. Disruptive new entertainment technologies such as the radio and the phonographic record also offered new and in some ways compensatory methods of experiencing music. At the same time, rising Indo-Mauritian nationalism and weakening commercial and cultural connections to Western Europe facilitated the rise of Indian and popular music genres in the Mauritian soundscape.

The First and Second World Wars were tremendously disruptive experiences for Mauritius, its inhabitants, and its music. Although the island had been a direct participant in the Anglo-French wars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the employment of full national mobilization (the so-called “total war economy”) in France and Great Britain during the twentieth century affected life on the island to an unprecedented extent. Recruitment, rationing, regulations on artificial light, relegation as a second-tier base, and restrictions on individual movement resulted in the *de facto* suppression of most public

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<sup>490</sup> Ashley Jackson, *War and Empire in Mauritius and the Indian Ocean* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 22.

performances of music in Mauritius during the two World Wars. The impact of these wartime measures often continued well after the end of armed conflict; rationing, for example, continued in the British Empire for almost a decade after the end of the Second World War – and was restored in various forms several times thereafter.<sup>491</sup> The World Wars had deep consequences for the culture of music consumption and performance in Mauritius.

The impact of these larger geopolitical events should not be understood as a monolithic process that stamped out or entirely eliminated music from Mauritian public society. Private Mauritian citizens and government officials made concerted actions to support music performance during and in spite of these trying times and restrictions. These actions provide many interesting illustrations of the use of music to alleviate persistent and otherwise irresolvable problems. That these measures were ineffective in the long term at maintaining or restoring the prominence of European art music in local society does not undermine their value during the wars. These measures also underscore that the rise of Mauritian nationalism was not directly in conflict with the island's longstanding European and African heritage, and show that particular efforts were made to retain the former even as the island moved towards decolonization and independence.

A particular theme that emerges in Mauritian musical culture during this period is the island's unwillingness or inability to provide native-born professional musicians for

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<sup>491</sup> See, for example, Imperial War Museums, "Rationing in the Second World War," accessed November 22, 2012, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/rationing-in-the-second-world-war/>.



its own shores. Repeated examples show that Mauritians judged their local resources to be insufficient and turned overseas for additional musical resources. In some cases, such as the formation of the Mauritius Police Band, professional musicians of Indian descent who had trained in the European musical tradition were found in British India. The construction of the Rose Hill Theatre (opened 1932) was intended in part to entice visiting theatre troupes from France to take up residence in Mauritius, providing an attractive modern performance venue and offering potential subsidies. In other instances, musicians were drawn from more unconventional sources, such as a group of Jewish refugees interned in Mauritius during the Second World War.

The practice of *séga* in Mauritius continued its general decline during this period. Commentators predicted the imminent and total disappearance of the genre,<sup>492</sup> which continued to be attacked as amoral, degenerate, and sinful in religious sermons, schools, and other venues. *Séga*, like European art music, faced competition from new streams and genres of music as recording and broadcasting technologies allowed local audiences to experience music in new and different ways. The traditional practice of *séga* (what would eventually be called *séga typique*) declined greatly as a result of the Second World War and was largely replaced by a new and fashionable form of *séga*, *séga salon*. The vogue for *séga salon* proved temporary, however; by the 1960s, Western rock-and-roll and Indian Bollywood music were firmly ensconced as the dominant popular forms of music. The two longstanding hallmarks of Afro-/Créole-Mauritian musicality, *séga* and

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<sup>492</sup> This prediction was neither new nor surprising, having been articulated since the 1840s.

European art music, were increasingly fringe genres as Mauritius approached independence.

### **Sources on Early-Twentieth Century Mauritius**

The literary and documentary sources on music in Mauritius in the early-to-mid-twentieth century are comparatively sparse. This exiguity can be attributed to several factors:

1. Mauritius' transition from a key global port of trade to a "second-tier" port of merely regional importance;<sup>493</sup>
2. the success of Christian missionaries on the island in the nineteenth century, causing missionary societies to redirect their interest and personnel elsewhere in the twentieth century;
3. the disruptive impact of the World Wars, the Great Depression, and postwar rationing on British and French publishing industries;
4. changes to Mauritian society resulting from the "total mobilization" of the British Empire during the World Wars;
5. actual declines in the performance of *séga* and European art music in Mauritius during this period.

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<sup>493</sup> In terms of cargo tonnage, the drop in shipping traffic after the opening of the Suez Canal was counterbalanced by the use of larger steam vessels, causing annual cargo traffic to rise despite the steady decline in the number of ship calls made in Mauritius. The number of visitors, however, declined in close relation to the diminishing number of ship calls. See A. Jahangeer-Choojoo, "Indo-Mauritius Trade: The Role of Gujarati Commercial Houses during the Second Half of 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Mauritius," *Journal of Mauritian Studies* N.S. 1, no. 1 (2001): 14-15.

This decline in published literary material is not unique to Mauritius or Mauritian subjects; British and French printing houses (historically the publishers of most Mauritian) were forced to curtail greatly their output during this period because of paper rationing and other supply problems. Mauritius' distance from the front lines did not help it greatly in this respect, as the growth of global trade had replaced most local Mauritian paper manufacturing with imported paper – and the small volume of local commercial paper production was subject to the same restrictions on use.

The impact of these restrictions is particularly visible when looking at local press coverage in Mauritius during the two World Wars. The four main daily newspapers were condensed into a single paper for the duration of the wars. During the Second World War, additional restrictions and shortages shrunk the daily news further: first to a single broadsheet, then to half of that size. By the end of that conflict, the “daily” news had become a triweekly printing and the island's regional gazettes had been shuttered for years. These same restrictions also explain in part the dearth of posters, pamphlets, and other sorts of printed ephemera. Given the above restrictions on printing, it is not surprising that there is often very little in the way of arts coverage in period newspapers. Surprisingly, Great Britain's “total war” mobilization did more to strangle the *British* printing industry in Mauritius than seven years of British blockading hurt *French* printing on the island during the Napoleonic Wars.

There is one notable exception to the above restrictions during the Second World War: a gazette published in the Beau Bassin prison complex and created in its entirety by the Jewish refugees housed there. This gazette was nominally titled *Camp News* and was

often published with humorous variations of the title. Despite its focus on the refugee community, it comprises one of the richest and most detailed records of music making in Mauritius from 1942-1945. Its existence and size is attributable both to its small circulation and the ingenuity of one of the refugees, who manufactured the paper stock used from local materials. Almost all of the surviving copies of *Camp News* are currently in private family collections; general descriptions of their content can be found in Geneviève Pitot's *The Mauritian Shekel: The Story of the Jewish Detainees in Mauritius, 1940-1945* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Vizavi, 1998) and Elena Makarova's *Boarding Pass to Paradise: Peretz Beda Mayer and Fritz Haendel* (Jerusalem: Verba, 2005).

The Jewish refugees' access to a private, internal paper supply explains in part the plethora of surviving primary source documents that detail their life in Mauritius. These documents are also, for the most part, predominantly found in private family collections; the Pitot and Makarova books contain the most current information in print about the contents of these collections, although no public catalogs or indexes exist. The Makarova book also reproduces a large number of documents in transcript and photo facsimile, the latter including several sketches and paintings of Jewish musicians in Mauritius. A few photographs of musicians are also reproduced in the Pitot book. The record of events provided by these primary sources has also been supplemented by several studies incorporating interviews with the former refugees and their descendants, of which these two volumes are also the most current repositories.

There is only one major source from the period 1911-1965 that describes *séga* in Mauritius in any significant detail. This work, a master's thesis written by Iswarduth

Nundlall in 1957, is the first surviving account of *séga* written with academic rigor and by a trained musician.<sup>494</sup> Nundlall, a native-born Indo-Mauritian, also provides a local perspective on *séga* in the context of the larger Mauritian soundscape. Although this thesis contains few details in terms of explicit rhythms and notation, it does supply examples of *séga* lyrics; descriptions of lyrical, musical, and dance improvisation; and a rich account of the cultural institution of the “*séga* house party” or *séga soirée* that typified the *séga salon* genre. That this thesis was written while the author was a graduate student in India falls into the longtime pattern of Mauritius’ most talented native-born musicians leaving the island to continue their studies elsewhere. Unlike Francis Thomé and Léon Carvalho, however, Nundlall returned to Mauritius following the completion of his music studies.<sup>495</sup>

This work is especially important because its author pursued his professional career in Mauritius and became a major figure in arts and education on the island. Nundlall designed and choreographed *séga* performances featured in the official Mauritian Independence Ceremony in 1968 and went on to serve in the various ministries for Arts and Education.<sup>496</sup> His research on *séga* led to him draft elementary education curricula that incorporated *séga* as an integral part of student and teacher training; these

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<sup>494</sup> Iswarduth Nundlall, “Music in Mauritius,” MMus thesis, Bhatkhande University of Music (Lucknow), 1957. This thesis has also been published several times, most recently as *Music in Mauritius* (Vacoas, Mauritius: Sargam Publications, 1984).

<sup>495</sup> Nundlall also completed a doctorate in musicology before returning to Mauritius, writing a dissertation on Indian Classical Music. This dissertation was later reprinted as Iswarduth Nundlall, *Bharat Ki Sangeet Kala* (Vacoas, Mauritius: Sargam Prakashan, 1972).

<sup>496</sup> The exact ministerial names and structures usually changed with every election; arts and education were often but not always placed under the same minister.

curricula were deployed in pilot programs in the 1970s. Nundlall eventually rose to the position of Minister of Education in the 1980s and oversaw the introduction of *séga* into public school classrooms across the island. Because his scholarship was so influential in the post-independence period, the impact of his work will be discussed further in the following chapter.

### **Immigrant Communities in the Early Twentieth Century**

The period of demographic change initiated by Asian immigration to Mauritius came to an abrupt end in 1910, when growing domestic protests and a saturated labor market led to a temporary ban on entry permits for indentured laborers from India. This ban would last twelve years, continuing through an export recession induced by the First World War and through a general slowdown in global trade. The efforts by plantation owners to continue to extend the indenture system (which increased the labor supply and kept wages depressed, to the benefit of the more established “old money” interests) were successfully opposed by pro-Indian advocacy groups and increasingly organized labor unions. Although the importation of indentured laborers was briefly resumed from 1922-1924, an unfavorable inspection led the Government of India to institute a permanent ban on further recruitment.<sup>497</sup> 1910 effectively marks the end of the era of immigration in Mauritius.

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<sup>497</sup> Kunwar Maharaj Singh, *Report by Kunwar Maharaj Singh, M.A. C.E.E., Barrister-at-Law, on his Deputation to Mauritius: With Appendices* (New Delhi: Government of India Press, 1925).

## **Indo-Mauritian Communities**

The socio-cultural ramifications of this almost century-long period of immigration and sweeping demographic changes were only gradually made apparent; many did not emerge until the twentieth century. During the first decades of this immigration wave, the majority of migrant Indian workers served out their five-year contracts and returned home. Having saved up enough money to buy land and marry in their native India, few of the (almost entirely male) workers wished to stay longer. Marrying Indian women locally was not an option at first, as plantation owners viewed women and children as less productive workers than men and gave explicit orders against their recruitment.<sup>498</sup> In addition, strict laws limited the Indian laborers' freedom of movement and restricted their contact with Mauritian society off the plantation.

The net result of these arrangements was that the majority of Indian migrant workers in Mauritius during the 1830s and 1840s were happy to return to their native lands when their contracts expired. For them, the living situation in Mauritius during this period paralleled that of French East India Company employees in Mauritius in the 1720s and early-1730s: although the pay for overseas workers was excellent compared to wages in their economically depressed homelands (i.e., Northeast India for the majority of coolies and the province of Brittany in France for the employees of La Compagnie), the lack of female society and culture was a huge disincentive towards staying. La Bourdonnais' transformative governorship and policies had resolved this problem in

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<sup>498</sup> This attitude had carried over from the earlier context of slave buying during the French and Dutch periods.

French Mauritius by taking decisive actions to add musical and matrimonial opportunities. In almost a century of Indian immigration, however, no governor of British Mauritius worked actively to promote marriage and Indian music amongst the Indian coolies.<sup>499</sup> As a result, the development of Indian music and culture in Mauritius proceeded at a much slower pace and for a long time did not threaten the more established musical traditions on the island. The slow velocity of this incremental development was further depressed by the high rate of Indian migrant workers returning to India, a factor that persisted even after the emergence of substantial permanent Indo-Mauritian communities.<sup>500</sup>

The workers who chose to stay followed various paths of integration. Many married local (primarily former slave) women, merging into the broad mixed-race Créole-Mauritian demographic. Others sought out higher-ranking positions on the plantations, becoming overseers and experts in sugar cultivation and refining. Yet another group began acquiring land for cultivation, becoming subsistence farmers on the small plots of marginal land then available for purchase. Another group moved to Port Louis,

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<sup>499</sup> Many colonial officials did quite the opposite, openly supporting the suppression of traditional Indian music and dance on the island via Christian evangelization and the selective application of noise and association ordinances.

<sup>500</sup> Indian emigration from Mauritius in the late nineteenth century remained much higher than from British territories in the Caribbean, although the cost and length of passage was certainly a contributing factor. Previous studies attributed this high return rate to the poverty of Indian workers and to the “company store”-type plantation services, but recent research has shown that this to be untrue. Most coolies returning from Mauritius to India sent their savings (often 1-2 years’ wages) home in advance before booking passage. This created a false impression of destitution when their assets and possessions were inventoried before embarkation. See Devesh Kapur, *Diaspora, Development, and Democracy: The Domestic Impact of International Migration from India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 52-53.



becoming part of the diversified urban economy there. All of those who chose to stay in Mauritius during this early period had strong incentives to integrate into the broader Mauritian society and cast off the visible trappings of their Indian heritage – trappings that invited all the legal and extra-legal prejudice applied against indentured and formerly indentured workers.<sup>501</sup>

The resulting integration took two forms, as Indian men who took Creole wives tended to adopt their spouses' culture and mores. Those who settled in Port Louis picked up the fashionable habits of urban Creoles, discarding their native dress for Creole and European garb and attending the theatre. Others integrated into rural Creole society, some even choosing to escape labor-intensive plantation environments to join sleepy Creole farming communities and fishing villages. This social integration is not well documented in most sources, but is attested by numerous nineteenth-century accounts from Christian missionaries detailing the composition and origins of their congregations and target audiences.<sup>502</sup>

The pressure to integrate into the dominant Franco-/ Créole-Mauritian society was strongest for the slowly growing Indo-Mauritian bourgeoisie. This predominantly urban demographic consciously followed the same pursuits as their European and Créole

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<sup>501</sup> Indians who could not demonstrate employment, for example, were subject to fines and imprisonment for vagrancy.

<sup>502</sup> The Anglican Bishop of Mauritius, Vincent Ryan, noted the presence of small groups of Indians within Creole village parishes during the course of his inspections. See, for example, Vincent W. Ryan, Diary Entry for June 17, 1847. Reproduced in Vincent W. Ryan, *Mauritius and Madagascar: Journals of An Eight Years' Residence in the Diocese of Mauritius, and of a Visit to Madagascar* (London: Sheeley, Jackson, and Halliday, 1864), 76-77.

counterparts on the island: French high fashion, European music, European social dancing, and European theater in its British and French flavors. Indo-Mauritians settling in farming communities and fishing villages blended in more gradually, adopting the Kreol language and *séga* dancing. Only during the second generation of immigration did a distinctly Indo-Mauritian identity begin to emerge, drawing on four developments:

- 1) growing numbers of women and children immigrating from India, in both absolute and percentage terms;
- 2) larger and less marginal tracts of land becoming available for purchase, allowing the establishment of permanent rural communities and Indian-owned commercial agriculture;
- 3) the establishment of large, stable Indian communities in Port Louis; and
- 4) the gradual immigration of musicians and priests from India to serve the above communities.

Although the Great Plague of 1866-68 affected Indians in Mauritius worse than any other demographic in both percentage and absolute terms, it also created the basic conditions for a subsequent Indo-Mauritian renaissance and resurgence: the price of land plummeted (especially in Port Louis), the sudden contraction of the labor pool created a positive pressure on wages, and urban flight by the middle class created new business opportunities for those remaining in the cities.

## Sino-Mauritian Communities

The development of Sino-Mauritian communities took a very different direction early on for two key reasons. First, early plantation experiments using Chinese laborers in Mauritius in the early 1830s pleased neither the migrant workers nor the plantation owners, creating a local perception that the Chinese were innately unsuited to plantation work. Second, most of the Chinese immigrants did not hold British citizenship, and were thus legally barred from purchasing land in Mauritius.<sup>503</sup> These two factors pushed most Chinese immigrants into a distinctly separate path than their Indian counterparts, in which one of the traditional routes to wealth – land ownership – was closed.<sup>504</sup> Instead, the Chinese leased land and set up businesses, supplying the growing plantation markets and slowly taking over much of the shopkeeping and services trades in Port Louis.<sup>505</sup> The overall number of Chinese residents stayed fairly low – rarely more than several thousands – but their concentration on the north side of Port Louis and domination of retail business made them highly visible.

This inability to own land was a strong disincentive for Chinese immigrants to stay permanently. As a result, most chose to eventually either return to China or continue on to other destinations in the British and French colonial empires after having first

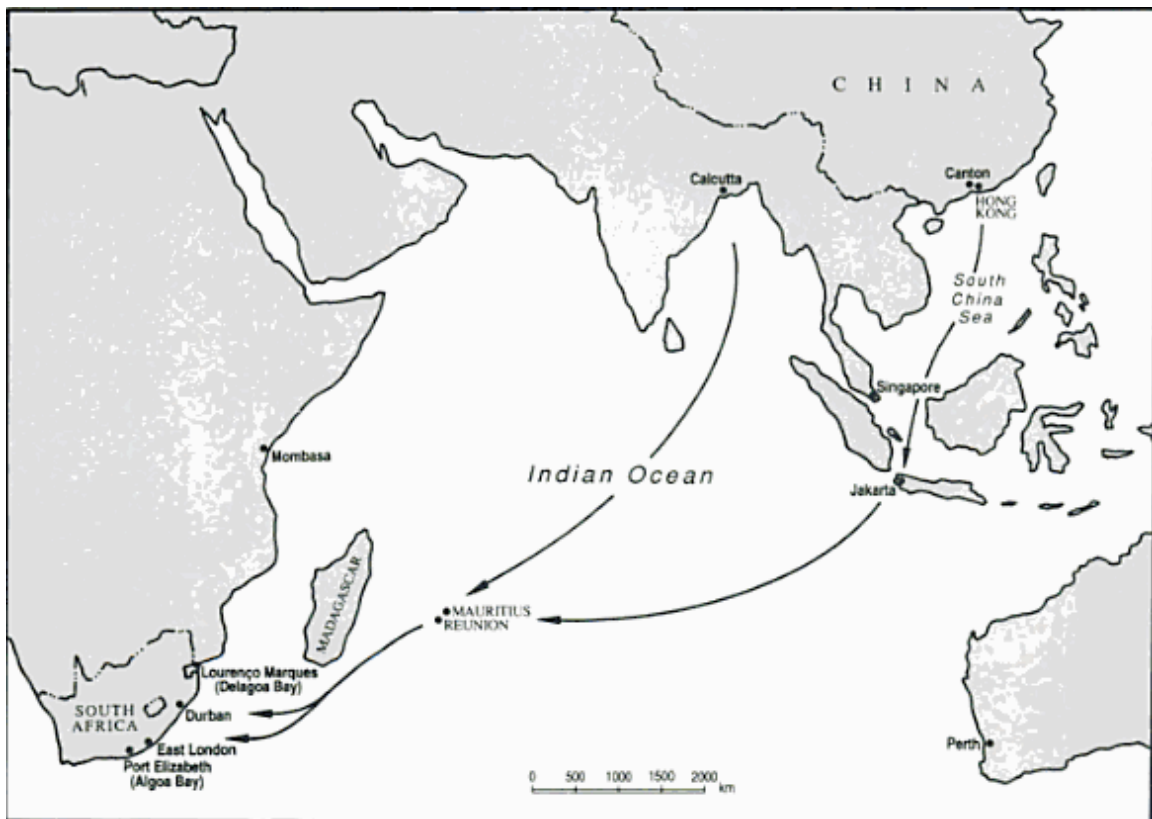
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<sup>503</sup> The vast majority of Chinese immigrants embarked for Mauritius from Hong Kong, after entering the British colony from Qing China (and, later, the Republic of China). Hong Kong did not itself possess any entry restrictions before 1950, and served as a funnel to collect channel Chinese workers to British colonies.

<sup>504</sup> This also made the Indo-Mauritians who owned the land being leased the beneficiaries of its long-term appreciation.

<sup>505</sup> Carter and Kwong, 190-95.

learned French or English and Anglo-French customs in Mauritius. By the late 1840s, a pattern had emerged in which immigrants would first stay in Mauritius for several years, then pass off their businesses and leases of to other, newly arrived family members. These new arrivals would take over and maintain the establishments before eventually leaving and passing them off in turn to other (often extended) family members.<sup>506</sup>



**Figure 22 - General paths of Chinese and Indian migrants to Mauritius and continuing on to South Africa, c. 1880-1900.<sup>507</sup>**

<sup>506</sup> Melanie Yap and Dianne Leong Man, *Colour, Confusion and Concessions: The History of the Chinese in South Africa* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1996), 35-38, 192-95.

<sup>507</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

The net result of these conditions was a demographic whose population was in a regular state of flux. The Sino-Mauritian community was regularly infused with new members arriving from China, but lacked individual permanence due to the constant departures. The ephemeral quality of this community was compounded and exacerbated by the Witwatersrand Gold Rush of 1886 in nearby British South Africa. The population influx and economic boom created by the gold rush created many business opportunities; between 1888 and 1898, the Sino-Mauritian population dropped by more than a third as members emigrated west, mostly to South Africa. The 1901 census counted a mere 3,515 Chinese people in Mauritius – less than one percent of the general population, despite Chinese immigration having been second only to Indian immigration for the preceding seventy years.<sup>508</sup>

**Table 2 - Population of Mauritius c.1901**

<b>Segment</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>%</b>
Overall	378,195	100%
Civilian	375,385	99.3%
Military & Transient	2,810	0.7%
Chinese (Official)	2,585	0.68%
Chinese (Unofficial)	7,000+	1.85%

All of these factors contributed to the Sino-Mauritian minority not significantly altering the cultural landscape of Mauritius during the colonial period. Its members comprised an economically significant group – 2,585 of the 3,515 Chinese people counted in 1901 were business owners – but their cultural activities took place within a

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<sup>508</sup> J. Scott Keltie, ed. *The Statesman's Year-book: Statistical and Historical Annual of the States of the World for the Year 1908* (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1908), 227.

prescribed sphere that only occasionally jugged into the public soundscape on festival occasions.<sup>509</sup> Indeed, many of those who chose to stay in Mauritius took Creole wives, producing a *créole chinois* sub-demographic that was lumped into the Creole category in the census and appears to have identified more strongly (or at least more visibly) with Creole culture.<sup>510</sup> Informal estimates suggested that the overall (mixed-race and full-blooded) Chinese community in Mauritius was actually composed of more than seven thousand members – roughly twice the number officially tallied – but that the uncounted members had assimilated into the mainstream Franco-Mauritian/Creole culture to a high degree.<sup>511</sup>

**Table 3 - Religious Affiliations of the Population of Mauritius c. 1901**

Segment	Population	%
Overall	378,195	100%
Hindu	206,131	54.5%
Roman Catholic	113,224	29.9%
Moslem	41,208	10.9%
Protestant	6,644	1.8%
Undefined or Not Specified	10,988	2.9%

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<sup>509</sup> Shuyun Song, “Mauritius’ Overseas Chinese, Today and Yesterday,” *At Home and Overseas (All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese)* (2001): 39.

<sup>510</sup> Amedee Nagapen, *Isle de France – Ile Maurice, 1722-1968: L’Eglise au Long de la Colonisation et du Peuplement* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Diocèse de Port-Louis, 2009), 65.

<sup>511</sup> *Ibid.* The census figures of this period are based on self-identified ethnicity; the decision of most mixed-race Sino-Mauritians to identify as European or Creole is a strong indicator of this assimilation.

## The Great War (1914-1918)

*Pauvre! T'est trop petit . . .*  
*[Poor Kaiser! You are too small . . .]*

--"Song of the Volunteers of Mauritius" (1914)<sup>512</sup>

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1871 had strong long-term ramifications for the economy of Mauritius. This impact was spread out over the subsequent three decades, as global trade routes gradually realigned to take into account the shortened passage from Western Europe to Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean markets.<sup>513</sup> By the early twentieth century, however, the island had devolved from a key global port and marketplace to one of more regional significance. This was compounded by a decline in sugar prices in the late nineteenth century. Although many of the island's Chinese residents continued on to find their fortunes in British South Africa, the Mauritian economy drifted from moribund growth to flirtations with economic depression. This downward prediction was reversed by the eruption of the First World War – an unexpected boon for the Mauritian economy that raised sugar prices and created new demand for output from the island's factories and shipyards.<sup>514</sup>

This burst of economic activity was matched by an outpouring of pro-French and pro-British patriotism among the populace. The Great War was not the first Great Power

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<sup>512</sup> [Anonymous], *Chants Patriotiques et Chant du Départ des Franco-Mauriciens pour la Guerre Européenne de 1914* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Imprimerie de La Patrie, 1914), 17-19.

<sup>513</sup> This was in part due to the narrow width and depth of the Suez Canal when it opened, which limited the number and size of transiting ships. The canal was subsequently expanded and improved in the latter decades of the nineteenth century.

<sup>514</sup> Philip M. Allen, *Security and Nationalism in the Indian Ocean: Lessons from the Latin Quarter Islands* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 52.

conflict waged by the British Empire since the conquest of Mauritius – the Crimean War (1853-1856) had previously pitted France and Great Britain against Russia – but it was the first conflict since the Napoleonic Wars to inspire a great outpouring of patriotism on the island.<sup>515</sup> Mauritius had never before contributed its native-born sons in quantity to the British side in a war. The Sepoy Mutiny (1857-1859) and Second Boer War (1899-1902) had drawn away the island's garrisons of foreign-born soldiers, but the First World War was the first conflict since the Napoleonic Wars in which soldiers were recruited in large numbers from the island's population. War was (at least at the beginning) embraced with outpourings of poetry and patriotic songs reminiscent of those that had greeted news of the French Revolution in 1790.

On 3 August 1914, the German Empire and France declared war on each other, opening hostilities on the Western Front. The following day, Great Britain declared war on the German Empire in response to the latter's invasion of neutral Belgium. News of each declaration reached Mauritius in less than twenty-four hours, thanks to the worldwide telegraph communication network that now linked the British Home Isles to their far-flung colonies. This war resonated with the British and French sympathies of the general population, and the Franco-Mauritian population responded to the call for military volunteers in especially large numbers.

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<sup>515</sup> The Hundred Days and the death of Napoleon had inspired pro-French demonstrations, much to the discomfort of British authorities. Expectations of pro-British patriotism in Mauritius were sufficiently low that the British Army did not make any organized effort to recruit Mauritian volunteers for service in nearby conflicts such as the Sepoy Mutiny (1857-1859) or the Second Boer War (1899-1902).



The musical effects of the First World War on Mauritius were fourfold. First, it temporarily removed the resident military bands. Second, it interrupted the normal visits from French theater troupes.<sup>516</sup> Third, it removed a large percentage of the audience for European music for the duration of the conflict. Fourth (and most importantly), it created a wealth transfer that cemented the decline of plantation estates as centers of European music and dance entertainment. The First World War also had two notable musical manifestations on the island: an elaborate send-off for volunteer soldiers, and a general celebration at news of the Armistice.

