

Introduction



The focus of this book is on a music genre from the Melanesian Republic of Vanuatu, generally referred to as ‘stringband music.’ In particular, I address musical hybridity and the construction and representation of social and cultural identity.

The modern music styles of Vanuatu are characterized by the interplay of innovations, acquisitions from foreign musics,¹ modifications of these, and combinations with Indigenous music traditions. These styles are part of active constructions of identities on different levels. There are clear differences between stringband music and other musics from Vanuatu in the way they construct and represent identities.

Stringband music is played on acoustic instruments and shows distinctive characteristics, which makes it easy even for laypersons to identify the genre. This type of music is very popular throughout the country. Despite musical similarities to ensembles of string instruments from other parts of the Pacific, Vanuatu stringband music is unique and most ni-Vanuatu (the citizens of Vanuatu) perceive it as a national identity marker: their own, genuine *kalja* (culture), *stael* (style), or *miusik* (music).² Consequently, I do not classify stringband music into a more general category but treat it, rather, as a distinct music genre, as do people in Vanuatu.

At a local level of identity construction, the genre is connected to the realms of kinship, social relationships, local histories, and particular localities. On a regional level, stringband music broaches the issue of the mobility of young people between rural and urban settings and promotes the concerns of Vanuatu’s provinces. The genre, however, also addresses events of national significance and beyond, like the manifestation of Christian values. Stringband music combines, corresponds with, and counterbalances all these aspects and is simple as well as ambiguous enough to express many things. Stringbands in Vanuatu are a phenomenon from the midst of society, often deeply rooted in the social structure of the village and in daily village life. Its aesthetics reflect the mainstream taste of the ni-Vanuatu population. In its course of change, stringband music was subject to both the dynamics of homogenization as well as to differentiation. Some common features

and stereotypes have evolved over the last decades—these concern musical aspects, the lyrics, behavior in relation to performance, the groups' images, and the structures of organization.

This study is based on empirical data, which was collected in the two urban centers of the country as well as in various village contexts during three field trips to Vanuatu. I first visited Vanuatu in November 2001 for the purpose of orientation and language acquisition (Bislama). The actual fieldwork and gathering of data took place in the phase between November 2002 and April 2003, as well as between November 2003 and April 2004.³ While I was able to follow some developments since then from a distance, it is evident that important changes in technology and communication have taken place, that is an increase in the availability of mobile phones and internet access which enables people in town to stay in touch with their peers and relatives on the islands. Data was collected in the capital Port Vila, due to the presence of most popular stringbands and also because of the pop groups' dependency on electrical equipment, which is available there. Shorter trips were undertaken to rural areas on other islands (Ambrym, Pentecost, Ambae, and Malekula), and to the second 'urban center' of Vanuatu, Luganville. Financial support for the second trip was granted by the German Academic Exchange Service and by the Dean of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Cologne.

Contemporary music genres experience development and accordingly the interrelation between music and identities is subject to transition. Because of this constant change, it has become all the more important to present the findings of my field research and to document Vanuatu's music scene at a point in time when mobile phones and the internet were scarcely available and when the reception of international popular music in Vanuatu was different compared to the present day.

Key Issues in the Study of Stringband Music

Yes it's true: in this world, you cannot live without music. Even if you hate music, if you don't listen to music tapes, you still whistle. You still whistle when walking around.

(George 'Gero' Iaviniau from the group Naio)⁴

Measured against the fact that the small population, scattered over many islands, was exposed to a variety of colonial and postcolonial influences and impositions, cultural creation is surprisingly sovereign and miscellaneous in Vanuatu, and this is particularly evident in the field of music. Most ni-Vanuatu differentiate between four main categories of music: *kastom miusik* (the various 'traditional' musics of Vanuatu), *stringban miusik* (stringband music), ecclesiastical music⁵ (of the different Christian denominations), and

pop miusik. These broad categories are shared among a wider Melanesian audience (cf. Webb 1993: 95). *Pop miusik* is a term, which includes a wide spectrum of international popular musics, as well as music genres from Vanuatu that use electrical amplified instruments and a drum set. They primarily include a local variety of reggae (*rege*), which connects with the global reggae community, mainly referring to Jamaica and South and West Africa. At the same time, *rege* is a distinctive style located in Vanuatu and Melanesia.⁶ People in Vanuatu make a sharp distinction between stringband music on the one hand and various forms of popular music on the other. Since the dichotomy of these realms of music is so central to this work, I adopt the emic categories of *stringban miusik* and *pop miusik*. Whereas in other parts of Melanesia stringband music “evokes strong feelings of nostalgia” and “is now a signifier of the local and ‘tradition’” (Diettrich et al. 2011: 103), I portray the genre as a practice of Melanesian creativity beyond traditional artifacts and *kastom*, as a part of modern life in Vanuatu.

The impact of a stringband can be thrilling. Positive properties of stringband music are described as relaxing and emotionally moving. Stringbands are appreciated as entertainment and for providing the music for dancing at functions and occasions of various kinds: marriages, fundraisings, on the occasion of the birth of a new child in the village, circumcision celebrations, kava nights, competitions, or just for the fun of it in the afternoons when the garden work is finished.⁷

Although stringband culture as a whole helps to unite the nation, there is usually no mixing of people from different backgrounds within the bands as these are formed according to members’ origins. Stringbands thus are an example of the motto ‘unity in diversity.’ Stringband music is a cultural practice that, despite its inherent local characteristics, manages to generate common ground, and this is no small thing in a heterogeneous setting like Vanuatu.

In the next sections, I touch on some topics which I will relate to stringband music over the course of this book. It is important to stress these aspects of syncretic musics that do not match with the mainstream sounds and habits of the ‘North Atlantic axis.’⁸ I hope that this study can contribute to the recognition of peripheral music scenes that have developed their own unique characteristics.

Gender

Women’s participation in the music scene of Vanuatu is to be seen in connection with issues of gender equality. For example, unequal pay is a reality in the commercial cultural sector of Vanuatu (DeBlock 2019: 139 f.). However, the most successful individual musician of Vanuatu is a young woman (Vanessa Quai).

