Looking through two lenses: reflections on transnational and translocal dimensions in Marseille-based popular music relating to the Comoros

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ABSTRACT
This article starts from the observation that whenever new concepts become popular, they are applied to more and more contexts until they have become so inclusive that they risk losing their analytical power. This tendency also shapes the relationship between the concepts of transnationality and translocality, which is discussed here with a focus on popular music. More precisely, this article draws on research on two musical actors who are both based in the French city of Marseilles and who both relate to the Indian Ocean archipelago of Comoros: the internationally acclaimed rapper Soprano and the group Afropa, who play Afrofolk on the margins of the music scene in Marseilles. Besides the different levels of success they experience and the distinct musical genres they embody, these musicians represent different generations of a Franco-Comorian ‘diaspora’. Their musical oeuvre, motivations and ambitions, as well as the perception of their music by different audiences, will be discussed with respect to the notions of transnationalism and translocality that become apparent.

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Introduction and theoretical considerations
This article reflects on the relationship between the concepts of transnationality and translocality by focusing on popular music. It does so by drawing on research on two musicians who are both based in the French city of Marseilles and who both relate to the Indian Ocean archipelago of Comoros (albeit in different ways): the internationally acclaimed rapper Soprano and the group Afropa, who play Afrofolk on the margins of the popular music scene in Marseilles. Besides the very different levels of success they experience and the distinct musical genres they embody, these musicians also represent different generations of a Franco-Comorian ‘diaspora’. Their
musical oeuvre, motivations and ambitions, as well as the perception of their music by different audiences, will be discussed with respect to the notions of transnationalism and translocality that become apparent.

In the other contributions to this special issue, the concept of transnationalism is put in dialogue with other concepts with which it has not (or hardly) been in dialogue so far. This is obviously not true of the concept of translocality, which emerged in response to the perceived limitations of transnationalism and thus was in close dialogue with it right from the beginning. However, the issue is that distinctions between these concepts are frequently not very clear and they are thus often used synonymously. This is by and large also true for several other concepts with which transnationalism shares a semantic field, for example ‘diaspora’ or ‘mobility’. On the one hand, it is important to carefully consider the transnational together with related concepts because as Tölölyan (2012: 4, referring to Ferdinand de Saussure) reminds us, ‘no term has its meaning independently, but rather acquires it in its relationship to, and nuanced difference from, related others’. On the other hand, the persistent lack of dialogue between academic disciplines and also between interdisciplinary fields (Hui 2016) means that one of these concepts is often presented as a one-fits-all framework for the analysis of empirical cases. This can also be related to the observation that whenever new concepts become popular, they are applied to more and more contexts until they have become so inclusive that they risk losing their analytical power. Brubaker (2005) made this (much cited) observation a decade ago with reference to ‘diaspora’, whose meaning has been considerably broadened over the last two decades, especially as postcolonial diasporas have gained more and more attention. Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013: 183–184) made a similar critical point with regards to ‘mobility’, noting that since the mobility turn was proclaimed in the mid-2000s, all kinds of mobilities ‘came to be studied through the same analytical lens’. Their counterproposal was to talk of different ‘regimes of mobility’, in order to enable meaningful analysis.

Thus, while scholars increasingly call for more rigid definitions of the concepts of ‘diaspora’ and ‘mobility’, the opposite tendency appears to prevail with regards to ‘translocality’, as it is a comparatively new concept. Whereas transnationalism aimed to overcome the limitations of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) inherent to many migration studies, translocality aimed to overcome the limitations of transnationalism, whose ‘primary concern still rests on the transgression of and exchange beyond national borders’, as Greiner and Sakdapolrak (2013: 3) put it. However, is this not precisely what scholars who situate themselves within transnationalism should indeed focus on: contexts where the ‘nation’ is a relevant category? Where this is not the case, the concept of translocality allows for more meaningful analysis. For example, translocality has the
undoubted advantage that it can also be applied to historical contexts that precede the existence of nation states. Therefore, viewed from a historian’s perspective, transnationalism appears to be merely a special case of translocalism, as argued by Freitag and von Oppen (2010: 12). Furthermore, translocality has come to be used to capture the sense of local-local connections across national boundaries (Brickell and Datta 2011: 10), and as Ogone (2015) reminds us with the example of the internal Kenyan Luo diaspora, the term also serves to analyse local-local connections within nation states. Greiner and Sakdapolrak (2013) have argued strongly in favour of understanding translocality as an analytical perspective in its own right and not simply as a concept meant to overcome some of the shortcomings of ‘transnationalism’, which by its very definition presupposes the existence of nations.

