

The Seychelles 'moutya' as a theatre prototype and historical record.

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In the post-colonial era when the ex-colonies were searching to establish or reestablish a national identity, in most cases, they had very little to go on except what had been preserved by their oral traditions. In such communities as in the Indian Ocean region where the population had been born out of the slave trade and the plantation business, most of the records kept would more often give information about the transactions of the colonial masters, and from the view-points of the latter, rather than from the view-points of the slaves and their descendents. Thus, in the present time when it has become necessary to integrate all aspects of our cultural heritage in order to gain a comprehensive national identity, we also need to turn to the records left for us by our oral traditions.

In the case of Seychelles, music, song and dance, are elements of our culture which we are trying to promote and preserve through research, animation and documentation. Anthropologist Jean-Claude Mahoune for example, has recently launched a DVD featuring the Seychelles '*Tinge*', which is thought to have originated from West Africa, if we are to compare the musical instruments and rhythms characteristic of this type of music to similar types found in Africa. In the context of this paper however, it is the lyrics which are of interest for they are the records that can be used to tell us the history of the earlier generations and testify to their socio-economic conditions. One of the most enduring lyrics of the '*Tinge*', a dance form which has now practically disappeared, is the following: "*Vey pizon ! Dan mai Bonm Zeze*" (bis)

This lyric, chanted by the dancers who were descendents of the slaves, reveals the economic activities of past generations as it refers to maize plantations. Similarly, the popular *Kanmtole* dances, very much alive in Seychelles today, reveal their origins in the French '*Cadrilles*' and other European influences as reflected in the '*Ecossaise*' and the '*Polka*'. As a historical record of times past however, there is none to beat the *moutya*, because by its very nature, it tells the stories of the people who created its lyrics and the times they lived in. The *moutya* is at once theatre, historical record, and the most enduring form of entertainment of the slaves upon whose backs the economy of the Seychelles islands was built. This paper is dedicated to the stories told by the *moutya* lyrics of Seychelles.

Performance (proto-theatre)

There are two main sources I will refer to in this work: one is Marie-Thérèse Choppy who undertook a research on the role of women in theatre in Seychelles, a forum initiated by the Southern African Theatre Initiative (SATI) in 2004. One section of her work was focused on the *moutya*, and though it was not the most important part of her research, I found it relevant to my own interpretation of the *moutya*. The other is Marvelle Estrale who has been conducting an extensive research on the Seychelles *moutya* as part of her assignments in the Literature Unit of Lenstiti Kreol.

In the context of performance, it is Choppy's paper I first turn to. In her discussion on the role of women in the development of Theatre as an art form in Seychelles, Choppy refers to the *moutya* as a prototype of theatre in Seychelles.

“The commonest form of ‘proto-theatre’ in Seychelles is the ‘moutya’ which consists of singing and dancing. One particularity of the songs is that they may be composed instantaneously on any topic of intrigue.” (Women in Theatre in Seychelles, 2004)

In her paper, Choppy sees the *moutya* as a performance involving many actors, but with one role being played by groups as in the Greek ‘chorus’. The main actors are the male chorus and the female chorus, with the drummer playing an individual role, as he is often referred to individually. The intrigue mentioned by Choppy is the story that is played out in the performance, usually with the male chorus introducing the subject and the female chorus retorting, climaxing in a command to the drummer to roll out the rhythm:

*“Deboury debourye tanbourye,
tap ou lanmen lo la pa large”*

The drummer's central role is illustrated by the chorus' discourse to him. For a *moutya* to be considered ‘hot’ and therefore, worth staying around for, the drummer must excite the singers and dancers to the point that they are inspired to create their lyrics. Thus, when the chorus says, ‘*tap sa tanbour la pa large*, (hit the drum and don't release it), it is imploring the drummer to maintain the rhythm. When the drumming is hot enough to satisfy the chorus, they will show their excitement in their lyrics:

“Ou a tap sa tanbour la tanbourye

Ou a met moutya lo leren sa marimba¹” (Estrale, 2003)