The still-recent Second Boer War (1899-1902) had exposed deep structural weaknesses in the British Army. The British Empire had not fought a conflict with another European power since the Crimean War, and decades of stagnant budgets and lax standards had caused a general deterioration in the quality of the national army and its ability to mobilize soldiers. The war so strained the resources of the British Army that Mauritius and many other colonies were largely or entirely stripped of their military garrisons, which were deployed to South Africa. One result of this overseas deployment and attrition was that the British Army garrison in Mauritius at the start of 1914 – more

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<sup>516</sup> Annual cargo traffic in Mauritius plunged from 438,029 tons in 1914 to 192,771 tons in 1919 – a decline of 56%. This precipitous drop does not fully reflect the scale of the changes, as cargo traffic from Western Europe almost entirely disappeared during this period, forcing Mauritians to switch to Asian suppliers for staples such as fabric and grain. Auguste Toussaint, *History of the Indian Ocean* (London: Routledge, 1966), 113-14. This, unsurprisingly, made it impossible to import music or musicians.

than a decade after the close of the Second Boer War – stood at a mere half of its normal peacetime strength.<sup>517</sup>

The outbreak of the First World War soon removed the rest of the regular garrison and its associated military bands. Under the Territorial and Reserve Forces Act of 1907, a Territorial Army (roughly comparable to the US National Guard in function) was created to support the regular British Army in times of conflict.<sup>518</sup> The Territorial Army was a second-line force, formed under a standing plan of action by which Territorial Army units replaced the regular British Army garrisons at non-front-line posts, freeing the regular units for front-line service. Mauritius was deemed sufficiently removed from the front of war that the core of the British Army garrison in Mauritius was withdrawn for service in Europe before the fourth month of hostilities came to an end;<sup>519</sup> only engineering and artillery units were left to man the coastal and port defenses.<sup>520</sup>

The replacements for the garrison were hastily mustered and organized. As reserve formations, the Territorial Army units lacked many of the regimental and battalion features of regular units and did not employ skilled professional musicians. Trumpeters in the Territorial Army were only required to play very basic musical signals (e.g., to signal a charge or a retreat); playing musical pieces or performing in an ensemble was beyond most of these signalers' capacities. As a result, the Territorial Army garrison

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<sup>517</sup> Jackson, *War and Empire in Mauritius and the Indian Ocean*, 21-22.

<sup>518</sup> 7 Edw. 7, c.9.

<sup>519</sup> Brad Chappell, *The Regimental Warpath, 1914-1918: A Listing of Every British Army Infantry Battalion in the Great War, with Raising Date, Formations to which Attached, Campaigns, and Service* (Takoma Park, MD: General Data LLC, 2008), 51, 416.

<sup>520</sup> Jackson, *War and Empire in Mauritius and the Indian Ocean*, 23.

in Mauritius not only lacked the large military bands that had so long endeared the normal garrisons to the populace, but entirely lacked a band of any size or non-military function.<sup>521</sup> This development considerably dampened the public music-making sphere in Mauritius for the duration of the war.

Theatre performances in Mauritius were also severely curtailed during the First World War. Wartime conditions in the French Empire prevented the normal visits by French theater troupes for the duration of the war. This was due to a combination of wartime travel restrictions, a reallocation of civilian shipping resources, and the use of general conscription in France throughout the conflict.<sup>522</sup> In addition, the Port Louis Theatre was shuttered for most of the conflict and rail service to access the theatre was limited due to coal rationing.<sup>523</sup> Although a few sporadic amateur theater productions were offered in Rose Hill in improvised spaces, the lack of nighttime train service restricted these performances to local audiences.

Although few consumer goods reached Mauritius during the First World War, the island's sugar exports became a valuable wartime resource. During the conflict, Great Britain was caught off from its traditional beet sugar sources in Central Europe and its

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<sup>521</sup> The 1st Battalion of the Essex Regiment garrisoned Mauritius at the start of the Great War. The Regiment had previously enjoyed an eleven-year assignment on the island from 1815-1826. See: H.G. Hart, *The New Annual Army List, Militia List, and Yeoman Cavalry List, for 1898* (London: John Murray, 1898), 304.

<sup>522</sup> French conscription was notably different from British conscription, both in its long history of use and the rarity of exemptions during times of war. Even famous artists, literary figures, and musicians were regularly conscripted. See Margaret Levi, *Consent, Dissent, and Patriotism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 12, 186.

<sup>523</sup> Coal was a valuable military resource and used for fuel by all of the British naval ships stationed in Mauritius; limiting nighttime activities also reduced the demand for coal-powered electricity.

ally, France, lost its beet-growing areas to the German invasion.<sup>524</sup> Mauritian sugar was used to feed British citizens in the Home Isles and British soldiers fighting in Egypt, Iraq, southern Africa, and in Western Europe. The steep increases in world sugar prices that accompanied this large drop in supply and incredible rise in demand greatly enriched the Mauritian sugar industry, which had struggled with oversupply and competition for several decades. The ultimate recipients of this financial windfall, however, were the Indo-Mauritians who had heavily bought into the sugar industry during the downturns of the late nineteenth century.

Unlike the financial windfalls from war, privateering, and sugar cultivation during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Mauritian sugar boom during the First World War did not lead to increases in music patronage.<sup>525</sup> The large-scale exit of Franco-Mauritian and Creole owners from the sugar industry in the late nineteenth century and their replacement by new, Indo-Mauritian owners had earlier disrupted the traditional pattern of rural music patronage on the island. Whereas the plantation owners of the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries had hosted concerts and balls and (after emancipation) supported *séga* gatherings on their lands, the new Indo-Mauritian owners employed workforces that were almost entirely Indian or Indo-Mauritian in composition. They did support Indian traditional and religious music to varying extents (largely in

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<sup>524</sup> César J. Ayala, *American Sugar Kingdom: The Plantation Economy of the Spanish Caribbean, 1898-1934* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 231-2.

<sup>525</sup> For example, privateering during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the construction of French and British Royal Navy bases, and the growth of the sugar estates (see chapters 3 and 4).

connection with religious festivals), but broke away from the old pattern of patronage.<sup>526</sup>

Although Franco-Mauritian plantation owners had weathered many other downturns in the sugar market and recovered when prices resumed, their large-scale abandonment of the sugar industry meant that the recovery cemented the position of their replacements, raising the value of arable land and the coinciding barriers to Franco-Mauritians and Creoles (re-)entering the sugar industry. There was also very little in the way of trickle-down wealth distribution, as the sugar industry profits went primarily to plantation owners.<sup>527</sup>

The departure of the first transport ship of army volunteers in 1914 for service in the First World War was an occasion of great pomp and circumstance in Mauritius. It was the last large-scale musical activity of any sort until the war's end, and was in many respects the last great gasp of the old guard of Mauritian society. The call for volunteers (Great Britain did not introduce a draft until 1916, and even then this was not applied to Mauritius) had been circulated in newspapers, placards, speeches, and poems, to strong public reception. Those who had answered the call were fêted with a grand parade through Port Louis and a musical send-off right before their departure overseas for service and training.

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<sup>526</sup> As European art music and theater performances became less common, a larger portion of the Indo-Mauritian elite attended due to its increasingly rarified status symbol connotations; this practice was distinct from underwriting performance endeavors and subscribing to concert series, which they did not participate in.

<sup>527</sup> Sugar plantation owners in Mauritius have historically exercised ownership of the island's sugar refining and distribution industries through collective associations.

The musical selections prepared for the departure ceremony are preserved in a commemorative book published and distributed for the send-off itself.<sup>528</sup> Full lyrics are provided for thirty-two songs and poems, including the texts of several *contrafacta* and one original song written for the occasion. Most of the selections are patriotic French songs in both the linguistic and Gallic sense, with several describing the loss of Alsace and Lorraine in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1) and calling for revanchism. Other song texts appear to have been included for purely political reasons, and are unlikely to have been performed at all due to logistical constraints. The extent to which French culture, French identification, and French patriotism continued to underline a large portion of Mauritian society is underscored by the choice of songs and poems and the explanatory notes added for the benefit of the readership.

Mauritius has always suffered a deficit of classically trained professional music composers, a product in part due to the lack of a permanent music conservatory on the island before 1987. Historically, young composers of art music have traveled to Paris or London for further musical training and not returned to the island; Francis Thomé (1850-1909), a Mauritian who studied at the Paris Conservatoire and found success as a salon music and opera composer, is the best-known example. As a result, most occasions during the colonial period that required a custom piece of music married new texts to older melodies. If an entirely original composition was presented at a large public event (excepting the occasional new opera written by a professional singer or talented amateur),

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<sup>528</sup> [Anonymous], *Chants Patriotiques et Chant du Départ des Franco-Mauriciens pour la Guerre Européenne de 1914* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Imprimerie de La Patrie, 1914).

it was usually penned by a band director or the director of the opera orchestra – individuals with a much broader and deeper familiarity with the musical repertoire than even the average professional musician on the island. For an entirely new song to be written for a large public event, to be performed by a gathered multitude, was quite unusual.

The original song written for the embarkation ceremony is entitled “Pauvre Kaiser! T’es trop petit” (“Poor Kaiser, You are Too Small”) and captioned as the official song of the Mauritian Volunteers.<sup>530</sup>

Unfortunately, no music for this song is known to have survived, but the lyrics suggest music that was light and upbeat;<sup>531</sup> based on prior examples, the melody was probably styled along the lines of French operetta or *opéra-comique*. The song’s character is humorous and mocking, with lyrics poking fun at the Kaiser; as such, it sits within the larger tradition of satirical parodies popular in Mauritius since the late eighteenth century. Because the song lyrics were published in advance, it is likely that at least some members of the crowd that assembled to see off the troops were taught the music in advance. The

**Thomé, Francis** (*recte* **François-Luc-Joseph**), b. Port Louis, Mauritius, Oct. 18, 1850. Pupil at Paris Cons., 1866–70, of Marmontel (pf.) and Duprato (theory); resides at Paris as a teacher, composer, and critic. Has set to music numerous light stage-pieces; also *Roméo et Juliette* (after Shakespeare by G. Lefèvre; 1890); the mystery *l’Enfant Jésus* (1891); the symphonic ode “Hymne à la nuit”; has publ. vocal melodies, romances, etc., and numerous elegant pf.-pieces (*Simple aveu*, op. 25; *Les Lutins*, op. 60).



**Figure 23 - Francis Thomé’s entry in Baker’s *A Biographical Dictionary of Musicians* (1905)<sup>529</sup>**

<sup>529</sup> Theodore Baker, *A Biographical Dictionary of Musicians* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1905), 583.

<sup>530</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-9.

<sup>531</sup> Songs that use previously composed melodies have these melodies identified in the volume.

well-reputed Mauritian ear, led by a group of pre-taught singers and paired with the printed lyrics, would have sufficed to teach the rest of the crowd on the spot.

One of the *contrafacta* in this volume, a new song text titled “Aux Armes! Enfants de la France”<sup>532</sup> illustrates the manner in which musical themes and melodies were used in Mauritius. The new text is modeled on the well-known song text “Les Enfants de la France” (1819), by the French author Pierre-Jean de Béranger (1780-1857).<sup>533</sup> De Béranger’s text is, in turn, a *contrafactum* to a melody (“Air du vaudeville de Turenne”) from the one-act vaudeville *Turenne, où un Trait de Modestie* (1815).<sup>534</sup> There is no known record of the source vaudeville ever being performed in Mauritius; instead, the tune was likely recycled into yet another vaudeville production and arrived on the island through that channel.<sup>535</sup> The name by which Mauritians knew this tune was “Honneur aux enfants de la France” – the final line of the De Béranger song text’s refrain. This sort of corrupted title is typical of song texts or melodies that are transmitted orally.

The English songs and poems included in this volume deserve special mention. Alfred Tennyson’s poem “The Charge of the Light Brigade” was likely included for its

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<sup>532</sup> Ibid., 21-3.

<sup>533</sup> Pierre-Jean de Béranger, *Œuvres Complètes de P.J. de Béranger*, Tome II (Paris: Péroton, 1834), 214.

<sup>534</sup> World premiere: Paris, Théâtre du Vaudeville, 23 February 1815. Composer unknown; libretto by Fulgence-Joseph-Désiré de Bury et Achille d'Artois.

<sup>535</sup> This was not an infrequent occurrence in Paris with popular melodies. The vaudeville *Le Vaudeville en Vendages, Petit A-propos Villageois* did exactly this, premiering in Paris in the same year (30 September 1815) and same theater as *Turenne*, and including a song set to the melody of “Air du vaudeville de Turenne”. Marc-Antoine Désaugiers, Eugène Moreau, and Michel Joseph Gentil, *Le Vaudeville en Vendages, Petit A-propos Villageois* (Paris: Imprimerie de Chaignieau Ainé, 1815), 20.



depiction of bravery under fire, rather than its depiction of the last Great Power conflict in which British and French forces had been aligned.<sup>536</sup> The three best-known English songs included – “God Save the King,” “Rule Britannia,” and “Hearts of Oak” – are all longtime standards of British patriotic and military music, yet the volume’s compiler still felt a need to instruct the readership that “Hearts of Oak” had a particular association with the British navy. Because every verse and chorus of this latter song refers explicitly to ships and sailors, this suggests an editorial expectation that the Mauritian public would have recognized the melody (e.g., from band performances) while remaining unfamiliar with the lyrics.

The volume also includes five song texts that are not from the Anglo-French repertoire, comprising the national anthems of the five countries allied to Great Britain at this stage of the First World War. The Belgian national anthem is presented in its original French, the Italian and Serbian in French translation, the Japanese in Romanized form and in French translation, and the Russian in English translation. These national anthem texts were most likely included as a demonstration of solidarity, but not actually performed at the embarkation ceremony. (As none of these five nations sent ships to Mauritius with any regularity, so there is little reason to suggest that either sheet music

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<sup>536</sup> Although there are numerous extant musical settings of this poem from British composers during the nineteenth century, there is no evidence to suggest that any of its musical settings were ever sung in Mauritius.

would have been available or this disparate body of music have been in the local military bands' repertoires.)<sup>537</sup>

Two other texts deserve special mention because of their content and imagery: “Le Chant du Départ” and “La France.” “Le Chant du Départ,” placed at a mid-point in the volume, is a classic song from the French Revolution, with music by Étienne-Nicolas Méhul (1763-1817) and lyrics by Marie-Joseph Chenier (1764-1811). It was originally written as a special commission for the 1794 Bastille Day celebrations in Paris, and quickly grew to rival “La Marseillaise” (also included in the same volume) in popularity. Unlike many other French Revolution-era songs, “Le Chant du Départ” was not banished from the public sphere during the Restoration and remained in continuous use (particularly in the French military) all the way through the start of the First World War. Starting in August 1914, it was sung across the French Empire as part of military training and used to hail new recruits departing for military service.<sup>538</sup> The song’s use in British Mauritius as the final song before the recruits boarded their transport created a deliberate and conscious parallel with the sendoffs of French Army recruits taking place in neighboring Réunion and beyond.

The poem “La France” closes the commemorative volume and summarizes the predominantly French patriotism on display. This poem, written in 1875 by the French

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<sup>537</sup> *Chants Patriotiques et Chant du Départ.*

<sup>538</sup> Jean-Jacques Becker, “1914: Partis pour un Été,” *Vingtième Siècle: Revue d’Histoire* 5: “Les Guerres Franco-Françaises” (January-March 1985): 169-171; Regina M. Sweeney, *Singing Our Way to Victory: French Cultural Politics and Music during the Great War* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2001), 43-55. A songsheet for “Le Chant du Départ” is reproduced in *Singing Our Way to Victory*, 50-51.

poet Victor de Laprade, is an unabashed hymn of love and devotion to France. A translation of the last lines of each stanza indicates the poem's general tenor: "Love France," "Serve France," "Suffer for her," and "Die for her."<sup>539</sup> Despite more than a century of British rule by the time *Chants Patriotiques et Chant du Départ* was published, the spirit of French culture and patriotism was still strong in the Franco-Mauritian population. The selection of songs sung, the tone of contemporaneous newspaper editorials, and choice of poetry together show that the patriotism displayed was not *British* patriotism (as might be expected in a British colony) but very specifically and *French* patriotism by British *subjects*. More than a century of British rule had failed to displace either the island's French culture and the pro-French leanings of the Franco-Mauritian population.

Music and other live entertainments in Mauritius were muted for the remaining duration of the war. The rise in sugar demand and sugar prices caused the prices of rum and arrack (both made from sugar cane products) to significantly rise. Prices of brandy and other imported French wines spiked as trade was interrupted and local stockpiles dwindled. These liquors had long served as the social lubricants for most of Mauritian society, with their consumption *de rigueur* at dinners, dances, the theater, and *séga*; depriving audiences of alcohol undercut the joviality the limited music programming

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<sup>539</sup> Victor de Laprade, *Œuvres Poétiques de Victor de Laprade: Pernelle; Le Livre d'un Père* (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1881), 201-2.

from 1915-1918.<sup>540</sup> Wartime wage freezes and steep spikes in food prices compounded the sobriety of the island.

News of the armistice between Germany and the Allies reached Mauritius on 11 November 1918. The spread of this news was immediately greeted with what was described as “a frenetic joy,” but the initial festivities were more spontaneous than organized.<sup>541</sup> A formal celebration was not held until the following Saturday, the 16<sup>th</sup>, with a *Te Deum* mass sung in the Cathedral of St. Louis and a government banquet held later in the day. It was a decidedly lower-key affair than the last great celebration; a large celebration<sup>542</sup> more in keeping with Mauritian tradition was not celebrated until the following July, when a general celebration of the Anglo-French alliance was given on Bastille Day<sup>543</sup> and a separate celebration of peace was held on 19 July 1919.<sup>544</sup>

## Interbellum

Old World entertainments returned in force to Mauritius in the 1920s and 1930s, but their logistical details changed in several important respects with long-term ramifications. The first was the establishment of a professional band funded by the Municipality of Port Louis – an ensemble intended to substitute for and ultimately

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<sup>540</sup> Wartime shipping restrictions also caused the prices of imported French wines, brandies, and champagne to spike.

<sup>541</sup> This was most likely influenced by the Armistice having come into effect at 11 a.m. local time in Paris that day – 4 p.m. local time in Mauritius. Allowing for the inherent lag time transoceanic telegraph transmissions, the news would have reached Mauritius during the evening (local time).

<sup>542</sup> Unfortunately, no detailed accounts survive of this celebration.

<sup>543</sup> I.e., 14 July 1919.

<sup>544</sup> Antoine Chelin, *Une Île et son Passé, Supplément* (Mauritius: Éditions de l'Océan Indien, 1982), 240-41.

replace the regimental bands that had long figured in the local music scene. The second was a change in amateur musicians' interests from Western art music to Western popular music, a change typified by a vogue for the accordion – a European folk instrument enjoying renewed popularity in European popular music at the time. The third was the construction and opening of a new theater and performing space in Rose Hill. Each of these developments disrupted long-running structures of musical practice on the island.

The British Army after the First World War was faced with conflicting demobilization pressures and garrison requirements for the new territories conquered from the German and Ottoman Empires.<sup>545</sup> Meeting both demands required that the garrisons of “second-line” colonies such as Mauritius be restored to no more than a fraction of their pre-war size, allowing these units to be deployed in more volatile areas.<sup>546</sup> Because the Mauritian social scene had relied so heavily on regimental bands to supply professional musicians at public and private events, this created an acute problem for the numerous balls and large formal banquets that appeared after the end of rationing. This problem would have been particularly pronounced because amateur Mauritian instrumentalists in this period continued to favor the piano and string instruments (as they had since the late eighteenth century), rather than the woodwind, brass, and percussion instruments used in the military bands.

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<sup>545</sup> Most of these territories were formally designated as League of Nations mandates, a legal status that in no way obviated the requirement or challenges of garrisoning them.

<sup>546</sup> It should be again noted that the size of the Mauritius garrison on the eve of the First World War was already half the garrison's normal (pre-Second Boer War) size.

The Municipal Council of Port Louis moved to remedy this shortage in 1923 by expanding the Police Orchestra, the predecessor of today's Police Band. This amateur musical ensemble traced its roots back to the mid-nineteenth century and was composed of a loose association of police officers stationed in the Port Louis Police Barracks. Under the Municipal Council's supervision, the Police Orchestra was professionalized, with its members retaining their technical status as full-time police officers while being assigned full-time to the ensemble. A bandmaster, M. Role, was appointed to lead, expand, and reorganize the group, and quickly moved to expand it; in 1923 alone, he added seventeen new musicians: thirteen professional band musicians recruited from Bangalore, India; one local constable with prior musical training; and three fourteen-year-old children of police officers who were enrolled as apprentice musicians. The reorganized Police Orchestra gradually took over most of the social music functions for which the regimental bands of garrison units had been responsible since 1810.<sup>547</sup>

The apprenticeship program was designed to train and elevate local talent to staff the Police Orchestra, a goal at which it appears to have been successful: within a few years, most of the foreign musicians had returned to India and were replaced by local musicians. By 1927, the bandmaster was leading an ensemble of thirty full-time professional musicians – twenty-three of whom were locally trained and only seven of whom still hailed from India. The growing importance of the Police Orchestra in public and civic life was reflected in its assignment to a separate category in the police

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<sup>547</sup> Louis-José Paul, *Deux Siècles d'Histoire de la Police à l'Île Maurice, 1768-1968* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), 137.

organizational structure, and by its employment in musical functions across the island. Just four years after the group's professionalization, the Police Orchestra was entrusted by the colonial government with providing music for the visit of the Duke and Duchess of York (the future George VI and his wife) in June 1927.<sup>548</sup> This success was followed five years later by a three-week performance tour in Réunion in 1932.<sup>549</sup>

Although the Police Orchestra filled a specific set of needs during the 1920s and early-1930s, there are multiple indications that the ensemble had difficulty maintaining a high standard of performance. Members played at numerous charity balls and dinners during the Great Depression,<sup>550</sup> for example, but were frequently passed over for alternatives at official events. It was clear by the onset of the Second World War that the Police Orchestra's performances were sub-par according to the cultivated and exacting standards of the Mauritian elite. In addition, the ensemble (rechristened as the "Police Band")'s repertoire had shrunk and was limited primarily to marches, causing both local and visiting musicians to speak disparagingly of its abilities. Despite the human and financial investments made in developing the Police Orchestra/Band, Mauritian

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<sup>548</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>549</sup> It should be noted that the primitive state of roads in Réunion at this time would have significantly limited the number of concerts given during this all-island tour.

<sup>550</sup> Sydney Selvon, *Histoire – La Genèse d'une Ville: Vacoas-Phoenix* (Vacoas-Phoenix, Mauritius: Municipalité de Vacoas-Phoenix, 1984), 108. Many of these affairs were organized for the aid of families that were "respectable" (i.e., those with a background of business or wealth) but had been financially ruined by the Great Depression; since the Police Orchestra/Band worked *gratis* at such events, they were most likely engaged for cost reasons.

audiences viewed it as a second-rate ensemble and continued to prefer visiting or *emigré* musicians when these options were available.<sup>551</sup>

The last important musical development of the inter-war period was the construction of a new theater in Rose Hill, a once-sleepy commuter suburb that grew in the early-twentieth century into Mauritius' second major city. Rose Hill's convenient location on the rail line to Port Louis allowed its residents to patronize the Port Louis Theatre; in the first decade of the twentieth century, a survey of theater patrons by a visiting French impresario had found that "more than 80% of the spectators who went to the theater of Port Louis were from Plaine Wilhems [the region surrounding Rose Hill]," taking advantage of the special late-night train service mentioned previously.<sup>552</sup> During the travel restrictions of the First World War, local amateur ensembles had attempted vaudeville performances in the tight confines of the custom-built Rose Hill Cinema Hall, with results that pleased no one.<sup>553</sup> After the war's end, a critical mass of local residents gradually organized to propose and finance the construction of a new theater in the center of Rose Hill, with construction starting in 1929.<sup>554</sup>

The Rose Hill Plaza Theatre opened on 27 May 1932, one hundred and ten years after the inauguration of the (by then) aging Port Louis Theatre. The new theater dwarfed

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<sup>551</sup> The role of the Police Band during the Second World War will be discussed further below.

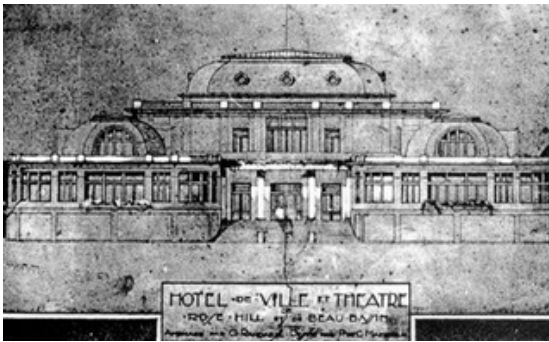
<sup>552</sup> Premlall Mahadeo, *Mauritian Cultural Heritage* (Beau Bassin, Mauritius: Gold Hill Publication, Ltd., 1995), 96.

<sup>553</sup> Unlike most European and American cinema halls in this period, which were converted theaters, the Rose Hill Cinema Hall had been built specifically for film projections. As a result, it lacked the stage, wings, and other facilities of most contemporaneous spaces. Antoine Chelin, *Une Île et son Passé, Supplément*, 237.

<sup>554</sup> Mahadeo, 97.



its older rival, with one thousand seats to the latter's four hundred, and was planned as a piece of monumental architecture.<sup>555</sup> The Port Louis Theatre's neighboring buildings consisted of ordinary shops, bars, and restaurants; the Rose Hill Plaza Theatre anchored part a large, new building complex that included the town hall, municipal library, and a luxurious ballroom that doubled as an art gallery. These neighboring civic resources and its constituents' deep pockets allowed the new Rose Hill Plaza Complex to quickly depose Port Louis as the preeminent center of high culture in Mauritius.<sup>556</sup>



**Figure 24 – Drawing of the Rose Hill Plaza Theatre, c. 1930.**<sup>557</sup>



**Figure 25 - Photo of the Rose Hill Plaza Theatre, c. 2005.**<sup>558</sup>

The Rose Hill Theatre opened with performances by two local amateur theater ensembles, but its management had greater dramatic ambitions. The guest of honor at the

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<sup>555</sup> Several descriptions incorrectly state that the Plaza Theatre was originally built as a cinema hall. These descriptions either misinterpret the showing of film segments at the theatre's opening and later uses, or conflate the Plaza Theatre with cinema halls that were built near the same site in the 1910s and 1920s.

<sup>556</sup> The Port Louis Theatre was the largest theater in the Indian Ocean islands and southern Africa when it opened, a distinction that it lost to the Rose Hill Theatre. As of 2012, the Rose Hill Theatre remains the largest theater in the Indian Ocean islands. See Martine Maurel, *Mauritius* 5th ed. (London: New Holland, 2007), 115-6.

<sup>557</sup> <http://www.operamauritius.com/images/plaza55.jpg>.

<sup>558</sup> <http://www.operamauritius.com/2009/images/archi1.jpg>.

inauguration was Carlo Liten, a renowned Belgian singer-actor who was invited to Mauritius for the occasion.<sup>559</sup> Glowing reviews of Liten's performances had been syndicated in Mauritian newspapers since the 1910s, and it later emerged that wealthy Mauritians wishing to bring Liten to the island had courted the star for years. This extended courtship finally came to fruition in 1932, when the actor agreed to add Mauritius as a stop on his world performance tour.<sup>560</sup> Adoring crowds lauded Liten's appearance at the inauguration of the Rose Hill Theatre and his subsequent performance, but the advent of the Great Depression stilled the management's ambitions to bring other top-tier, world-class talents to Mauritius.

Despite this setback, the opening of the Rose Hill Theatre invigorated music and theater performance in the vicinity. Local amateur thespians banded together to found the Mauritius Dramatic Club<sup>561</sup> in 1932 to take advantage of the new theater, their venue of choice for rehearsals and performances.<sup>562</sup> The theater's managers successfully lured visiting troupes to add Rose Hill to their itineraries or even skip Port Louis altogether, and cultural programming in the complex included concerts and art exhibitions by

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<sup>559</sup> Carlo Liten extensive acting career included numerous critically acclaimed cinema and stage roles in Western Europe and the United States in the first three of the twentieth century. He was a featured performer in the world premieres of Edward Elgar's war pieces *Une Voix dans le Désert* (1915) and *Le Drapeau Belge* (1917), giving dramatic recitations at much-publicized wartime concerts; he was also strongly associated with Elgar's *Carillon* (1914), although Liten did not perform that latter work until 1918.

<sup>560</sup> "Personal. Vice-Regal," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 August 1932, 8. Accessed 13 January 2013, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article16910143>.

<sup>561</sup> The Mauritius Dramatic Society in some sources; the two are used interchangeably, although "Mauritius Dramatic Club" is the formal name in English.

<sup>562</sup> I. S., "Mauritius," *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*, ed. Martin Banham. Rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 693.

prominent European artists.<sup>563</sup> Other wealthy interior towns such as Curepipe followed suit, developing their own arts programs with gallery showings, scientific exhibitions, and other offerings. The suburbs' successes pushed arts programming at the Port Louis Theatre into a slow but steady decline, to the point that non-performance uses of the space (lectures, graduations, award ceremonies, and even weddings) dominated as the Great Depression closed.