While the importance of the concept of translocality is beyond doubt given the arguments presented above, I do not think it useful to advocate translocality as a concept that is somehow superior to transnationalism on the basis of it being ‘broader’ and thus applicable to more contexts. These two concepts do not need to be seen as competing. Rather, the emergence of translocality offers the opportunity to employ transnationality in contexts where the ‘national’ actually proves relevant. In many cases, it may not even be evident at the beginning of a research project whether this is the case or not. Therefore, I argue that the relevance of the respective concepts might in some cases only become evident in the course of data analysis. Moreover, as the examples given in this article will show, transnational and translocal dimensions interact in many contexts. Thus, in this article, I argue that much could be gained if related concepts, in this case transnationality and translocality, were to be seen as a researcher’s ‘toolkit’, helping to grasp the complexities of the empirical material more clearly, though without these concepts competing with each other, as the development of concepts is not a goal in itself.

**Background, focus of the paper and a note on methods**

Coming from a transdisciplinary field, i.e. African Studies, I employ these concepts in my research on popular music in African countries and in diasporic contexts. Researchers with a background in social sciences tend to examine popular music solely as a social issue and neglect other dimensions, such as it being an aesthetic phenomenon, which often leads to disparities between the self-understanding of musicians and the expectations of researchers (cf. Verne 2017: 361).

Furthermore, while the discussion of popular music as a social issue is certainly relevant, the focus is often on notions of resistance in a rather narrow sense, neglecting the fact that the strategies of artists are more manifold and
that their ambitions relate to the music itself, as well as to its content. In this actor-centred analysis, I will therefore not only discuss how the musicians intervene in the perception of the geographical spaces that constitute their ‘origins’ – Marseilles and the Comoros – but also how they aim to intervene in the existing, rather stereotyped notions of what constitutes their musical origins, i.e. ‘Comorian rhythms’ and ‘hip-hop’ respectively.

Marseilles, a port city located on the Mediterranean coast in Southern France, has a population of around 850,000 and is thus the second largest city in France. Due to high rates of crime, it has a notoriously bad reputation that has not gone away despite the investment associated with the city being named the European Capital of Culture in 2013.

A significant proportion of the population of Marseilles – the most common estimate is around 10 per cent – is related to the Comoros in one way or another, either because they have migrated from there or were born to parents (or grandparents) who had done so. Located in the Indian Ocean at the northern end of the Mozambique Channel, the four Comorian islands – Ngazidja (Grande Comore), Nzwanzi (Anjouan), Mwali (Mohéli) and Maoré (Mayotte) – were brought under French colonial rule in the mid-19th century. In 1975, three of the four islands unilaterally proclaimed independence, whilst Mayotte remained ‘French’, becoming a collectivité territoriale (‘territorial collectivity’) in 1974 and a département d’outre-mer (‘overseas department’) in 2011. (cf. Englert and Fritsch 2015) Migration from the Comoros to France intensified in the late 1970s and 1980s due to decolonisation processes and family reunification policies. (Direche-Slimani and Le Houérou 2002: 23)

There is no such thing as a coherent ‘Comorian community’, as lines of division not only follow structural categories such as gender, generation and status, but also the island or village of origin, as well as political ideology. (cf. Fritsch 2018) However, among the general French public, the image of ‘one’ Comorian community prevails and it is a rather negative image, which has also been reinforced by the remarks of politicians such as the then interior minister Claude Guéant, who in 2011 related criminality in Marseilles to Comorian migration. This was followed by collective action in the form of protests, mainly led by younger generations of politicised Franco-Comorians. (cf. Bretillon 2013: 110)

