

Créolité and Réunionese *Maloya*: From ‘In-between’ to ‘Moorings’

Stephen Muecke, University of New South Wales

An old *Malbar* is wandering in the countryside at night, and, seeing a light, approaches a cabin.¹ It is open, so he goes in. He is invited to have a meal. No questions are asked; but he sings a ‘busted *maloya*’ [*maloya kabosé*] that speaks of his desire to open his wings and fly away, to accept the invitation to sleep in the cabin, to fall into the arms of the person narrating the ballad, and to weep. The whole company sings the ‘busted *maloya*.²

Malbar is the name for Tamils descended from indentured labourers from parts of South India including the Malabar Coast and Pondicherry, where the French had another colony. Estimated to number 180,000, these diasporic Tamils had lost their language and taken up the local *lingua franca*, Creole, spoken among the Madagascans, French, Chinese and Africans making up the population of Réunion in the Indian Ocean. Creole, as a language and set of cultural forms, is not typical of many locations in the Indian Ocean. While the central islands of Mauritius, the Seychelles, Rodriguez, Agalega, Chagos and Réunion have their distinct varieties of French Creole language, Creole is not a concept that has currency in East Africa, Madagascar or South Asia. Versions of creolized English exist in Northern and Western Australia; at Roper River in the

¹ Thanks to Elisabeth de Cambaire and the anonymous reviewers of this paper for useful additions and comments, and to Françoise Vergès and Carpanin Marimoutou for making available the UNESCO Dossier de Candidature.

² See http://www.wat.tv/audio/davy-sicard-maloya-kabose-2zo_2f1lx_.html, for a music clip. The text of the song follows as an appendix.

Northern Territory, where Kriol is an official language name. Creole culture, as in the Caribbean also, depends for its evolution on a single powerful colonizing culture and language, with a subaltern and linguistically diverse population of slaves or indentured labourers with the need for a *lingua franca*. Creoles were less likely to develop in those parts of the world without a slave trade and/or with robust institutions such as royalty.

At the beginning of October 2009, UNESCO announced that the culture of *maloya*, a genre of song and dance from the island of Réunion, would henceforth become an international heritage item ('Fet kaf 2009'). The Geneva committee placing this endangered form of culture under their protection defined it as a 'type of music, song and dance native to the island of Réunion' (Dossier 2008).

There is nothing unusual in the fact that a marginal item of immaterial culture, originating from a tiny speck of France in the Indian Ocean, should be brought to the notice of an international organisation and 'protected' in this way. What this short discussion paper is investigating is what UNESCO thinks it is protecting, what sorts of pressures it might be responding to, and what it might think is the nature of the Creole culture it has formally endorsed in this way, along with 76 other diverse practices and traditions from around the world that the committee identified in the same sitting. Local Réunionese musicians like Firmin Viry and Davy Sicard had been lobbying for years for the recognition of this heritage. Françoise Vergès and Carpanin Marimoutou prepared the UNESCO document for its recognition, calling it the 'major expression' and the 'symbol' of Réunionese identity (Dossier 2008: 3–4).

The UNESCO statement went on to make explicit that *maloya* is an evolving form, and they used the phrase *il se métisse* [it is mixed or blended], the same term, *métis*, that is used for 'mixed race':

Maloya was once simply a dialogue between a soloist and a choir accompanied by drums, but today it is taking on new and more varied forms, in terms of lyrics as well as instrumentation (the use of djembes, synthesisers, drum kits). It blends with rock, reggae and jazz and feeds into poetry and slam performances. It was created by sugar plantation slaves from Madagascar and Africa, before spreading to the whole population of the island.³

³ Jadis dialogue entre un soliste et un choeur accompagné de percussions, le Maloya prend aujourd'hui des formes de plus en plus variées, au niveau des textes comme des instruments (introduction de djembés, synthétiseurs, batterie). Il se métisse avec le rock, le reggae ou le jazz, et inspire la poésie et le slam. Il a été créé par les esclaves d'origine malgache et africaine dans les plantations sucrières, avant de s'étendre à toute la population de l'île (Dossier 2008: 4).