The principle of homosociality can be found in many cultural practices of Vanuatu. The dynamics between hegemonic masculinity in terms of control, domination, and subordination (within, but also in relationships outside the groups) and subordinate masculinity in stringbands certainly is an interesting field of research which can only be briefly touched on in this study. Structures of vertical and horizontal homosociality (a distinction introduced by Hammarén and Johansson 2014) become apparent in the organization of the groups (see Chapter 5, this volume).

On their album “Grassroot Laef” (2002) the stringband Dausake featured the female singer Alsina Garae. She is a recognized *pop musik* singer who works together with various musicians in Port Vila. This collaboration is extraordinary.⁹ The song proved to be very successful, and the band released another album a year later, on which Alsina Garae sings three songs.

Another recent development is the attempt of an all-female stringband, the Mauna Stringband in Port Vila, which was formed by ten women from Emao and Nguna in 2001. According to bandleader Maria Manua, girls are interested in the group because it offers an unparalleled opportunity for them to perform in public. Meanwhile, other all-female stringbands formed in Port Vila, such as Saravanua (Stern 2007: 170).

Tourism

Stringband music is a ubiquitous ‘national attraction.’ It is comparatively cheap for a hotel to hire a stringband and the groups do not need any electronic equipment, meaning that they can play everywhere, whether on the quayside or the poolside. Live performances accompany many tourist activities in Vanuatu, showing how the music is regarded as a tourist-related service industry, which constructs images of ni-Vanuatu life for outsiders. The groups are employed at all the switch points of the industry, starting with the entry of the tourists (at the airport or the wharf) and their arrival at the hotel, right up to special occasions such as the weddings at the Erakor Lagoon. Apart from contracts with hotels, the best source of income for stringbands is tourism-related trips overseas. When ni-Vanuatu musicians—chosen by the National Tourism Office (NTO)—perform abroad, many understand their tours as a mission in service of their country (which involves the promotion of Vanuatu as a vacation destination) and themselves as cultural ambassadors.

In contrast to any kind of display involving the representation of *kastom*, stringband music has the advantage that questions about the authenticity of the representation do not arise. Indeed, this is notable considering the sector’s focus on traditional artifacts and architecture, dance (involving headdresses and body painting), sand drawings, and rituals. While all of

these—although cherished and vivid in many cases—embody a traditional past, stringband music helps to create an image of contemporary Vanuatu, which represents the country and its people for the visitors as hospitable, welcoming, friendly—and yet exotic. Stringband culture has not produced an equivalent to the material artifacts of ‘the domain of *kastom*,’ which can be taken home by visitors in the forms of woven mats, fans, or miniature slit gongs. However, tourists can buy cassettes and shoot videos instead (for an example for such a setting see Taylor 2016: 366). As far as the marketing of Vanuatu and its communities as a tourist destination is concerned, a general focus on *kastom* does not interfere with stringband music: although, for example, people in Walarano (Malekula) theme their tourist shows and attractions as a representation of traditional life, a stringband greeting the cruise ship passengers is an inherent part of it as well.

Copyright

Copyright is a complex issue in Vanuatu, and there are different ways of dealing with copyright depending on the cultural practice in question (see Geismar 2005). Some musicians prefer a Western-style copyright that recognizes and protects the individual creativity of the composer. However, in Vanuatu, cultural practices and innovations are generally seen more as an achievement of the community from which the creators come. The understanding is rather that of “a more communal form of ownership” (Geismar 2005: 37). The situation becomes even more complicated in cases where the musicians fall back on traditional songs—then *kastom kopiraet* (customary property rights) must also be taken into account.

Haidy Geismar reports of a meeting of carvers from Ambrym who transcribed their genealogies: “It was intended that this local document would ensure that each individual’s family rights to carve particular images would be made public knowledge, and by extension, become an enforceable form of Indigenous copyright legislation that could be used to regulate the growing market for carvings” (2005: 40). When I read this, it made me think of a stringband musician who tried to register the compositions of the stringbands of Emao Island (see Chapter 4). A registration and archiving of the songs of each stringband from Emao at the Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta (VKS) would provide a form of recognition of the property rights and thus a de facto copyright in a setting without official copyright law.

The Global and the Local

Globalization is one of the fundamental consequences of modernity which, in turn, is characterized through the development of national states and sys-

tematic capitalist production (Giddens 1990: 64). However, it is important to keep in mind “that Western modernity is not the only one of its kind” (Brumann 1998: 501). Philip Hayward remarks: “This picture looks quite different from particular non-Western locations, especially when the focus is on the character and agency of the local rather than on local vulnerability to Western influences” (2012: 52).

Popular and syncretic music can be regarded as a global phenomenon insofar as some stylistic elements of different origin contribute to an international ‘toolbox’ of stylistic idioms. This ‘toolbox’ has some homogenizing effects in the sense that it results in a worldwide distribution of some musics or some of their elements which are often simplified and standardized in the process of transculturation (Guilbault 1993: xvii f.; Manuel 1988: 21). Though in fact the usage of single reproduced musical motives reach a peak with the sampling technology, the view of global music as a toolbox containing tools of musical motives and standardized lyrics that always fit to each other not only underestimates the musicians’ creativity and potential to develop localized forms of music but implies that all music has ‘universal language’ properties or a ‘universal expression of emotion,’ views which have long been rejected in ethnomusicology. Popular music writers portrayed the Anglo-American dominance in the international popular music industry as a form of cultural imperialism that seeks to incorporate local forms of popular music for Anglo- and Eurocentric markets (Mitchell 1996: 1). Notions of global cultural homogenization include ‘cultural grey-out’ (Lomax [1968] 2009: 4); ‘alarmism’ (Hannerz 2002: 42); the concept of ‘McDonaldization of society’ (Ritzer 1983); and the ‘Global (or World) English phenomenon’ (Berger 2003: xix).

Although musics are related to place, they can, in principle, be picked up everywhere. People from different parts of the world can have access to music cultures that are constructed as ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1983). The only precondition seems to be that the music must be available.¹⁰ Often though, the use of music in the places where it originated differs quite considerably from where it is eventually received, and connotations and meanings of musics change when they flow from one place to another place. Some genres from the US, the Caribbean, France, or Africa are quickly absorbed by ni-Vanuatu (such as the genres reggae and zouk), while others are not (such as heavy metal and Western art music); some subjects for song lyrics, which are popular with Western musicians are avoided altogether (such as explicit references to sexuality). In the overall picture, we can by no means observe mere processes that lead to a homogenization in the realm of popular culture, because at the same time the contrary is true. This book will illustrate this point through multiple examples.