With regards to popular cultural practices, there are two musical genres that are primarily associated with the ‘Comorian community’ and that represent different generations: on the one hand Twarab, which is mainly practiced by elder generations, and on the other hand rap, which generally appeals to a younger audience. The artists whose strategies and identifications are being discussed in this article relate to these two genres, as well as to Afro-folk.
It is a challenge to discuss artists who connect to the same (trans)national context – in this case France and the Comoros – without reducing them to their ‘origins’. Discussing artists that contrast considerably on various levels, as is the case in this article, contributes to a perspective that highlights the complexities and contradictions and helps to avoid the creation of essentialising narratives. As previously mentioned, Soprano and Afropa not only differ in terms of their success as artists, but also with regards to the musical genres and the generation they represent, as well as the language they use and the topics they cover. Nevertheless, the following is not a comparative perspective in a more narrow sense, but rather a focus on different cases within one specific setting in order to examine the heterogeneities and how notions of nation, transnationalism, translocality and diasporic ‘community’ intermingle.

I argue that neither translocal nor transnational alone serve to grasp this construct in which ‘national’ and ‘local’ aspects intermingle in a very specific way. Therefore, by conceptualising it as translocal, certain aspects are lost, and the same is also true when it is conceptualised as transnational.

On the one hand, the analysis draws on audiovisual ethnographic research that included qualitative interviews and participatory observation with a focus on the group Afropa in Marseilles, which was carried out in 2012 with visual anthropologist Andrés Carvajal. A follow-up visit in 2015, as well as communication via chat programs that continues to this day, complements the data. On the other hand, especially with regards to Soprano, the analysis draws on song lyrics, music videos, videos of live concerts and interviews that are available online (mostly via YouTube) and on social media pages.

In the first part of the analysis, the focus is on the aspects that are best grasped through a transnational lense, whereas in the second part, the translocal lense is applied. As will be outlined below, the transnational dimension is particularly relevant for discussing what is ascribed to certain genres, as well as to certain actors from the outside.

Transnationality: representing the Comorian nation through the diaspora

Soprano, who began his hip-hop career with a group called KDB (Kid Dog Black), became known to a wider audience with the group Psy 4 De La Rime, with whom he released four albums between 2002 and 2013. In 2007, he issued his first solo album ‘Puisqu’il faut vivre’, his most recent albums being ‘Cosmopolitanie’ (2014) and ‘L’Everest’ (2016). He has become one of the most popular French rappers, winning numerous awards and gaining more than 3.5 million followers on Facebook.
French hip-hop is not just a translocal music genre, but must also be seen as a postcolonial phenomenon, as it developed in direct connection with ‘the postcolonial relationships established with the former Francophone colonies of Africa and the Caribbean’. (Helenon 2006: 151, cf. Prévos 2001) Many French rappers thus hold ties to different African countries and for many of them, claims of their ties to Africa are an important part of their oeuvre, as is the questioning of their condition of being Black in France. (Helenon 2006: 159)

The discussion of Soprano’s oeuvre is thus primarily framed by his ‘origins’ as somebody born to parents who migrated from the Comoros, and his ‘origins’ in ‘hip-hop culture’, with its (cl)aim of speaking out on political issues. It can be stated that his songs about ‘contemporary political concerns’, as well as ‘issues pertaining to young Comorians’, are the most noted by academics. (cf. Bretillon 2013: 106)

However, his oeuvre is much more diverse and also includes straight-up party songs, as well as songs about personal issues. Songs that do not reconfirm his ‘origins’ in hip-hop and ‘in the Comoros’ tend to be treated as irrelevant in the understanding of him as an artist, or even taken as proof of him having become ‘commercial’.

Comorian issues and rhythms feature less prominently in Soprano’s work, though brief references to the Comoros or the Franco-Comorian community are included in a number of his songs (such as in ‘Hiro’, where references to the history of the Comoros mingle with references to Black American and European history, as well as popular culture).