This ‘mixed’ cultural form is recognized neither as a fixed tradition nor as a merely recent invention, even though it has come to prominence only since the 1970s (Dossier 2008: 4). The Creole origins of the form are being celebrated as typical and specific forms of culture in France. Regional identity is a great French nationalist tradition, one that can conceivably include forms of oppositional culture within the French nation. In this case, the opposition takes the form of the ongoing struggle to build a new Reunionnese identity in the contemporary era, as understood by Vergès and Marimoutou in ‘Moorings: Indian Ocean Creolisations,’ translated and included in this special issue of *Portal* (2012).

The UNESCO initiative underscores the international significance of *créolité* and creolization as cultural movements. Neither indigenous nor nationalist, such movements are more the ‘creations’ of an identitarian politics. Creation is at the origin of the term Creole in Spanish (*criollo*, descending from the verb *criar*—‘to breed’ or ‘to raise’—ultimately from the Latin, *creare*, ‘to produce, create’). Something of this spirit of creation—given UNESCO’s promotion to keep the culture ‘alive’—is at the heart of this discussion. We know that cultural hybridity as developed by Bhabha—as in his brilliant 1994 article, ‘How Newness Enters the World: Postmodern Space, Postcolonial Times and the Trials of Cultural Translation’⁴—and then celebrated by Robert Young, as a cultural theory of the ‘in-between’ (1995), has been hotly contested and fallen out of favour (Modood & Werbner 1997).⁵ One suspects that the metaphors of *syncretism* and blending (*métissage*) are not working hard enough either. Okwui Enwezor *et al.* make grand claims for the metaphorization of the concept of Creole beyond its simple linguistic application. Now, for the *créolité* literary movement, it will come to represent a new kind of consciousness:

Beginning as a full-fledged literary movement in the late 1980s in the French Caribbean, Créolité ventured into the ‘chaos’ produced by history to reclaim nationalist Creole identities. As a hypothesis of cultural production, the subsequent process of creolization reaches far beyond the plantation cultures of the Caribbean, towards a conceptualization of a non-totalitarian consciousness of preserved diversity that has its contested terrain within language, identity, politics, religion, and culture. Transcending still entrenched postcolonial and imperialist narratives of domination and resistance, center and periphery, creolization as a theory of creative disorder analyses active urban contest and contact zones in flux. It expresses a need for particularization that, by embedding Creole dynamics into sociopolitical and sociolinguistic histories, reformulates

⁴ Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (1994) analyses the liminality of hybridity as a paradigm of colonial anxiety. His key argument is that colonial hybridity, as a cultural form, produced ambivalence in the colonial masters and, as such, altered the authority of power.

territories of art, architecture, dance, film, music, poetry, cuisine, oral literature, magic, and carnival. (Okwui Enwezor *et al.* 2003: 1)⁶

Moving away from models of emancipation and resistance, they posit a ‘theory of creative disorder.’ This has the effect of splitting the stake, as it were, in one’s investment in forms of culture. First, there is an *ontology of cultures* where we might want to speculate on all the environmental factors that make them come into existence and then persist, in other words, their very being, which is quite observable (for example with ethnographic methods). At this level *maloya* might be described as having its origins in Madagascar or East Africa, and then flourishing today with the 300 or so troupes of musicians playing in the genre. The second ‘investment’ is constituted around the intellectual discourses, the languages of reference and analysis, which pitch their associated concepts (‘safeguarding of heritage,’ ‘hybridity,’ ‘creative disorder’) as arguments into domains that have nothing to do with the worlds where songs like *maloya* ones are created. This is theory as a vehicle for political action. It is the way in which the argument is pitched to UNESCO that allows for the heritage listing of *maloya*. What is at stake is not the ontological status of forms of culture like *maloya* (which in its *practice* is blissfully unaware of how advocacy on its behalf is being formulated); what is at stake is reason, reasoning for culture. If you like, you could say that the existence of an intellectual culture, the international language of theory, is invested and exposed at these international crossroads of theory and cultural policy. Intellectuals, some well meaning, others self serving, are in the business of *translating* the cultural experience of *maloya* into the languages that creatively engage an agency for the culture in question. In which case, one may argue that intellectual cultures are *specific* in their application, broken away from their organic relations to such local cultures as *maloya*, and yet still linked in some way. Therefore it is possible that without the help of linguistics, historical studies, anthropology, and musicology (converging in postcolonial studies), *maloya* might still be languishing alone, unrecognized and unrecognizable, in a far-flung corner of the world, without its intellectual allies who created the language and the ‘disorder’ that enabled it to be ‘valorized’ by UNESCO (Dossier 2008: 10).