### **The Second World War (1939-1945)**

*The curtain closes abruptly; the orchestra dies. A great silence reigns in the wings. In the hall, no one knows what is happening. The gallery starts to become agitated. [Then] The tenor parts the curtain and approaches, halting before this scene. Some seconds of silence – then he announces the news: “Ladies and gentleman, we have just learned that England and France have declared war on Germany.”*

--The Port Louis Theatre, 3 September 1939<sup>564</sup>

The seeds of domestic unrest in modern Mauritius were sewn on the eve of the Second World War. Low-level wages had remained stagnant for decades against the backdrop of worldwide economic depression, and government attempts to crack down on illicit alcohol manufacture (Prohibition laws having been enacted on the island in 1922) in the 1930s added fuel under a brewing cauldron of labor unrest. Strikes and demonstrations roiled the island in the 1930s, disrupting commerce, and confrontations

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<sup>563</sup> There is some evidence that amateur troupes located in the interior were renting and transporting sets and scenery around the island well before the Rose Hill Theatre opened; the rail system in Mauritius had specific rates and procedures for handling theatrical sets and backdrops. See, for example, *Blue Book for the Island of Mauritius: 1907*, A41.

<sup>564</sup> Alain Gordon-Gentil, *Le Théâtre de Port-Louis: Scènes* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Éditions VIZAVI, 1994), 1.

between the police and striking workers often flared into violence.<sup>565</sup> The inevitable arrests and trials were marked by accusations of favoritism and racial profiling leveled against the Creole-dominated police and judiciary, creating a groundswell of Indo-Mauritian political activism that would eventually dismantle the civil service's racial quota systems in the 1940s.<sup>566</sup>

On 3 September 1939, Great Britain and France declared war on Nazi Germany in response to the invasion of Poland. News of war reached Mauritius the same day, and local volunteers were immediately mobilized into the Mauritius Territorial Force, a local reserve unit charged with the island's defense during the conflict. Over the following six years, thousands of Mauritian citizens were mobilized and sent overseas for military and civilian service in Egypt.<sup>567</sup> In contrast to the preceding conflict, no grand ceremonies or celebrations accompanied the volunteers' departures. This change may be due in part to the rapid progression of the war: by the time the first contingent of volunteers left

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<sup>565</sup> Matthew Lange, *Lineages of Despotism and Development British Colonialism and State Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 72-73, 77-78; Paul Younger, *New Homelands: Hindu Communities in Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, South Africa Fiji and East Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 41-42.

<sup>566</sup> One of the more positive responses to this perceived discrimination was a large wave of educated Indo-Mauritians who entered the civil service, public education, and police services in the 1950s. Anand Mulloo, *Voices of the Indian Diaspora* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publications, 2007), 97-98.

<sup>567</sup> More than 4,500 Mauritian men served overseas in the Royal Pioneer Corps and more than 1,000 women served overseas in the Auxiliary Territorial Service. In addition, approximately 2,500 men joined the Mauritius Defense Force (a Home Guard military unit) and more than 8,000 were conscripted into the Civilian Labour Corps for government service in wartime areas. Although these groups together represent only four percent of Mauritius' roughly 400,000 people, a much larger percentage were directly employed in war-related industries, drafted via the merchant marine, volunteered for British Army and Royal Navy service, etc. See Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), 325.

Mauritius on 19 August 1940, Germany had defeated and conquered most of France, rupturing the Anglo-French alliance and casting a much more somber mood than the opening months of the First World War.<sup>568</sup>

The Second World War affected Mauritius far more profoundly than the Great War. Mauritius had enjoyed steady trade relations with Réunion since the former's colonization in 1721, excepting only a short period in 1810.<sup>569</sup> The breach of diplomatic relations between Vichy France and Great Britain following the Battle of Mers-el-Kébir (3 July 1940) caused these trade relations – and the normal artistic exchanges – to evaporate overnight. Even after the conquest of Réunion by Free French forces on 28 November 1942, however, the two islands lacked the shipping resources to recommence their normal traffic, as the national mobilization plans pursued in Great Britain and France had previously requisitioned all of the islands' commercial cargo vessels for military-priority use elsewhere.<sup>570</sup> The limited cargo traffic between the two islands during the rest of the war was primarily concerned with transferring emergency food and war supplies on warships. Non-military human traffic between the two islands was strictly regulated.

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<sup>568</sup> France surrendered to Germany on 22 June 1940, causing the British navy to attack their French counterparts on 3 July 1940.

<sup>569</sup> The British conquest of Réunion (formerly Île-Bourbon and Île-Napoleon) in July of 1810 only interrupted trade between the two islands for half a year, until British forces conquered Mauritius the following December.

<sup>570</sup> The lack of shipping was so great that no ships visited Mauritius between June 1940 and April 1941. After the conquest of Réunion by Free French forces, the Free French destroyer *Léopard* was forced to make several passages between the two islands to transport critical food supplies to Réunion, as no other large ship was available. See "Charles André Jean Capagorry – Gouverneur Île de la Réunion," *Le Guide de la Réunion*, accessed 15 October 2012, <http://www.run974.com/fr/histoire/les-gouverneurs/charles-andre-jean-capagorry.html>.

Very few printed records describe musical activities in Mauritius during the Second World War. Some of this is doubtlessly due to wartime restrictions on the use of paper (restrictions compounded by the lack of shipping traffic), which limited the production of books and shrunk newspaper pages. It is more likely, however, that this dearth is reflective of an actual and tangible drop in nocturnal activities such as music performances due to deteriorating conditions under wartime. With the exception of a Jewish refugee internment camp established in Mauritius (discussed below), most non-household music making on the island appears to have ground to a halt as theaters closed, nighttime travel was prohibited, and movement around the island was generally discouraged.

The most far-reaching development in war conditions began when the Empire of Japan declared war on Great Britain on 8 December 1941, transforming Mauritius from a safe and distant outpost to an outpost near an active war front. Japanese forces swiftly defeated the British military in China, Malaysia, and Burma, pushing the war into the Indian Ocean. The stunning losses inflicted on British forces by Japanese aerial bombing led the Mauritian authorities to take strong and rapid measures against air attack.<sup>571</sup> The use of externally visible artificial lighting of any sort at night was forbidden; on 5

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<sup>571</sup> The sinking of the battleship *Prince of Wales* and the battlecruiser *Repulse* by Japanese aircraft on 10 December 1941 was particularly traumatic, as the *Prince of Wales* was one of the largest and most powerful British warships afloat and had called in Mauritius less than a month before its sinking. See, for example “Indian Ocean Becomes the Newest Theater of War,” *LIFE Magazine*, 20 April 1942, 28; Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*, 291-92; Geoffrey B. Mason and Mike Simmonds, “HMS Prince of Wales – King George V-class 14-in gun Battleship, Including Convoy Escort Movements,” *Service Histories of Royal Navy Warships in World War 2*, accessed 28 January 2013, <http://www.naval-history.net/xGM-Chrono-01BB-Prince of Wales.htm>.

February 1942, the ringing of bells of all sorts (up to and including church bells) was forbidden throughout Mauritius, except for alarms. The Indian Ocean Raid of 1942<sup>572</sup> and the subsequent withdrawal of the British Eastern Fleet to East Africa left Mauritius on the front lines of the war. Local fears of invasion were so stoked by these military disasters that the authorities in Mauritius felt compelled to organize parades with music in Curepipe (3 May 1942) and Port Louis (14 June 1942) to calm and rally the populace.<sup>573</sup>

### **An Internment in “Paradise”**

*The detainees were somewhat lost and disturbed by their deportation. They thought that they were in hostile territory. I, along with Sergeant Major Ythier and Sergeants Henri Perrier, Picaud and Roussel, tried to comfort them. . . . At exactly midnight a beautiful voice was heard that moved everyone. It was an Austrian tenor singing Minuit Chrétien<sup>574</sup> amid a reverent silence.*

--Serge d’Avoine, Security Guard (1940)<sup>575</sup>

The sagging cultural scene in Mauritius, deprived of its normal injections of French talent, received a much-needed infusion of foreign musical expertise on 27 and 29 December 1940. This human and cultural injection came from an unlikely and

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<sup>572</sup> The Indian Ocean Raid was an Imperial Japanese Navy campaign conducted in March and April 1942. Japanese warships and carrier aircraft severely damaged the Royal Navy’s main Indian Ocean bases in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), sank dozens of ships in the Bay of Bengal, and caused the British Admiralty to withdraw its forces further west. The resulting loss of the Royal Navy’s protection caused significant unrest in British territories across the Indian Ocean.

<sup>573</sup> Chelin, *Une Île et Son Passé, Supplément*, 277.

<sup>574</sup> The well-known Christmas song “O Holy Night” (1847) by Adolphe Adam, adapting the poem “Minuit, Chrétiens” by Placide Cappeau. The choice of a Christian song was an odd choice, given the religious affiliation of the refugees.

<sup>575</sup> *The Sun* [Mauritian newspaper], 8 February 1988. Quoted in Geneviève Pitot, *The Mauritian Shekel: The Story of the Jewish Detainees in Mauritius, 1940-1945* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 131.

unexpected source: one thousand, five hundred and eighty Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe.<sup>576</sup> These men, women, and children had escaped Nazi persecution by fleeing to the British-controlled Mandate of Palestine, only to find themselves exiled to Mauritius and interned as foreign non-combatants. Their exodus from Europe thus became the first large-scale human inflow to Mauritius since the definitive end of Indian immigration in 1924; it was also the first large-scale involuntary transportation to Mauritian shores since the last slave-smuggling ship arrived in the early 1830s. Despite the odd circumstances of its arrival, the refugee community revitalized the European art music and popular music scene in Mauritius for the duration of its stay.

The refugees, although united by their common Jewish heritage, came from a variety of locations; most were citizens or former citizens of Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, or the Free City of Danzig.<sup>577</sup> After a tortuous transit down the Danube River and across the Black and Mediterranean Seas, the refugees had escaped from Nazi persecution, arriving in the British Mandate of Palestine in November 1940. Unfortunately, however, memories of the 1936-1939 Arab Revolt in Palestine were still fresh on the minds of local authorities, and the refugees arrived in the face of strong local pressures to “solve” the problem of illegal Jewish immigration to Palestine. The refugees and the ships that carried them were swiftly interned in Haifa. After internal debate, the British government in Whitehall decided to detain all the refugees in an internment camp

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<sup>576</sup> The frequently given tally of 1,250 is erroneous, and is derived from estimates in newspaper reports.

<sup>577</sup> Many of the refugees were technically stateless after having been stripped of their citizenship (along with other Jews) by their parent countries.



in Mauritius for the duration of the war.<sup>578</sup> This decision was designed and publicized to deter further Jewish attempts to immigrate to Palestine; its stimulating effects on the moribund Mauritian music scene were entirely accidental.

The refugees were interred *en masse* in a prison complex near the Port Louis suburb of Beau Bassin.<sup>579</sup> Living conditions were not particularly hospitable: not only were the men's living quarters literally communal prison cells, but the women and children were housed in a series of tin sheds hastily erected next to the main prison compound. The entire complex was surrounded by barbed wire, with armed guards posted inside and around the perimeter. Although Prime Minister Winston Churchill had given instructions to the Cabinet that the refugees should be treated with respect and not imprisoned for the full duration of the war, the actual orders that were sent to Mauritius specified that conditions should be restrictive and penal.<sup>580</sup> The result was an imprisonment that was far from comfortable but devoid of abject cruelties.

The Mauritian government delegated most responsibilities for the internal management and maintenance of the camp to the refugees. This decision was partly practical – very few of the refugees spoke French or English, and few of the local officials spoke German, Czech, or Polish – and partly in tacit recognition that the

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<sup>578</sup> Geneviève Pitot, *The Mauritian Shekel*, 88-89. A small number were allowed to stay in Palestine after the infamous *Patria* disaster, when an Irgun attempt to keep the refugees in Palestine went horribly wrong. A bomb intended to cripple and sink the ocean liner *Patria* proved more damaging than intended, swiftly sinking the ship and killing many of the refugees on board. The Palestinian authorities allowed the refugees who had already been loaded onto the *Patria* and survived the sinking to stay, whereas those who had not boarded before the disaster were sent to Mauritius.

<sup>579</sup> Beau Bassin was located on the then-extent rail line between Port Louis and Rose Hill.

<sup>580</sup> Geneviève Pitot, *The Mauritian Shekel*, 93-95.

refugees had already set up their own structures for self-governance during the sea voyages to Palestine and Mauritius. The resulting internal camp government addressed basic maintenance, self-policing, agricultural, and hygienic needs; it also attended to other matters that the refugees deemed essential, including schooling for the children and a variety of cultural and adult education programs. Music was one of the most popular activities that took place in the internment camp, to the extent that it was usually one of the first things mentioned by former refugees when asked decades later to recall their experience in Mauritius.<sup>581</sup>

Almost two-thirds of the refugees were city dwellers hailing from Austria and Czechoslovakia and possessing refined tastes in music. Many were amateur musicians; at least nine had been professional musicians in their home countries before anti-Semitic laws and the German occupations had forced them from their chosen profession. The most famous of the professional musicians was the Austrian concert pianist Samuel Grünberg, who had toured internationally before the *Anschluss*. His counterpart Artur Steinberg, also from Austria, was a violinist of great skill. The other seven professional musicians, all from the Czech Republic, organized themselves into the Papa Haas Orchestra – a group originally conceived as an ensemble to provide dance music. The

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<sup>581</sup> Many of these period letters and later letters of reminiscence were collected for a traveling museum exhibition. See Elena Makarova, ed. “Exhibition: ‘Boarding Pass to Paradise’,” accessed 22 December 2012, [http://makarovainit.com/bedya/exhibition\\_index.htm](http://makarovainit.com/bedya/exhibition_index.htm).

Papa Haas Orchestra members also performed (augmented with other refugee musicians) as the jazz band BBB (short for “Bloody Boys Band”).<sup>582</sup>

**Table 4 - Practicing Professional Musicians amongst the Jewish Refugees.**

Name	Instrument	Ensemble(s)	Nationality
Samuel Grünberg	Piano	Soloist (and Chamber Music)	Austrian
Artur Steinberg	Violin	Soloist (and Chamber Music)	Austrian
Papa Haas	Piano	Papa Haas Orchestra, BBB	Czech
Awi Haas	Guitar	Papa Haas Orchestra, BBB	Czech
Heinz Lindemann	Violin,	Papa Haas Orchestra, BBB	Czech
Werner Herbst	Guitar, or	Papa Haas Orchestra, BBB	Czech
Erich Weininger	Accordion <sup>583</sup>	Papa Haas Orchestra, BBB	Czech
Arnim Neumann		Papa Haas Orchestra, BBB	Czech
Julius “Uri” Spitzer	Drums, Xylophone <sup>584</sup>	Papa Haas Orchestra, BBB	Czech

The refugees spent most of the first month of internment in strict isolation, confined to the camp and mostly left to their own devices. They started a camp newspaper, organized schooling, and started what would become a regular schedule of cultural activities ranging from poetry recitations and amateur theater to weekly concerts and weekly or bi-weekly cabaret nights.<sup>585</sup> Most of the refugees had been separated from their possessions during the complicated passage to Palestine and then to Mauritius,

<sup>582</sup> Geneviève Pitot, *The Mauritian Shekel*, 252; Elena Makarova and Sergei Makarov, *Boarding Pass to Paradise: Peretz Béda Mayer and Fritz Haendel* (Jerusalem: Verba Publishers, 2005), 67.

<sup>583</sup> Most of the surviving photographs do not label these men specifically; in addition, almost every member of the Papa Haas Orchestra played several instruments by the end of their stay in Mauritius, obscuring who played what upon arrival.

<sup>584</sup> Uri Spitzer learned to play xylophone in Mauritius, using an instrument that he manufactured himself using local hardwoods. See Makarova and Makarov, *Boarding Pass to Paradise*, 82.

<sup>585</sup> Geneviève Pitot, *The Mauritian Shekel*, 141-2, 157, 252.

however, and several of the professional musicians had lost their instruments. As long as the refugees were entirely isolated within the confines of the camp, this was an impossible shortfall to remedy.

The first breach in this isolation followed visits to the prison camp by the Governor of Mauritius and various civic figures soon after their arrival, in January 1941. The refugees were allowed to take out an advertisement in one of Mauritius' largest newspapers, *Le Cernéen*, asking for loans or donations of several types of musical instruments and sheet music. The newspaper ran the advertisement on 1 February 1941, stating that there were many skilled musicians amongst the refugees and intimating that public concerts would be offered if sufficient instruments and scores could be made available.<sup>586</sup>

The Mauritian public responded to this call with a fervor that past commentators have attributed variously to simple hospitality, a desire to see the hinted concerts, or both.<sup>587</sup> Local donors *did* provide a number of violins, pianos, guitars, and accordions for use by the refugees, which were loaned on a more or less permanent basis for the five years of internment. The readiness with which the residents parted with their instruments, however, should be understood in the context of a general decline in private and public music making on the island. The fashionable veneer of playing European art music had been worn away, and musical instruments were no longer considered great status symbols in Mauritian society.

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<sup>586</sup> *Le Cernéen*, 1 February 1941, cited in *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>587</sup> See Geneviève Pitot, *The Mauritian Shekel*, 145.

In fact, the popularity of the violin and piano – instruments that had long been mainstays of the island’s amateur music scene – plunged in Mauritius in the 1920s and 1930s; the harp had dropped out of fashion in the preceding century. Imported French and Indian accordions enjoyed something of a vogue in the 1930s, thanks to a number of popular recordings, but by the start of the Second World War even that aura had been lost.<sup>588</sup> In the years before the outbreak of war, middle- and upper-class families invested in phonographs, records, and radio sets instead of instruments and lessons.<sup>589</sup> The availability of recordings and broadcasts obviated the need for communal music making in order to hear music at home and in informal social settings; this left plenty of unused instruments in closets and attics to supply the refugees.

Loaning or gifting instruments was also a transaction that promised and delivered ample musical benefits to Mauritians. Most members of the Papa Haas Orchestra and the Bloody Boys’ Band had lost their musical instruments to theft, confiscation, burning, or sinking during the passage from Eastern Europe to Mauritius.<sup>590</sup> Once the musicians were

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<sup>588</sup> Indian accordions were somewhat notorious for their short lifespan (1-2 years) in the hot tropical climate, and were generally discarded when they could no longer be played. Similar accordions were imported from India to French Madagascar, where their lack of durability made them a useful trade good for sellers. See Conrad Keller, *Madagascar, Mauritius and the Other East-African Islands. With 3 Coloured Maps and 64 Illustrations*, H.A. Nesbitt, trans. (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., Lim., 1901), 79-80, 144-45. French accordions were more expensive but generally more durable and better made, features that were regularly pointed out in Mauritian newspaper advertisements during this period.

<sup>589</sup> This change of demand can be seen, for example, in the near-disappearance of newspaper advertisements for music lessons and the growing import statistics for these goods.

<sup>590</sup> One of the refugee ships departed for Palestine with insufficient supplies of coal, forcing the refugees to collect all available articles of wood – including suitcases, cabin doors, and the ship’s furnishings – to burn in the ship’s boilers. Pianos, unsurprisingly, did not make or survive the voyage.

re-equipped, the Governor of Mauritius granted them special dispensation to leave the refugee camp to play at public and private events, including performances broadcast on the local radio station. Mauritians booked the refugee music ensembles for weddings, funerals, public events, and private parties. The governor's dispensation was not entirely selfless, as he was himself one of the first individuals to enlist the Papa Haas Orchestra for a private concert engagement.<sup>591</sup>

The speed with which Mauritians spurned the Police Orchestra in favor of the unwilling visitors' musical offerings illustrates the disregard with which the Mauritian citizenry regarded their homegrown ensemble. The Police Orchestra/Police Band<sup>592</sup> was displaced from providing music at both official and private functions as soon as new alternatives were available – a displacement that was also a practical acknowledgment of the group's shrinking repertoire, which had declined greatly in breadth and depth during the 1930s.<sup>593</sup> By the time of the Second World War, the Police Orchestra, in the words of the youngest BBB musician, “only played marches,” suggesting a generally low technical proficiency amongst its musicians.<sup>594</sup> The author of this derisive but truthful comment, a Jewish refugee named Uri Spitzer, had himself been no more than a casual and amateur

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<sup>591</sup> Makarova and Makarov, *Boarding Pass to Paradise*, 82.

<sup>592</sup> The two names were used interchangeably for several years; the appellation “Police Band” was more commonly used by the war's end in 1945.

<sup>593</sup> The economic troubles of the 1930s may be partially to blame in this regard, as descriptions of the professionalized Police Orchestra's abilities in the 1920s are generally favorable.

<sup>594</sup> The Police Orchestra's library of music scores was evidently also quite limited; although the refugees had full access to the Police Library, surviving records and accounts do not indicate that they accessed any musical scores or sheet music from its collection. See Geneviève Pitot, *The Mauritian Shekel*, 143.

student of music in his native Czechoslovakia. Although Spitzer's vocational training was as a mechanic, the small town he had grown up in his native Czechoslovakia still possessed a sufficient variety of rich musical offerings to allow him to play in an amateur band – and, when he arrived in Mauritius, to play a greater variety of music (and much more difficult genres) than his Police Orchestra counterparts who were ostensibly full-time professional musicians.<sup>595</sup> Despite the best intentions of the Municipal Council of Port Louis when the Police Orchestra had first been professionalized, the ensemble remained a distant cousin to its European counterparts.<sup>596</sup>

The refugee musicians' strong backgrounds in European music allowed them to boost the standard of public music performance in Mauritius and the diversity of the repertoire. The Papa Haas Orchestra and the Bloody Boys' Band offered a veritable potpourri of music compared to the Police Orchestra: dance music of popular and ballroom styles, jazz, and arrangements of classical sonatas and quartets.<sup>597</sup> The pianist Samuel Grünberg and the violinist Artur Steinberg arrived with considerable bodies of repertoire committed to memory, which they performed in live performances and in radio broadcasts. This use of new and unfamiliar repertoire helped attract students eager to

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<sup>595</sup> Makarova and Makarov, *Boarding Pass to Paradise*, 66, 82.

<sup>596</sup> The Police Orchestra nevertheless continued to give performances of a less-prestigious stature throughout the war; in 1945, for example, the ensemble played at the Port Louis Hospital seven times. The Police Orchestra was also authorized in 1944 to hold public benefit concerts for members of the police force and their families; three such benefits – one at the Port Louis Theatre – were given in 1944, featuring programs of variety (i.e., vaudeville) music. See *Blue Book for the Island of Mauritius: 1945* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Government Printer, 1945), 105; Paul, *Deux Siècles d'Histoire de la Police à l'Île Maurice*, 147.

<sup>597</sup> Symphonic and orchestral scores were hard to procure on the island during the war; most of the opera and symphonic music played by these ensembles was the product of re-orchestrating piano transcriptions.

study with the two soloists – including the sister of the recently deposed Shah of Iran, who heard Grünberg performing a radio concert and engaged him for private piano lessons in her home.<sup>598</sup>

The activities of the Jewish musicians also serve to illuminate the limitations of the pre-war musical repertoire in Mauritius. Numerous anecdotes and incidents show that Mauritian audiences were largely unfamiliar with Eastern European music in general and the sound of European *avant-garde* music from the early-twentieth century in particular. Czech folk songs, for example, were a complete novelty to Mauritian audiences, leading Uri Spitzer to form a vocal quartet. This new ensemble performed Czech folk songs in four-part arrangements with piano accompaniment to delighted audiences. As the refugees had learned most of the songs casually during childhood, this endeavor required that the Czechs transcribe the folk songs from memory and compose their own arrangements.<sup>599</sup>

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<sup>598</sup> Makarova and Makarov, *Boarding Pass to Paradise*, 67. The Shah of Iran, Rezā Shāh Pahlavi, had been forced to abdicate his throne by the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran in 1941. The ex-Shah and most of his retinue were exiled to Mauritius by the British authorities, remaining on the island for several years before being transferred to South Africa. For a partial list of the Mauritian high society members who studied with Grünberg, see Geneviève Pitot, *The Mauritian Shekel*, 179.

<sup>599</sup> Makarova and Makarov, *Boarding Pass to Paradise*, 33, 82.



Local audiences' relative inexperience with European *avant-garde* music was driven home during the summer of 1943, during an outbreak of public hysteria after German U-Boats sunk several ships nearby within a matter of weeks. Some of the many rumors that circulated accused the refugees of passing coded signals to Axis submarines; some radio listeners even suggested that the “strange notes” (likely the use of harmonics and quarter tones) that they'd heard during radio concerts by

Jewish musicians were actually these signals being broadcast in musical code.<sup>601</sup> The chilling effects of the U-Boat attacks were only temporary, however; the overall reaction

CZARDAS

VITTORIO MONTI

Violino  
MANDOLINO  
PIANOFORTE  
 Largo      rall.      Largo  
 cresc.  
 molto rall.  
 a piacere  
 poco rall.      a tempo      rall. molto  
 Proprietà di RICORDI & C. EDITOR, MILANO.      RIFRETTINO 111  
 Tutti i diritti sono riservati.  
 Toute forme d'imitation, de diffusion, de reproduction et d'arrangement réservés.  
 PRINTED IN ITALY      102808      (IMPRIMERIE EN ITALIE)

**Figure 26 - The first page of Vittorio Monti's *Csárdás* (1905), one of the pieces played in the Jewish Internment Camp.<sup>600</sup>**

<sup>600</sup> This piece – better known to listeners today via its quotation in the Lady Gaga song “Alejandro” – makes use of stopped harmonics in the section marked *Meno, Quasi Lento*. *Csárdás* was a staple of Steinberg’s concert repertoire and is a strong candidate for the source of the “strange sounds” interpreted by some Mauritian radio listeners as coded communications. See Lady Gaga [Joanne Angelina Germanotta], vocal performance of “Alejandro,” by RedOne [Nadir Khayat] and Lady Gaga, recorded 2009, on *The Fame Monster*, Interscope Records B0013535-72, compact disc.

<sup>601</sup> Geneviève Pitot, *The Mauritian Shekel*, 195.

by the Mauritian populace to the introduction of new repertoires of popular and art music was to greet it with open ears and arms.

The Jewish refugees also made smaller but nonetheless notable contributions to the local theater scene. The refugees staged several plays and musical revues during their internment that were open to Mauritian audiences, including novelties such as marionette theater that had not been seen on the island for many decades.<sup>603</sup> Thanks to



**Figure 27 – Untitled Drawing: Jewish Refugee Musicians Rehearsing at the British Prison in Beau Bassin, by Fritz Haendel<sup>602</sup>**

connections with one of the camp’s inspectors,<sup>604</sup> they also participated in several cooperative ventures with the local branch of the Mauritian Dramatic Society (MDS).<sup>605</sup> Two professional artists from the refugee community, Beda Mayer and Fritz Haendel, created painted backdrops and sets for MDS plays and tutored a local amateur artist in painting and scenic design.<sup>606</sup> The largest and most high-profile venture was a

<sup>602</sup> [http://makarovainit.com/bedyia/images/thumbs\\_maurikii2.jpg](http://makarovainit.com/bedyia/images/thumbs_maurikii2.jpg)

<sup>603</sup> Makarova and Makarov, *Boarding Pass to Paradise*, 102; Geneviève Pitot, *The Mauritian Shekel*, 188. Several French troupes that staged marionette and children’s theater visited Mauritius in the nineteenth century.

<sup>604</sup> The Chief Justice of Mauritius, one of these inspectors, was an amateur thespian and the producer for the Mauritian Dramatic Society. Makarova and Makarov, *Boarding Pass to Paradise*, 102. This connection made it very easy to obtain permits for cooperative efforts.

<sup>605</sup> “Mauritius Dramatic Club” in some sources.

<sup>606</sup> The local amateur artist, Thomas “Tomi” Mayer (no relation to Beda Mayer), ultimately went on to pursue a successful professional career in ballet and opera set design in London. His first theatre credit was creating the set designs that Beda Mayer and Fritz Haendel painted for the Mauritian Dramatic Society. See Elena Makarova, “Tomi Mayer,” *Boarding Pass*

performance run of Puccini's *La Bohème* at the Rose Hill Theatre, for which musicians from the Papa Haas Orchestra joined forces with several amateur instrumentalists to provide the pit orchestra, accompanying a cast composed of local amateur and semi-professional singers. This performance run of *La Bohème* played to packed houses and was the sole opera staging to take place in Mauritius during the entire Second World War.<sup>607</sup>

The Jewish refugee community's contributions to the music of Mauritius ended abruptly with the conclusion of the Second World War. Germany's surrender on 7 May 1945<sup>608</sup> was greeted with cautious celebration in Mauritius;<sup>609</sup> after the surrender of Japan and the overall end of the war on 14 August 1945, authorities permitted a two-day public holiday but did not organize any large-scale civic festivities.<sup>610</sup> The signing of the Armistice at the end of the First World War had been greeted with spontaneous celebrations in the streets of Port Louis, a civic banquet, and the singing of a *Te Deum* at the St. Louis Cathedral. By contrast, the local response to the Second World War's end

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*to Paradise: Artists Peretz Beda Mayer and Fritz Haendel*, accessed 22 December 2012, [http://makarovainit.com/bedya/story\\_mauritius\\_tomi\\_gallery.htm](http://makarovainit.com/bedya/story_mauritius_tomi_gallery.htm).