That Soprano became an important role model for other young Comorians born or raised in France is not surprising. Interestingly, his success in France also turned him into a national icon of the Comoros, which he refers to only marginally in his oeuvre.

Soprano does have a few songs that are dedicated to the Comoros, which he first visited at the age of 12. One of them, which he recorded during his first visit to the Comoros as an adult in 2008, is called ‘Beramu’ (‘The Flag’), and is a rap interpretation of the national anthem that was the result of a transnational collaboration of rappers, more precisely by Vincenzo from Psy 4 De La Rime and the Comorian rapper Cheikh MC. With its strong Comorian focus however, the song did not fit in with Soprano’s portfolio and thus was not published by him but rather featured on the album ‘Enfant du tiers monde’ (‘Child of the third world’) by Cheikh MC. (Soprano 2014: 150)

By this time, Soprano was already famous in France as a result of his first solo album and it was during this trip to the Comoros that he became aware of his enormous popularity in the country (of birth) of his parents. Soprano (2014: 139) recalls that his trip in 2008 ‘resembled an official state visit’, as did trips in the following years when he went to play concerts in the Comoros. (Bretillon 2013: 107)
The hip-hop artist from Marseilles has come to represent the Comorian nation internationally more than any other artist because he is the most successful. Rapping in French with only occasional references to the Comoros, he has nevertheless come to represent the nation more than any other. In a Facebook posting from 19 September 2017, his colleague Cheikh MC, who posted a picture of himself together with Soprano, put it as follows: ‘With the most Comorian (of Comorians). The Comorian who is most known in the world. Merci to brother @sopranopsy4 and the team for this moment’. The text was followed by red and black hearts, as well as the Comorian national flag.

When Cheikh MC, the most successful rapper who is based in the Comoros, declares his colleague from Marseilles ‘the most Comorian (of Comorians)’, it becomes evident that the ‘Comorianess’ of Soprano is constituted by his transnational dimension. Many of the numerous comments below the posting also emphasised the importance of the two artists – though especially Soprano – in representing the Comorian nation, for example: (Anonymous 1): ‘Soprano Officiel’ and ‘Cheikh Mc Officiel’ great talents, great hearts, great respect!!! Thank you for the honour that you give to our country. You are our greatest ambassadors, brothers. (Anonymous 2) added: ‘You are the pride of the country KM’. Others commented with phrases such as ‘Long live the Comorian stars’ or ‘Long live the Comorian rap’.

Soprano has come to represent the Comoros not only from a Comorian perspective but also from a French perspective, because as Bretillon (2013: 106) rightly notes, ‘[P]erhaps no public figure has made Comorian identity more visible in contemporary French popular culture than the hip-hop artist and producer known as Soprano, […]’. While he has come to ‘represent’ Comorian identity in French popular culture, he is not perceived as representative of ‘Franco-Comorians’, precisely because he is so successful and thus does not fulfil the stereotypical perceptions of (Franco)-Comorians as the economically and socially marginalised ‘Others’. This characterisation rather applies to the group Afropa, who are unknown to a wider public and who can also be seen as outsiders with regards to the Comorian music scene, as will be discussed in the following section.

While the hip-hop artist Soprano came to represent the nation through the diaspora, hip-hop as a genre is generally not perceived as a ‘Comorian’ music genre. This label is reserved for Twarab, which has come to represent Comorian music in the diaspora.