⁶Preceded by: ‘Increased and accelerated processes of cultural syncretism have produced new configurations of identity for which theories of hybridity, métissage, and cosmopolitanism have been deployed and reworked in order to capture the polycentric and polysemic aspects of a new political philosophy of the Other. Under pressure from localized resistances, these terms no longer provide adequate frameworks for articulating the critical issues of difference and the asymmetry of evolving contemporary cultures’ (Okwui Enwezor *et al.* 2003: 1).

Françoise Vergès and Carpanin Marimoutou, in ‘Moorings: Indian Ocean Creolisations,’ personify a productive link between theory and advocacy. Their version of creolization is neither the distanced analysis of the linguist contemplating a form of language, nor an instance of the play of theory acting for itself, exploiting creolization as a pretext. It is passionately and intimately linked with political processes that make creole forms visible at the same time as their representatives speak on behalf of them. This is possibly why they are attracted to the metaphor of mooring; it is anti-transcendentalist:

Creolisation is not an accumulation or a sum of differences. It has the dynamism of an unfinished process that is subject to mutations and loss. It borrows mimetically and creatively. It has no problem with putting down roots, because a root is not necessarily stultifying, if it is a mooring that allows us more easily to move on. We do not idealise movement. The mooring is a relation that accepts the link, that has no fear of submitting to meaning, to desire, and is happy to let things go. (Vergès & Marimoutou 2012: 34)

It is a beautiful maritime metaphor of binding and release, arrivals and departures. Each link in this network is singular and precise, because values have to be exchanged as cultural capital is imported (in the colonial moment, typically from France) or exported in exchanges about ‘Indianoceanness,’ as they say, within the region. It retains the idea of heterogeneity and reinvention via negotiation and exchange, so in this sense it is a long way from the biological metaphor of hybridity in creolization. Bricolage and inventive creation is much more rapid in this context than evolution can be:

We reject the particularisation of religions, civilisations or philosophies. We defend *a philosophy of borrowing, forgery, imitation, and a dynamic of patching up, making do, offixing up, of mending*. A world quick to imitate, but which creolises the imitated thing to make something else of it, which invents the quotidian. *This is a dynamic of alterity where we see no alienation or submission, rather a creativity of a world subject to continual conflicting inputs.* (35)

Creation, then, at the root of the word creole, has a ‘heterogeneity that presides over its development’: ‘Heterogeneity bursts forth … in crossings and appropriations … It bursts forth in a *maloya* by Firmin Viry where the heroine of an Indian epic, Sità in the *Ràmà�ana*, transformed into a female plantation worker, meets an ancient French romance’ (36). And they also remind us that *maloya* is a performance:

Maloya is a stage for the space of processes and practices of Indian Oceanic creolisation, a common ground for a Réunionese ethos. The lyrics of the *maloya* take on meaning and value in a festive or ceremonial context, where there is internal interaction (singer, chorus) and external interaction (players/participating audience). The lyrics of the *maloya*, often improvised from a base of uncertain origin, are infinitely variable, according to the conditions under which it is uttered, the public’s role, how the singer is feeling, and how the chorus is made up; in short,

maloya is a performance. It is both a social practice and a discursive practice, with its own internal logic. It can be read as a text, it has deconstructions/ reconstructions of established collective speech, it has lexical shifts, and is the unique text of a unique artist. (36)

This is quite different from Homi Bhabha's notion of the performative, written in 1994, putting the critical move of 'the in-between' firmly on the agenda:

What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities: the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, *contingently*, 'opening out,' remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference—be it class, gender or race. Such assignations of social differences—where difference is neither One nor the Other but *something else besides*, *in-between*—find their agency in the form of the 'future' where the past is not originary, where the present is not simply transitory. It is, if I may stretch a point, an interstitial future, that emerges *in-between* the claims of the past and the needs of the present.