<sup>607</sup> The refugee musicians provided the core of the orchestra, but the singers were all local amateurs and dilettantes. The musical arrangement used was most likely a custom orchestration made by members of the Papa Haas Orchestra. See Makarova and Makarov, 67. As a gesture to the refugees' contribution to making the performance possible, a single performance night was given over for the refugees to attend – but as the theatre had only 1200 seats available, only four-fifths of the refugees were able to get tickets.

<sup>608</sup> Mauritius, being part of the British Empire, marked V-E Day on 7 May, one day earlier than in the United States.

<sup>609</sup> A two-day public holiday for businesses and banks was celebrated 8-9 May 1945 in Port Louis and the towns; the public holiday did not take effect on the sugar plantations until 9-10 May 1945. Chelin, *Une Île et Son Passé*, 282.

<sup>610</sup> Chelin, *Une Île et Son Passé*, 283. This time the public holiday was coordinated so that it was celebrated 16-17 August across the island.

was decidedly muted and had nothing of the euphoria found in the United States, Australia, or Western Europe. The cumulative effect of war exhaustion had taken its toll on the island's population and the refugees (still largely confined to the prison complex in Beau Bassin) were themselves still awaiting news about their repatriation. Thus, the Second World War ended in Mauritius with a whimper and with no great musical celebrations.

The overall influence of the refugee musicians on the musical landscape of Mauritius was mostly transitory and ephemeral. Although the circumstances of their arrival were unique and spectacular in the island's history, they ultimately filled the same basic roles as the traveling theatre and opera troupes that visited Mauritius during peacetime. Unlike these troupes, however, they did not sell sheet music, and thus made no lasting contribution to Mauritian music libraries and performance repertoires (although, admittedly, the role of French theatre companies in introducing new music had dwindled over time as these companies became more repertory-based). The refugee community itself disbanded after the war, with its members choosing variously to return to Europe, or to take advantage of loosened post-war border controls and immigrate to Palestine.<sup>611</sup> By the end of 1945, the evacuation was complete and the five-year domination of Jewish musicians in Mauritius was at its end.

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<sup>611</sup> Most ultimately settled in Palestine or (after 1948) the State of Israel. See Pitot, *The Mauritian Shekel*, 230-1.

## Wartime *Séga*

Whereas the European art music scene in Mauritius was at least temporarily buoyed by the presence of the Jewish refugee community, the *séga* tradition in Mauritius was virtually sedated by the wartime restrictions. The practice of *séga* had been in decline since the 1850s, but the particular circumstances of traditional *séga* performances – large, outdoor nighttime events around raging bonfires, with massive quantities of food and drink to consume – made it particularly in conflict with the wartime restrictions. Nighttime noise regulations, for example, had long been used in many towns and villages to discourage the practice of *séga*, and charges of disorderly behavior were used to limit alcohol consumption even after the formal end of Prohibition. With the wartime restrictions in place, enforcement of the noise regulations – long a subjective matter – escalated significantly.<sup>612</sup> Some of the most popular places to sing and dance *séga*, the island's beaches,<sup>613</sup> became inaccessible at night due to regulations and patrols watching for Japanese soldiers, spies, or saboteurs.<sup>614</sup> The regulations against artificial lighting at night were particularly problematic, as the one of the core *séga* instruments – the *ravane*

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<sup>612</sup> Wartime noise regulations banned the use of bells and gongs except to indicate fire or attack.

<sup>613</sup> Beaches were particularly prized for *séga* singing and dancing because of the cool sea breezes that provided natural air conditioning, especially during the Mauritian summer.

<sup>614</sup> This paranoia was justified in part by Mauritius' role as a key naval base in blockading French Madagascar and Réunion (before these islands were captured by Free French forces) and interdicting Vichy French trade. Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*, 326-27.

– required regular use of an open fire to tune its goatskin head.<sup>615</sup> Finally, the wartime rationing system also made it impractical to gather the large quantities of food and alcohol that were traditionally consumed at *séga* gatherings.<sup>616</sup> These restrictions collectively gave rise to a new genre of *séga*: *séga salon*.<sup>617</sup>

*Séga salon* (loosely translated as “private *séga*” or “living room *séga*”) <sup>618</sup> first developed out of a simple matter of expedience: a smaller and more intimate form of *séga* was necessary to fit *séga* into the confines of a rural house whose windows could be covered or blocked to stop the transmission of light and sound<sup>619</sup> The rural farming and fishing villages home to the poorer Afro- and Créole-Mauritian populations lacked large indoor spaces for public assembly;<sup>620</sup> this was not problematic before the two World Wars because suitable outdoor spaces (e.g., an open field or beach) were accessible and available, providing ample space for large gatherings with *séga*. As a result, gatherings

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<sup>615</sup> *Ravanes* made from traditional materials must be tuned after 15-30 minutes of playing.

<sup>616</sup> Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*, 326-27, 360. Overseas supplies of several traditional staples of the Créole-Mauritian diet – rice and fresh meat – were particularly constrained, as were the familiar Indo-Mauritian alternatives. The nutritional shortfall was made up by requiring that the sugar plantations grow other food crops on more than a quarter of their land, but the unfamiliarity of these new food crops required that the government deploy educational teams to show how to cook, use, and store them. This prevented the preparation of many traditional foods.

<sup>617</sup> Jacques K. Lee, *Sega: The Mauritian Folk Dance* (London: Nautilus Publishing, 1990), 18. An additional complication came from the traditional goatskin-covered *ravane*’s need to be frequently tuned (i.e., every fifteen minutes or so after sustained use) using an open fire.

<sup>618</sup> The term *séga salon* was also used more-or-less interchangeably with “modern *séga*” until the mid-to-late 1980s, after which this term began increasingly to be used to refer to what is now called “*hotel séga*.”

<sup>619</sup> Lee, *Sega: The Mauritian Folk Dance*, 74. These measures were necessary to comply with the Second World War regulations against loud noises and visible lighting at night.

<sup>620</sup> The inhabitants of these villages generally lacked the financial resources to build an equivalent to the large city mansions and plantation houses that had played prominent roles in the island’s music making in previous centuries.

for what would later be called *séga typique* (traditional *séga*) were amorphously sized but generally large community affairs, often involving hundreds of participants.<sup>621</sup> When the constraints of the Second World War forced *séga* to move indoors, a combination of the small size of the *séga*-dancing population's rural houses and ventilation concerns necessitated that the *séga salon* events be much smaller. *Séga salon* began as a small-scale, indoor version of *séga typique* but continued to evolve after the war's end, eventually developing its own conventions and rituals of courtship.

### **Commentary on the Second World War**

Mauritius during the Second World War saw no notable examples of music patronage. This was due both in large part to the dearth of musicians (aside from the Jewish refugees, a unique category) to patronize and to the changing financial patterns of war. Mauritian citizens and charities sent large amounts of money overseas throughout the war, supporting causes such as the complete underwriting of the manufacturing costs for a Spitfire squadron, subsidies for the operating costs of various Royal Navy warships, and soup kitchens for victims of the London Blitz. This outflow of capital was not balanced by inflows from government spending or from ships captured on the high seas. Privateering had been prohibited in Great Britain since 1856, preventing private citizens from participating directly in the spoils of war.<sup>622</sup> As a result, although warships operating out of Mauritius sank and captured dozens of German and Vichy French ships,

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<sup>621</sup> A small gathering would still have had scores of participants.

<sup>622</sup> Second Empire France and the British Empire concluded a treaty to this effect at the end of the Crimean War, the Paris Declaration Respecting Maritime Law of 16 April 1856.

the captured ships were seized directly by the British government for its own use or turned over to Free French forces. This deprived the islanders of the financial windfalls of auctioned prize ships and prevented the creation of a new group of socially mobile *nouveaux riches* that might have produced music patrons.<sup>623</sup>

### ***Séga* Musical Culture in the Postwar Period**

*The sight of eighty girls, all with bougainvillea in their hair, eyes and teeth shining in the light of a bonfire twelve feet high, clapping hands in accompaniment to a Creole séga, with the sea on the reef as a background . . . does much to reconcile one to the dreariness*

. . .

--The Schools' Holiday Camp, Mauritius (1948)<sup>624</sup>

The first detailed description of *séga salon* in print appeared in 1957, more than a decade after the end of the Second World War.<sup>625</sup> The author, Iswarduth Nundlall (1926-1984), was a native Indo-Mauritian who traveled overseas to pursue advanced studies in music.<sup>626</sup> Unlike his predecessors, Nundlall eschewed Paris and London (the traditional overseas education destinations for the Mauritian elite) and visited the newly independent nation of India for his music studies. Nundlall ultimately received masters and doctoral

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<sup>623</sup> The changing nature of naval warfare also ensured that a much larger percentage of ships were sunk, rather than captured, in comparison to the Napoleonic Wars and earlier conflicts.

<sup>624</sup> Alec Lovelace, "The Schools' Holiday Camp, Mauritius," *Oversea Education: A Journal of Educational Experiment and Research in Tropical and Sub-Tropical Areas* 19, no. 3 (1948), 698-99.

<sup>625</sup> Nundlall, "Music in Mauritius."

<sup>626</sup> For a retrospective biography of Iswarduth Nundlall, see Sarita Boodhoo, "At the Initiative of the Northern Association of Indian Music – Remembering Dr Iswarduth Nundlall: Pioneer in Introducing Indian Classical Music in Mauritius," *The Mauritius Times*, 13 July 2012, accessed 25 January 2013, [http://www.mauritiustimes.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1750](http://www.mauritiustimes.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1750).



degrees<sup>627</sup> from what is now the Bhatkhande Music Institute University<sup>628</sup> in Lucknow before returning to Mauritius.<sup>629</sup> He chose to write an overview of the music traditions present on his native island for his master's thesis, producing the first in-depth scholarly treatment of the music of Mauritius.<sup>630</sup>

Nundlall describes *séga* as “a special style of creole singsong,” placing it within a broader tradition of Créole folk songs particular to Mauritius.<sup>631</sup> The Créoles, he states, are “a race which sprang up from the union of the marooned Dutch settlers, the first French settlers and the Madagascarians in Mauritius.”<sup>632</sup> This definition, which Nundlall qualifies as “according to Mauritian ethnology and etymology,” is factually incorrect but illustrates some of the dynamics of Créole-Mauritian self-identification in this period. Many Créole-Mauritians consciously chose to identify themselves as possessing an idealized composite of Dutch,<sup>633</sup> “old” French, and Malagasy heritages. This self-

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<sup>627</sup> His doctoral dissertation, written in Hindi, is a general study of art music traditions in India. Iswarduth Nundlall, “Bharat Ki Sangeet Kala [Indian Art Music]” (PhD diss., Bhatkhande University of Music (Lucknow), c. 1962). Reprinted as *Bharat Ki Sangeet Kala* (Vacoas, Mauritius: Sargam Prakashan, 1972).

<sup>628</sup> Although this school in Lucknow (India's only dedicated University of Music) was not formally named a university until 2000, its name has traditionally been translated into English as “Bhatkhande University of Music” since the mid-twentieth century. See “About,” Bhatkhande Music Institute University, Lucknow, accessed 22 December 2012, <http://www.bhatkhandemusic.edu.in/pages/about.html>.

<sup>629</sup> Most talented Mauritian musicians who pursued music studies overseas (e.g., Francis Thomé, Léon Carvalho) ended up pursuing their careers overseas as well.

<sup>630</sup> It is also the first description of music in Mauritius written by a professional musician.

<sup>631</sup> Nundlall, “Music in Mauritius,” 39.

<sup>632</sup> Nundlall, “Music in Mauritius,” 37.

<sup>633</sup> There is no historical evidence to support any significant *métissage* between shipwrecked Dutch sailors and *maroons*, as seen in chapter 2; indeed, most of the detailed scholarship that first brought to light details on *maroon* activities from colonial archives would not take place until decades later.

identification rejected the whole or partial African heritage of much of the Créole-Mauritian community<sup>634</sup> along with the “tainted” French of the recent Vichy régime, appealing instead to a more ancient and “purer” idea of their cosmopolitan heritage.<sup>635</sup> In a period in which ethnic distinctions in Mauritius were largely stratified, non-situational, and non-subjective,<sup>636</sup> these acts of inclusion and exclusion served to assert a distinct and molded identity within the island and the larger British Empire.<sup>637</sup> This was particularly profound in the aftermath of the Second World War, when the claims to Dutch and

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<sup>634</sup> In the 1901 census, a mere 643 people chose to identify themselves as “African,” causing the category to be dropped from the 1911 census as statistically insignificant. See Jocelyn Chan Low, “De l’Afrique Rejetée à l’Afrique Retrouvée? Les ‘Créoles’ de l’Île Maurice et l’Africanité,” *Revi Kiltir Kreol* 3 (2003): 41. For a discussion of background factors, see Low, 42-43.

<sup>635</sup> This stigmatization of African heritage by Créole-Mauritians was a holdover from the early days of slavery in French Mauritius, in which slaves were viewed according to racial stereotypes based on their supposed (and often incorrect) origins; see chapter 3 and chapter 4. Créole-Mauritians protested vigorously against the stationing of continental African soldiers in Mauritius during the Second Boer War, with several incidents in which these soldiers were barred from areas such as the theater that native Mauritians of all colors could freely access. After Créole-Mauritian and Indo-Mauritian soldiers in the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Mauritius Regiment were sent to garrison duty in Madagascar during the Second World War, the unit mutinied, claiming that the soldiers were being treated “like Africans.” This mutiny forced the British Army to disband the unit.

See Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*, 26; Ashley Jackson, “The Mutiny of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The Mauritius Regiment, Madagascar 1943,” *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 80 (2002): 232-50.

<sup>636</sup> See Jimmy M. Sanders, “Ethnic Boundaries and Identity in Plural Societies,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 (2002): 327.

<sup>637</sup> See Michael Moerman, “Ethnic Identification in a Complex Civilization: Who Are the Lue?” *American Anthropologist* n.s. 67, no. 5, pt. 1 (1965), 1216-17. Mauritians in general embraced the island’s motto, “Stella Clavisque Maris Indici” (“The Star and Key of the Indian Ocean”), for similar reasons – especially as the island’s importance within the British Empire declined in the late-nineteenth century.

French heritage invoked these countries' past victories against the British Royal Navy – a history that included the greatest defeats ever suffered by the Britain at sea.<sup>638</sup>

The popularity of *séga salon* after the Second World War should be seen as part of this broad assertion of identity by Créole-Mauritians – albeit one that took place primarily in the semi-public spheres of rural towns and villages. As the decolonization movement spread across the globe, the British colonial authorities in Mauritius initiated democratic reforms that threatened to swamp the Créole-Mauritian minority (representing approximately one-fifth of the population) under the Indo-Mauritian majority (representing approximately three-quarters of the population). One of these reforms was to dismantle the ethnic quota system that governed hiring for the Mauritian civil service, a system that had guaranteed Créole-Mauritians a large and outsized role in the island's government as a check against block-voting on ethnic lines by the Indo-Mauritian majority. This police force transition from a majority Créole-Mauritian force to a majority Indo-Mauritian force eliminated much of the selective enforcement of noise regulations that had severely limited public performances of Indian traditional music in some towns and neighborhoods.<sup>639</sup> These changes, combined with the widespread popularity of Bollywood cinema and film music imports in Mauritius after Indian

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<sup>638</sup> This glorification of the “history of resistance” was continued with the identification with the Créole-Mauritians' Malagasy heritage. Local potentates in Madagascar successfully resisted Anglo-French attempts to dominate and colonize the island for centuries; as a result, the conquest of Madagascar in 1895 was one of the final steps in the Scramble for Africa.

<sup>639</sup> This selective enforcement was not strictly along ethnic or color lines; as discussed in chapter 4, many Créole-Mauritian police chiefs had used interpretations of these same laws to effectively ban *séga* performances within their jurisdictions.

Independence (1948), fanned Créole-Mauritian fears of political and cultural suffocation by the Indo-Mauritian majority. These factors generated a new interest in *séga* among younger Créole-Mauritians, manifested as a vogue for *séga salon*.

*Séga salon* had a more respectable reputation than the *séga typique* that preceded it.<sup>640</sup> Several groups of Mauritian musicians had worked abroad during the Second World War, providing entertainment for British and American soldiers. One of them, Mario Armel, sang *séga* songs as part of his broader repertoire (he mostly sang jazz and popular song standards) and continued a professional singing career in Europe after the war. Armel's success on the European stage was a source of pride in Mauritius, covered favorably in the local press and viewed by some as validating *séga* as a legitimate (and not degenerate) entertainment.<sup>641</sup> This presentation of *séga* in a mainstream, "respectable" context abroad in Europe was paralleled at home in Mauritius by *séga salon*, which discarded or downplayed the excesses of food, alcohol, and sex that had so strongly characterized *séga* since emancipation. Meeting and interacting with the opposite sex remained a key part of *séga salon*, but the social and romantic intercourse was reframed within a more family-friendly context.

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<sup>640</sup> *Séga typique* did continue to be practiced (albeit with decreasing frequency) in Mauritius during the 1950s.

<sup>641</sup> Lee, *Séga: The Mauritian Folk Dance*, 84. After the Second World War, Mario Armel recruited *séga* dancers from Mauritius to join his European act. One of these dancers, the future Patricia Armel, married Mario and became one of the first trailblazing female *séga* singers. The dancing in Mario Armel's (overseas) postwar act was sanitized by Mauritian standards but reportedly quite titillating and compelling to American, British, and French audiences. Sedley Richard Assonna, *Les Femmes du Séga* (Port Louis: Éditions de la Tour, 2009), 19-20.

The effort to move *séga salon* away from its lowbrow roots was accompanied by a formalization of song and dance conventions. These changes never formalized *séga* dancing to the extent of Western ballroom or social dances, but they did tone down the “lascivious gyrations” that had shocked and intrigued European visitors in previous centuries. One of the most notable changes was a formalization of the basic step pattern over superimposed 3/4 and 6/8 beats:<sup>642</sup>

- 1) Begin in a standing position with hands joined, palms together and fingers facing up (as if in prayer).
- 2) On Beat 1 (of 3/4 time), simultaneously clap hands loudly while stamping the heel of the right foot.
- 3) On Beat 2, simultaneously strike the chest with the palm of the right hand while stamping with the ball (or toe, depending on one’s shoes) of the right foot.
- 4) On Beat 3, reverse the pattern for Beat 2 and simultaneously strike the chest with the palm of the left hand while stamping with the heel of the left foot.

This step pattern can still be seen in Mauritius today, although the hand movements are usually omitted and it is only one of a much larger vocabulary of step patterns.<sup>643</sup> The heel-ball change on the first and second beats can be used for quick and sweeping pivots

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<sup>642</sup> Adapted from Nundlall, “Music in Mauritius,” 40. Nundlall’s English prose was written for an Indian audience and uses Hindi words and references for explanations. Some of the resulting issues with the prose have been clarified in the above description; these and later examples are sometimes assisted by interlinguistic comparisons with Hindi.

<sup>643</sup> This observation is based on field research conducted in Mauritius from 2011-2012.

that allow two dancers to orbit each other, loosely imitating the sinuous patterns of the Viennese waltz. This helped to bring this particular flavor of *séga* more in line with the European dances that continued to be fashionable in urban and suburban Créole-Mauritian neighborhoods. The emphasis on imitating a dance leader or dance leaders instead of pursuing freeform, individual dance improvisation also evokes the dancing masters who taught ballroom dances to young Mauritian audiences in the nineteenth century.<sup>644</sup>

These changes culminated in the emergence of the *séga soirée*, or “*séga evening*.”<sup>645</sup> *Séga soirées* could be held on any night of the week<sup>646</sup> and typically drew members of the local community who lived in walking distance. Before arriving, guests were expected to eat dinner at the regular hour (6 p.m.) at their own homes – although the host provided supper and snacks, these supplemented (rather than replaced) the normal evening repast. Most of the alcohol for a *séga soirée* was provided by the guests, who were each expected to bring a bottle of wine for the occasion;<sup>647</sup> these measures distributed the evening’s expenses among those present, reducing the direct costs of hosting a *séga soirée* and enabling *soirées* to take place at a different location each

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<sup>644</sup> See chapter 4, especially the case of William Castell.

<sup>645</sup> Nundlall uses the term *soirée musicale*, a name previously used on the island to describe formal social gatherings for European dancing and music making in houses (during the late-eighteenth century) and for the literary and musical events of the Triple Espérance Masonic Lodge (in the early-to-mid-nineteenth century). *Séga soirée* is the more common appellation used today, although the term “*séga party*” is growing in popularity with the younger generations.

<sup>646</sup> Sunday, the general working holiday, was less common due to the extra-long *séga soirées* held on Saturday nights.

<sup>647</sup> Nundlall, “Music in Mauritius,” 42.

time.<sup>648</sup> With the end of wartime lighting restrictions, the *soirées* moved outdoors, where yards and alleys replaced the fields and beaches of previous decades.<sup>649</sup>

The archetypical *séga soirée*, as described by Nundlall, began around 7 p.m. and lasted until midnight or later. The choice of start time allowed guests to finish a blue-collar workday and eat dinner in their own homes at 6 p.m. before setting out to the reach the venue on foot.<sup>650</sup> The *soirée* formally started with the hostess (the wife or sister of the host) singing a song of blessing,<sup>651</sup> then greeting each guest in turn.<sup>652</sup> Greetings were accompanied by music from a loosely structured instrumental ensemble, with the violin, mandolin, and guitar offered as sample instruments. By tradition, this opening music incorporated the melody from the last *séga* song to be sung at the preceding *séga soirée*, providing a measure of continuity within the community;<sup>653</sup> the guests, most of whom

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<sup>648</sup> Nundlall mentions that a given house might host a *soirée* “once in 2 months or so,” suggesting that the hosting responsibility rotated among most of the houses in a community. *Ibid.* The use of outdoor spaces was an equalizing factor and allowed more households to participate as hosts.

<sup>649</sup> Due to limited car usage and ownership during this period, a large *séga soirée* could also spill onto a nearby street without incident.

<sup>650</sup> The short tropical day ensured that guests would arrive at or after nightfall, depending on the season and distance to be traveled. The distance traveled would have been short, generally of no more one or two kilometers (roughly ten-to-twenty minutes’) distance.

<sup>651</sup> Nundlall’s description of the “devotional” sound of this song suggests that it was sung *a cappella* or to a drone. Nundlall, “Music in Mauritius,” 43.

<sup>652</sup> The greeting ritual, which Nundlall describes as being “in the continental fashion,” mixes a kiss on the forehead (from the hostess to the guest) with hand-kissing (from the guest to the hostess). Hand-kissing (*baisemain*) was a common practice in French society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; its revival in Mauritius was probably linked to an influx of Hollywood films featuring the practice in the 1940s and 1950s. See Elaine Sciolino, *La Seduction: How the French Play the Game of Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2011), 3-5.

<sup>653</sup> This detail is implied but not explicitly stated in Nundlall’s text (p. 44); that the opening song is actually a *séga* song becomes obvious only after comparing it to his functionally identical description of a *séga* song performance on p. 46. This implicit communication is a typical characteristic of Hindi and Bhojpuri (both languages that Nundlall studied and used in

would have been present at the previous gathering, were invited to hum or sing along.<sup>654</sup>

As soon as the greetings were concluded, the hostess and her family together sang the song's chorus, with the entire assembly joining after a prescribed interval of two measures. The remainder of the song performance consisted of alternating choruses and verses, with the responsibility for improvising and singing the verses falling to each family in attendance in turn; audience interaction during the verses was encouraged. During the final chorus, all of the guests were expected to not only sing along but to join in dancing, following the motions of designated dance leaders.<sup>655</sup>

Depending on the day of the week it was offered, a *séga soirée* might last as long as five hours (weekdays) or close to ten (Saturdays). Maintaining a high energy level and excitement throughout the evening was facilitated by alternations between solo vocal and group song and dance performances led by the soloists. The host's eldest unmarried son or eldest unmarried daughter always selected the first soloist extemporaneously in a short, stylized musical ritual: the designatee walked amongst the guests to the accompaniment of a percussion ensemble, with an *accelerando* in the downbeats played by the *ravane* building tension. The music stopped abruptly when the designatee handed a glass of wine<sup>656</sup> to someone of the opposite sex, designating them as the next soloist. The

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Mauritius and in India) and not an intentional omission. Nundlall, "Music in Mauritius," 44, 46. A similar close reading reveals that three core instruments of *séga typique* – the *ravane*, *maravanne*, and triangle – are also used for accompaniment after the initial introduction.

<sup>654</sup> Nundlall, "Music in Mauritius," 43.

<sup>655</sup> *Ibid.*, 40, 44.

<sup>656</sup> Nundlall uses the word "chalice," a word that has since acquired more particularly religious connotations but was used colloquially in Mauritius to refer to any goblet-shaped drinking vessel.



soloist was then obliged to sing a love song of his or choosing for the group, with full musical accompaniment by the instrumentalists present.<sup>657</sup> After the love song, the soloist selected a number of backing singers to join her or him in the performance of another *séga* song, assuming the roles of the host family from the first *séga* song performance; one or more of the backing singers lead the dancing on the chorus. The pattern of selecting a soloist, the soloist singing a love song, and the soloist and a small group leading a *séga* performance repeated throughout the evening; if the energy level in the room declined, an instrumental interlude provided background music while the guests took advantage of the break to eat, drink, and rest.<sup>658</sup>

The *séga soirée* ritual also made allowances to include the young and the old. If school-age children were present, they were asked to sing songs or give recitations learned in school; this took place after the second *séga* song of the evening. After the conclusion of the children's performance, they were sent upstairs or indoors to their beds.<sup>659</sup> After the children performed, the senior lady present (a stature determined by communal respect but generally corresponding to age) designated the next soloist; after senior lady's selection, each soloist in turn designated their successor. Once the third

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<sup>657</sup> It is implied but not specified that the accompaniment was entirely improvised and that the instrumentalists could accompany any tune by ear. Interviews conducted during my fieldwork in Mauritius suggest that the love songs were drawn from Créole love songs, French chansons, Western popular love songs, and even opera arias with a love theme.

<sup>658</sup> Nundlall, "Music in Mauritius," 37-52. Instrumental interludes between the verses were also incorporated into the solo love song performances, allowing the soloist to rest his or her voice and drink.

<sup>659</sup> This custom survives today at Mauritian wedding parties, at which children are allowed to participate for the first part of the evening but are sent to their beds before the evening grows late. The general character of the *séga* dancing at such events becomes much more lascivious after the children are sent home or to bed.

*séga* finished, however, any elderly man could exercise his right to interrupt a soloist mid-song or veto their selection as the next soloist, substituting himself.<sup>660</sup> A soloist could thus be replaced for a poor performance (in which case the elderly man was expected to out-do him at the same song) or have their performance pushed later in the evening simply to allow the elderly man a moment in the spotlight.<sup>661</sup> Popular opinion held that the best and most skilled *séga* singers were old men and these interruptions were sometimes encouraged by audiences eager to hear a particular *ségatier*.<sup>662</sup>

**Table 5 - Structure of a *Séga Soirée***

#	<u>Activity</u>	<u>Primary Participant(s)</u>	<u>Musical Action</u>
1.	<i>Starting Song (Invocation / Greeting)</i>	Hostess	Singing
2.	<i>Formal Greetings</i> Accompanied by the melody of the previous <i>séga soirée</i> 's last song.	Hostess w/ Guests	Instrumental music from melodic and chordal instruments; guests hum along.
3.	<i>Performance of the previous séga soirée's closing song</i>	All	Initially led by the host family; the host family and all guests sing on the choruses; guests improvise and sing the verses in alternation. Full instrumental accompaniment from all melodic, chordal, and percussion instruments.

<sup>660</sup> This custom only applied to men.

<sup>661</sup> This custom also survives today in Mauritius, although usually only at informal (non-concert) performances of *séga typique* at which a famous *ségatier* is present. In this latter case, the *ségatier* is usually nominated by public acclamation during one of the breaks between songs, and takes the stage to perform one song before retaking her or his seat.