While the musicians who are the focus of this text do not play Twarab as such, both – Afropa and to a lesser extent also Soprano – occasionally include elements of it in their music. In any case, it is vital to understand the hegemonic position this musical genre has come to occupy within Comorian communities based in France, especially in Marseilles, since the mid-1990s. (compare Carvajal Gómez, Hamadza Hamza, and Fritsch 2016).
Twarab can be described as a translocal genre, with it combining influences from Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula, India and Europe with East African musical practices and having begun to be developed in Zanzibar in the late nineteenth century (cf. Topp Fargion 2014). It eventually became popular in the Comoros, but after Ali Soilih had come to power in 1975, it ‘[… ] came under severe pressure […]. Because of its supposed association with the urban upper-class Twarab was not popular with the Soilih administration, and indeed many of the older musicians stopped performing’. (Gräbner 2001: 141) After the murder of Soilih in 1978 and the fall of his regime, a revival of Twarab occurred. In Marseilles, Twarab events that take place on Saturday nights are usually organised by one of the many associations that have become a central mode of organisation within Comorian communities, mostly structured around a village or region of ‘origin’. (Englert and Fritsch 2015) These events, which almost exclusively take place in event halls in the northern quarters of Marseilles where most (Franco-)Comorians live, are not only meeting points for people that connect to a specific place in the Comoros, but also function as a way of collecting funds in order to finance different ‘development’ projects in the respective villages and/or regions the associations are related to (Blanchy 1998: 16–18; Vivier 2000: 85ff; Fritsch 2018: 60).

Afropa are one of the few groups attempting to challenge the hegemony held by Twarab in Marseilles in representing Comorian music – though with rather limited success.

Abdoulwahab Chaharani and Ali Cheikh Mohamed, who were both born in the Comoros in the mid-1960s, form the core of Afropa, though they have performed in different formations over the last couple of years. As teenagers, they were strongly influenced by the socialist politics of President Ali Soilih. Following his murder, his followers were also subject to repressions, which caused Abdoulwahab Chaharani to leave Grande Comore in 1986, first for Mayotte and then in 1992 for France, where he has lived ever since. There, in late 2008, he met Mohamed Cheick Ali, who had moved to France earlier that year from Grande Comore, where he had worked as a primary school teacher while also performing with Sambeco, one of the country’s most famous bands.

Musically, they were shaped by two very different influences when growing up: on the one hand by rhythms originating from the Comoros, such as Chigoma, Sambé, Zifafa, Doundijidi, Biyaya, Sarbwalolo, Débé, the Shigoma, Mdiridji or Tari la Meza, and on the other hand, by rock groups such as Dire Straits, Santana and Pink Floyd. As Abdoulwahab Chaharani (Interview, Marseilles, February 2012) recounts: ‘[…] at the age of 14–15, we listened to Pink Floyd. People who heard it thought we were mad. Primarily in the Comoros, because to understand people who listened music like that. So we listened to a lot of music like that, we took note, we tried to take
note, to understand Santana, Dire Straits etc. These two strings of influence – ‘Comorian rhythms’ and Western rock music – resulted in a music that they describe as belonging to the genre of ‘Afrofolk’ and which can certainly also be described as translocal. Their lyrics are primarily written in Shingazidja, the variety of Comorian spoken on Grande Comore, partly in French and with occasional phrases in English.

Besides Comorian rhythms and language, Comorian history and politics also feature prominently in Afropa’s songs. For example, in ‘Comoros, No Cry’, a cover of Bob Marley’s ‘No Woman, No Cry’, they talk about the separation between the three islands that form the Union of the Comoros and the fourth island of the archipelago, Mayotte, which has never been decolonised. The choice of the Mahorais to remain under French rule is also covered in the song ‘Mohéli’, the violence following the numerous political coups that have occurred in the Comoros since independence is the topic of the song ‘Boumboum’. While the majority of their songs relate to the history and politics of the Comorian archipelago, they also have a few songs such as ‘Résiste’ (‘Resist’) and ‘Ibrahim Ali’, which discuss the situation of Franco-Comorians in France.

Despite this focus on issues relating to Comorian society and politics, and whilst writing mostly in Shingazidja, their songs are not listened to in the Comoros and are rather unknown among Franco-Comorians in Marseilles. Afropa have not yet produced an album, but they have recorded two songs. Their lack of success is obviously also related to their lack of supportive structures and management skills. The interesting aspect though, from my perspective, is that they repeatedly stressed that the audience in Marseilles would not perceive their music as ‘Comorian enough’. Moreover, they did not explain their outsider status primarily as the result of their influences from Western rock music, but rather as the result of their plurality of Comorian rhythms in a context in which the notion of ‘Comorian rhythms’ is limited to Twarab. As Ali Cheikh Mohamed (Interview, Marseilles, February 2012) puts it: ‘Here, it is like in Zanzibar. There is a lot of Twarab here. People who don’t do Twarab here, they struggle. Like us, when we are going to do a concert. People who like Twarab too much, they won’t come. Also if important artists come here and play something other than Twarab, there are not many people who go to see them’.