(Bhabha 1994: 219)

Compare the spatial metaphor of 'in-between' to 'moorings.' The latter concept is concrete, rather than, in the Derridean language that Bhabha has inherited, ineffable or deferred. It is not the gap between the ship and the wharf that is celebrated by Vergès and Marimoutou, it is the link which moors one in a place, a connection that one can also decide to abandon. In the invention and (re)composition of *maloya*, elements can be ignored or abandoned (for instance, French popular music from European France, of the Charles Trenet variety), while others can be taken up, giving *maloya*'s many variations: 'rap/*maloya*, folk/*maloya*, rock/*maloya*, *malogué* (*maloya* and reggae), blues/*maloya*' (Dossier 2008: 10).

So we might use, to underscore the theoretical point, Johnny Mercer's famous refrain from 1944 'Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive'⁷ against those who romance, cheapening Bhabha, the concepts of ambivalence, openness, ambiguity and the in-between. The appeal to the perennially open does not do the necessary work any more. Its transcendental absences are a residue of Heideggerian phenomenology. Against that dominant philosophy, let us put in place a more realist, or multi-realist architecture of thought that would tell us the details of cultural translations, and how such movements of culture are supported by allies, and let us detail the hard work (which needs much more research than has been done here to discover) that gets them from one place to another, from Réunion to UNESCO via the agency of certain advocates who have been

⁷ Johnny Mercer was brought up in Savannah, Georgia. Mercer's exposure to black music was perhaps unique among the white songwriters of his generation. As a child, Mercer had African-American playmates and servants, and he listened to the fishermen and vendors about him, who spoke and sang in the Creole dialect known as 'Geechee.'

able to positively valorize concepts like ‘cultural creolisation’ (Dossier 2008: 5) in the context of globalization, so that cultural forms like *maloya* are not blocked on the basis of lacking putative cultural purity. Cultural creolization, or indeed hybridity, by this account, lies not in the thing as an ontological quality, it is created in the networking process that is a real territory: a part of the Indian Ocean, and a part of a specific history, including its affective history. Vergès and Marimoutou speak of the ‘robust modernity’ of the form, which is so often ‘a story of loss which opens the way to melancholy, to an impossible task of mourning’ as we have seen so clearly in the text of the *maloya kabosé* discussed here. The lone roving *malbar* (one thinks of a *marron*, a runaway slave) is welcomed back into community to shed his tears of suffering: these are the feelings, territory and history of *maloya*.

‘Theory’ becomes the conceptual ally of an organic cultural form by being ‘moored’ to it, not by looking at it dispassionately across the ineffable gap of representation. At its best it will continue to be inspired by the metaphysics of evolving cultural forms such as *maloya*. Both organic and theoretical conditions assist in their creation and then cultural life as they move through the worlds of the island, and then the wider world. A cultural form is now understood as traces of life engendered by partners. These are constituted as chains of intimately connected transformations that work with alterities, as Vergès and Marimoutou say: ‘a creativity of a world subject to continual conflicting inputs.’ Here there are no metaphors of depth or transcendence, just a ceaseless trying things out with others. To say that a culture lives *in a place* is to refuse modernist universalisms, and to engage the facts and values of its particular existence as a local voyager. Theories also have to be created (*creare*) (*criar*) raised and sustained in their own places. They are not the neutral language of reference, they too must perform, otherwise we will keep singing the same old songs as a Homi Bhabha, a Foucault or a Marx.

The mode of analysis sketched here is a tracing of pathways, via the cultural translations, that take us from *maloya* to UNESCO; or from *maloya* to Warner music, as the song in question is promoted and sold. And there is another pathway which is the one followed by the intellectual whose practice allows her to ‘read’ or observe a *maloya* performance, link it to a struggle over national or regional identity, and various other elements in a hybrid assemblage, eventually leading to a piece of writing that is submitted for publication. The politics of cultural heritage is not conceived, therefore, as the

application of a human agency or will to a more inert social situation or thing (like *maloya*) in need of transformation, mastery or redemption. Cultural politics and advocacy involves an on-going participation in such worlds.