The Rootedness in *Ples*

In many places in Vanuatu, concepts of identity are connected to ‘root-places’ or ‘founding places’ where founding ancestors first appeared.¹¹ Often these are commemorated in songs and ‘mythical cycles’ (e.g., Ammann 2012: 41 ff. and Bonnemaïson 1994: 114). In some cases, such myths and their remembrance are of great importance because territorial rights are derived from them:

In the negotiations, the man who can sing the . . . song related to the piece of land in question has the final argument. For this reason songs are kept secret and are only performed as a final trumpcard. . . . The song’s content speaks about the early migration of the ancestors and the names of the places through which they travelled. (Ammann 2012: 44)

While “place names function as mnemonic devices that help people to recall stories, specific events or emotions” (Hess 2009: 122), some songs are linked to particular places (e.g., Jolly 2003: 192) and stringband songs in particular are used to remember people, incidents, and places.

In traditional Melanesian society, a ‘circular mobility’ (Bonnemaïson 1985) within networks of alliances with populations on other islands involved journeys along established and customary ‘routes,’ ‘roads,’ or ‘paths’ (see also Bonnemaïson 1994; Bolton 1999a: 49 f.). Thus, Melanesian identity is determined by both rootedness around primordial places and mobility along roads of alliance.

As Daniela Kraemer shows, the roads themselves can become places: in contrast to most ni-Vanuatu for whom their home island is an important marker of their identity, young men in Freswota, Port Vila, create a new identity which involves “place-making activities” (2013: 37) to transform “the area in which they live from a place with no shared and relevant social meaning into a place imbued with greater collective significance” (ibid.: 40).

While Kraemer depicts the situation of people born in town, many of those persons who come to town from other islands and villages do settle in the same neighborhoods and thus rebuild their communities based on ‘territorial solidarity’ (Bonnemaïson’s term; 1985: 58):

The longest established have often jointly bought urban land, where little societies reconstitute themselves on miniterritories, with their own space and new hierarchies. . . . Young bachelors, who find in being mobile a means of temporary escape from the constraints of rural society without completely severing their ties, are particularly well represented in these group structures. (ibid.)

This also applies to many stringband musicians. They engage in practices of place-making by creating and recording stories of the place, thus developing the (oral) history of the urban setting they live in. Bolton notes that “*kastom* mediates and expresses place-based identity” (1999a: 43). Stringband music likewise constitutes a cultural formula which helps to emplace people in their *ples*—whether in town or in the village. The song’s plots are usually specifically located, and, in this way, bands demonstrate their affiliation to particular places.

Identification through Acquisition, Identity through Innovation

Our identities result from a web of various social and personal identities which are further based on individual characteristics and group affiliations such as gender, age, and identities that are motivated by political orientation or religion. While considering these and commenting on them, I focus on the relations between music and cultural identity, language identity and local identity, all of which are entangled and congeneric in the case of Vanuatu.

Some group affiliations we can give up quite easily while others might leave their mark on us for the rest of our lives. This is one way in which we acquire, form, and change our identity during the course of time. In normal circumstances, every one of us participates in many of these groups. Cultural practices, such as music, play a crucial role in their formation. Group affiliations can also be imagined; for example, we feel spiritually akin to faraway musicians and their audiences, which we read about in fanzines.

Though bound to certain material preconditions (instruments, audio devices, etc.) music is an immaterial cultural product which, as such, lends itself perfectly to acquisition. Copyright legislation (non-existent in Vanuatu at the time of fieldwork) cannot keep musicians from copying, modifying, or ‘acquiring’ other styles in all different shades. Musical influences from other places change local listening habits and musicians’ practices. If people start to integrate foreign musics into their lives, they begin to identify with them in one way or another.

I argue that identification requires processes of acquisition, which make the exploitation and use of those musics possible. Modification is necessary because the music in question needs to become meaningful in the new context. The creative processes of acquisition, combination, modification, and innovation are means in the processes of identity construction. Acquisition—other authors refer to this process as ‘Indigenization’ (Waterman 1990; Goldsworthy 1998; Appardurai 2002; Gillespie 2010), ‘hybridization’ (Mitchell 1996), ‘creolisation’ (Hannerz 1987), ‘localization’ (Diettrich et al. 2011), ‘domestication’ (Tobin 1992), ‘incorporation’ and ‘(reverse) appro-

priation¹² (Mitchell 1996), ‘(musical) transculturation’ (Kartomi 1981), and ‘recontextualization’¹³—is creative in the sense that it entails changes and adjustments in performance and meaning.¹⁴ The range of musical synthesis happening within the process of acquisition is quite wide: it starts from “transfers of discrete musical traits” (Kartomi 1981: 236), “scenarios in which a musician ‘borrows’ (or copies, or steals) a phrase or style or sound or inflection” (Mitchell 1996: 8), but can also incorporate further processes as well as dance and lyrics. Acquisition of foreign musical ideas might take place for “purely musical reasons” (Kartomi 1981: 240), but more significant are the extra-musical reasons, one of them being the establishment of identities (ibid.).

When ‘acquisition’ is at its very beginning, identification is rather superficial, as is the case with mere copying. International music is incorporated only selectively and according to the social and cultural background, as local structures strongly determine the perception and use of foreign musics. Although ‘copied’ music can involve musicians as well as its listeners equally emotionally, the music concerned is not perceived as someone’s own.

There are differences between stringband music and popular musics in Vanuatu, most notably concerning sound and the instruments used. Special modifications and innovations of instruments during the processes of acquisition and the development of the stringband genre have led to this situation. However, there are also different implications of meaning—how distinguished stringband music actually is from popular musics in Vanuatu becomes manifest on the basis of its musical structure, the language and the topics of the lyrics, the performance contexts, the role and behavior of the audience, as well as the organization aspects of the groups.