By comparing the situation in Marseilles to Zanzibar, the place in which Twarab originated before it spread to the Comoros, Ali Cheikh Mohamed suggests that Twarab has indeed become more popular in Marseilles than in the Comoros. Whereas a variety of rhythms other than Twarab are also popular in the Comoros, in the diasporic context of Marseilles, it is Twarab that has become the musical genre that represents the Comorian nation.

While the transnational dimension plays a crucial role with regards to what the successful artist and the dominant genre represent, taking the
perspective of the actors reveals that their identifications and strategies are more appropriately understood as translocal.

Neither Soprano nor Afropa aim to represent ‘Comorianness’ to their respective audiences, rather, on a musical level, they aim to broaden what is perceived as Comorian music (Afropa), as well as what is perceived as hip-hop (Soprano). Furthermore, they understand their music as a contribution to the creation of less homogenous perceptions of Marseilles, as well as of the Comoros, as will be discussed in the next section.

Translocality: reimagining musical and geographical spaces

While Afropa lament the lack of recognition from fellow (Franco)-Comorians, they do get some attention from a ‘milieu blanc, Francais’ (‘white French audience’), as Ali Cheikh Mohamed stated (Interview, Marseilles, February 2012). However, although they also want to attract this audience, the main ambition of Afropa – as stressed by both musicians over and over again – is to raise awareness of the diversity of Comorian rhythms beyond Twarab and to pass these distinct rhythms on to the next generation. As they emphasised repeatedly, they are already in their forties and thus need to make sure that their knowledge of Comorian music is passed on sooner rather than later. However, despite their open contempt of the hegemony of Twarab among Comorians in Marseilles, they also experiment with Twarab themselves – with the aim of making it more ‘modern’ (Interview with Abdoulwahab Chaharani, Marseilles, February 2012).

As Soprano reaches an audience far beyond the ‘Comorian community’, the hegemonic role of Twarab among Comorians in Marseilles does not affect his success. Furthermore, among the younger generations of (Franco)-Comorians, hip-hop is generally more popular than Twarab. While Afropa want to broaden/reimagine what is understood as ‘Comorian rhythms’ in the diasporic context of Marseilles, Soprano wants to broaden/reimagine what is understood as hip-hop and move away from its negative image.

Musicians within this genre are expected to embody a certain type of person, which Soprano refers to by using the term ‘voyou’ (‘bad guy’). Rappers are assigned certain fixed roles and tend to only receive public recognition if they stick to those roles. In his autobiography, he comments that: ‘[…] what always struck me is the extent to which rap suffers from clichés that are incredibly negative. Violence, hatred, vulgarity, delinquency and vouyoucratie are all present, whereas I am totally the opposite of all of this. Certain people mix everything up (font des amalgams) and are always surprised when a rapper does not correspond to their prejudices. And if you break the stereotypes, you are no longer considered a rapper in the eyes of most of them […]’ (Soprano 2014: 219, translation by the author)
In ‘Préface’, the first song on his album ‘Cosmopolitanie’, he discusses his political position and in particular his contempt for the extremely right-wing National Front (FN), whilst at the same time emphasising his unwillingness to fulfil the expectations projected onto him, especially by the media, as expressed in the following lines:

He thereby highlights an issue that can also be observed in parts of the scholarly literature on hip-hop, whereby the political relevance of rap artists tends to be closely tied to the political content of their lyrics or the extent to which artists are ‘keeping it real’. This phrase characterises ongoing debates regarding questions of ‘authenticity’ within hip-hop culture, which could also be framed as a ‘Regime of Mobility’ in the words of Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013). If artists ‘move’ out of the narrow confines of ‘hip-hop culture’, they are often perceived as no longer ‘belonging’ by other rappers, fans and scholars alike. However, it is not only in a hip-hop context that artists are confronted with a narrow understanding of ‘belonging’, as can be seen in the example of Afropa with regards to notions of what constitutes ‘Comorian music’.