<sup>662</sup> Nundlall, "Music in Mauritius," 49-52.

4.	<i>Selection of Soloist #1</i>	Eldest Unmarried Son or Eldest Unmarried Daughter of the Host	Pattern of downbeats on the <i>ravane</i> with instrumental accompaniment.
5.	<i>Performance of a Love Song</i>	Soloist #1	Singing to full instrumental accompaniment, with musical interludes.
6.	<i>Selection of the Backing Singers</i>	Soloist #1	Unaccompanied
7.	<i>Performance of a new séga song</i>	Soloist #1 w/ Backing Singers and Guests	Initially led by the soloist and backing singers; all sing on the choruses; the soloist improvises and sings the verses.
8.	<i>Children's Performance</i> <sup>663</sup>	All Children Present	Unaccompanied Singing
9.	<i>Selection of Soloist #2</i>	Senior Lady Present <sup>664</sup>	Pattern of downbeats on the <i>ravane</i> with instrumental accompaniment.
10.	<i>Performance of a Love Song</i>	Soloist #2	Singing to full instrumental accompaniment, with musical interludes.
11.	<i>Selection of New Backing Singers</i>	Soloist #2	Unaccompanied
Repeat Steps 9-11 until midnight (weekdays) or early morning (Saturday nights), with each soloist selecting the following soloist from the opposite sex – unless an older man interrupts and claims the position of soloist.			

The relationship of the instrumentalists to the guests at a given *séga soirée* depended mostly on the night the *soirée* was held. On weekdays, the instrumental players were drawn from amateur musicians in the community itself; this is most likely the cause

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<sup>663</sup> The potential content included: literary recitations, songs learned in school, or recent film songs.

<sup>664</sup> Nundlall uses the term “Prima Donna,” a title used colloquially in Mauritius to refer to the eldest or most respected lady in a social group.

of the loose selection of melodic instruments in the ensemble.<sup>665</sup> Professional musicians from outside the community were engaged for special events and for the longer Saturday night *séga soirées*, when the working holiday on Sunday allowed the event to continue through the long hours of the night into the wee hours of the morning. This allowed the musicians from the community to participate in the eating, drinking, singing, and dancing at the weekend *soirées* – activities that were effectively barred to them on weeknights because they were too busy providing music throughout the evening. This selective hiring of professional musicians thus restrained costs while taking pains to not ostracize instrumentalists living in the community from the communal activities.<sup>666</sup>

Since most of the participants (and, generally, all of the singers) at a *séga soirée* were musical amateurs and the musical program was variable, some musical concessions were made to assist the recitation and improvisation. Having the instrumental ensemble play the first *séga* song's melody during the greeting allowed the guests (and hosts) to refresh their memories of its contours, or to learn the melody outright if they weren't present.<sup>667</sup> Since the host family led the first singing of the song refrain, guests were given time to reacquaint themselves with the song lyrics (or learn them for the first time) before joining in. Finally, during the improvisational periods set aside for verse singing,

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<sup>665</sup> The inclusion of at least one *ravane*, one *maravanne*, and one *triangle* was fixed.

<sup>666</sup> Little else is known about the professional musicians; it is likely that most of them were part-time professional musicians and that a small minority were full-time professional musicians who played European art music, Bollywood music, popular music, etc. at other gigs. Most would have commuted from nearby regions due to the poor state of the roads, low car ownership, and limited regular nighttime train service.

<sup>667</sup> In practice, only one of the instrumentalists would have been required to know or hear the tune in advance, since the other instrumentalists could themselves follow in call-and-response or joining in after the first iteration of the song melody.

the instrumental ensemble played only a stripped down version of the music with simplified rhythms and harmonies; this would have provided singers with more freedom to improvise and more latitude for the instrumentalists to shape the accompaniment if an improvised verse was too long or too short.<sup>668</sup> The choruses drew from a fixed body or repertoire of lyrics that the attendees were expected to know or to quickly pick up; only the verses were improvised. The overall result of these changes was to lower the barriers to entry and participation for a highly refined musical tradition that virtually none of the participants studied formally.

### **Other Musics**

*Mozart, Beethoven, Debussy, Bach, Strauss, Schubert, Mendelsohn, Handel[,] etc are household names while Tansen, Gopal Nayak, Baiju Bawara and the illustrious Indian classical musicians of past and present are known to only a scanty few among the Indian population only.*

--Iswarduth Nundlall, "Music in Mauritius" (1957)<sup>669</sup>

Nundlall's master's thesis includes a survey and overview of the various musical traditions present in Mauritius at the time of his writing. The most popular musical tradition, he noted, was Western classical music – a primarily European tradition, still, whose concerts and theater performances could be enjoyed live only three months out of the year. Most major performances in this category were mounted by French theater troupes that visited three months out of the year – a situation not unlike that enjoyed in

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<sup>668</sup> "While one party is improvising the instrumentalist[s] strikes the key notes and chords thereof . . ." Nundlall, "Music in Mauritius," 44.

<sup>669</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

Mauritius from the mid-nineteenth century until the start of the First World War.

Classical music could be enjoyed off-season through recordings – vinyl records of this type of music were apparently very popular and ubiquitous – and through off-season provided by local musicians, although Nundlall noted, “Most of these local artistes [*sic*] do music as a part time job.”<sup>670</sup>

There is a palpable sense of decline in Nundlall’s descriptions of European art music in Mauritius. He tallied the theater-going public at around five thousand people<sup>671</sup> – a very small audience pool in light of the seating capacities of the Port Louis Theatre (400 seats) and the Rose Hill Theatre (1,000 seats), and a mere .833% of the total population. This audience, he said, was primarily amused by repetitions of old favorites – works such as Georges Bizet’s *Carmen*,<sup>672</sup> Camille Saint-Saëns’s opera *Samson et Dalila*,<sup>673</sup> and the Savoy operas of Gilbert and Sullivan<sup>674</sup> – and not by new stage

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<sup>670</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>671</sup> Ibid. Nundlall states that the audience was primarily clustered in the suburb of Rose Hill and its neighbors. In the 1950s, these areas were still home to the more affluent sectors of society *and* had easy access to the Rose Hill Theatre, which had become the island’s primary concert hall.

<sup>672</sup> The world premiere of *Carmen* took place on 3 March 1875 at the Opéra-Comique in Paris; its (fully-staged) Mauritian premiere took place in 1885 and was repeated several times over the following decades. Although the world premiere of *Carmen* preceded the appointment of Léon Carvalho as Director of the Opéra-Comique, he had previously worked with Bizet on the premieres of the latter’s operas *Les Pêcheurs de Perles* (1863) and *La Jolie Fille de Perth* (1867) at the Théâtre Lyrique.

<sup>673</sup> The world premiere of *Samson et Dalila* took place on 2 December 1877 at the Grossherzogliches Theatre in Weimar, Germany; its did not receive its French premiere until 3 March 1890 (at the Théâtre des Arts in Rouen) and its Parisian premiere until 23 November 1892. The aria “Mon coeur s’ouvre à ta voix” appears in many concert and recital programs in Mauritius in the early twentieth-century, after the opera had achieved international fame following the Parisian premiere and entered into both the English and French operatic repertoires.

works.<sup>675</sup> He found a similar problem in the concert repertoire, observing that the rigid form of Western classical music did not lend itself as well to repeated hearings within a short span as did Indian classical music, which allowed more improvisation. This problem was evidently exacerbated by a calcification of the repertoire: of the eight composers that he cited as household names,<sup>676</sup> three of them had flourished in the eighteenth century<sup>677</sup> and four in the nineteenth century.<sup>678</sup> The one example from the twentieth century, Claude Debussy, had died in 1918 – almost forty years before Nundlall wrote his thesis. The European art music repertoire in Mauritius had not progressed significantly since the First World War, despite the visits of French troupes and the multi-year presence of the Jewish refugee musicians.

These troubles were compounded by a change in status of European art music from a class-natural experience in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries to a primarily upper-class experience. “The patrons of western music,” Nundlall noted in

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*Carmen* and *Samson et Dalila* are the only two operas that Nundlall mentions explicitly by name. Both works are mainstays of the French operatic repertoire; however, the most likely reason Nundlall mentions them is not any particular or special local popularity but because these were the two operas staged in Mauritius during the year that he wrote his thesis (1957).

<sup>674</sup> Nundlall does not provide complete information on these works; the extrapolation of the composers’ names and bodies of work can be discerned through a study of the period repertoire and advertisements. See Nundlall, “Music in Mauritius,” 5.

<sup>675</sup> Nundlall mentions the works of the singer-actor-playwright Sacha Guitry (presumably his spoken plays) as enjoying similar popularity; these would not have been new works, as Guitry had ceased writing stage works three decades’ prior and died in the same year that Nundlall completed his thesis. It is likely that Nundlall chose to mention Guitry due to the latter’s international fame one of the star directors of French cinema, an activity that continued until Guitry’s death in 1957.

<sup>676</sup> Nundlall, “Music in Mauritius,” 2.

<sup>677</sup> [J.S.] Bach, [Georg-Friedrich] Handel, and [Wolfgang Amadeus] Mozart.

<sup>678</sup> [Ludwig van] Beethoven, [Franz] Schubert, [Felix] Mendelssohn, [Johann] Strauss [I and II – the two were often confused in Mauritius].

1957, “are mostly french [*sic*] and english [*sic*] residents of the island, and of course the indian [*sic*] aristocracy.” European art music was more available than ever before – taught in all of the schools; heard in films, via records, and on the radio; still used in the theater<sup>679</sup> – and yet its paying concert audience in Mauritius shrank in contrary motion to demographic trends. This was accompanied (as in other parts of the world) by rising ticket prices for live entertainment as film screenings drew away the lower- and middle-class audience base from the theater and the concert hall. Just three decades after lower- and middle-class Mauritians began to abandon the instruments of European classical music for the newly fashionable accordion, these demographics ceased to be significant audience factors for European art music.<sup>680</sup>

The attention of live music audiences had shifted to two other genres: what Nundlall termed “Western light music” – a loose category that included band music, Western popular songs, dance music, and Hollywood film music – and Bollywood film music. The chief conduit of Western light music outside of cinema and radio during this period was the much-derided Police Orchestra, an ensemble that was sufficiently reorganized and improved in the 1950s that it excelled at this (less difficult) repertoire. Under the leadership of Philippe Ohsan, a Sino-Mauritian violinist who had studied in Europe and played in the London Philharmonic Orchestra before returning to Mauritius, the Police Orchestra began a series of free, weekly open-air concerts in Port Louis on

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<sup>679</sup> Nundlall, “Music in Mauritius,” 7; 2.

<sup>680</sup> In terms of absolute growth, the population of Mauritius had grown ten-fold since the arrival of Joseph Laglaine’s first opera company in 1792.



Sundays.<sup>681</sup> This restored a valuable and popular public music function lost after the overseas deployment of the island's military bands, but without the symphonic and opera content that was previously a cornerstone of the public soundscape.

The pricing out of middle- and lower-class audiences from the theater and the (Western) concert hall created a particular and almost mystical aura around European art music on the island. As the 1950s drew to a close, hearing a symphony or seeing an opera live was out of reach for most Mauritians – a complete turnaround from conditions of the nineteenth century. From the perceptions of the have-nots, attending a symphony concert fell somewhere between a mystical ascension and conspicuous consumption. As Nundlall opined, “In a nutshell[, attending a] classical concert is an annual dream, and only the aristocrats can tread in that dream land, the proletariat cannot [but] dream of that dream in a whole life time.”<sup>682</sup>

The inaccessibility of live symphony concerts and opera created opportunities for a more recent arrival in the Mauritian soundscape: Bollywood film scores. Although live European art music enjoyed a special veneer of exclusivity in Mauritius in the 1950s, the growing esteem for Bollywood film scores presented a serious and long-term threat to the genre's now questionable supremacy. The burgeoning popularity of Bollywood films on

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<sup>681</sup> Identified only as “Oh-San” in Nundlall's thesis. *Ibid.*, 8. Phillippe Ohsan would later Jooneed Jeeroburkhan create the national anthem of Mauritius by combining a text and a tune by separate authors into a new arrangement, which he orchestrated.

<sup>682</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

the island attracted audience members from all social classes to Mauritian cineplexes.<sup>683</sup> These film audiences in turn clamored for live performances of the latest Bollywood songs and film score suites, a demand that commercial concert operators and public concert programmers were happy to oblige with open-air concerts. These concerts benefitted from advances in sound amplification, allowing inexpensive concerts to be staged in public locales such as athletic fields, plazas, bus stations.

The change was, at least at first, one of content rather than personnel: Bollywood films of this period made strong use of Western instruments and Western-style orchestrations. This allowed musicians who might otherwise be performing European art music or Western light music to change their repertoire without having to learn or master new instruments. Sound amplification also opened up new avenues by reducing the number of musicians that had to be hired to fill a venue – whether the venue was a large field in the open air, a club, or a restaurant. Thanks to these advances, imported Bollywood songs and film scores were taking over the popular concert scene in Mauritius by the time Nundlall left the island to study in India.

### **Postlude to the 1961-1965 Period**

The period from 1911-1965 was one of unprecedented disruption to the musical fabric of Mauritius. The stresses of two World Wars, a global economic depression, and new entertainment technologies mixed with political shifts and a demographic awakening

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<sup>683</sup> This period coincides with the Golden Age of Bollywood (c. 1947- c. 1967) and a wave of pro-Indian nationalism in diaspora communities following the Independence of India in 1947.

to rewrite and rearrange systems of musical patronage and transmission that had lasted since the French period. The last eight years of this period (1957-1965) saw a flood of imported Bollywood film music, a flood that further marginalized European art music as a fringe entertainment for the economic (and increasingly Indo-Mauritian) elite. The vogue of *séga salon*, seemingly so bright in the aftermath of the Second World War, disappeared under this new cultural onslaught as rock-and-roll and other new genres of popular music caught the public ear. Even the radio broadcasts that had continued to carry European art music to the masses began to diversify their programming, replacing symphonies and opera arias with Western popular songs and rock-and-roll from Britain, France, and the United States. As the decolonization movement in Mauritius gained traction in the 1960s, the island's soundscape appeared on the verge of discarding its art music and *séga* roots in favor of the invading popular music genres from the West and India.

## VI. European Art Music and *Séga* in Modern Mauritius (1965-2012)

*Dutch Mauritius was famed for possessing the dodo; French Mauritius, Ile de France, was famed for Paul and Virginia's love-story; British Mauritius boasts of Post Office stamps which cost a penny or twopence, and now sell for thousands of pounds.*

--*A Short History of Mauritius* (1949)<sup>684</sup>

### A Glimpse of Modern Mauritius

Music in modern Mauritius (1965-present) is richer and more varied than at any prior point in the island's history. A walk through the streets of Port Louis today takes a visitor past hardware stores and bakeries playing Chinese traditional and popular music, mosques with devotional chants and calls to prayer, posters advertising Indian classical dance concerts, Bollywood-themed club nights, *séga* dance parties, and – if the season is right – notices for a concert of European art music by the local conservatory or a musical presented by a visiting French troupe. A five-minute walk through downtown from one of the main bus stations takes visitors and locals alike past several dedicated music stores, supermarkets with racks of compact discs,<sup>685</sup> and a dozen or more street vendors with rows of CDs laid out on tables or scattered across tarps spread over the pavement. It would be easy from this profusion of sights and sounds to conclude that Mauritius is a

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<sup>684</sup> P.J. Barnwell and A. Toussaint, *A Short History of Mauritius* (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1949), 165-66.

<sup>685</sup> *Hypermarchés* (“hypermarkets”) in local parlance; *supermarché* (“supermarket”) is used to refer to any store that sells food.

cosmopolitan nation with a myriad set of musical cultures, none of which dominate over the other.<sup>686</sup>

A closer examination reveals that although Mauritius may be cosmopolitan in its influences, there are clear biases in the patterns of consumption. The strains of Shanghai and Hong Kong popular songs and Peking opera do not emanate past the Chinese quarter of Port Louis, an area in which much of the tiny but influential Sino-Mauritian population continues to reside.<sup>687</sup> The Islamic calls to prayer emanate from just two mosques situated on opposite sides of the city, their sound resounding through the plain thanks to large speaker arrays that fuel an ongoing noise pollution dispute with their neighbors, who are sick of hearing the *adhā* (the summons for mandatory prayer) and *iqama* (the signal to start lining up to start prayers) at high volumes five times per day.<sup>688</sup> Interviews and informal chats with Chinese shopkeepers and store clerks reveal that most of the Chinese music played in their places of business comes from recordings purchased by friends or family who have visited mainland China or Hong Kong; many cannot understand the words.<sup>689</sup> The sub-community of Muslim Indo-Mauritians and the Sino-Mauritian community do not enjoy their own broadcast radio or broadcast television channels,

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<sup>686</sup> These and other observations in this chapter are based on the author's fieldwork conducted in Mauritius from 2011-2012.

<sup>687</sup> Most of the more affluent Sino-Mauritians moved to the northern commuter suburb of Baie-du-Tombeau in the mid-to-late twentieth century, but the bulk of this demographic still lives in the Chinese quarter of Port Louis.

<sup>688</sup> The volume level of the mosques' speaker systems is the subject of two separate court cases that (as of 2012) are working their way through the Mauritian judicial system.

<sup>689</sup> The CD packages that I was able to examine, along with the very low purchase prices given, suggested that most of these were pirate copies of recordings. This is not a problem particular to travel in China; music piracy is a major issue to many Mauritian recording artists.

although specially targeted cable TV offerings have emerged in recent years.<sup>690</sup> Little of the music or chanting heard in the Chinese and Muslim quarters is readily available for purchase around the city. European music concerts are rarely advertised in the general profusion of posters that fill the city's billboards, walls, and other co-opted poster spaces, and when they are advertised, the posters are quickly covered up by new events.<sup>691</sup> Posters advertising "Classical music" or "Musique Classique," as the genre is usually referred to in Mauritius, are only found with some regularity in the hill suburbs of the interior.

The general picture that emerges is of two principal musical traditions competing for attention. One of these traditions is distinctly Mauritian, centered on *séga* and its spin-off genres. The other is Indian or Indo-Mauritian and vacillates variously between a variety of ethnolinguistic cultural roots (e.g., Marathi devotional music and Telugu dance) and the pan-Indian spread of Hindi-language Bollywood. In terms of numbers, *séga* easily dominates the variety and volume of recordings for sale; although Port Louis has one dedicated Indian music store and a handful of Indian stores that sell music,<sup>692</sup> a close examination of the titles they stock reveals that many of the non-devotional music

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<sup>690</sup> The diversity of Sino-Mauritian linguistic heritage makes it harder to serve this market, as many households still preserve regional dialects such as Hakka that have largely been supplanted by Mandarin and Cantonese on the mainland. The current practice is for younger Sino-Mauritians to be taught English as their main language and encouraged to study Mandarin as a foreign language.

<sup>691</sup> There is an informal convention among poster-pasting crews that new posters will be allowed to stand freely for one week, after which they are fair game to be covered up by newer posters.

<sup>692</sup> Six small music store chains and a few independent competitors deal primarily with *séga*.

recordings contain *séga* songs in Bhojpuri and Hindi. Indian music can be bought in a number of places around the island, but *séga* is the only genre of music that can be bought almost anywhere where music is sold in Mauritius.

This broad permeation of *séga* through Mauritian society today would have surprised most Mauritians during the 1960s. The vogue for *séga salon* in the postwar period had largely subsided by the end of the 1950s, supplanted by a more general interest in Western popular music genres and Bollywood. For most of the population, *séga* dancing was something only seen at a Créole-Mauritian wedding or when visiting one of the more isolated parts of the island such as the Rivière Noire region in the southwest, an hour-and-a-half bus ride away from the city center. The growth of the world consumer electronics market gradually reduced the price of television sets, introducing them slowly but steadily into communities. The arrival of a television in a Mauritian village was, as in many parts of the world, considered a significant event and served as something of a status symbol in the poorer areas. Owners of television sets were often eager to show off their acquisitions, and watching television with one's neighbors supplanted *séga salon* and other activities that had formerly drawn larger communities together.

The growth of television in Mauritius as the preferred medium of nighttime entertainment for the masses was given a strong boost during this period by a new approach to French cultural diplomacy. When the French national television and radio operator, Radio France, upgraded its TV/Radio transmitter tower in nearby Réunion, the new transmitters were oriented towards Mauritius and operated with sufficient power to

provide television and radio coverage to most of the island.<sup>693</sup> In many respects, Radio France was a greater factor in the adoption of televisions in Mauritius than the local Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation, for the simple reason that dedicated French-language programming was more accessible to the Mauritian population at large than English broadcasts syndicated from the BBC. Despite a hundred and fifty years of English rule, most Mauritians continued to speak mostly French or Kreol as the languages of daily business.

This renewed consumption of French culture presented an especially effective threat to *séga* because of television's ability to attract entire family and community groups.<sup>694</sup> Previous vogues and fads for music and dance had tended to attract a subset of individuals (e.g., members of a particular age or cultural group), but television appealed to and even entranced a wide spectrum of viewers. Many interviewees who grew up in Mauritius during the 1950s and 1960s recounted stories of their family crowding with others into the house of a neighbor, the mayor, or a prominent personage in the village community to watch small black-and-white television sets. In many cases, watching television directly replaced attending *séga soirées* in their families' social calendars.<sup>695</sup>

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<sup>693</sup> This was greatly in excess of the broadcasting power needed to serve Réunion alone, given that Réunion is even smaller than Mauritius and located one hundred and fifty miles away.

<sup>694</sup> This move away from *séga* was actually viewed by many Mauritians as a positive development because of the negative stigma that continued to be associated with *séga*. (This was in spite of the efforts to make *séga salon* more respectable.) Several elderly men and women that I interviewed recounted hearing anti-*séga* sermons while attending church during the 1950s and 1960s.

<sup>695</sup> Most of the older Mauritians that I interviewed who had attended a *séga soirée* had only vague memories of the event, having been school-age at the time and thus were sent to bed



Some aspects of the *séga soirée* practice carried over into television watching. As the number of households with television sets in a small community increased, hosting television viewings was spread across several households. It was not uncommon for a household to regularly host these viewings on a particular day out of the week, with the largest gatherings taking place on Saturdays at the house of a prominent village figure such as a businessman or the mayor. The hosting household showed off its social status (or made pretensions to the same) by owning a television set and making it available in this fashion to other members of the community. In contrast to *séga parties* and *séga soirées*, however, the hosts of a television-viewing party did not provide anything more than the lightest sorts of refreshments and drinks to visitors.<sup>696</sup>

The penetration of television access into rural Mauritian communities in the late 1950s and early-to-mid-1960s was accompanied by a strong decline in *séga*. Much of the television programming typical of this period, being syndicated or modeled on British and French sources, involved Western music. Variety shows, bandstand performances, choreographed social dancing, and talk shows with guest performances by popular musicians – particularly rock and roll – reinforced the domination of Western popular music genres amongst the general population, with the most effective competition coming from Bollywood imports. By the start of 1965, most Mauritians had collectively

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after the performance of two *ségas*. See chapter 5 for additional information on *séga salon* and *séga soirées*.

<sup>696</sup> The root of this change has to do with the fact that television-viewing parties did not, unlike the *séga soirées*, rotate amongst a large group of hosts. Regularly feeding and a large group of attendees would have been cost-prohibitive – especially as the television owners did not tend to visit other television owners to enjoy the same hospitality.

cast off both the local *séga* and imported European art music traditions that had characterized their island soundscape for almost two hundred and fifty years.

### **Sources on Modern Mauritius**

Modern Mauritius has been examined in greater volume and detail than any other period in the island's history. The flowering of scholarship on Mauritius includes numerous studies of Mauritian politics, political history, economics, society, and tourism. Since independence, *séga* in Mauritius has been the subject of article and book-length studies by anthropologists, dance historians, folklorists, literary scholars, and sociologists. Nor is this interest in *séga* limited to a single generation of scholars: in Fall 2011, at least five doctoral students from British and French universities were conducting field research in Mauritius on various aspects of the previously listed topics. This scholarly interest has produced a wealth of primary source observations and secondary source-monographs on *séga* from the perspective of their respective disciplines – but little in the way of specifically music scholarship. As a result, this chapter is intended in part as historical survey of important musical trends in *séga* and European art music in Mauritius during the period from 1965-2012, presenting information that has not previously been collected or organized into a coherent history.

Musical recordings of Mauritian *séga* are, of course, readily available in Mauritius. Mauritian *séga* musicians and ensembles that have toured internationally frequently have recordings that can be purchased from distributors in the United Kingdom and France, especially in Paris and London where there are large expat

communities of Mauritians. These recordings are usually but not always older selections; when separate editions of the same recording are published for European and Mauritian markets, the European editions usually include printed song lyrics – an element that is uncommon in Mauritian CD packages. As of this writing (2012), the quantity of Mauritian music recordings that can be purchased from American distributors and online music stores is quite limited, although Mauritian songs can be found interspersed in compilations of Indian Ocean island and African music. A number of Canadian record labels have distribution agreements with Mauritian artists and/or carry ethnographic recordings.

The largest, most comprehensive, and most current repository of Mauritian music recordings is held at the National Library of Mauritius in Port Louis, Mauritius. The collection catalog can be accessed online<sup>697</sup> and the collection itself can be accessed onsite during regular business hours. This non-circulating collection primarily consists of CDs submitted since 2000 in fulfillment of the Mauritian copyright deposit requirement; its coverage of prior decades is limited primarily to donations and reissues.<sup>698</sup> The copyright deposit requirement is not vigorously enforced and many items in this collection have gone missing or are not correctly catalogued;<sup>699</sup> as a result, the most accurate record of the collection contents is the acquisitions ledger kept in the library's

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<sup>697</sup> <http://202.123.28.124/uhtbin/webcat/>.

<sup>698</sup> The National Library of Mauritius is a relatively young institution, having opened in January 2000.

<sup>699</sup> The OPAC catalog system used by the National Library of Mauritius does not use equivalencies for letters with diacritical markings. Since entries may have errors and use diacritics inconsistently, this can make title and author searches very difficult.

AV storage room. Researchers are recommended to search the catalog off-site, as Internet access on-site is very slow. There are also no machines onsite for playing LPs or CDs, so researchers will need to provide their own playback and listening equipment. The National Library has also inherited a comprehensive collection of Mauritian newspapers and magazines (transferred from the National Archives of Mauritius), enabling researchers to examine press coverage, advertising, and other related ephemera.<sup>700</sup> A number of biographies of Mauritian musicians written by local journalists are also in the library's collections.

Early radio and television broadcast archives of *séga* (and, after 1987, some features and concerts of European art music concerts in Mauritius) are primarily preserved overseas. The Archives de Radio France in Paris hold the largest body of this material from before the mid-1980s, including numerous recordings made before *séga* became regular broadcast content in Mauritius itself. As of this writing (2012), the Service Archives Écrites et Musée de Radio France is closed due to ongoing renovations, but materials are still available for access via advance request.<sup>701</sup> Radio France also issued many albums of *séga* music in the 1970s and 1980s on LPs and audiocassettes;

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<sup>700</sup> Researchers should be aware that there can be a considerable backlog in processing acquisitions; newspapers are usually available in 0-2 business days, but (as of 2012) books and periodicals may not be catalogued and made available to the public for up to a year.

<sup>701</sup> Interested researchers can contact the archivists directly at: [archivesecrites@radiofrance.com](mailto:archivesecrites@radiofrance.com). For information on finding aids, see “Archives Historiques,” Radio France, accessed 22 Dec 2012, <http://www.radiofrance.fr/lentreprise/lhistoire-de-rf/archives-historiques/>.

copies of some of these releases can be accessed in the Médiathèque of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France-François Mitterrand in Paris.

For the first several decades of Mauritian independence, the national broadcaster, the Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), provided most local television and radio service. MBC did not include extensive broadcasting of *séga* and other related music genres until the 1980s; an advance request is required to access their archives. Following the deregulation of the Mauritian airwaves in the 1990s, several new broadcasters emerged as the agglomerated broadcasting market segmented into more targeted markets.<sup>702</sup> The most important local broadcaster besides MBC is Radio One, a private corporation whose primary station focuses on French- and Kreol-language broadcasts. Advance notice is strongly recommended for researchers looking to access the Radio One archives.