While *rege* emerged in the aftermath of the advent of the widely known West Papuan group Black Brothers in Vanuatu in 1986, the initial processes of acquisition and innovation that led to the evolution of the *stringban* genre took place several decades before. Stringband music has been an established genre that has continually developed since its beginnings, which I suspect were in the 1940s. The genre is subject to relatively static structures: topics, stylistic means in lyrics, musical, and organizational structures have been standardized. Influences are consistently incorporated without changing the core of the structures. When amplifiers, electric guitars, bass guitars, and finally keyboards became available, stringband music was not diffused within *pop miusik* but asserted itself as an independent genre. Stringband music is still seldom played by older musicians; it is precisely the young men who are the bearers of the culture.

To ni-Vanuatu, stringband music is not merely an alternative to any popular music genre, but—at least in many places—rather a part of life, like hymns from one’s church or *kastom miusik* from one’s island. Hence,

for many people, the question of whether one likes stringband music does not arise. Stringband music and popular musics from Vanuatu are never in competition. Most *pop miusik* musicians in Vanuatu have also played stringband music in the past (or are still doing so) and there is no polarization of listeners to either side. Despite the obvious differences mentioned above, this seems less confusing when one takes into consideration the status of stringband music in Vanuatu as well as the plurality of identity in general. For much of the population, Vanuatu's popular music styles are less successful for their identification as 'ni-Vanuatu' than is stringband music, which refers predominantly to the local sphere. For this reason, stringband music plays a special role in Vanuatu's cultural identity.

The Quest for a National Musical Identity

The creation of a national 'musical' identity of Vanuatu, that is to say an unmistakable and typical music, is a more or less concrete long-term objective of many musicians of all ages. In this respect, the music scenario in Vanuatu differs very much from the cultural landscape of Western countries where we find a multitude of music-related groups, many of which are not confined to national boundaries. For many Western musicians it seems to be a requirement to try to find an individual style, a niche, within a special genre. Social groups in urban Melanesia, however, crystallize more according to origin and language.

National unity is a burning issue particularly connected to the condition of postcolonial states. The search for a national style among ni-Vanuatu musicians is confined to the realm of *pop miusik*, as there is no doubt about the status of stringband music as *wan nasonal miusik blong Vanuatu*. For decades it has been used to represent the country in tourism-related events overseas and in the country itself. Despite this, stringband musicians usually lack the aspiration to go beyond the domestic market. As opposed to this, much of Vanuatu's *pop miusik* is produced with a clear focus on international audiences, at least within Melanesia. The search for a unique national *pop miusik* style of Vanuatu is characterized through attempts to incorporate Melanesian elements. These attempts constitute a balancing act to communicate traditional values in a form acceptable for young people of their own (speech) community, while producing a representational style on a national level and an international appealing piece of 'world music' at the same time.

Sometimes popular music is used as a forum for the young to express opposition and to criticize politics, society at large, or the world of the older adults. This is also the case in Vanuatu; however, at least as many ni-Vanuatu musicians approve of the status quo, their songs providing instructions for socially acceptable conduct. This is especially so in stringband music. String-

band competitions are often organized by (governmental) institutions, and songs that are composed particularly for these events carry messages that mirror the official lines. Thus, a substantial part of stringband songs is about common concerns. This situation, as well as the fact that stringband lyrics always exhibit strong references to the realities of everyday life in Vanuatu, contributes to the construction of stringband music as a national musical style. Stringband music seems to be a perfect tool to invoke unity and solidarity not only on the national level but also within provinces, island communities, political parties, and churches. Faced with the huge diversity of languages and cultural practices in Vanuatu, the fairly homogeneous and standardized stringband music acts as an opposite pole. I argue that stringband music plays an active role in building the nation. It has played a major part in the rallies of political parties preceding independence. In this respect, it is more present on a national level than is any form of *pop miusik*.

Pop Miusik and Stringban Miusik as ‘Tradition’

Kastom, which refers to the knowledge and practices concerning tradition and custom in Vanuatu, is a crucial concept in terms of politics, religion, language, housing, the arts, and economical aspects. Keesing remarks that: “*Kastom* canonically denotes ancestrally enjoined rules for life” (1982: 360), and MacClancy writes: “Left vague and undefined, *kastom* was exploited by people to mean different things at different times” (2002: 137).

Many studies concerning identity in Melanesia focus on its relation to *kastom*. In the context of postcolonial nationalism and sometimes separatism, constructions of identity are constantly taking place, often including idealized representations of precolonial times. Although these ‘traditional ways of life’ “may bear little relation to those documented historically, recorded ethnographically, and reconstructed archaeologically,” they function as political symbols for the unification or separation of population sections (Keesing 2000: 231).

As in other parts of Melanesia, where pidgin is spoken, the “ideologies of *kastom*” (ibid.: 232) are crucial for ni-Vanuatu society.¹⁵ One basic problem in the construction of a national identity lies in the heterogeneity of the island communities that form the nation state today. Unity is not easy to establish where no common cultural heritage exists, so the mere presence of any *kastom* in these communities represents the lowest common denominator and leads to such often quoted concepts as ‘The Melanesian Way’ (Narokobi 1983). Before, within the context of missionary efforts, *kastom* marked pagan practices and thus had a negative connotation (Tonkinson 1982: 313). With independence, *kastom* as a general concept emerged as a resource of national ni-Vanuatu identity. There is a fundamental ambiguity of the term

kastom: on the one hand, it refers to a political ideology concerning the unity of the nation state, and on the other hand it serves to distinguish cultural entities on the local level (Maas 1994: 14). ‘Enacted’ *kastom* actually differs from island to island and sometimes even from village to village. It is flexible and subject to diverse interpretations and usages.