Appendix

Davy Sicard - *Maloya kabosé*

Tèl ou ‘a vi la limièr baya/Tèl ou ‘a nî po gardé/Tèl ou ‘a vi té rouvèr baya/Tèl ou ‘a vî ou ‘a rantré
 Na pa rod konèt out zistwar/Ni kisak ou lé/Na di aou jîs la pa granshoz mounwa/Mé vyin manj in
 boushé/E la dinkou konma ou la
 Ral in maloya kabosé/Sa la ariv tousle/Sa i té d’au ou la zèl/Ki koté sa i té sort/La amèn a li dvan nouf
 port’/Sa i té ral aou lwin/La ousa ou té san aou byin/Sa i té d’au ou lo tan/Tèl li arriv tèl li sava
 Tèl ou té fini manjé baya/Tèl ou ‘a rod po alé/Tèl ou ‘a sort da la kaz baya/Tèl la nuit la tombé
 La na di aou poukwé ou dor pa la/Ou lé tro fatigé/La ou la tonnem dan mon bra/Out larm la koulé
 E la dinkou konma ou la/Ral in maloya kabosé
 Tèl lannmin la rive/Tèl ou té fine gaya/Tèl na di anou adie/Tèl ansanm nou la ral
 O tèl ansanm nou la ral/Ral in maloya kabosé

Translation into French

Comme tu as vu de la lumière, vieux Malbar/Tu t'es approché pour regarder/Tu as vu que c'était ouvert
 vieux Malbar/Donc tu es entré
 Nous n'avons pas cherché à connaître ton histoire/Ni qui tu étais/Nous t'avons dis que ce n'était pas
 grand-chose mon vieux/Mais manges avec nous
 Et d'un seul coup tu as/Commencé à jouer un Maloya abimé/C'est venu tout seul/Ça t'a ouvert les
 ailes/D'où qu'il venait/Il est arrivé devant notre porte/Ça t'a emmené loin/La ou tu te sentais
 bien/Comme il arrive il s'en va
 Une fois que tu as fini de manger, vieux Malbar/Tu as voulu t'en aller/Tu es sorti de la case vieux
 Malbar/La nuit était tombée
 Nous t'avons invité à dormir/Tu étais trop fatigué/La tu es tombé dans mes bras/Et tes larmes ont coulées
 Et d'un seul coup tu as/Commencé à jouer un Maloya abimé
 Comme tu es arrivé ici/Comme tu te sentais mieux/Comme tu nous as dis adieu/Comme ensemble nous
 avons joué
 Oh Comme ensemble nous avons joué/Joué un maloya abimé

Translation into English

Since you saw the light, old Malbar/You came closer to look/You saw that it was open, old Malbar/So
 you went in
 We didn't ask you your story/Nor who you were/we told you it was no big deal old friend/But eat with us
 And all of a sudden you/began to play a busted Maloya/it came by itself/it opened your wings/from
 whence it came/it arrived at our doorstep/it took you far away/where you felt good/just as it came it
 went away
 Once you had finished eating, old Malbar/you wanted to go away/you left the hut, old Malbar/night fell
 We invited you to sleep over/you were too tired/then you fell into my arms/and your tears flowed
 And all of a sudden you/began to play a busted Maloya
 Since you came here/since you felt better/since you said good-bye to us/since together we played
 Oh, since together we played/played a busted Maloya

Reference List

- Bhabha, H.K. 1994, ‘How Newness Enters the World,’ in *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, London & New York, 212–35.

Dossier de Candidature Présenté par le Conseil Régional de la Réunion au Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication pour une Inscription du Maloya sur la Liste Représenteative du Patrimoine Culturel Immatériel, Convention de L'UNESCO pour la Sauvegarde du Patrimoine Culturel Immateriel, June 2008.

Enwezor, O. *et al.* (eds) 2003, *Créolité and Creolization*. Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern.

'Fet kaf 2009, le maloya à l'UNESCO' 2009, December 20. Online: available: http://archives-lepost.huffingtonpost.fr/article/2009/12/20/1849526_fet-kaf-2009-le-maloya-a-l-unesco.html [Accessed January 1 2012].

Modood, T. & Werbner, P. (eds) 1997, *Debating Cultural Hybridity*. Zed Books, London.

Vergès, F. & Marimoutou, C. 2012. 'Moorings: Indian Ocean Creolisations,' *Portal Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1: 1–39. [in this special issue]

Young, R. 1995, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. Routledge, London.