In this case, a particular female dancer is also impressing the chorus enough for them to ask the drummer to take up her challenge. When the *moutya* is at its peak, a ululation will take place with the dancers emphasizing their movements. The less inhibited female dancers might raise their skirts higher (sometimes right over their heads!) and their male counterparts will literally dance beneath their skirts. If however, there is some element of dissatisfaction in the *moutya*, it will soon be made known. Sometimes, the male chorus might consider that the female chorus is not performing satisfactorily. The chorus will say so in the next verse and threaten to leave:

“Reponn mon lavwa bann madanm

reponn mon lavwa si ou a oule

reponn mon lavwa si ou a oule

Mon a degout moutya mon ava ale” (Estrale, 2003)

If it is the drummer who is not performing satisfactorily, he will be told so in very colourful terms! When they are being mild, the chorus will simply ask him where he is or if he’s sleeping:

“Tanbourye, ki kote ou ete?

Tanbourye ou a tap sa tanbour” (Estrale, 2003)

When they are being mean, they might suggest that the skin of the drum is not the drummer’s mother’s skin, therefore he should not be afraid to beat it:

“Bat sa tanbour la, tanbourye,

Sa pa lapo ou manman ki lo la (bis)

Sa lapo zannimo ki lo la!”

According to Estrales’s research, the lyrics and the rhythms were not only inspired by the drums but also by the copious amounts of alcohol, usually home-made brews (*baka², kalou³*) being consumed, as is illustrated by this singer’s suggestion that the drinks are taking long to reach him!

¹ Marimba is a Creole word for woman, usually expressing the fact that she’s beautiful or somebody’s lover.

² Baka: fermented fruit

³ Kalou: palm wine (fermented coconut sap collected from the tree)

*“Pa bezwen tarde pour aroz mwan
Sansan mon laraz vera i a monte!”* (Estrale, 2006)

In most cases, the songs would end with a jubilation of ‘*olae lae*’. Sometimes, ‘*olae lae*’ would indicate that it was now time to change to another song and sometimes, the singers would merely be buying time in order to compose new lyrics. The performance would go on all night long, with each person having an intrigue to talk about, taking turns to sing it. Eventually, lyrics that were well established in the singers’ repertoire would be used as metaphors and allegories to match the events that were going on in the community at the time.

The intrigues

(I). Historical records of slavery and plantation life

The earliest *moutya* lyrics can be classified as historical records of slavery and its aftermath during the islands’ colonial days. They mainly describe the singers’ suffering, disgust or anger. The following is a typical one:

*Gran blan, Msye mon bourzwa
Gran Msye, donn nou nou lavi*

*Soley leve mon dan plantasyon
Soley kouse mon ankor ladan menm*

*Lot fwa mon ti mank noye, Gran Msye
Mon ti ape rod ou bouyon*

*Tanto ler mon ariv se mwan
Mon piti pe manz manze sek*

*Gran Blan Msye mon bourzwa
Gran Msye, retourn mwan mon fanm*

Mon pa'n fer sa par mon leker

Mon fer sa pour sov ou lavi

In this case, the general chorus of 'olae lae' will not be a ululation of delight but a cry of despair. The singer tells of his hard master who makes him work in the plantations from sunrise to sunset. He has to risk his life to catch fish for his master, but when he gets home, his children do not have any fish or meat to eat. To cap it all, his master is having an affair with his wife, whose response indicates that she is forced to capitulate to her husband's master or her husband will be in danger of his life. This is so typical of the records of slavery; it could be a story from "Mandingo" or Alex Hailey's "Roots".

The plantation masters' arrogant treatment of their workers have remained in the memories of the descendents of the slaves and this arrogance has been passed on to the descendents of the masters as is illustrated in the later lyrics which were composed on the outer islands which were being exploited for cash crops and raw materials. The following lines tell of a young female worker who left home to work on the plantations at a very early age:

"Dan mon douz an, katorz an

Piti mon manman dan lakour

Al plis koko Lil Alfons

Al tir gwano Lasonmpsyon"