His vision of being accepted as a rapper who does not live up to the stereotypical associations of the genre of his musical origins runs parallel to his vision of contributing to a more positive image of his home town of Marseilles, as clearly stated in the last sentence of his autobiography, which was published shortly before Cosmopolitanie. (Soprano 2014: 310).

As Soprano (2014: 289) also notes in his autobiography, he is ‘Marseillais before being French’. Bretillon (2013: 105–06) suggests in her chapter on Soprano that ‘Soprano’s self-styling as l’aboutissement de deux etres (the outcome of two beings), both Comorian and Marseillais, deliberately avoids the “problem” of Frenchness, and suggests that identification with the multicultural, cosmopolitan city of Marseilles offers an alternative to rigid constructions of French identity as defined by dominant political and social discourses’. However, I would caution against an over-interpretation from a postcolonial perspective, as Soprano’s identification as Marseillais also ties in with the long history of a strong local identity in Marseilles and the South of France, particularly in opposition to Paris. The phenomenon of competing
local identities is also well known in hip-hop culture more generally (for instance ‘West Coast’ vs ‘East Coast’ in the US context), and certainly also ‘Paris’ vs ‘Marseilles’ in the French context (cf. Tödt 2011; Prévos 2001), (to mention just the broadest differentiations).

Nevertheless, the crucial role of Marseilles in Soprano’s biography and oeuvre is well established and many of his songs are based in or relate to Marseilles. One of his most ‘Marsaillais’ songs is probably ‘A la bien’, whereby he turned a typical conversation in a cafe into song lyrics and which has become the national rugby team’s anthem (Soprano 2014: 290). With the album *Cosmopolitanie*, in which he musically goes beyond his ‘origins’ within hip-hop to what he calls ‘urban music’, Soprano plays homage to the cosmopolitan character that has been ascribed to Marseilles by politicians and artists alike across the decades. *Cosmopolitanie* must therefore not be mistaken for Marseilles as it is, but rather it represents an ideal, utopian Marseilles, where the borders are not only transcended between population groups that exist as the result of ethnicised politics and are reflected in the segregated structures of the city, but also the borders between musical genres. This transgression of borders is expressed most explicitly in the song ‘Cosmo’, which reached number 5 in the French music charts. In ‘Cosmo’, Soprano creates visions that challenge existing orders and (hi)stories. He puts himself in the position of defining what ‘cosmopolitanism’ should look like in Marseilles and actively engages in the creation of positive counter-images of the city.

While Marseilles does not feature explicitly in songs by Afropa, in our conversations, they repeatedly stressed their identification as ‘Comarseillé’ – a term that connects ‘Comores’ with ‘Marseilles’ and that points to the widely held notion of Marseilles as the fifth island of the Comoros. Following this narrative, which is often heard among (Franco)-Comorians, the Comoros are constituted as a space that is made up of five ‘islands’: Grande Comores, Anjouan and Mohéli, which form the Union of the Comoros, Mayotte, which is the fourth island of the Comorian archipelago in a geographical, historical and cultural sense, and Marseilles, the French metropolis that is inhabited by more people that relate to the Comoros than the Comorian capital Moroni.

Importantly, the inclusion of Marseilles in this translocal space is not only argued in terms of the contemporary presence of inhabitants that relate to the Comoros, but also with regards to the history of the Comorian presence, which in the beginning was right in the centre of the city in the ‘Le Panier’ quarter, an area that has been subject to gentrification in recent years. As Abdoulwahab Chaharane stressed (interview 26/02/2012, italics by the author): ‘Le Panier is everyone’s mother, because all, all, all of the people who suffered the war, when it finished, they were all here. These are our roots. Our grandparents were here. They lived here after the war. Voilà, that
is the Panier of Marseilles’. Expressions such as ‘everyone’s mother’ and ‘our roots’ show to what extent the Le Panier quarter, but also Marseilles more generally, is thought of as an integral part of a translocal Comorian space formed by a history of connection. Besides the longstanding presence of Comorians in this part of town, Abdoulwahab Chaharani also emphasised its physical features, such as the narrow alleys, which remind him of Moroni in the Comoros.