## **On Fieldwork**

My numerous interviews and conversations with Mauritians throughout my fieldwork period provided a broad and valuable source of information for this research project involving *séga* in postcolonial Mauritius. Although the Republic of Mauritius is classified as a Third-World country, the main island is relatively well developed and possesses an extensive public health system, producing a long average lifespan

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<sup>702</sup> Similar deregulations of the airwaves also took place elsewhere in the world during this time, including in many Caribbean island states. Small island states that deregulated their airwaves typically saw a huge growth in local recording and broadcasting. See, for example, Jocelyne Guilbault, *Governing Sound: The Cultural Politics of Trinidad's Carnival Musics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 170.

competitive with that in many European nations. As a result, many individuals from all social classes who were in their twenties and thirties during the run-up to independence are still alive. This provides a wealth of potential interviewees, but also a particular set of constraints: many activists who wrote *séga* protest songs in the 1960s and 1970s are still active in politics today, sometimes on different sides of the political divide than before.<sup>703</sup> Festering political disagreements, respect for former colleagues, and the Mauritian pattern of social networking in which individual contacts and referrals comprise an exclusive resource must all be considered when conducting interviews.

Mauritian citizens brought many of these concerns to my attention and made numerous unsolicited suggestions. My host, for example, offered, “Do not tell someone that other people are helping you. Otherwise they may decide not to talk to you, or they will feel unimportant.”<sup>704</sup> Others who had previously been active in politics made remarks such as “Don’t mention that you talked with me,” and “You should not talk to [insert name].” These suggestions were offered very frequently by anyone who I told that I planned to interview Mauritians; they are a reflection of a culture of interpersonal communication that prizes personal networks and the value of being able to provide a personal referral. Most Mauritians referred me exclusively to people within their own

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<sup>703</sup> Paul Bérenger, for example, currently heads the Mouvement Militant Mauricien and is the Leader of the Opposition. Anerood Jugnauth currently heads the Mouvement Socialiste Militant and was the President of Mauritius from 2003-2012.

<sup>704</sup> Clarel Bastien-Sylva (Proprietor, Le Capitaine Touriste Residence), in discussion with the author, October 2011.

social networks, a convention that often resulted in a very roundabout chain of lateral referrals rather than initiating direct lines of communication immediately.

Persistence is essential when navigating this chain of communication. Visitors from Europe and North America will be surprised to learn that although cellphones are ubiquitous, the pricing structures of Mauritius' telecommunications market have produced some very different customs. Many Mauritians neither listen to nor leave voicemails; missed calls are considered the normal way of requesting a callback or responding to a call.<sup>705</sup> Since missed call notifications do not show up when a phone is turned off, multiple calls may be required before the communication is noticed.<sup>706</sup>

A special set of concerns exists when conducting research on *séga* and politics. The use of Kreol (the language of most *séga* song lyrics) in public contexts often has strong political overtones. Whether or not Kreol should be a language of instruction in public schools (it is currently discouraged in favor of English or French) or should be an official topic for study (a pilot program was launched in 2012) is a subject that has aroused and continues to provoke rancorous debate in the Mauritian parliament.

Advocates for the artistic value of *séga* lyrics as poetry are usually also advocates for the

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<sup>705</sup> Most Mauritians use pay-as-you-go cellular phone plans for which incoming phone calls are free but outgoing calls are charged if the call is picked up. As a result, a local custom has arisen in which most people will call and then deliberately hang up before the other person can pick up, forcing the other person to call back and pick up the phone charge. Younger Mauritians sidestep this by sending text messages, which are less expensive than airtime.

<sup>706</sup> Researchers from Western countries may also be presented with surprise request for assistance on a variety of seemingly random tasks, ranging from information on applying to foreign universities to requests for lodging should the person eventually visit the researcher's home country. Politely refusing requests is only rarely problematic, but many other researchers shared stories in which they felt that they been taken advantage of due to their inability to say no.

use of Kreol as the official language of government, which remains English after forty-four years of independence.<sup>707</sup> Perhaps the most famous living author of politically charged *séga* song lyrics, Dev Virahsawmy, retired from the direct political arena to advocate for Kreol-language through literature, writing plays, novels, and essays in Kreol. Many other writers who cover topics related to *séga* are similarly intertwined with Mauritian politics. Proceeding along the roundabout course suggested by Mauritian contacts, although sometimes frustrating, helps greatly with navigating these unseen political and ideological minefields.

### ***Séga*, Racial Politics, and the Run-Up to Independence**

The history of music in modern Mauritius is no less connected to local politics and international geopolitics than the preceding centuries of colonial rule. Perhaps the single most important factor in the development of music in Mauritius in the postwar period was the worldwide decolonization movement. The British Empire began its long, gradual breakup almost immediately after the end of the Second World War as long-suppressed independence movements surged to the forefront in dozens of overseas colonies. The primarily Indo-Mauritian movement for Mauritian independence had been

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<sup>707</sup> This situation, with the overwhelming majority of the population having a very limited comprehension of the official language, is very common in postcolonial Sub-Saharan African states. Fluency in the colonial languages of French and English is still seen by most Mauritians as necessary for success and a semi-neutral form of communication in a polyglot landscape where advocacy for Hindi and Mauritian Bhojpuri competes with advocacy for Kreol. For a discussion of the general problems of language politics in postcolonial Sub-Saharan Africa, see Maggie Canvin, "Postcolonial Development, Language, and Nationhood," in *Contents Global Issues in Language, Education and Development: Perspectives from Postcolonial Countries*, ed. by Naz Rassool (Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters, 2007), 50-96, especially 87-90.



politically active since the 1930s but represented only a small minority of the populace during its first decades of activity. The independence of India – the crown jewel of the British colonial empire and Mauritius’ largest trading partner – in 1948 gave new impetus to the Mauritian independence movement, especially as the Indo-Mauritian population became culturally aligned with the land of their forefathers.

Ties between India and Mauritius deepened considerably following Indian independence. British India and British Mauritius had enjoyed extensive human and commercial ties through most of their joint history of British rule; after Indian independence, these ties were further reinforced by the Indian government’s educational and cultural initiatives. Classically trained Indian singers and dancers were sent on extended performance tours to Mauritius in the 1950s and 1960s, capitalizing on the new popularity of Indian culture on the island from Bollywood film imports. The Indian government also set up scholarship programs for young Mauritian intellectuals to attend universities in India.<sup>708</sup> This produced a generation of Indo-Mauritian politicians who were culturally and intellectually aligned with India and not with the British Empire – and strongly interested in Mauritian independence.

By contrast, the island’s minorities did not share these pro-independence sentiments. Anglo-Mauritians, Créole-Mauritians, Franco-Mauritians, Christian Indo-Mauritians, Sino-Mauritians, and others were almost universally opposed to

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<sup>708</sup> Iswarduth Nundlall, the author of “Music in Mauritius” (1957), was one such example.

independence, fearing political domination by the Hindu Indo-Mauritian majority.<sup>709</sup>

When British authorities announced universal suffrage and a gradual transition to independence in 1961, these minorities began lobbying in earnest for a referendum to challenge the question of independence. British authorities in Whitehall, however, were pursuing an accelerated program of decolonization and ignored the calls for a referendum.<sup>710</sup> After a coalition of Indo-Mauritian political parties won several intermediate elections, the anti-independence sentiment erupted in 1965 into political unrest with rioting and demonstrations.

This unrest spiked in 1967, after the results of a parliamentary election interpreted as an unofficial referendum showed that some forty-three percent of the island's population were firmly opposed to independence. Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, the Chief Minister of Mauritius and the head of the largest Indo-Mauritian political party, interpreted his party's electoral victory as an endorsement of their pro-independence policies and conducted behind-the-scenes negotiations with British authorities. Under this agreement, Ramgoolam agreed that Mauritius would cede title to the Chagos Islands in

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<sup>709</sup> A longstanding piece of British colonial policy included protections for ethnic minorities against domination by ethnic majorities. The size of the Indo-Mauritian demographic was a major factor in the other groups' fear of Indo-Mauritian political domination, with the Indo-Mauritians comprising three quarters of the population in 1965. This was a vastly different situation than in most other British colonies; in Trinidad, for example, the Afro-Trinbago and Indo-Trinbago populations were roughly equal in size, with no ethnicity or ethnically aligned party being able to command a majority of the votes. See Viranjini Munansinghe, *Callaloo or Tossed Salad? East Indians and the Cultural Politics of Identity in Trinidad* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 193, 206-08.

<sup>710</sup> Helen M. Hintjens and M. D. D. Newitt, *The Political Economy of Small Indian Ocean Islands: The Importance of Being Small* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1992), 96-98; William F. S. Miles, "The Creole Malaise in Mauritius," *African Affairs* 98: 215.

return for British support of a referendum-less independence. 12 March 1968 was announced as the date on which Mauritius would become independent.

This announcement caused Mauritius to descend into chaos, with repeated rioting and demonstrations sweeping the island. Politically charged ethnic violence caused more than three hundred deaths during the period 1965-1968, with most of the deaths occurring in the run-up to the 1967 election and after the announcement of impending independence. The Créole-Mauritian population had voted all but unanimously against independence and their principal political party, the Mauritian Social Democratic Party (PMSD), continued to argue for close ties with the United Kingdom. Créole-Mauritian protesters were known for singing political songs at their rallies, most of which were *contrafacta* of well-known tunes. The lyrics of some of these protest songs were occasionally written and printed beforehand, but most were generated extemporaneously and taught to the crowds via call and response. Some protesters, especially those marching from rural villages to the capital for demonstrations, improvised *séga* songs during the marches. These songs, with a soloist near the head of the line improvising verses and the rest of the marchers joining in on the chorus, are collectively referred to as *séga engagé* (“engaged” or “involved” *séga*) – a subgenre of *séga* focused on political activism and protest, rather than love and other amorous topics.<sup>711</sup>

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<sup>711</sup> Anthropologist Jacques Lee maintains that *séga engagé* emerged shortly after, rather than before, independence. Lee associates the rise of *séga engagé* with the formation of the Mouvement des Étudiants Militant, the predecessor of today’s MMM political party. I propose (based on interviews conducted during my fieldwork) that the practice began several years

*Séga engagé* existed almost entirely as an oral practice and was not a commercial genre of music. At the time, Mauritius had no domestic commercial recording company or (outside of radio) domestic production of music recordings. With the exception of a few short snippets captured in news broadcasts,<sup>712</sup> there are almost no extant recordings of *séga engagé* songs from the 1960s – an omission that can be traced to a combination of a lack of recording facilities, government control of the airwaves, and the songs’ essentially improvisatory generation.<sup>713</sup> Most *séga engagé* songs were ephemeral works, created spontaneously for an occasion and then forgotten. A particularly humorous or memorable chorus or melody might be repeated later, but no thought was given to their preservation as the inspiration and use was linked to a particular event.

This ephemerality is captured in an account of a 1967 protest march recounted to me in 2011 by Enri, a Créole-Mauritian man.<sup>714</sup> Enri, now sixty-eight years old, was twenty-three years of age and had no stable employment at the time. Despite this, his memory of events was very clear:

*My friends were going, so I went too. . . . We met in Sable-Noir [a fishing village near Port Louis]. There were dozens of us, more than a hundred. The march to*

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beforehand. See Jacques K. Lee, *Sega: The Mauritian Folk Dance* (London: Nautilus Publishing Co., 1990), 74-76.

<sup>712</sup> Unfortunately, the few examples that I was able to locate could not be transcribed due to their short duration and the poor quality of the recordings.

<sup>713</sup> During the 1960s, the only recording studio in Mauritius was the broadcast studio of the Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation, a state-controlled entity that supported the majority government. MBC was, unsurprisingly, not friendly to the idea of broadcasting anti-government protest songs.

<sup>714</sup> This pseudonym is used at the interviewee’s request.

*Port Louis took more than an hour in the sun.<sup>715</sup> Someone had brought a drum, a ravanne. They beat on it as we marched, and someone started singing. We joined in – it was a song about Ramgoolam [the Chief Minister of Mauritius], very funny. We would not say such things today.<sup>716</sup> The verse went through the line until it came to me. I made up a few lines, not very funny, but everyone sang the chorus after and it continued [despite my poor performance]. We sang two or three songs like that before we arrived.<sup>717</sup>*

When pressed for details, Enri could not recall any other details of the exact lyrics of the first song or the content of the others. He remembered easily whom he had marched alongside and who did not come with them, but only a general impression of the song lyrics themselves. He did, however, hum a short snippet of a simple melody corresponding to the chorus. When asked why he might recall that, he replied to me, matter-of-factly, “It was a common *séga* [melody] back then. We sang it at many marches.”<sup>718</sup>

Enri’s account was typical of those I collected from Créole-Mauritians. Most of the marchers, they remembered, were young men: friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. One or more people brought along a drum (usually a *ravanne*, occasionally some improvised instruments as well) and played sporadically during the march. Sometimes this would spur someone to start singing a song; if it was a *séga*, the marchers would listen until they knew the chorus and could join in. Verses were improvised on some

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<sup>715</sup> If this detail is correct, the march likely stopped several times along its way to pick up other participants, as it is only half an hour’s brisk walk from Sable-Noir to the outskirts of Port Louis.

<sup>716</sup> Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, or SSR, is now near-universally venerated in Mauritius as the father of the nation.

<sup>717</sup> Enri [pseudonym] and Basil Considine, 8 November 2011. Translated from Kreol.

<sup>718</sup> Ibid.

topic related to politics, often making fun of elements of speeches or specific politicians, and the duties of improvising verses were distributed informally amongst the group.

The accounts of *séga engagé* by Enri and other individuals that I interviewed closely resemble the basic practices and conventions of *séga salon* and the customs of the *séga soirée*.<sup>719</sup> When pressed, Enri confessed that he did not clearly remember whether or not he had ever attended a *séga soirée*, as they weren't a custom in his village during his youth. He had, however, sung *séga* songs when playing with neighbors' children and had improvised verses in that context. This suggests that the practice of verse improvisation seen in *séga salon* continued in some Créole-Mauritian households despite the disappearance of *séga salon* or the *séga soirée* itself. When an appropriate social occasion such as a protest march brought a large group of people with similar backgrounds together, crafting a *séga* song related to the occasion – a *séga engagé* song – was the natural result.

Despite the best efforts of Créole-Mauritian politicians and activists (including the incisive use of *séga engagé* songs at rival pro- and anti-independence rallies, a use that often triggered a violent response), the independence process was not derailed. The British authorities took the unusual step of flying in more than a thousand soldiers from East Africa to try to keep the peace. Although this group of soldiers was woefully small for such a task, the soldiers did suppress some demonstrations and protected government buildings and important infrastructure from arson and vandalism. The dawn of 1968 saw

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<sup>719</sup> See chapter 5.

a divided Mauritius heading towards its scheduled independence, an event that both pro- and anti-independence parties began to realize was a foregone conclusion.<sup>720</sup>

### **The Sounds of Independence**

Although the run-up to independence was fraught with violence and turbulence, the independence festivities on 12 March 1968 were celebrated with great popular joy and acclaim. The main ceremony was preceded by a motor parade, with a long motorcade passing through the outlying towns and villages on the approach to Port Louis, down roads lined with crowds and decorated by municipalities and private citizens with numerous arches and resplendent banners. For the main ceremony, a great crowd estimated between 100,000 and 150,000 Mauritians gathered at the Champ de Mars. The crowd packed the bleachers, filled the standing areas and streets around the field, and covered the surrounding mountainsides.<sup>721</sup> This was the largest human gathering in the history of Mauritius to-date, far exceeding attendance at the greatest military parades and flag-blessing ceremonies of the French and British colonial eras.

The main independence ceremony at the Champ de Mars set the tone and model for its subsequent anniversaries. The event began at 10:55 a.m. with a joint ensemble

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<sup>720</sup> For a succinct but detailed political history of Mauritius in the two decades leading up to independence, including the matters of debate and sociocultural factors, see EISA, “Mauritius, the Road to Independence (1945-1968),” Electoral Institute for the Sustainability of Democracy in Africa, last modified September 2009, <http://www.eisa.org.za/WEP/mauoverview7.htm>.

<sup>721</sup> Business Magazine, *1968-2008: Le Mémorial de L'Indépendance. 40 Ans de la Vie de Maurice*. Special Edition of *Business Magazine*, 12 March 2008 (2008): 20-22.

composed of the Police Orchestra and the military band of the 10<sup>th</sup> Madras Infantry<sup>722</sup> playing the British national anthem, “God Save the Queen.”<sup>723</sup> A march followed, accompanying a long parade of soldiers, judges, and other officials of the outgoing regime. The assembled crowd was then treated to motorcyclists demonstrating precision riding and acrobatics, several short military parade marches, and a Chinese dragon dance. In a concession to the Créole-Mauritian community, the penultimate performance was a set of *séga* dances by a troupe from Mahébourg. These *séga* dances were led and choreographed by Iswarduth Nundlall, who had returned to Mauritius some years prior and acquired a reputation as a respected folklorist and expert in Indian and *séga* dance.<sup>724</sup> An elaborate “helicopter dance” showcasing precision flying concluded this part of the ceremony on schedule at 11:55 a.m.

The second part of the ceremony, just five minutes long, saw the British flag lowered and folded to a solemn repeat of “God Save the Queen” by the joint musical ensemble. Then, as the new Mauritian flag was raised to replace the Union Jack, the same ensemble played the new Mauritian national anthem, “Motherland,” in its first public performance. The ceremony concluded and riotous applause broke out as the assembled

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<sup>722</sup> The 10<sup>th</sup> Madras Infantry was the last British Army unit to be posted for regular garrison duty in Mauritius.

<sup>723</sup> “God Save the Queen,” despite being taught to schoolchildren, was not very familiar to most Mauritians by this time. Iswarduth Nundlall noted in 1957 that Mauritians attending English film screenings were usually confused as to why their British counterparts stood up when the anthem was played before feature films. See Nundlall, “Music in Mauritius,” 34-35.

<sup>724</sup> Nundlall returned to Mauritius in 1959 and was appointed to the position “Education Officer (Music)” in the Ministry of Education in 1961.



soldiers of the Special Military Force<sup>725</sup> fired rifle salutes and naval warships in the harbor fired a 31-gun salute with their cannon. As the crowd dispersed, spontaneous *séga* dancing broke out in the streets and continued into the evening.<sup>726</sup>

Three musical aspects of the independence ceremony deserve special mention. First, this ceremony brought the tradition of imported European military bands to a close in Mauritius. Although the tradition had been interrupted several times before, this was its final and definitive end; thereafter, only the homegrown Police Orchestra remained to carry the torch. Compared to the great band concerts that had accompanied major ceremonies in the French and early British colonial periods, the bands' contribution to the first independence celebration was limited. They performed just a few musical items, all of which accompanied important structural elements of the ceremony: the call-to-attention, the parade, the flag lowering, and the flag raising.

Second, the origins of the Mauritian national anthem are an interesting antecedent of reality television and an apt illustration of a typically Mauritian approach to song composition. The selection of a national anthem for independent Mauritius was delegated to the Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation, which announced a call for submissions and a

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<sup>725</sup> The Special Mobile Force is a paramilitary Mauritian police unit comparable to American SWAT units.

<sup>726</sup> Business Magazine, 1968-2008: *Le Mémorial de L'Indépendance. 40 Ans de la Vie de Maurice*, 42.

juried competition to select the song. No financial prize was offered in remuneration and no materials to set were provided.<sup>727</sup>

News of the competition reached Philippe Ohsan, the director of the Police Orchestra. In his capacity as a leading artistic figure in Mauritius, Ohsan often received unsolicited submissions of music and texts from colleagues. One such colleague sent him a French poem entitled “Motherland,” by a local poet named Jean-Georges Prosper; one of his band musicians, Philippe Gentil, separately sent Ohsan a song melody that he’d composed as a possible addition to the Police Orchestra’s repertoire. Ohsan would later recount that he played Gentil’s melody and thought, “It’s like our future national anthem.”<sup>728</sup> After reviewing Prosper’s poem, Ohsan realized that the two were metrically matched and – in the tradition of band and orchestra leaders in Mauritius dating back to Joseph LaGlaine’s company in 1792 – set the text to the (separately composed) tune and orchestrated it. His submission was reviewed by a panel of experts including Iswarduth Nundlall and accepted as the new national anthem.<sup>729</sup> The first word of notice that Gentil and Prosper received that they had unwittingly composed the national anthem of Mauritius was when they were contacted by MBC via telephone at the beginning of March 1968 – less than two weeks before the independence celebrations.<sup>730</sup>

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<sup>727</sup> Jean-Georges Prosper and Philippe Gentil, *Gloire à la Mère Patrie: Inspirations de l’Hymne National* (Mauritius: Éditions Le Printemps – Ile Maurice, 2008), 20, 41.

<sup>728</sup> Ibid., 20, 31.

<sup>729</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>730</sup> Ibid., 31-32. There are very few pieces of custom music prepared for large, important ceremonies in Mauritius that have been entirely original. Ohsan’s choice of an original poem and tune, however, represented a meaningful divergence from the previous usage of opera and vaudeville melodies paired with new texts.

**Table 6 - “Motherland,” the National Anthem of Mauritius.<sup>731</sup>**

Gloire à toi, Île Maurice.	Une seule nation,
Île Maurice, O ma mère Patrie,	En paix, justice et liberté
Fraîche est ta beauté,	Pays bien aimé
Doux est ton parfum.	Que Dieu te bénisse
Nous voici tous debout	Aujourd'hui et toujours.
Comme un seul peuple.	

The third musical element of special note in the Mauritian independence celebration was entirely spontaneous: *séga* dancing in the streets of Port Louis after the main ceremony finished. This dancing was likely inspired in part by the *séga* dances seen during the ceremony itself – an unusual treat for the audience and the first recorded instance of a government-sponsored *séga* performance in the history of Mauritius. The Mauritian newspaper *L'Advance* reported that members of the crowd brought *ravannes* and cymbals with them to the Champ de Mars, beating on the instruments fervently as the Mauritian flag was raised to the top of the flagpole.<sup>732</sup> These instruments were most likely brought not with any intended music-making purpose, but simply as convenient and portable noisemakers, much like a *vuvuzela* at a South African soccer game. When exuberant Créole-Mauritians (there is no reason to suspect that other ethnicities were

<sup>731</sup> Text by Jean-Georges Prosper, c. 1967. Depending on the context, the national anthem of Mauritius may be heard in English, French (most common), Kreol, or (rarely) Hindi. Reproduced from *Jamboree 2007: Souvenir Song Book – August 2007* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Mauritius Scout Association, 2007), 81.

<sup>732</sup> “Le Spectacle d’Indépendance,” *L'Advance*, 13 Mars 1968, 1.

involved) began to dance *séga* after the ceremony, numerous *ravannes* were available to accompany them. As the distinctive sound of the *ravanne* echoed through the street, other people were inspired to join in, either following the sound to link up with other groups or starting their own *séga* circles at the first convenient locale.

### **Independence and the Rise of *Séga Engagé***

The peace and exuberance of the independence celebration was only a temporary lull in Mauritius' domestic troubles. Well before independence, British officials in London had quietly predicted that Mauritius would descend into postcolonial anarchy or civil war after British forces were withdrawn. As independence approached, the riots and civil disorder of 1965-1968 seemed to bear out this prediction.<sup>733</sup> Mauritius, they decided, was an island with many problems and no natural resources of note – a demographic ticking time bomb with bitter ethnic rivalries, a high population density, rapid population growth, and an agricultural economy dominated by and overly dependent on sugar cane monoculture.<sup>734</sup> Indeed, Mauritius' first several years of independence gave them little cause to think otherwise, with years of ongoing ethnic strife after the outwardly exuberant independence ceremony. A decline in global sugar prices and a resistance to family planning programs (sustaining a high birth rate) completed the panoply of concerns.

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<sup>733</sup> This opinion was echoed by several noted economists, including the Nobel Prize winner James Meade. See James E. Meade, *The Economic Structure of Mauritius* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1961); Richard M. Titmuss and Brian Abel-Smith, *Social Policies and Population Growth in Mauritius* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1968); and V. S. Napual, *The Overcrowded Barracoon* (New York: Knopf, 1973).

<sup>734</sup> See, for example, Hintjens and Newitt, *The Political Economy of Small Tropical Islands*, 96-98.

A large human exodus compounded the island's troubles. Between 1961 and 1982, more than sixty-six thousand Mauritian citizens emigrated from the country – more than ten percent of the main island's population in 1961.<sup>735</sup> The bulk of these émigrés – almost all of the Anglo-Mauritians, many of the Franco Mauritians, and most of the (French-speaking) Créole-Mauritian middle and upper classes – left during the turbulent years immediately before and after independence (1965-1973), creating a broad disruption of the local economy.<sup>736</sup> This exodus not only removed most of the island's fluent English and French speakers but also much of its audiences for European art music and theater.<sup>737</sup> With the exception of the Police Orchestra, almost all of the island's professional musicians trained in the European art music tradition also left the island.<sup>738</sup> This human exodus, a worsening economy, and rising unemployment set the stage for a new political party to emerge: the Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM).

The MMM was founded in 1969 by a group of high school and university students who believed that the existing political system in Mauritius was inherently

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<sup>735</sup> “Worldwide Population Statistics, 1961,” NationMaster, accessed 22 December 2012, [http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/peo\\_pop-people-population&date=1961](http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/peo_pop-people-population&date=1961). Note that the total given in this source includes the dependency of Rodrigues.

<sup>736</sup> Larry W. Bowman, *Mauritius: Democracy and Development in the Indian Ocean* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 64, 155-56.

<sup>737</sup> Although only a small portion of the Mauritian diaspora has returned to the island in the post-independence era, emigrés and their children are often highly engaged in following Mauritian music through video sharing websites, internet forums, and newsletters. *Kreol Magazine* (a travel publication that now serves a more general Creole audience), for example, began as a publication specifically for the Mauritian emigré community in London. In September 2011, I spoke with the grown children of several Mauritian emigrés living in London and found them very well-informed about the latest hit songs, albums, and hot artists in Mauritius.

<sup>738</sup> Claudie Ricaud (Director, Conservatoire de Musique-François Mitterrand), in discussion with the author, 27 March 2012.

biased in favor of a small group of elites.<sup>739</sup> Party members sympathized with Liberal Marxist political philosophies, advocated for increased educational and employment opportunities for students and women, and promoted the use of the Kreol language. Mauritian Kreol, they argued, was the common language of all Mauritians and should be the official language of the country – not the English or French of their former colonial rulers.<sup>740</sup> This message attracted members from the full spectrum of ethnicities and religious backgrounds in Mauritius, making the MMM the first major Mauritian political party to not draw its support from a single ethnic or ethno-religious base; most of its early members were students or unemployed recent graduates.<sup>741</sup> As newcomers to politics, the MMM leadership developed a number of unorthodox methods of organization and discourse, including the use of *séga* songs at meetings to serve as catalysts for discussion, draw attention to items of concern, or even suggest policy.<sup>742</sup>

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<sup>739</sup> At point, the island's economic elite was drawn from a very small slice of primarily Indo-Mauritian society, which the MMM alleged was using the government to establish a plutocracy.

<sup>740</sup> Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Common Denominators: Ethnicity, Nation-building and Compromise in Mauritius* (New York: Berg, 1998), 88-90.

By the time of independence, English had been the legal language of Mauritius for more than a century, although the language had never been spoken fluently by more than a small fraction of the population.

<sup>741</sup> The MMM was unusual not only for attracting a mix of Créole- and Indo-Mauritians, but also for having a strong mix of women and men involved in leadership roles.

<sup>742</sup> Some critics have characterized the MMM's use of *séga* as an attempt at cultural hegemony, falsely equating the use of Kreol with the party being dominated by Créole-Mauritians. It would be more correct to characterize the pre-MMM political landscape as what Jonathan Friedman calls "a struggle for cultural hegemony" between different political parties, whereas the MMM efforts seized upon Kreol and *séga* as the opposing idea, the "shared point of departure." See Jonathan Friedman, *Cultural Identity and Global Process* (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 76.

The MMM embraced pre-composed *séga engagé* songs as a medium for political and social discourse that could bridge intellectual divides, a practice that was at first derided as empty singing but became a powerful political tool.<sup>743</sup> Many of these *ségas* used lyrics written by the party's leadership: individuals such as Paul Béranger, Jooneed and Chafeekh Jeeroburkhan, and Dev Virahsawmy who are now legendary figures in Mauritian politics.<sup>744</sup> The young songwriters from the MMM created a body of political and protest songs carrying coherent and nuanced political messages, often including extensive argumentation. Since the lyrics were of paramount importance, these *ségas* were normally performed without dancing and were integral, rather than incidental, parts of MMM meetings. Although the MMM *ségas* are not a direct continuation of the improvised *séga engagé* songs from the run-up to independence, they collectively constitute the second stage of *séga engagé*.<sup>745</sup>

In previous centuries, *ségas* were considered a purely lower class entertainment and associated with poverty and poor education.<sup>746</sup> The MMM's use of *séga* turned this perception on its head: its *ségatiers* (both the performers and the songwriters) were, in the words of Jacques K. Lee, "mainly unemployed graduates, politically aware students[.]"