The work described in this extract is very hard; de-husking coconuts and digging for guano. It tells us of the poor social conditions of the workers; a testimony of child labour, which in most cases arose out of the need to have a higher income in the family, or even, just so the child may eat. It is worth noting that the lyrics testify also to the economic activities of the past. It is however, the plight of the workers however, which is our main focus. The same song illustrates the plantation master's mistreatment of the singer: "*Mon lapo ledo in ize, Msye Marcel pe riye*". She complains that the skin on her back is worn out, but her master is laughing. Now, this could either mean that she has been carrying loads on her back or just hard work. Estrale's research however, concludes that a worn back in a woman's case means having sexual intercourse, thus the allusion to lying on the back. Estrale has thus interpreted this song as meaning that the singer was being abused sexually. If that was the case, then 'Msye' Marcel's reaction when the singer asks for her salary is even more monstrous for he laughs and tells her he is not ready, to come the next morning. "*Mon pa ankor pare, vin demen ne-v-er bomaten.*" All her anger and suffering

is expressed in those lines as she mimics her master's arrogant voice in the moment of release she gets in the *moutya*.

On a less despairing note, other important events that took place on the islands were recorded in the *moutyas*. One song tells of a lorry breaking down and impeding traffic in the environs of the town: “*Anmontan Bel Air, Kanmiyon fin dereye lao laba / Mon oule sey monte, mon pa kapab, Mon oule sey desann, mon pa kapab.*” The composing of the song marks the fact that lorries were a fairly new sight on the islands' roads at the time, thus a broken down lorry would be quite a sight to see and definitely something to sing about. Another song tells of a fire which could have taken place on the outer islands or on the mainland. “*Laklos sonnen, o dingdong (3x) / Mon kriye dife, o dife (3x).*” This song was used appropriately to animate a performance based on the historical burning down of the ‘jardin du Roi’ in the opening ceremony of the Kreol Festival in 1999. It is not clear whether the lyrics were composed to mark the real event or if it was another fire that is referred to; however, it is right that the *moutya* tradition should be kept alive in such an important national performance, as part of our cultural heritage.

(II) Social disapprobation

The *moutya* was also a means of expressing the community's disapproval of its members' unacceptable behaviour. It was accepted that bad behaviour was everybody's business, so if you were caught stepping out of line, you could expect your linen to be washed in public; and if the subject of the song was present and bold enough to answer back, then the *moutya* would be really hot and spicy! ‘*La Waneta i antre*’ is a *moutya* that tells of a woman who is so busy with her lover that she fails to hear the arrival of the weekly boat at the port. She is castigated for not respecting the memory of her husband who had just died.

“*La Waneta i antre, Ma Paviyon i souffle(3x)*

La Waneta i mouye, Madanm marye dan lakaz pa tande.

Madanm marye dan lakaz pa tande (3x)

Madanm marye i pe tronp lalyans

Madanm marye i pe tronp lalyans (3x)

Pour li met dey lanmor son mari

The lyrics show the singers' disapprobation of the married woman's behaviour. It shows clearly their position that the wedding ring is sacred and should be respected. In taking a lover, the tone of the song says, the woman had sullied the image and status of a married woman. The woman in this case had the impudence to retort that she had to prostitute herself in order to buy the proper mourning clothes as her dead husband had left her destitute and had not provided for her necessities. (Estrale, 2006) This bears on the fact that it was also expected that men who took wives or lovers should be able to provide for them. Now, this situation might actually be a performance composed by the *moutya* dancers and not necessarily involve real actors of real intrigues. The beauty of the *moutya* is that it reflects society so that its lyrics may be performed by the real actors themselves or invented by the singers based on general situations.

If the ordinary married woman is castigated for not respecting her married status, there is cause for a deeper sarcasm when the woman concerned also has a higher social status. The following lines come from a *moutya* which tells of the infidelity of a 'Komander'⁴'s wife.

*"Kare nepli monte lo rido Borlanmer
I sed laplas pour Madanm Komander"*

The turtles have ceased to come out to the beach. They've given over to the *Komander's* wife. There is no need to say what the *Komander's* wife does on the beach. By the very fact that she is the subject of the *moutya* song, it is clear that she has turned her subordinates into her masters by her deviation from the norms for they now have the power to judge her and pour ridicule on her husband, their master.