Melanesian traditional culture and popular culture are often not understood as strictly divided spheres, but there are many mixtures, particularly within the field of music. Tradition is linked in many ways with syncretic musics in Vanuatu:

1. **lyrics:** by using their vernacular, the performing group stresses its particular local identity, which is an important part of the notion of *kastom*. There are lyrics which address both the importance of *kastom* and the appeal to take care of it.
2. **oral tradition:** a big part of the stringband repertoire consists of songs that represent a historic record of, for example, a village community (songs are commissioned to commemorate certain persons or events).
3. **genre transgression:** some stringbands and pop groups in Vanuatu experiment with *kastom miusik* from their own community.¹⁶ Thus, there is a remarkable difference between the production and the reception of the music: while all ni-Vanuatu can listen to the music, only those who have the right to perform and use the prevailing traditional musical elements (or have acquired the right) from the authorities within the community may produce it.
4. **new traditions:** inventions and stylistic coinage in cultural practices in Vanuatu are soon received as ‘tradition,’ owned by its practitioners and their community. These inventions are guarded against those not belonging to the community yet shared within it.
5. **emphasis on continuity:** young men continue to play the compositions of the previous generation in the same band founded by their fathers and uncles. They also learn how to play from their older relatives and proudly pronounce this continuity. This inheritable nature of repertoire and belonging to a group is a distinguishing mark usually attributed to traditional music. Communities identify with their stringband.
6. **representation:** in video clips and MC and CD covers there is extensive emblematic use of *kastom* images.¹⁷
7. **substitute for *kastom*:** stringband music and *kastom miusik* coexist in most regions of Vanuatu, while stringband music serves as a substitute for traditional musics of communities in the northern part of Efate and its offshore islands that were lost due to past missionary influence. In this case, stringband music actually takes on the role and the

meaning of *kastom miusik*. It can be said that more often than not that playing in a stringband is restricted to a phase in the life of a man, that is, before marriage. This could be understood as a life-cycle ‘function.’ The vast majority of musicians first start playing in a stringband before playing any other popular music. Thus, stringbands constitute a kind of rite of passage with regard to syncretic music.

- 8. exchange of cultural practices:** In Vanuatu there is a long tradition of the incorporation of new cultural practices. These traditionally exchanged cultural practices include songs. Stringband musicians occasionally take up songs that they have heard from other people. This is not unusual for musicians in general but the stringband genre seems to have a special capacity to transform them according to its own aesthetic standards. The crucial point is that musical ‘borrowings’ become ‘acquisitions’ and, as such, involve modification and innovation. Music provides the possibility to integrate international influences and yet hold on to (or revitalize) local ways at the same time. Ni-Vanuatu do not regard modernity necessarily as the antithesis to traditional ways.

Studying Syncretic Musics

Corresponding to the diversity of social and cultural ‘settings,’ as well as individual experiences, there is a multitude of constructions and practices of music, and “while for analytical purposes we can identify each of these as separate categories of music and musical meaning, in the actual process of lived practice the values and meanings and experience of them spill from one category to the next” (Horner 1999: 29). This ambivalence in our individual experiences and the way we manage the meanings of music are the preconditions for the creative process of synthesis of different musics. Although all music is probably a product of synthesis (Kartomi 1981: 230; Mitchell 1996: 239; see also Stross 1999: 258, 266 and Acheraïou 2011: 1), its discursive qualities seem to be recognized especially in forms of non-Western popular music.¹⁸ Popular musics, particularly those of ‘Indigenous’ peoples outside the ‘North Atlantic axis,’ are often called ‘syncretic’ or ‘hybrid’ forms of music.¹⁹ The fundamental notion is that a ‘traditional’ or ‘Indigenous’ music hybridizes with imported, Western music styles.²⁰

For a long time, ethnomusicologists regarded cross-cultural forms of Western and non-Western musical elements as a threat to the ‘pure,’ ‘traditional,’ and ‘Indigenous’ music styles (Kartomi 1981: 227, 228).²¹ A change occurred in the course of the 1980s due to the popularization of the marketing category ‘world music,’ namely “the Western marketing of musical products produced by musicians from non-Western locations” (Hayward 1998:

2). Meanwhile, the label ‘hybrid’ is exploited by the world music industry. Homi Bhabha’s conception of hybridity is often quoted as “challenging the implied or explicit hierarchal categorization of cultures evident in colonial discourse” (Terpenning 2016: 461), while others view “hybridity as reinforcing Western European hegemony” (ibid.: 479). Although recognizing the fact that hybridity and syncretism have their “own ideological baggage” (Weiss 2014: 510), in this book, I use them to relate to processes of musical transculturation.²² The assumption of mixtures implies the existence of categories and notions of purity which can be accepted when including Brian Stross’s concept of a ‘cycle of hybridity,’ that is, a cycle that goes from relative heterogeneity to homogeneity “until finally ‘pure’ enough to interbreed with other purebreds (which are themselves probably former hybrids), thus beginning anew the cycle of hybrid production” (1999: 265).

The few sources available on the syncretic musics of Vanuatu provide information with respect to Vanuatu’s popular music in the first place, while treating the topic of stringband music as a marginal note.

The Construction of Social and Cultural Identity through Music

Identities are ideals, products of the imaginary. It is we who decide, to a certain degree, how we present and represent ourselves. It is for this reason that I fall in with Holland et al. who state that:

People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are. These self-understandings, especially those with strong emotional resonance for the teller, are what we refer to as identities. (2001: 3)²³

Popular music is a prime example, showing that “invented cultural affinities come with every identity” (Appiah 1992: 174). It provides the possibility to “place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives” (Frith 1996: 124) and can bridge the limits of individual cultures “with the result that a person is no longer a member solely of one culture” (Ellis 1985: 15).

It is, however, difficult to establish a homology between the musical material itself and the social group which produces and listens to the music (Frith 1996: 120). How, in fact, should we explain why some ni-Vanuatu youth like the Backstreet Boys? Often, musicians do not belong to the same social groups or even the same time period as their listeners, and often they have minimal (or even no) experience of the everyday realities of their audience (Shepherd 1992: 138). Even if music is produced with certain intentions, it develops a life on its own, which is no longer under the control of the producers.

Music creates us “as a web of identities” (Frith 1996: 121). Timothy Rice (2007) emphasizes the difference between music’s role as symbolization and as a reflection of pre-existing identities on the one hand, and the actual construction of identities through music on the other. I argue—mindful of the validity of his differentiation—that both processes are interrelated because the representation of identities in music can, in turn, have identity-establishing effects.

Formations of identity might most easily be spotted during periods of change “or where the weak and the powerful are fighting over issues of identity” (Rice 2007: 25), however I claim that even if a music genre cements mainstream values, it still can contribute to the formation of identity. Not always is the design of a new identity at stake but conservative values need to be reaffirmed and sometimes adjusted to fit changing social environments. Stringband music is part of a local identity construction that tends to emphasize continuity with traditions. In addition, music can be part of an identity-establishing enculturation of children and other new members of a community. Thus, many music genres or individual music pieces participate in identity construction all the time in one way or another and to varying degrees—some have a huge impact on people’s lives, while others leave only a fleeting impression.