These narratives thus serve to create a translocal space that allows for identifications not only beyond national binaries but also beyond transnational concepts. As the example of the notion of ‘Comarseillé’ shows, in certain contexts, transnational and translocal dimensions intermingle in ways that make it impossible to separate them. By stressing the long intertwined history of the city of Marseilles and the Comorian archipelago, the artists not only underline the way in which Comorians are present in the history of Marseilles, but also their conception of Marseilles as part of the Comorian archipelago.

**Conclusion**

While the concept of transnationality has to be seen as a specific variety of translocality, there is no benefit to be gained from dropping transnationality and instead pushing the use of translocality. If we simply assume that the translocal also encompasses the transnational, we are then unable to take advantage of the careful differentiation that is offered by both concepts. In this article, I have therefore argued in favour of looking through both the transnational lens and the translocal lens, and of using them to specify what they help us to see. It is important to employ both the transnational and the translocal carefully, ensuring that the two do not become conflated. This means posing the question of when the nation is the relevant category and when the local is the relevant category. In many cases, such as those discussed here, it is not a question of ‘either/or’, both are relevant categories: in the specific case that has been discussed here, the transnational lens proved to be particularly relevant for discussing what the successful artist and the dominant genre represent, whereas the translocal lens helped to grasp the strategies and self-positioning from an actor-centred perspective. We have seen how musicians who represent different generations, different levels of success and different musical genres – which are also characterised by translocality – relate to the Comoros, as well as to Marseilles. Soprano, the diaspora-born rapper who raps in French and has a number of songs that relate to the Comoros or the Comorian community in France in one way or another, is widely perceived as the ‘most Comorian’ artist and as an ‘ambassador’ of the country from which his parents migrated. However, the work of Abdoulwahab Chaharani and Ali Cheikh
Mohamed of Afropa, who sing primarily in Shingazidja, whose songs are based on Comorian rhythms and who primarily cover Comorian history and politics, is framed as ‘not Comorian enough’, in the wake of the dominance of Twarab. It has been shown how Soprano as well as Afropa go beyond certain clear-cut categories, challenging linear narratives of ‘origins’ and ‘belonging’ – with regards to the physical spaces to which they are ascribed, as well as in terms of musical genres. Neither Soprano nor Afropa aim to represent ‘Comorianess’ to their respective audiences, but on a musical level, they aim to expand what is perceived as Comorian music (Afropa), as well as what is perceived as hip-hop (Soprano). Furthermore, they understand their music as a contribution to the creation of less homogenous perceptions of Marseilles, as well as of the Comoros. With regards to popular music studies, the argument was thus made that artists can best be understood when their strategies relating to different spaces (musical as well as geographical) are examined in tandem and that these are likely to include both transnational and translocal elements. In conclusion, I would therefore like to state that the question is not whether one should continue working with the concept of transnationality or the concept of translocality, but rather that it is necessary to employ them both in a careful and distinct way.

Notes

1. Each member of the group chose a new pseudonym, such as Soprano, Segnor Alonzo (Kassim Djae), Don Vincenzo (Illiassa Issilame) and DJ Sya Styles (Rachid Ait Baar), (Soprano 2014: 33). Rachid Ait Baar (DJ Sya Styles) died on 26 October 2015.
2. For an introduction to the beginning of rap music in the USA, see for example Rose (1994), for its development outside the USA, Mitchell (2001).
3. The profiles of most posters that were openly accessible indicated that most of them were based outside of the Comoros, also the exclusive use of French rather than Comorian seems to back this assumption up, although French is obviously also used by Facebook users who are based in the Comoros. The names of posters have been anonymised.
4. Full lyrics at http://www.paroles.net/soprano/paroles-preface, last accessed 27 December 2016.
5. Full lyrics at http://www.paroles.net/soprano/paroles-cosmo, last accessed 27 October 2017.

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