Unmarried women did not escape censure. 'Lorenza' is a *moutya* that castigates a young woman for behaviour that the community considers abnormal:

*"Madanm Zan anmas Lorenza, Lorenza pe fer nou onte.
Simityer ti fer pour lemor, pa ti fer lakaz Lorenza..."*

⁴ 'Komander'. The plantation's overseer or administrator. The one who gives the commands, and of course, the one with the highest status in the community.

Lorennza was evidently a young lady with very little inhibitions as she seems to have been everywhere, perpetrating her bad behaviour. The *moutya* chorus tells her guardian or her mother (*Madanm Zan*) to check her behaviour as she was bringing shame on the whole community. The chorus then proceeds to quote all the places that *Lorennza* has turned into her house, from the cemetery to the church (meaning either that she spent too much time there or that she was doing things there that should only be done in her house). It was possible at times to be censured without sufficient cause. There is the famous case of Father Théophile who was found dead in a ravine in the Cascade area in 1925. It was never established whether he had been murdered or whether his death was an accident, but the community accused one ‘*Gro Louis*’ in a song ‘*Gro Louis rann mwan mon Per*’. Even if the priest had really been murdered, it was not proven that the said ‘*Gro Louis*’ had done it; but the community had passed judgement in the court of the *moutya*. On the other hand, if a case had actually been tried in court, but justice had not been done, the case would be tried in a *moutya* or *sega*⁵ and the wrongdoers accused as in ‘*Claire mon pti fiy, koz laverite / Ou’n koz lalang devan Seloner*’. In this case, the story goes that a witness lied in court and consequently sent an innocent person to prison. She did not however, escape the censure of the traditional composers. (Estrale, 2006)

(III) Social heritage and satire

The *moutya* lyrics are also records of the social inheritance of Seychellois society. The value-systems established by the colonial masters are proving to be rather die-hards if we are to judge by some of the fairly recent lyrics.

“*Depi ler mon’n arive, mon bat lanmen danm pa leve*
Me siboudou i annan seve long, i bat lanmen danm i leve.”

Here, the singer is male and he complains that he has been around a long time but has not been rewarded with a dance partner. ‘*Siboudou*’ however, has just come, but the ladies immediately accept his offer of a dance. The singer attributes ‘*Siboudou*’s success with his Indo-European hair whereas he is unsuccessful because of his tight African hair, “*Abe mwan mon seve lanmson, mon bat lanmen danm pa lanse.*” Even as he complains, the singer is being sarcastic towards those female partners who are silly enough to judge a man by his hair. He is avenged by another

⁵ Segas may be considered as a faster version of the *moutya* though the rhythms of both lyrics and beat may vary.

singer in another time and another moutya, who experiences the same thing, though he has something to add to the story. Typically, the lady he refers to rejects him because of his peppercorn hair:

Fler zerison mon pa oule (3x)

Pangar i a pik mon lanmen

But she only rejects him in public for behind closed doors, ‘peppercorn’ spices her life. The peppercorn on his head is the downfall of young ladies, the male singer says; “*Sa fler zerison lo mon latet / Sanmenm maler zenn fanm!*” It is worth noting that this particular *moutya* was composed very recently (2004) by the Anse Etoile Cultural Troupe as part of the Kreol Festival activities. Here is a typical example of a story that is not real, does not refer to any particular person, but could really be about anybody in a society affected by the social heritage of colour and hair rating, according to the European concept of beauty. That the young lady would rather not be seen with the Negroid man but enjoys certain intimacies with him in private is also typical of the preconceptions and prejudices around black races caused by slavery and colonialism; which is that they make great bed partners.

In her 2006 paper about the Seychelles ‘moutya’, Estrale touches on the composers’ metaphoric skills and power of sarcasm. Some lyrics will be quite direct, the metaphors being the main artistic expression:

“A la Gro Makro in ariv ankor

Ek son bel mole koman pye palmis!”