The close relationship between music and identity in Melanesia and Oceania is undisputed. On the first page of their over one-thousand-page work on music in Oceania, the editors of the *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music* write: “Today, Oceanic music is performed in sacred spaces, on festival stages, in urban clubs, and at family gatherings. But above all, musical performances are markers of cultural and ethnic identity” (Kaeppeler and Love 1998: 1).

Methods, Field Techniques, and Data

The gathered data stems mainly from participant observation, interviews and conversations, as well as recorded music (either published, unpublished, or recorded by myself). Bislama was the most important language in all of these realms, although some English and French was used occasionally. I learned Bislama when in Vanuatu; however, when carrying out fieldwork in Fiji for my Master’s thesis I was lucky to get my hands on Terry Crowley’s *A New Bislama Dictionary* at the Institute of Pacific Studies in Suva. I tried to teach myself some Tok Pisin since there is some literature about the language in Germany, and I thought it would be helpful to know about the structure of any of the Melanesian pidgin languages. While at first people in Vanuatu had to correct me continuously while I was using Tok Pisin vocabulary, it later served me well in identifying Tok Pisin usage in Bislama songs.

While corrections and supplementing of song texts written in Bislama were essential in the beginning but later posed no grave problems, I relied on songwriters, singers, or friends who transcribed the lyrics written in vernaculars. In between the phases in the field, I was occupied with the evaluation of the collected data and with determining quantitative and qualitative gaps in the material.

While choosing sites of research and people to talk to, I tried to keep a balance between urban and rural, young and old, and well-known and unknown. Efate and Espiritu Santo were visited because the urban centers on these islands are where many musicians as well as others involved in the industry live. Craig Cove on Ambrym was chosen arbitrarily to provide an example of a rural context without any specific attractions in terms of music (or anything else). My desire to see the place where some outstanding musicians come from brought me to the northern part of Pentecost. I visited Malekula to meet members of the project Neminamel and also went to Ambae in the same manner to meet a selected stringband. Another interview was conducted in Troyes, France, with a ni-Vanuatu musician who lived there.²⁴ I stayed with families within a village context on my trips to the islands, but even while I was staying in Port Vila I mostly had some bonds to families in whose neighborhood I was living.

My wish to consider both sexes equally was possible in Port Vila without many hindrances. During my stay in the islands, though, I detected that it was far more difficult for me to make contact with women and especially girls. Although these difficulties were balanced a little due to the fact that my former girlfriend, an anthropologist who accompanied me temporarily on two of the trips, occasionally had some additional information concerning the perception of women, information on the island situation reflect a male bias. These shortcomings are not too serious if one considers the fact that stringband music is an almost completely male domain.

Typical situations of participant observation, the imperative method of ethnographic investigation, were concerts, rehearsals, festivities, church services, nightclubs, studio recordings, fundraisings, youth centers, kava bars, and the like. The observations proved to be important for the comparison to and verification of information gathered in interviews, to modify questions, to understand the differences between statements and behavior, to detect new aspects, and, above all, to experience the atmosphere of social events. The latter are particularly important for the study of music and cannot really be learned by asking questions.

When I first entered the field, I was twenty-six years old—a fact that surely helped to establish contact and friendships because most of my interlocutors were young people. I believe that as a person to talk to, I was far more accessible to many as a practicing musician than as an anthropologist. Playing the

guitar, ukulele, or a percussion instrument or singing occasionally became part of the participant observation during rehearsals or interviewing.²⁵ Interlocutors often asked me about my own musical activity. For fun, I wrote songs and parts of songs in Bislama myself, and between the field trips I recorded and released them with my band in Germany. When I presented these to a few friends and key interlocutors in Port Vila, this further consolidated relationships. Between the field research sections, I founded my own stringband in Germany, initially to play original pieces for fun, but also as a methodical tool to try out arrangements, playing techniques, and self-made instruments. This practical understanding has taught me more about stringband music than I would have thought possible at first and has proven to be a useful addition to my research.²⁶

Persons of interest to me were chosen because they were key figures in the scene or history of popular music in Vanuatu or because they held special positions in the media or other institutions. Other interlocutors were chosen arbitrarily, and musicians often drew my attention to yet others. Apart from the participant observation, most data was gathered through interviews. In this text I use the term ‘interlocutors’ when referring to the persons who provided valuable information on the topic.²⁷ For reference, verification, and further future research, all names mentioned are those of real persons. If someone told me not to quote him or her, I do not mention any particular name.

All semi-structured interviews were recorded for later transcription. Interviews and other forms of conversation were conducted with a wide range of different personalities: musicians,²⁸ sound engineers, producers, persons responsible at the public radio and TV stations, producers of video clips, staff members of the VKS and of the Wan Smolbag Theatre, members of dance groups, managers, operators of nightclubs, festival organizers, store keepers, a Disc Jockey, the president of the ‘Vanuatu National Youth Council,’ and young people at youth clubs or elsewhere. The interviews lasted up to three hours or more and some were continued in further meetings.

Structured interviews with a standardized questionnaire (in Bislama) were used to collect information about which interpreters are popular with young people. It could not always be prevented, that, when a questionnaire was handed to a youth, a crowd gathered around him or her, answering the questions collectively. In the end, I found that if they could discuss the answers within the group, the results were more fruitful than they would have been if the youth had filled in the questionnaire alone. In some cases, shyness and illiteracy were limiting factors; also, the survey was astonishingly time-consuming. It was for these reasons that only forty-seven questionnaires were filled in by people of both sexes, aged between thirteen and twenty-eight years. The results are nevertheless useful as they confirm my

findings from qualitative interviews. Besides this, a few unexpected songs were also listed.