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<sup>743</sup> This practice was, and remains, unique to the MMM.

<sup>744</sup> Paul Béranger is a Christian Franco-Mauritian, the Jeeroburkhan brothers are Telugu Indo-Mauritians, and Dev Virahsawmy is a Muslim Indo-Mauritian.

<sup>745</sup> Some writers date the origins of *séga engagé* to the foundation of the MMM, e.g., Lee, *Sega: The Mauritian Folk Dance*, 74-75.

<sup>746</sup> Although the practitioners of *séga salon* had attempted to create a more respectable form of *séga* (especially via the structures of the *séga soirée*), a more positive perception of *séga* still eluded the general population.

and other young intellectuals.”<sup>747</sup> Additionally, many of the party leaders who wrote *séga* songs had attended foreign universities before returning to Mauritius. Instead of eschewing Kreol and *séga*, as would have been expected, these highly educated individuals embraced the two as nationalistic mediums for songs about oppression and injustice.<sup>748</sup> Their use of *séga* songs defied convention and centuries of intellectual tradition, and can be seen as a deliberate act of appropriation to reclaim a common Mauritian heritage – a heritage intrinsically linked with Kreol.<sup>749</sup> The MMM’s use of *séga* created new associations for the music as a source of power and unity, rather than a degenerate or primitive piece of heritage to be discarded. *Séga* ceased to be a purely Kreol folk music genre and became the medium for powerful political messages.

The egalitarian leadership environment fostered by the MMM favored a free interchange of ideas, an attitude that extended to its *séga* ensembles. As party membership and musical participation grew, discussions about culture and other topics spilled out of the formal party meetings into a series of informal events called cultural nights (“soirées kiltirel”). These cultural nights – part intellectual discussion and part coffeehouse-like venues for sharing songs – developed a life of their own. Several of the

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<sup>747</sup> Ibid.

<sup>748</sup> Paul Bérenger, for example, attended Bangor University (then the University College of North Wales) in the United Kingdom, and Jooneed Jeeroburkhan attended the Université de Montréal in Canada.

<sup>749</sup> The use of *séga engagé* songs during the run-up to independence was a fringe practice and was associated with working-class Créole-Mauritians who were mostly uneducated and unemployed. The use of these songs was never a central or featured component of the Parti Social Démocrate Mauricien (PMSD)’s campaigning, which made their value easy to dismiss. In contrast, most of the *séga engagé* songs used by the MMM during its early years were written by leaders with educated middle- and upper-class backgrounds and used as central part of party activities.



most popular discussion/songwriting groups (“Grup Kiltirel”) developed to the point that they became mobile (rather than strictly local) attractions, touring the island and attracting non-MMM audiences. This made *séga* a recruiting tool for the MMM and a catalyst for dialogue and ideological rapprochement.<sup>750</sup>

The MMM’s *séga engagé* songs also developed a unique sound due to a new and distinctive set of instrumentation. The Grup Kiltirel included Indo-Mauritian and Créole-Mauritian members who brought their own instruments to the meetings, creating ensembles that mixed instruments from *séga* (the *ravanne*, *maravanne*, and triangle), Indian folk and classical music (the sitar, *tabla*, and harmonium), and Western music (the violin, guitar, and drum kit).<sup>751</sup> The songs that they created were generally slower than *ségas* meant for dancing, giving more emphasis on lyrical content and encouraging musical improvisation that responded to lyrical messages. This fusion mixed *séga* with European and Asian influences, creating an expanded melodic, harmonic, and aesthetic vocabulary that drew on the three parent traditions.<sup>752</sup> The sound was partly Créole,

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<sup>750</sup> Not all meetings of the Grup Kiltirel were strictly political. As the more popular groups developed concert followings, their cultural nights came to include a few (non-political) classic and contemporary *séga* songs.

<sup>751</sup> Most of the meeting venues did not have pianos, which at any rate were now very uncommon in Mauritian households. Electric keyboards did not appear at meetings until much later, after Casio began manufacturing (relatively) inexpensive battery-powered models during the 1980s.

<sup>752</sup> The distinctive sound of the MMM and its Grup Kiltirels’ *séga engagé* songs has led some writers to term it a separate genre, *santé engagé*. This term has largely disappeared from current parlance in favor of *séga engagé*.

partly Indian, partly European, and also something new – something that was, to the MMM, wholly and uniquely Mauritian.<sup>753</sup>

*Séga engagé* had three notable successes: one general and commercial, and two specific and political. Although the MMM's musical activities had begun with mostly political intent, the popularity of some groups branched into commercial music activities. Several of the Grup Kiltirel became professional musical ensembles, performing numerous concerts in Mauritius and Réunion and making commercial recordings.<sup>754</sup> The first Grup Kiltirel, Soley Ruz, was active for six years (1973-1979) before it dissolved due to its membership deciding to pursue solo musical careers or found their own musical ensembles; the Grup Latinier for example, was founded by two members of Soley Ruz after the breakup of Soley Ruz and remains an active and well-known professional ensemble today. The Grup Kiltirel Morisien (founded in 1975) and the Grup Zenfan Dodo (a less formal group that emerged in the mid-1990s) are two other famous *séga* ensembles that originated as MMM Grup Kiltirel. These ensembles sufficiently popularized *séga* to the extent that MBC began broadcasting their *séga* recordings; by the 1980s, this commercial form of *séga engagé* was one of the most popular types of music in Mauritius, with broad popularity amongst the working class.<sup>755</sup>

The MMM also used *séga engagé* to win two spectacular election successes, breaking the political monopoly held by the pre-independence political parties, which

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<sup>753</sup> Eriksen, *Common Denominators*, 88-89.

<sup>754</sup> This is not to suggest that these members were exclusively full-time musicians; most worked separate, daytime jobs in addition to their musical activities.

<sup>755</sup> Low, "De l'Afrique Rejetée à l'Afrique Retrouvée?" 46-8.

MMM members saw as supporting the establishment and status quo. First, the MMM won the largest percentage of the vote during the 1976 parliamentary elections; during the negotiations to form a government, however, rival political parties were still able to form a coalition government that gave them a narrow majority of the seats and excluded the MMM.<sup>756</sup> Smarting from this unexpected reversal, the MMM leadership planned a special get-out-the-vote campaign for the following legislative election.

The MMM electoral strategy for 1982 depended heavily on rallying the largest untapped demographic of potential voters: unemployed Indo-Mauritian housewives. The MMM had historically included the highest percentage of women in its leadership and membership of any Mauritian political party, and after the MMM was excluded from the government in 1976 it set up a special division for women's interests. Although the singers and instrumentalists in *séga* ensembles were still primarily male, many of the Grup Kiltirels included female singers and songwriters who were given special assignments for the 1982 election. Their efforts produced a core strategy in which a special set of *séga engagé* songs was created for the Indo-Mauritian woman demographic, setting new (political) lyrics to the melodies of recent Bollywood hit songs. These songs were used in outreach efforts including a vigorous door-to-door campaign to

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<sup>756</sup> EISA, "Mauritius: 1976 Legislative Assembly election results," Electoral Institute for the Sustainability of Democracy in Africa, updated November 2007, <http://www.eisa.org.za/WEP/mau1976results.htm>. The MMM won 34 out of the 70 seats in the legislature (48.57% of the seats); only the narrowest of margins and parliamentary sleight of hand allowed the other parties to keep the MMM from unilaterally forming a government.

rally undecided voters, producing a record voter turnout and a spectacular electoral victory.<sup>757</sup>

The 1982 parliamentary election in Mauritius was a great victory for the MMM and demonstrated the power of *séga engagé* as a political tool. An alliance between the MMM and a new party, the Parti Socialiste Mauricien (PSM),<sup>758</sup> won a record ninety-seven percent of the directly elected seats in the legislature – a great upset and the most spectacular electoral victory in the history of Mauritian politics. This gave the MMM-PSM alliance an overwhelmingly commanding majority in the Legislative Assembly, full control of the government ministries, and an electoral mandate.<sup>759</sup> Although the MMM splintered into two political parties the following year, forcing a new election, the MMM-led government aggressively promoted the Kreol language during its brief rein, including prominent actions such as changing the language of the Mauritian national anthem to Kreol for government events and its nightly broadcasts on Mauritian radio.<sup>760</sup>

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<sup>757</sup> During my fieldwork, I was able to meet and interview several women who had been targets of this door-to-door campaign. Although none of them could remember specific song lyrics or even the title of the Bollywood songs that provided the source melodies, all of them remembered the get-out-the-vote campaign vividly. All of these women had been stay-at-home housewives in 1982 and had never voted before.

<sup>758</sup> The PSM was formed by disaffected members of the parliamentary coalition created to block the MMM in 1976.

<sup>759</sup> The “Best Loser” system of assigning seats in the Mauritian parliament gave several seats to the opposition, a concession that still left the MMM-PSM alliance with 91% of the seats in the Legislative Assembly.

<sup>760</sup> Eriksen, *Common Denominators*, 89. The previous official government version of the national anthem used an English text, although prior to 1982 the French version was performed publicly more often in practice than the English version. Regular radio broadcasts of the national anthem disappeared during the deregulation of the Mauritian airwaves during the 1990s.

Although the MMM's dominating control of the Mauritian government apparatus was relatively brief, it had a profound long-term effect on the relationship between *séga* and the national government. The succeeding government restored the country's national anthem to its English version, but also took steps to add *séga* songs (albeit "tamer" songs) to public school curricula. In the 1970s, Iswarduth Nundlall<sup>761</sup> had written elementary school curricula for the Ministry of Education that used *séga* songs in Kreol to teach principles of music, morals, folklore, and history. Aside from a few pilot programs, these curricular proposals were largely ignored and not promoted by the various parties-in-power before 1982.<sup>762</sup> After the MMM lost power in 1983, however, the new government ordered the *séga* curricula to be rolled out across the island. Nundlall himself was appointed Minister of Education, allowing him to supervise the program's implementation and oversee the initial revisions and updates to the curriculum (including the addition of *séga* songs in non-Kreol languages such as Mauritian Bhojpuri, Hindi, French, and Mandarin).<sup>763</sup> This had the dual effect of promoting the spread of *séga* in Mauritian society while at the same time depoliticizing it: as *séga* became more universal, its association with the MMM weakened. Promoting *séga* as the heritage of all

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<sup>761</sup> The author of "Music in Mauritius" (1957) and the choreographer of the *séga* dancing featured in the 1968 celebration of independence.

<sup>762</sup> For most of the 1970s, Nundlall's main tasks at the Ministry of Education were to develop public Indian music and dance programs in Mauritius, including setting up international exchanges and conducting teacher training. Lutchmee Parsad Ramyeed, *The Establishment and Cultivation of Modern Standard Hindi in Mauritius* (Vacoas, Mauritius: Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1985), 130-38.

<sup>763</sup> Nundlall died in 1984, but his work has been continued by the numerous teachers and officials that he trained during his twenty-three years with the Ministries of the Arts and Education. Many elements from his curricular plans are still in use today.

Mauritians caused *séga* (and particularly *séga engagé*) to lose much of its power as a tool or symbol of resistance and opposition.

The lopsided electoral victory by the MMM-PSM alliance in 1982 introduced a dangerous idea into Mauritian politics: that a single political party could gain complete control of the government. The MMM's successes in 1976 and 1982 showed that this was both feasible and possible, galvanizing the opposition parties to rally against the MMM in subsequent elections. This birthed a tangle of shifting alliances that has continued to this day, in which political parties become close allies in one government and fervent opponents in the next. Despite the mix of strange bedfellows and shuffling ministries that have marked Mauritian governments since 1983, successive governments have nevertheless pursued clear and sustained educational plans promoting *séga* as the national culture of Mauritius.<sup>764</sup> This phenomenon alone is somewhat unusual – after all, before 1968, *séga* was considered a fringe folklore practice from a minority ethnic group, most of whose members had long since abandoned it. Prior to the electoral upset of 1982, coalition governments excluding the MMM had paid little attention to *séga*; afterwards, the other political parties took pains to highlight *séga* as the heritage of all Mauritians.<sup>765</sup>

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<sup>764</sup> This is not to say that the content of educational curricula isn't a politically volatile subject; *séga* has remained a key part of public education in spite of ongoing and often rancorous debates about the content of the general curriculum.

<sup>765</sup> This deliberate course of creolization is especially unusual in that the political leaders of a majority ethnic group (Indo-Mauritians) chose to adopt a minority culture that had (before the MMM) been largely expunged from society and denigrated. This is dramatically different than, for example, the gradual adoption of *calypso* as the national music of Trinidad & Tobago. In that latter case, *calypso* was considered the unofficial national culture well before independence and no single ethnic group represented a majority. See Peter Manuel, Kenneth M.

The interest paid by successive Mauritian governments to *séga* in the 1980s was the result of the dynamics of political power and an attempt to reduce the political utility of *séga* to the MMM, not an interest in folklore.<sup>766</sup>

### ***Hotel Séga and Séga Engagé***

While the MMM and its Grup Kiltirels explored the political and artistic spheres of *séga engagé* during the 1970s, another important type of *séga* emerged in one of Mauritius' newest postcolonial industries: tourism. This new subgenre, *hotel séga*, was developed and largely performed for visiting tourists. Its creation was a combination of happy accident and shrewd business sense, and the sound of *hotel séga* underwent rapid changes in response to trends and fads in Western popular music. Although *hotel séga* began as touristic culture, it eventually developed its own popularity among Mauritians and is the most popular type of *séga* in Mauritius today.

The Mauritian tourism industry is almost entirely a product of the postcolonial period. Colonial Mauritius had no organized tourism industry to speak of and little in the way of tourist facilities.<sup>767</sup> In the early-twentieth century, steamers occasionally deposited

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Bilby, and Michael D. Largey, *Caribbean Currents: Caribbean Music from Rumba to Reggae* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995. 188-93.

<sup>766</sup> Notably, the addition of *séga* to school curriculums was not initiated by the MMM, nor was it accompanied by any other officially sponsored Kreol-language subjects or material. Although Kreol remained a central issue of the MMM party platform, its increased use by the state during 1982-1983 was hugely controversial and led to conflict between the MMM and PSM. See IOCP, "Creole Island or Little India?" International Organisation of Creole People, accessed 12 November 2012, <http://iocp.potomitan.info/mauritius/creole2.php>.

<sup>767</sup> The first major industry conference to be hosted in Mauritius, the World Sugar Congress in 1962, brought in three hundred visitors. As only 110 hotel rooms were available on the whole island, the conference maxed out the island's hotel capacity and the organizers were

a few hundred tourists on its shores and a few small hotels were constructed during the 1950s, but the island that greeted independence was a largely unknown, undeveloped, and untapped tourism market. In 1965, before word of the island's internal troubles spread overseas, just over a thousand tourists visited – mostly arriving by sea for short holidays from Réunion and Madagascar, which had regular commercial shipping links with Mauritius.<sup>768</sup>

The small tourism industry in Mauritius took a severe shock from the country's unrest during the run-up to independence and was slow to start afterwards. In 1967, the first year that the British Overseas Airways Corporation tried to promote Mauritius as an exclusive tourist destination, British troops were sent from continental Africa to try to restore order.<sup>769</sup> Unsurprisingly, the small flow of tourist traffic did not grow in the manner the BOAC predicted and all but evaporated, remaining low for several years.<sup>770</sup> Despite a number of expensive overseas promotions in Paris, Hong Kong, and other major cities, tourism in Mauritius grew only incrementally in the early 1970s.<sup>771</sup>

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forced to house many of the guests in private residences. Michel Pitot, *Mon Histoire du Tourisme & des Voyages à Maurice: Île Maurice 1950-2004* (Mauritius, c. 2005), 17.

<sup>768</sup> Republic of Mauritius, *National Day – 12<sup>th</sup> March 1993*. “*A Dream in Silver: Development in Unity*” (Port Louis, Mauritius: Ministry of Arts, Culture, Leisure and Reform Institutions, 1993), 72.

<sup>769</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-24.

<sup>770</sup> For example, occupancy rates at Le Morne Brabant Hôtel did not exceed ten percent for all of 1967. *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>771</sup> Many of the failed efforts to attract tourists are quite comical in retrospect: advertising the island as a golfing paradise (the golf course ended up being unusable due to the wind), an overseas haven for high-quality French pastries (the pastries spoiled in the heat and the chef quit), a hunting reserve (an idea that did not take root for two decades), and suggesting updates for travel guides on Mauritius that had not sold enough copies to be profitable. These and other experiments are chronicled in *Ibid.*, 1-32.



In retrospect, it may appear strange that *séga* and Mauritian culture were not promoted by the Mauritian tourism industry from the outset. In the 1960s, however, cultural tourism was still a relatively young phenomenon, with most present-day marketing conventions yet to be developed. As a result, references to *séga* in early Mauritian tourism marketing materials are often vague or omit important details. An untitled 1962 publicity poster, for example, shows a costumed *séga* dancer, but neither mentions *séga* nor even that the attractive woman pictured is a dancer. As late as 1971, promotional magazines still referred generically to “rites and traditional manifestations [that] are displayed in a colorful way,” and that “tourists should watch for them.”<sup>772</sup> Although tourist operators did succeed in attracting a growing number of tourists interested in Mauritius’ pristine beaches, the first five years of the postcolonial tourism industry delivered disappointing results.

Tourist traffic increased considerably following a conference for British and American tourism operators held in Mauritius in 1972. This industry conference, described to me by three different tourism professionals in Mauritius, flew in more than a hundred tourism operators for an all-expenses visit to Mauritius that included tours of hotels, visits to Mauritian beaches, and other attractions. When the string quartet engaged to provide music for the conference was unavailable due to illness, the event organizers were unable to find a substitute quartet due to the general exodus of Mauritian musicians with the rest of the Créole-Mauritian middle class. After fruitlessly exhausting the limited

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<sup>772</sup> *Magazine Touristique et Culturel de l’Île Maurice* 1: 18.

avenues of inquiry available, one of the organizers was able to engage a *séga* folk ensemble (a group that normally performed only at weddings and other select social events) to provide a performance at the conference. This performance evidently left an impression on the tourism operators, as their clients who visited the following year asked when they would be able to see the *séga* performances that they had seen pictures of and heard about from their travel agents.

The above sequence of events, recounted to me separately by three different sources, has several important details that stand out.<sup>773</sup> First, a Classical string quartet was originally intended to provide music at the tourism conference, in keeping with the intended “high class” theme that the organizers presumed would interest tourists and their agents. Second, that the use of a *séga* ensemble in place of the intended string quartet was a matter of expedience, not of planning. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the organizers of the tourism conference (themselves employees of Mauritian hotels) did not realize the significance of this substitution until the following wave of tourists began asking about *séga*. These details cast a special light on a series of anecdotes that I collected from other tourist industry professionals about hotel managers dispatching vans to rural Mauritian villages, searching for *ségatiers* to perform at the hotels.<sup>774</sup> By the

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<sup>773</sup> Although most hotel managers that I met were happy to show me their facilities and allow me to attend events, many were reluctant to talk “on the record” about business and marketing actions earlier in their careers. In this particular set of cases, the managers agreed to speak with me on condition of anonymity, as they were not authorized by their superiors to speak with the press on such matters. Since reporters visit these hotels more frequently than scholars, it is not surprising that I was lumped into the “press” category with its attendant restrictions.

<sup>774</sup> Many of these latter stories are likely exaggerated in typical story-telling fashion (in the same manner as fishing stories); however, there is little cause not to believe that there is a

1980s, *hotel séga* performances were *de rigueur* at all medium and large hotels (i.e., those with more than a hundred beds) on the island.

The Mauritian tourism industry has grown rapidly since the mid-1970s, becoming one of the largest sectors of the Mauritian economy and providing important economic diversification. Today, *séga* is at the forefront of the Mauritian tourism brand, with dancers in *séga* costumes appearing in almost any tourism-related material and travel guides listing it as one of the “must see” attractions for visitors. The results are quite impressive: tourist arrivals have increased by an average of nine percent annually and tourism industry revenue has grown by an even more impressive average of twenty-one percent each year. Visitor stays have lengthened to an average of ten days and the per diem revenue has increased as guests patronize the new luxury resort-hotels popping up all around the coast.<sup>775</sup> By 2011, this growth produced a tourist industry with just short of one million visitors annually, making Mauritius the most-visited destination in the Indian Ocean island category, a model for economic studies, and a much-imitated blueprint for other islands seeking to develop sustainable cultural tourism industries.<sup>776</sup>

The rapid growth of tourism in Mauritius was accompanied by many efforts to anticipate tourists’ interests and demands. Hotel managers encouraged *séga* musicians to

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core of truth to them. During the course of my fieldwork, I received several suggestions from contacts about stories that had likely grown in the telling. I found it useful to double-check certain stories with several contacts to confirm their accuracy.

<sup>775</sup> Ministry of Tourism and Leisure, “Overview of Tourism Sector in Mauritius,” Republic of Mauritius, accessed 10 December 2012, <http://www.gov.mu/portal/site/tourist/menuitem.8d7c3f1e66340b44c5e7931000b521ca/>.

<sup>776</sup> For example, the Sri Lankan government sent a large delegation to study the Mauritian tourism industry following the end of the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009). Other such recent delegations include groups from the Andermani Islands, Fiji, and Seychelles.

incorporate fashionable aspects of Western music, resulting in *séga* bands that featured Hawaiian steel guitars during the overseas country-and-western music craze in the 1980s and trumpets during a brief vogue for Mariachi music later on in the same decade.

Although the first *séga* bands to play in hotels were amateur *séga typique* ensembles, these acoustic performances (often fifteen or more minutes in length) were deemed too long, insufficiently festive, and much too old-fashioned. As the process of booking *séga* bands for gigs formalized into a system called the “hotel circuit,” musicians playing the circuit were encouraged to speed up the music, keep the atmosphere festive, and modernize their sound. Electric keyboards (especially programmable Casio keyboards), guitars, and drum kits became common, especially as more large hotel venues were built that required amplified sound.<sup>777</sup> Presenting a diverse array of musical sounds and a rotating set of musical acts became especially important as tourist stays lengthened and hotels tried to discourage their clients from booking their stays at multiple hotels to see other *séga* bands perform. This same impulse led hotels to increase the number of *séga* performances each week to three or more at the largest hotels, an expansion of demand that supported dozens of part-time professional *séga* bands by the 1980s.

*Hotel séga* was, at first, largely distinct from the slower *séga engagé* used by the MMM. Most of the musicians who formed *séga* bands serving the hotel industry had

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<sup>777</sup> The *ravanne* never entirely disappeared from *séga* bands, since it was the trademark instrument of *séga* and was emblazoned over *séga*-related marketing materials. During the 1980s, many *hotel séga* bands that switched to drum kits retained only a token *ravanne* in their line-up, sometimes not deigning to mic the instrument. This trend reversed in the mid-1990s and multiple *ravanne* are seen at most performances, even if a drum kit is also present.

working-class origins, however, and most were self-taught musicians – musicians who fit into one of the MMM’s main constituencies. Although instructed to play festive music, many *ségatiers* took a transgressive pride in slipping *séga engagé* songs into their set lists, singing songs about oppression and destitution in place of love ballads and courtship songs.<sup>778</sup> Many Créole-Mauritian *séga* musicians working for foreign or Indo-Mauritian hotel managers interpreted these actions as an act of resistance against the establishment and status quo, an act of resistance perpetrated under the unsuspecting noses of foreign tourists and employers who could not understand or follow the nuances and content of the song lyrics performed for them.<sup>779</sup>

An interest in authentic performance entered the Mauritian tourism industry during the mid-1980s, after the hotel circuit booking system was well established. A growing number of tourists were interested in seeing not just touristic culture prepared for them (i.e., most *hotel séga*), but also “real” *séga*. This pursuit took many tourists out of the coastal hotel-resorts and into the less expensive interior of the island, as they sought out village performances of *séga*, particularly *séga typique*. Hotel managers responded to this market demand by requesting that their agents provide “traditional” *séga* for their clients, sometimes staging elaborate events where a hotel-affiliated van or bus dropped off tourists at a village square where a performance in traditional *séga* costumes “just happened” to be taking place. To create a renewed interest in performances at the hotels, musicians were directed to add spoken introductions to some

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<sup>778</sup> For example, see Miles, “The Creole Malaise in Mauritius,” 222.

<sup>779</sup> Boswell, *La Malaise Créole*, 64.

songs and encouraged to program *séga* songs that were overtly about slavery and other previously taboo topics. Weekly performance schedules were also diversified to add performances of music in the *séga typique* style (although generally much shorter than strictly traditional, with many of the normal eroticisms toned down) and stylized performances in plantation garb.<sup>780</sup>

As with *séga engagé* before it, *hotel séga* eventually developed into a major commercial product. The French Embassy and French Cultural Center in Mauritius began organizing concert tours in England and France for *hotel séga* musicians, helping the bands that they sponsored to create press kits and other materials needed for overseas bookings, and underwriting album recording costs.<sup>781</sup> A craze for *séga* dancing swept dance clubs in Mauritius and East Africa in the late-1970s and early 1980s, sending several *séga* bands to play in Africa until the clubs switched over to using records during a regional economic recession brought on by the OPEC oil embargo.<sup>782</sup> The advent of the compact cassette in the consumer music industry also enabled economical short-run productions of *séga* recordings, which became a popular tourist souvenir and important source of revenue for *séga* musicians, who were allowed to sell their own recordings after hotel shows.

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<sup>780</sup> This information was compiled from discussions with more than a dozen active musicians who had worked the hotel circuit during the 1980s. Because female *séga* singers and dancers tend to have short careers and retire when they have children (if not before), all of these performers were male. For information on gender divides in contemporary *séga* performance, see Assonne, *Les Femmes du Séga*.

<sup>781</sup> This practice continues into the present day; many *séga* CDs sold in Europe bear acknowledgements of this assistance.

<sup>782</sup> *Séga* bands enjoyed a slightly longer craze in Parisian and London dance clubs, but were ultimately replaced by disco and *séga* records in the same clubs.

Today, *hotel séga* is the archetypical style of *séga* experienced and performed by Mauritians and tourists alike. Most *séga* records (and almost all *séga* hit records) are in the *hotel séga* style and most *séga* musicians get their professional start by playing on the hotel circuit. Mauritian record companies scout the hotel circuit for upcoming talent, often signing teenagers while they are still in school and recording debut albums while the musicians are still in their late teens. (Unsurprisingly, there is a high percentage of one-hit wonders, and in recent years the practice of debut albums has shifted towards debut singles.) Except for Michel Legris, the oldest and most respected practitioner of *séga typique* alive, almost every famous *ségatier* in Mauritius today has worked extensively on the hotel circuit – and even Legris has released an album of music in the *hotel séga* style.

### **Hybridity and Returns**

*Séga typique* is currently enjoying a surprising resurgence in Mauritius as a fringe benefit of the tourism industry's success. During the 1980s, many of the star *ségatiers* of *hotel séga* credited seeing the musician Jean Alphonse Ravaton (1900-1992, stage name: Ti Frère) give simple but inspired performances of *séga typique* as the inspiration that led them to study music. As recording and distribution costs dropped with the proliferation of CDs, recording companies sought out Ti Frère in the last four years of his life to make

commercial and ethnographic recordings of his performances.<sup>783</sup> Despite making his first commercial recording at the age of eighty-eight, Ti Frère received major recognition from the Mauritian government in the last years of his life.<sup>784</sup> Many of the classic *séga* songs that he recorded have been subsequently covered (in *typique* and *hotel* styles) by other Mauritian artists, breathing new life into this older repertoire.<sup>785</sup>

Non-Kreol-language *ségas* have been in existence at least since the 1950s, when Iswarduth Nundlall quoted the lyrics for several *ségas* written in Asian languages. Historically, most of these *ségas* have been simple translations or adaptations of *ségas* popular at the time, especially during the 1980s when *hotel séga* songs were newly fashionable and frequently covered by Bollywood-cover bands at Indo-Mauritian weddings.<sup>786</sup> Eventually, Sino-Mauritian and Indo-Mauritian bands began to write their own original songs in their ancestral languages.<sup>787</sup> During the 1990s and 2000s, the rise of inexpensive digital recording technologies allowed many of these non-mainstream bands to record songs and albums, giving them greater distribution than the small areas that their ensembles covered through live concerts.

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<sup>783</sup> One of these recorded albums (featuring multitrack recordings of Ti Frère singing and playing the ravane, maravanne, and triangle) was later picked up for distribution by Harmoni Mundi. See Ti Frère, *Hommage à Ti Frère*, Ocora 560019, 1990, compact disc.