The above lines express the disgust of a group, probably plantation workers, for one of their colleagues whom they suspect is playing up to the overseer for favours. The lyrics categorically insults him/her, what in Seychelles Kreol is called ‘*maltrete*’. His/her legs are described as tree trunks and he/she is named ‘gro makro’⁶ (*sucker-up*). As the general group would have been able to do very little against the ‘makro’ in working circumstances, especially if he/she was really favoured by the overseer, the *moutya* would then become a forum for the group to vent out their anger and disgust. The *moutya* was also used as a forum for disputes between different parties. The following verses are sung by a woman who is addressing another woman, probably a rival for social position in the community:

“Ou dir mwan ou mari zouvriye (3x)

⁶ It is not clear whether the ‘makro’ is male or female as ‘makro’ can be both masculine and feminine in SK, though there is also a feminine version; ‘makrel’.

Zouvriye dan koko Delorié

The singer is satirizing her rival who boasts that her husband is a skilled worker. The term ‘zouvriye’ would apply to masons, carpenters, forgers, etc; definitely a cut above ordinary unskilled labourers. If, as the singer claims, however, her rival’s husbands worked in Delorié’s cononut plantation⁷, he could not be anything else but a labourer who picked coconut as was common among working adults from the Anse Etoile and Glacis area during the late British colonial era. The singer’s sarcasm becomes quite vitriolic as she moves on with her song, probably carried along by the excitement of her audience and the general moutya fever: she insults the manhood of her rival’s husband.

“*Zonm ki pis ansizan mon pa oule(3x)*

I a donn mwan malad leren!”

What does she want with a man who has to pass urine sitting down, she says; she’ll end up getting back-ache! The innuendo is highly sexual and savagely derogatory. It is intended to offend, and offend deeply; thus in the original *moutyas*, if the person the lyrics were targeting was unable to issue a sufficiently cutting response, it was just too bad. The *moutya* after all, had become a forum for washing dirty linen in public for those who had the skills of composers.

In this respect, and also with the help of local brews, the lyrics composed could be very erotic. Clandestine affairs would be made public and quarrels between lovers would be aired. The young woman who complains of ‘Msye’ Marcel’s treatment of her (see section 1) also recounts her adventures with the local casanova ‘*Alibaba Kok maron*⁸’: “*Roul mwan par isi, Alibaba, roul mwan par laba / Roul mwan par isi, ou ape balans mwan koman balanswar.*” If her experience with Alibaba has been memorable, certainly, the people who sing her song in her wake are afforded much pleasure in the personal implications each person gives to it. To those who would condemn the *moutya* for its erotic aspect, it is important to remember that the society that created the *moutya* was after all a society born out of slavery. Throughout this paper, the lyrics have illustrated both extremes of social values; from respect for the status of marriage, to the description of sexual experience. Though the slaves and their descendents would have been influenced by their own original value-systems, this would only be to a certain extent as the

⁷ Delorié was a big landowner whose lands expanded from the hills to the sea in the Northern part of Mahé. A lot of people were employed at a negligible rate to pick coconuts on these lands.

⁸ ‘*Kok maron*’: a male bachelor who has intimate relations with many women in a community.

authorities who dictated behaviour would be the masters, not only by what they preached, but also by what they practiced.

Conclusion

That the *moutya* is still very much alive today in Seychelles is a testimony to the fact that it has a definite appeal to the Seychellois psyche. Unlike the ‘*Tinge*’, common practice kept it alive, and this, in spite of the fact that there was a concerted effort to ban it by the British colonials and the Church.

“During the colonial days, the moutya was banned in the town districts because it was considered by the church to be too erotic a dance and the English lords said it kept them awake at night.” (Choppy Marie-Thérèse, 2004)

In her research, Estrale recounts an incident whereby the local priest had interrupted a *moutya* and actually tried to whip the dancers with the cord around his habit. By the time Seychelles had got its independence, the practice of the *moutya* had dwindled and its valorization much affected by years of psychological attack by the authorities, both Church and Government. In the 1970s and 80,s young people were ashamed to dance or sing the *moutya*. Today, it cannot be said that every young man or woman will voluntary take part in a spontaneous *moutya*. However, much effort is being put into the preservation of this art-form as there is no doubt that even only in the singing or listening, we are afforded much pleasure. The *moutya* owes its survival to the fact that it is the most intoxicating of the hybrid music created by our African ancestors, but most importantly, it is a symbol of not only our creativity but also of our hard won freedom. Each time we perform the *moutya*, we are offering an omage to the memory of our ancestors.

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