Much insight was obtained by conducting case studies of individuals and of music groups, soon resulting in the identification of the networks between them. There were some difficulties in finding concrete data on time periods and dates. This is due to the fact that many of my interlocutors remember notable events rather than years. Respondents often confined their dating to statements like: “that was before Cyclone Uma.”²⁹ Since I had no time to establish ‘historical calendars’ during fieldwork for each region where I conducted interviews, some data such as release dates and the founding of groups is inevitably vague. Similarly, I had to be satisfied with age-guessing, for many interlocutors could not tell me their exact age. As they made their own guesses, however, they are likely to be more or less accurate.

Most of the music I recorded myself is taken from actual performance situations but sometimes musicians were asked to play, for example, a special rhythm or a ukulele *introdaksen* (see Chapter 2). Macka Silona († 1 August 2007), former sound engineer of the VKS Productions Studio, made studio recordings available to me. Apart from the albums I purchased and from the archive material of the VKS I could listen to and copy a selection of old tapes recorded by Paul Gardissat († 7 May 2013) in the 1970s and 1980s. This was especially important to me because these now unavailable cassettes are hard to find even in the personal collections of the musicians who once recorded them with him. With a considerable amount of tenacity, I was able to obtain a selection of video clips from the Vanuatu Broadcasting & Television Corporation and other sources. Samples of the daily radio program were recorded and ‘transcribed’.

Normally the VKS assigns the foreign researcher to a fieldworker who is then meant to advise and assist the researcher (a network of ni-Vanuatu researchers, each in charge of his or her own area, extends all over the country).³⁰ This was not the case with me, as I conducted multi-local fieldwork. It would have taken considerable effort to meet all these people in the prevailing areas; people who are focused on *kastom* and who usually do not regard popular music as being part of their subject. For this reason, I looked for my own experts in music.

The Setting

Vanuatu, an archipelago consisting of over eighty islands is located in the Southwestern Pacific (see Map 0.1). Neighboring countries are the Solomon Islands, Fiji, New Caledonia, and Australia.³¹

Although quite small in terms of population (186,678 in 1999, increasing to 300,019 in 2020),³² Vanuatu has considerable cultural and linguistic

diversity. As local identity in Vanuatu is strongly linked to cultural practices and languages, a range of local identities exists. With over one hundred different local languages, the country exhibits the highest density of languages worldwide.³³ Most ni-Vanuatu speak an Indigenous language as their first language. Apart from these and the colonial languages of English and French, ni-Vanuatu use the country's most widespread language, Bislama—a variety of Melanesian Pidgin/Creole.³⁴ Bislama, English, and French are the three official languages of the Republic of Vanuatu. Bislama makes conversation possible, no matter which part of the country people come from or what kind of school they have attended, and it is the most important of the three for this reason. The educational system with its two colonial languages reflects the division of the population in different denominations to a certain degree.

In 1906, the British and the French agreed to rule the New Hebrides together and the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides was proclaimed in December 1907 (Speiser [1923] 1979: 16). The village communities, originally not only separated by forest and stretches of sea but divided by warfare and fragmented politically, culturally, and linguistically, became a unit at least in terms of administration. However, the condominium rule was a failure. All institutions were set up twice, with two hospitals, two prisons, and a local police corps under the command of a British and a French commissioner. There were even two currencies. Education and medical care were under the full responsibility of the missions.

These days there are many Christian churches in Vanuatu: Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, Seventh Day Adventist (SDA), the Church of Christ, Assemblies of God, the Neil Thomas Ministry, Apostolic, Mormon, Jehovah's Witnesses, Ba'hai, and the Holiness Fellowship. In addition to these congregations, a small section of the population sticks to traditional religious practices (generally referred to as *kastom*). The John Frum movement, a revivalist movement, evolved on the island of Tanna around 1941 and still has many followers at Sulphur Bay.

It was estimated in 2002 that some 30 or 40 percent of the capital's population live in informal residential areas in very simple houses made out of corrugated iron, many of which are without electricity, flush toilets, or running water (National Statistics Office 2003: 148 f., 151). Since then, this number has most likely risen significantly. For example, the urban community Freswota is steadily growing, which is why neighborhoods within this part of Vila are numbered (up to Freswota 6). Currently, around sixty-seven thousand people are living in urban areas (National Statistics Office 2020: v). The population of Vanuatu is very young. At the time of my fieldwork, 43 percent was under the age of fifteen (National Statistics Office 2000: 17).

The biggest part of the population lives in rural areas and most households there have access to customary lands. Even if people feel poor in terms of cash, the rural dwellers have access at least to their garden produce. Subsistence farming and fisheries are particularly important. Since 1990, tourism plays an increasingly important part in the economy of Vanuatu. Port Vila Downtown is flooded by day visitors at certain hours and the arrivals of cruise ships even tripled between 2006 and 2011 (DeBlock 2019: 136). The present currency is the ‘Vatu.’ On 1 January 2004, the exchange rate was 1 US\$ to 117 vatu (vt).³⁵

Notes

1. Using the plural is common practice in ethnomusicology.
2. Bislama (Melanesian Pidgin/Creole) terms are italicized throughout this work.
3. Whenever I use the present tense I refer to the current state at the time of fieldwork.
4. “Yes i tru, long wol ya yu no save liv *without* miusik. Sapos yu hetem miusik, yu no wantem lisin long ol tep, be yu stil wisil yet. Yu wokbaot yu stil wisil yet.”
5. There is no consistent umbrella term; most ni-Vanuatu refer to this music as *singsing blong jos* or else call it *gospel miusik* or *kwaea* (thus emphasizing the importance of singing in this music).
6. I use the Bislama term *rege* when referring to reggae from Vanuatu because local versions of the style can be quite different from Jamaican or Jamaica-derived forms of reggae—indeed to such an extent that outsiders might not recognize them as ‘reggae’ at all.
7. Some religious communities discourage their members to play any music that encourages dancing. In such cases, stringbands are not allowed to perform within the village and they have to go to neighboring communities to play at dance events.
8. “Popular Music Studies has primarily applied itself to what might be termed a North Atlantic axis—seeing the music cultures of the USA and United Kingdom (and, to a lesser extent, those of Canada and western Europe) as constituting its essential culture and focus” (Hayward 1998: 2). Weiss uses the term “European-North American arc” (2014: 509).
9. In the 1980s there were already some women in stringband music, see Chapter 1.
10. At the time of fieldwork, a highly selective range of international popular music was available in a few places in Vanuatu and CDs were very expensive. There was only one TV channel occasionally showing video clips from overseas with a transmitter of very limited range. This situation has changed in recent years due to increased access to mobile phones and the internet.
11. There are accounts of the creation of various islands of Vanuatu: Bonnemaïson (1985: 32 ff.; 1994), Patterson (2002: 205), Hess (2009: 15 f.), Bolton (1999a: 45), Jolly (2003), Taylor (2008), and Mondragón (2008).