<sup>784</sup> The national government honored Ti Frère with several public award ceremonies, invitations to events as an honored guest, a government prize, and by naming a government building in Rodrigues after the musician.

<sup>785</sup> “Ti Frer, Père du Séga,” *Le Mauricien*, 6 May 2009.

<sup>786</sup> This observation is based on a review of hundreds of commercial recordings produced in Mauritius from the 1980s to the present and on numerous interviews with Mauritian citizens and visitors to the island.

<sup>787</sup> Young Sino-Mauritians learning Chinese today tend to learn Mandarin, rather than Hakka (which was historically more common in Mauritius). As a result, most *séga* translations by Sino-Mauritian musicians tend to have Mandarin lyrics.



The popularity of *séga* songs in Mauritian Bhojpuri eventually produced a spinoff of *hotel séga* called *chutney*, or “Mauritian *chutney*” to distinguish it from the food article and music tradition of Trinidad.<sup>788</sup> The sound of Mauritian *chutney* is not unlike that of contemporary Bollywood songs, as most of today’s ensembles got their starts as Bollywood cover bands and continue to perform Bollywood hits. Dancing to *chutney* is often much more loose than *séga*, with participants milling around and moving in improvised fashions not discernably different than dancing to festive music at any other event; *chutney* performances are also less likely to feature dancers than more mainstream flavors of *séga*, although dancing by the audience is generally encouraged. Most of these songs use a mix of Western and Indian instrumentation, usually including *tabla* for drums and an electronic keyboard.<sup>789</sup>

To the untrained listener, it can be very difficult to distinguish between an upbeat Bollywood dance song and a *chutney* song meant to accompany *séga* dancing, even if the listener belongs to the parent community. At a concert celebration of Holi in Mauritius in 2012, I asked three of the Indo-Mauritians in attendance about the identity of a song. One person identified it as a *chutney* song, explaining that he knew it was a *séga* because he was familiar with the Kreol original on which it was based. The other two men that I

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<sup>788</sup> Mauritian and Trinidadian *chutney* have some superficial similarities and claim similar roots, but developed more or less independently from each other. Both local lineages are connected to the music of Indian weddings. For information on the *chutney* music of Trinidad, see Guilbault, 177-82, 306-307.

<sup>789</sup> Catherine Servan-Schreiber, “Indian Folk Music and ‘Tropical Body Language’: The Case of Mauritian Chutney,” *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* (2012), <http://samaj.revues.org/index3111.html>.

asked identified it as a song intended for dancing but that they could not be more specific, although it was a familiar song to them from previous events that they'd attended. This amorphous perception of what does or does not constitute a *séga* or Mauritian *chutney* song illustrates the ubiquity of *séga* in Mauritian society, in which a formerly distinct type of music becomes so commonplace and varied that it ceases to have neatly defined and easily discernable boundaries. Through this process, identification becomes strictly subjective, such that (in the words of one Holi attendee), "If it's *séga*, I know that it's *séga* – because I feel *séga* in my legs."<sup>790</sup>

*Séga mandarin*, one of the newest subgenres of *séga*, is a spinoff of *hotel séga* typified by its use of Mandarin song lyrics, costumes reminiscent of traditional Chinese garb, and musical elements associated with traditional Chinese music. *Séga mandarin* songs, in contrast to Mauritian *chutney*, are usually very easy to identify by ear. Most adhere strictly to use of a major or minor pentatonic scale in their melodic and harmonic accompaniment, compositional choices that are not often heard in other types of *séga*. Electronic keyboards dominate the instrumentation, using sampled and synthesized sounds to imitate well-known traditional Chinese instruments such as the *guqin* and *guzheng* (two types of zithers) and the *yangqin* (a type of hammered dulcimer) alongside more Western electronic sounds. Mandarin-language covers of Kreol-language *ségas* may or may not use *hotel séga* instrumentation.

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<sup>790</sup> Unidentified guest at the Holi Festival Concert, Saint-Pierre, Mauritius, 8 March 2012.

The emergence of *séga mandarin* as a distinct genre in Mauritius is a relatively recent phenomenon. The small Sino-Mauritian population in Mauritius has not produced a great number of *séga* or Western-trained musicians in recent years, despite (or perhaps because of) the popularity of Chinese musical traditions such as lion and dragon dancing. As a result, most of *séga mandarin*'s distinctive traits are modeled on the performing style used by Dr. Mario Ng Kuet Leong, a Sino-Mauritian gynecologist that the Mauritian government sent on a *séga mandarin* performance tour and medical mission to China in 2011. Dr. Leong started translating *séga* songs into Mandarin while studying the language and eventually began writing his own original lyrics; after winning a local song contest in Mauritius in 2010, he was selected to sing at a number of cultural events and selected for an overseas tour to jointly promote Mauritius as a tourism destination (through his concerts) and to set up medical exchanges between Chinese medical schools and Mauritius.<sup>791</sup> He was also a featured performer in the official 2012 Independence Day concert.

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<sup>791</sup> “Mario Ng Kuet Leong,” *L'Express* 24 July 2011; “Mario Ng Kuet Leong: ‘Le Séga Mandarin’: Pour Faire Connaître le Pays à Travers ma Culture.” *L'Express* 28 August 2011.

*Séga mandarin* has both a distinctive sound and a distinctive appearance. The current norm, established by Dr. Leong, is for the soloist to wear slacks and a simple Chinese peasant shirt with a Mandarin collar and frog buttons. Dancers (who may be of any ethnicity) wear short dresses inspired by the *cheongsam* and carry two colorful paper parasols, one in each hand. Instead of grabbing and waving their dress skirts, *séga*



**Figure 28 - Dr. Mario Leong, wearing the archetypical garb of a *séga* mandarin singer.**<sup>792</sup>

*mandarin* dancers wave, open, and twirl their parasols. The overall visual aesthetic – designed especially for Dr. Leong’s performance tour of China – is, like the sound, friendly and familiar while still retaining a bouncy *séga* rhythm.

Although there are innumerable topics for *séga* songs, it is notable that most of the songs from Dr. Leong’s concert tour described Mauritius as an idyllic paradise or were straight-out *travel ségas*. *Travel ségas*, a particular type of *hotel séga*, are songs that take the listener on a journey through well-known (and usually scenic) places in Mauritius. By picking out place names from a *travel séga*, audiences are subtly nudged to reminisce about places that they visited and experiences that they enjoyed – or, if they are able to parse the description (which is usually less recognizable in Kreol than the place

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<sup>792</sup> Screen capture from MBC broadcast, “Chinese Songs Competition,” December 2011.

name), encouraged to seek out places yet unvisited. As a piece of cultural diplomacy, Dr. Leong's tour was aptly designed to spread a positive and appetizing image of Mauritius to a new potential tourist market – and timed to slightly precede an announcement of new direct flights from China to Mauritius.

Mauritian *chutney* and *séga mandarin* comprise examples of transnational fusion that places the shared heritage from living in Mauritius (*séga*) under a symbolic roof with elements of diasporic heritage. This fusion posits that *séga* itself is heterogeneous and inclusive, with a capacity to generate variants that still constitute a collective national culture. The combination of elements from diaspora cultures with *séga* highlights the varying backgrounds of Mauritian citizens, rather than shunts them off into discrete and separate venues and cultural institutions. If these *séga* subgenres had existed in isolation and not within the context of *hotel séga*, mapping Chinese traditional dress and pentatonic scales or *tabla* and Bollywood dancing onto *séga* could easily have been construed as tokenism in the vein of *chinoiserie* and Orientalism. Since *hotel séga* had already introduced many variants of foreign musical sounds and instrumentation to Mauritian listeners before the development of *chutney* and *séga mandarin*, however, these subgenres fit well within an existing, pre-established tradition of musical fusion on the island. This allows listeners to focus on the familiarity of the sounds and sights in front of them, despite the genres and combinations being relatively new.<sup>793</sup>

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<sup>793</sup> This familiarity is a key part of the audience experience and something mentioned to me by many interviewees. During a lull in the 2012 Mauritian Independence Concert, a Sino-Mauritian man described his experience of seeing *séga mandarin* for the first time to me in these

### **Rastafarianism, Slum Shanties, and *Seggae***

The economic boom of the ‘Mauritius Miracle’ in the 1980s defied all outside expectations as the island economy experienced rapid and sustained economic growth, reducing unemployment and giving Mauritius one of the highest per-capita GDPs in Sub-Saharan Africa. The booming tourism industry and successful ventures into textile manufacturing and other light industries was a blessing to many on the island, but not for all. As a demographic, Créole-Mauritians conspicuously trailed other groups in terms of employment, education, and living conditions. Most of the Créole-Mauritian middle and upper classes had left Mauritius around the time of independence, leaving behind a few elites and those who could not afford to leave. Many of those who remained were crowded into crime-ridden shantytowns on the outskirts of Port Louis, where high crime rates and drug addiction were common.

One of the largest and most impoverished shantytowns in Mauritius is that of Roche Bois,<sup>794</sup> a coastal region sandwiched in-between the Port of Port Louis [*sic*] and Baie du Tombeau, an affluent Chinese commuter suburb.<sup>795</sup> Roche Bois provided a fertile ground for Rastafarianism in the 1980s, when the religion spread around the Caribbean

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words: “I didn’t know what it was, except [that] when I saw and heard it I knew it was part of me. It was part of Pierre [a Créole-Mauritian friend], too, but more [part of] me.” Jie Leung (Sino-Mauritian male, 46), in discussion with the author, 12 March 2012.

<sup>794</sup> While conducting fieldwork in Mauritius, I lived just north of Roche Bois (in Baie du Tombeau) and passed through the area or its outskirts on a daily basis.

<sup>795</sup> As of 2012, Roche Bois is the largest slum and shantytown in all of Mauritius, and continues to be plagued by crushing poverty, high crime, drug use, and alcoholism. Much of the 1965-1968 violence involved residents of Roche Bois whose homes were destroyed by a cyclone in 1965. Boswell, *Le Malaise Créole*, 136-39.

and within Mauritius.<sup>796</sup> Reggae was introduced to Mauritius through the Rastafari movement, and a number of musicians in Roche Bois created a hybrid form of *séga*-influenced reggae called *seggae*. As the MMM became an establishment political party and the national government's co-option of *séga* reduced the impact of *séga engagé*, *seggae* became the protest music of choice for a new generation of the disaffected.

The most famous figure in the history of *seggae* was a native of Roche Bois, Joseph Réginald Topize (1960-1999), better known by his stage name, Kaya. Kaya was the son of a poor and alcoholic Créole-Mauritian fisherman and was born into a family trapped in poverty. At the age of eight, he dropped out of school to seek work as an untrained manual laborer to support his family.<sup>797</sup> Disenchanted with Mauritian society and its government, Kaya converted (like many of his fellow residents of Roche Bois) to Rastafarianism in the late 1970s. An ardent admirer of Bob Marley and reggae music, Kaya took his stage name from the title of the 1978 Bob Marley and the Wailers reggae album of the same name.<sup>798</sup>

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<sup>796</sup> The spread of reggae during this same period was abetted in part by the advent of the prerecorded music audiocassette and the Sony Walkman, which significantly lowered the access barriers for listening to pre-recorded music. During fieldwork, I observed many older residents of Roche Bois who still owned and used battered Walkman cassette players to listen to music. These inexpensive, battery-powered units helped sustain high audiocassette sales in Mauritius well into the 1990s.

<sup>797</sup> This work was technically illegal due to child labor laws, but substantial underground economies continue to exist in Mauritius despite efforts at enforcing labor laws.

<sup>798</sup> One detailed biography of Kaya exists, a book-length monograph by the Mauritian journalist Sedley Richard Assonne. Assonne interviewed Kaya many times and covered his concerts before the musician's untimely demise. Since few written records were kept in Roche Bois, it is based almost entirely on interviews and reminiscences. Many of the interviewees are still alive and retain vivid memories of Kaya and his music. For further information, see Sedley

The creation of *seggae*, a mixture of *séga* and *reggae* played in  $\frac{4}{4}$  time, is usually credited to Kaya. Although a number of other *seggae* musicians made initial forays into the genre independently around the same time, the sound, content, and style of *seggae* are commonly acknowledged to be the result of Kaya's influence and musical experiments in the mid-1980s. In eleven albums released between 1988 and 1998 – one of the most productive recording careers in the history of Mauritius – Kaya produced a repertoire of more than a hundred commercially-recorded *seggae* songs that were freely covered by other musicians. Many of his songs became radio, recording, and concert hits, and his concerts drew some of the largest crowds outside of the hotel circuit and concerts by Western popular music artists.

Notably, Kaya did not play any solo concerts on the hotel circuit during his career. Kaya, his friends, and his neighbors only spoke Kreol, giving them little access to the foreign sponsorship and lucrative hotel gigs that English- and French-speaking counterparts were able to acquire through the tourism industry. He did (as a guitarist) accompany the *séga* musician Stéphano Honoré (stage name: Menwar) on the latter's 1982 performance tour and appeared on Honoré's studio album *Létan L'Enfer* of the same year, but Kaya ultimately returned to Roche Bois after the tour. At home, he founded a reggae band with other residents of the shantytown; this band was named Racinetatan (a Kreol form of Ratsitatane) after the nineteenth-century Malagasy prince discussed in Chapter Four. For the residents of Roche Bois, Ratsitatane's execution



represented the ultimate injustice of the system against the Créoles, and references to this and more recent cases in the legal system worked their way into the lyrics of Racinetatan's songs. Then, around 1986, Kaya began experimenting with a combination of *séga* and reggae that produced the music now known as *seggae*.

There was, at first, little commercial interest in *seggae*. The dreadlocked *seggae* musicians and the reggae beat were out of sync with the carefully massaged presentation of Mauritian music that hotels marketed, and the often-dystopian descriptions of Mauritius contrasted with the common *hotel séga* depiction of Mauritius as a peaceful paradise. As a result, the commercial careers of Kaya and most other *seggae* musicians started more slowly than those of the stars of the hotel circuit, and for many years, news of *seggae* concerts spread primarily by word of mouth. When tourists did hear about *seggae* during the 1980s, few were willing to venture into Roche Bois and other slums, which hotel staff warned them were dens of crime and drug use.<sup>799</sup> As a result, Kaya did not record his first commercial solo album until 1988. The success of this album and its sequels fueled a concert career that took Kaya and *seggae* around Mauritius, although he continued to live in Roche Bois with his family.

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<sup>799</sup> Many elderly tourists repeated stories of these warnings to me when I interviewed them regarding past visits to Mauritius. I personally received this “friendly advice” from many staff members at the *grand hôtel* resorts who suggested that I stay at their hotels because they were safer, and dismissive laughs about the same from the *hoteliers*' counterparts at Les Cocotiers, a mid-sized hotel located just north of Roche Bois. Several more neutral commentators suggested that it was in the *grand hôteliers*' interest to play up the danger of these areas to discourage tourists from moving to cheaper lodgings closer to Port Louis.

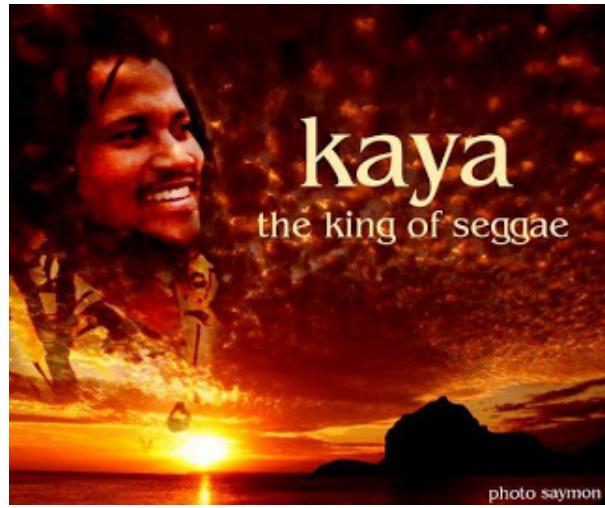
Kaya's life and career came to a sudden and tragic end in 1999 when the singer was arrested after a concert and was beaten to death in police custody. Mauritian Rastafarians had long espoused, like most of their co-religionists, the legalization of marijuana for religious reasons.<sup>800</sup> Kaya's last concert was at a rally promoting the legalization of marijuana in Mauritius and concluded with the artist smoking a joint on stage as an act of public protest. An hour later, he was arrested by the police, who announced later that evening that Kaya had suffered a seizure and died of a cerebral hemorrhage from striking his head against the cell walls.<sup>801</sup> Disenchanted Créoles greeted this announcement with incredulity and anger, setting off three days of riots and looting across the island.

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<sup>800</sup> For information on marijuana use in Rastafarianism, see James A. Winders, "Reggae, Rastafarians and Revolution: Rock Music in the Third World," in *Reggae, Rasta, Revolution: Jamaican Music from Ska to Dub*, ed. Chris Potash (London: Books with Attitude, 1997), 16-18.

<sup>801</sup> This verdict is widely perceived in Mauritius as a police cover-up. Despite several investigations, no police officer or government official has ever been charged with a crime in association with Kaya's death.

Kaya's death and the violent reaction that followed it triggered a broad government response to address the social unrest that had boiled to the surface. The Mauritian government quickly announced new social and work programs for the residents of urban slums and funded extensive community programs designed to keep



**Figure 29 - One of many posthumous online tributes to Kaya.**<sup>802</sup>

children and young adults off the streets and off drugs and alcohol. Many of these programs underwrote community *séga* programming in dry (non-alcoholic) environments, positing that participating in communal *séga* playing and dancing could provide a compelling alternative to alcoholism. These last measures were somewhat ironic, given *séga*'s earlier association with excesses of food, drink, and sex, but the initiatives were popular with local communities and continue today.

*Seggae* is an essentially dead genre in Mauritian music today, persisting in several album re-releases (mostly of Kaya's work) and in frequent references in pop culture. It inherited the mantle of social protest music from *séga engagé* when the electoral

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<sup>802</sup> [http://1.bp.blogspot.com/\\_dEnBPgHmAro/TMouaHkQ\\_VI/AAAAAAAAAAAY/weJXluKZC2g/s320/king+of+seggae.jpg](http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_dEnBPgHmAro/TMouaHkQ_VI/AAAAAAAAAAAY/weJXluKZC2g/s320/king+of+seggae.jpg). The picture, poignantly, shows the mountain Le Morne Brabant in the background – the last refuge of *maroons* in Mauritius at the time of emancipation. In a tragic incident, the *maroons* mistook the party coming to announce the end of slavery for a *maroon*-hunting detachment and committed suicide by jumping off the mountainside.

successes of the MMM took that party from a fringe political group to a major political power, but its primary association with Kaya left few candidates to continue the tradition after his demise. The Mauritian government, too, continued its drug enforcement activities, arresting most of the leading *seggae* singers on marijuana possession charges during the period 1999-2001. Although most were released after relatively short jail sentences, these artists discarded Kaya's musical innovations that mixed *séga*, reggae, and elements of Indian classical music in favor of a more mainstream reggae sound. Although Kaya and *seggae* are frequently cited as some of Mauritian music's greatest influences, there is no practicing musician in Mauritius (as of 2012) who describes his or her music as *seggae*.

### **The Revival of European Art Music**

The European art music tradition in Mauritius was abruptly resurrected in 1987 by a French act of state. As discussed above, the bulk of the island's classically-trained musicians departed the island during the 1960s and early-1970s as part of the general exodus of the Créole-Mauritian middle class. This left few local musicians to meet the occasional demand for live incidental music from the European art music tradition, resulting in the chance scheduling that gave rise to *séga* music as one of the main branding elements of the Mauritian tourism industry. Although many Mauritians working as musicians in the tourism industry played Western instruments, most were self-taught or had learned to play their instruments through informal observation. This changed in

1987, when the visiting French President François Mitterrand announced that the French government was donating money to Mauritius to build a conservatory of music.

Mitterrand visited Mauritius many times during his tenure as the French head of state and was a strong supporter of French cultural diplomacy. Under his general direction, the French Embassy in Mauritius became an important middleman in bringing Mauritian musicians to Réunion and to mainland France, and a local cultural center funded by the French Government (formerly the Centre Culturel Français–Charles Baudelaire; now the Institut Français de Maurice) became a leading sponsor of young *séga* musicians and their recording efforts. Domestically, Mitterrand pursued a scheme of *grands projets*, creating massive buildings to revitalize moribund artistic and government institutions.<sup>803</sup> Abroad, Mitterrand pursued a similar scheme as a cornerstone of French cultural diplomacy, financing the construction of buildings that would house French-influenced or -affiliated institutions and promote international trade and goodwill. In Mauritius, this initiative took the particular form of a new campus to house a conservatory of music.<sup>804</sup>

The Franco-Mauritian agreement, promoted as an act of international friendship and cooperation, was to create an all-new conservatory of music. This was the first organized conservatory of music in Mauritius since an informal school run by a young

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<sup>803</sup> The Opéra-Bastille and the Cité de la Musique in Paris are both examples of Mitterrand's *grand projets*.

<sup>804</sup> Jean-Georges Prosper, *L'Île Maurice au Sommet de la Vague Économique Francophone* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1993), 191.

Léon Carvalho in the nineteenth century.<sup>805</sup> According to the agreed-upon terms, the French national government funded the construction of a conservatory campus in the interior suburb of Quatre Bornes, while the Mauritian national government provided operational funding and created a parastatal organization to run the conservatory itself. This organization was named the Conservatoire de Musique-François Mitterrand (Conservatoire-FM), after the French head of state.

The Conservatoire-FM opened in temporary quarters in 1987 with an enrollment of one hundred and twenty public school-age students and nine faculty members.<sup>806</sup> Today, it serves as the center and primary venue of classical music on the island. As of 2012, there were more than 1,300 students enrolled at the conservatory, ranging from children to adults.<sup>807</sup> Students can take lessons in singing, piano, most of the mainstream symphonic instruments, as well as music theory, composition, arranging, orchestra, and popular music and popular music instruments. Conservatory ensembles include two choirs, an all-conservatory orchestra, and several smaller ensembles for younger children and adults at its satellite campuses around the island. The all-conservatory orchestra (approximately 60 instrumentalists in 2013) is the only resident classical music orchestra in Mauritius.

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<sup>805</sup> An attempt to erect a conservatory in 1882 had run afoul of an economic recession the following year. See G. L., "Formation of a Musical Conservatoire in Mauritius."

<sup>806</sup> D. Gokhool, "Address by the Honorable D. Gokhool, Minister of Education and Human Resources. Launching Ceremony of a Branch of the Conservatoire de Musique in Curepipe," (lecture, Curepipe, Mauritius, 16 November 2006). <http://www.gov.mu/portal/goc/educationsite/file/sp16nov06.doc>. Most of the students were enrolled in group classes and private lessons in guitar, piano, recorder, or violin.

<sup>807</sup> Claudie Ricaud, in discussion with the author, 27 March 2012.

The Conservatoire-FM was originally envisioned by the Mauritian government as an African cultural center that would serve a primarily Créole-Mauritian audience.



**Figure 30 - The stage of the Auditorium-Francis Thomé at the Conservatoire de Musique-François Mitterand.<sup>808</sup>**

This stereotyping of Créole-Mauritians as the only demographic with a significant interest in

European art music was resisted by the conservatory's administration, which successfully lobbied for a more general focus.<sup>809</sup> Today, the conservatory's student body includes students from a broad swath of Mauritian society, although Créole-Mauritians form a slight majority of the students and there are very few Sino-Mauritian students currently enrolled.<sup>810</sup> Although the conservatory today directly serves only .1 percent of the Mauritian population, it has become a fixture of the Mauritian music scene, mounting joint stage and concert performances with visiting French artists and ensembles. Its holiday concerts are also a favorite of European expats and regular visitors.

One additional facet of the Conservatoire-FM deserves special mention. When the

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<sup>808</sup> Photo by the author. Most concerts of the full orchestra take place at rented halls and theater auditoriums off-site.

<sup>809</sup> Claudie Ricaud, 27 March 2012. It should be noted that the Government of India had financed the creation of several Indian cultural centers in Mauritius earlier in the decade, which were also set up as parastatal organizations targeting particular subsets of Mauritian society.

<sup>810</sup> Ibid. The director of the conservatory attributed this to the lack of a satellite campus near the Chinese Quarter of Port Louis or Baie du Tombeau, the two areas where this demographic is concentrated.

conservatory opened in 1978, most of its instructors were self-taught musicians due to the dearth of classically trained musicians in Mauritius. Today, many of the instructors are alumni of the conservatory who continued their education overseas before returning to Mauritius to teach at the conservatory.<sup>811</sup> This pattern of native-born musicians returning to Mauritius is a new phenomenon for the country, which for most of its history has suffered from a musical brain drain.

### **Conclusion: *Séga* in a Multi-Ethnic Society**

Music in Mauritius today is a combination of numerous rich and multi-faceted traditions that trace their roots to Western Europe, India, China, Africa, and Madagascar. The historically dominant traditions of *séga* and European art music, once thought on the verge of extinction on the island, are enjoying multi-decade-long resurgences due to a combination of local politics, a booming tourism industry, and French diplomacy. More than one hundred and seventy-five years of a majority-Indian population have planted numerous musical seeds on the shores of Mauritius, but they have yet to displace the old colonial music traditions. Instead, Chinese and Indian influences have infiltrated into *séga* just as European dance and opera influences did so in previous centuries.

Music in Mauritius has always been and continues to be a hugely political topic. Just as the arrival of opera in Mauritius was immediately followed by the enactment of regulations governing opera, the Mauritian government is deeply involved with most

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<sup>811</sup> Ibid; D. Gokhool, “Address by the Honorable D. Gokhool, Minister of Education and Human Resources.”



types of musical activities within its borders. Today, the lines of control are primarily financial. The national government sends numerous *séga* singers overseas each year to represent the country at international events and as goodwill ambassadors, with attendant guidelines or requests for appropriate behavior, topics of discussion, and performance repertoire. Most major artists have some degree of connection to the government thanks to sponsorship or participation in government-financed music festivals and concerts, resulting in a status quo in which few successful artists with mature careers are openly critical of the government. Because of the shifting web of parliamentary politics, the target of criticism in one government can easily become a patron or ally after the next election. Since the staffs of government ministries shuffle frequently and many different ministries may provide funding for an event, many musicians consciously try to avoid making enemies in political offices.

More than two hundred years after France lost its colony in Mauritius to a British invasion, France maintains strong cultural and linguistic ties to its former colony. The relationship between France and Mauritius is benevolent and friendly thanks to liberal investments in cultural diplomacy by France, much of it invested in sponsoring music and musicians. Although the French colonial empire is all but gone and many former colonies no longer trade with their former colonial master, Mauritius and France retain strong economic and cultural ties to this day – ties that, in the realm of music and the tourism industry, are very tightly linked. It was French investments that built Mauritius from a sleepy island colony to a major naval base and a vibrant colonial capital, endowing it with a rich tradition of European art music that helped give Port Louis the title, “The

Little Paris of the Indian Ocean.” Today, French visitors and investments continue to fuel the cultural life on this small island in the Indian Ocean, but the dynamic of power has shifted. Imported European art music reigned supreme in Mauritian culture and society for two centuries, until the strains of total warfare and decolonization all but uprooted it. Today, European art music has returned vibrantly to Mauritius, where it coexists instead of competes with a brighter and more flourishing tradition: *séga*.

Before the arrival of Dutch settlers in the seventeenth century, Mauritius had no history of permanent human inhabitation. This *tabula rasa* was populated, variously, with Dutch, Malagasy, African, French, British, Chinese, and Indian sources of humanity, each of whom brought elements of their respective culture. *Séga* is the synthesis of this diverse heritage: the one cultural tradition on the island that hails from no distinct place except Mauritius, that was shaped by successive waves of human arrivals on its shores and that continues to find new ways to combine and rejuvenate itself. A *séga* may quote an eighteenth-century opera melody or a simple fishing song, bearing its lyrics in any language that the inhabitants of Mauritius speak. It may appear on the shores of the Seychelles Islands, in a French dance club in Lyon, or even in a concert hall in Beijing. Whether they are about romantic love, brazen sexuality, oppression, love of the motherland, slavery, independence, tourism, or bitter rivalries, *ségas* stem from and reference a beautiful tropical island where the sun sets on sands of unearthly beauty and where one can still hear the resonant sound of the *ravanne* over the waves. Mauritius is a land of many peoples, many languages, and many traditions, all of who dance to the *ravanne* and who sing *ségas* in their own languages. *Séga* speaks to them all.

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