12. Mitchell applies the term ‘reverse appropriation’ for “a process of adoption of socially dominant forms of music by economically weaker and less developed minority societies” (Mitchell 1996: 8).
13. Androutsopoulos and Scholz (2002) apply the notion of ‘recontextualization’ for their research on hip-hop in continental Europe. They take over this concept from John Clarke ([1975] 1993).
14. I choose the term ‘acquisition’ instead of one of the aforementioned to avoid including potential shades of meaning coming with them, which are not necessary here or which might lead the reader astray.
15. In Fiji the corresponding concept is ‘vakavanua,’ while in New Caledonia the term ‘coutume’ is used.
16. Given the fact that there are over one hundred different cultural areas in Vanuatu, there is not much point in using the term ‘the traditional music of Vanuatu,’ which is why I prefer the plural, ‘musics.’ In this work, I apply ‘traditional music’ interchangeably with *kastom miusik*.
17. Among the most popular are images of the *nanggol*, the land-diving practiced in the southern part of Pentecost, in which boys and men jump from high wooden towers with lianas tied to their legs, and of the tall, erect slit-drums from Ambrym or Malekula, as well as of any traditional dance.
18. There are not only syntheses of the musics of two ‘cultures’ (too often implicitly thought of as being static) but also “intermeshed transculturations” (Ortiz 1947: 98) and “multiple syntheses” (Kartomi 1981: 245).
19. The first application of the term ‘syncretism’ in anthropology is generally ascribed to Melville Herskovits, while Richard Waterman is attributed to having introduced it in ethnomusicology. See Kartomi (1981) for a critical discussion of labels such as ‘syncretic’ and ‘hybrid,’ which in musicology were borrowed from other disciplines (see also Stross 1999).
20. In the absence of a better alternative, I use the term ‘Western’ in the customary figurative sense, although there is no real dichotomy between ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ (Kartomi 1981: 245). In a place like Vanuatu one can get confused with the directions anyway, if we understand the term literally. Regarding technology as well as cultural items or practices, ni-Vanuatu mostly use ‘European’ (or *blong waetman* in Bislama) to indicate that something comes from Europe, Australia, New Zealand, or the United States. I imagine no one in Vanuatu would talk about ‘Eastern technology’ with respect to vehicles from Asia.
21. Note the analogy to the handling of pidgin and creole languages by linguists until relatively recently (see Holm 1988: 1).
22. Appert has not “encountered substantial differences in how the two terms are generally used to describe musical genres in ethnomusicological literature” (2016: 281).
23. I use the term ‘identity’ to comprise the different processes, constructions, and senses of ‘self-identity,’ ‘self-identification,’ ‘self-understanding,’ ‘self-conception,’ and ‘self-worth,’ as well as ‘group identity’ and ‘collective self-understand-

- ing.’ These are interrelated and I do not consider it advisable to concentrate on only one of those aspects when relating identity to music.
24. The interview was conducted in June 2006 with Henry Toka, a member of the group Tropic Tempo.
 25. It is difficult to capture the actual rehearsal work of the musicians, as they sometimes switch to ‘presentation modus’ as soon as an outsider comes to witness their rehearsals. I found it easier with pop groups, maybe because rehearsals are costly and the musicians have to focus. I twice had to jam with a group before they agreed to be interviewed (with Naio and with some musicians around Ben Ratonel in Luganville).
 26. Meanwhile, we have performed throughout Germany in the context of events related to Melanesia or Oceania. In his capacity as the musical director of the drama group Wan Smolbag, as well as being the technician at Vanuata Productions, Henry Toka recorded bands for the soundtrack of the film “Democracy Dreams.” When I met him for an interview at his home in France, I told him that my own stringband in Germany covers the song ‘Bred I No Inaf’, which is one of these songs. Toka had planned to screen the film and thus invited us to perform at the association’s meeting in Paris which took place on 30 July 2006.
 27. I have decided to use the term because the alternatives do not match what I mean: I would not denote every youngster whose musical preferences I recorded as a ‘cultural consultant.’ Sometimes people who did not know much about the subject would provide useful information or give important hints. Still, it would give the wrong impression if I described them as being ‘cultural experts.’
 28. These were stringband musicians, musicians of *pop miusik* groups, members of church affiliated choirs, and practitioners and teachers of *kastom miusik*. Many of these were also composers.
 29. Cyclone Uma (February 1987) caused major damages as did Cyclone Pam in March 2015. Cyclones are prominent markings in the memory of many ni-Vanuatu but individually many other markers are of course used.
 30. See Tryon (1999) and Regenvanu (1999: 98 f.).
 31. Following the practice of other authors on the subject I refer to the archipelago as Vanuatu and to its people as ni-Vanuatu even when writing about the period before independence.
 32. See Bakeo (2000: 5) and *2020 Census Basic Tables Vol.1* (National Statistics Office 2020).
 33. The linguist Darrell T. Tryon counted between 105 and 113 different Indigenous languages, some of which are further subdivided into several dialects. In 2005, he counted 109 Austronesian languages in Vanuatu (personal communication, Marseilles, 3 July 2005).
 34. The Bislama orthography I use in this book is standardized, following the *New Bislama Dictionary* by Terry Crowley (1995). Exceptions are quotations from

written sources, in which I stick to the original spellings. This book comprises several Bislama words from the music domain, which are not included in the otherwise thorough *New Bislama Dictionary*.

35. For comparison: a newspaper (*Vanuatu Daily Post*) costs 100 vt; eight coconuts (ripe) 100 vt; a 330 ml bottle of *Tusker* beer 200 vt; a piglet (alive) 5,000 vt; a set of strings (classic guitar) 1,800 vt; an electric guitar (Pacifica, Yamaha) 45,600 vt (prices at the time of fieldwork).