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Charitativní a sociální práce

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*The meaning of Bèlè practices for the afro-descendant individuals
and their social functioning in today's Martinique – A study of anti-
oppressive dance therapy practices*

Diplomová práce

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Declaration of authorship:

I hereby declare, that this master's thesis has been written by me in person. All information derived from other works has been acknowledged in the text and the list of references.

In Olomouc:

Signature

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Introduction

Bèlè practices, a traditional expression of culture in form of music and dance, have been an integral part of the history of Martinique and its afro-descendent inhabitants. It supported them in difficult times, going through such hardships as slavery. It has been a tool that kept them in a good shape, both physically and mentally. But how is it today? How has this traditional practice changed since then? Is it still a tool that can help people in their social functioning nowadays? Is it used for therapeutic practices and social work? What is the meaning of it for the afro-descendant individuals? Does it help in their everyday life and if so, how? All these questions will be addressed in this diploma thesis.

One of the known social and community work approaches that we have learned about throughout our studies is a work with clients and communities through arts. Arts can be a powerful tool for people to deal with their difficulties. Through music and dance, Martinican people have been able to bear with stress during the slavery era, by expressing what would otherwise be unbearable. *Bèlè* served as an anti-oppressive practice for them, as a sort of rebellion when they could not have done much more. Therefore, *Bèlè* practices have had a special meaning for the *Bèlè* community as well as for the whole afro-descendant population of Martinique (Daniel, 2009; Daniel, 2010; Pham, 2016). Today, *Bèlè* is said to be a living expression of pain and anxiety from the slavery era (Pham, 2016). But does it also play a role in the personal social functioning? Does it bring people together and strengthen the force of the community? As mentioned above, arts can mobilize people and help them to cope with their troubles. But how is it specifically for *Bèlè* and Martinicans?

Social functioning of individuals is an important subject of social and community work. This study looks at it from the music and dance therapy perspective, assessing all the different dimensions within the holistic approach – biological, psychological, social and spiritual, and the strengths it can bring. Spirituality, community cohesion, psychological therapeutic aspects and other elements are explored.

The objective of this diploma thesis is to assess the meaning of *Bèlè* practices for the afro-descendant individuals in Martinique and for their social functioning.

Concerning methodology, the research was carried out in a qualitative manner/approach, using field research with purposive sampling and the methods of participant observation as well as semi-structured interviews with key informants.

First, social functioning of individuals will be discussed, speaking about the different aspects and dimensions that are necessary to assess in this research. Chapter on meaning of music and dance therapy practices in social and community work will follow, to explain the significance and potential of similar techniques and their use. The third chapter will focus on the historical and socio-cultural contexts of Martinique, to provide the much-needed background information for better understanding of the whole issue. Lastly, still in the same chapter, specifics of *Bèlè*, their origins, evolution and the current situation in Martinique will be presented.

Thanks to the opportunity of studying Cultural Studies for one semester in Martinique, I was able to conduct research in the Martinican afro-descendants' *Bèlè* community. This research has been a dream come true, studying cultural practices that have had such a strong impact on the history of one people. It has been a pleasure to be able to study *Bèlè* from the point of view of music and dance therapy, social functioning of individuals, and how practices like these can help all of us. Finding therapeutic aspects in these forms and understanding how people cope with different kinds of difficulties in their lives has been one of the main motives. As I would like to use music and dance therapy in my professional life in social and community work, this has been a great opportunity, as well as a challenge. Through this research, I have acquired new knowledge and skills that will help me in becoming who I want to be – dance/movement therapist.

Theoretical Part

1 Social functioning of individuals

The first chapter provides a necessary background and terminology for social functioning of individuals which is one of the main criteria for assessing the meaning of *Bèlè* music and dance practices in Martinique. It describes the starting point when looking at *Bèlè* in the lives of Martinicans in today's Martinique. The terms vulnerability, capacity and resilience are explained and later assessed in participant observation, as well as discussed with key informants during the interviews conducted. It is followed by an explanation of another important point for this research – the holistic approach, which was later used to assess the meaning of *Bèlè* for social functioning.

1.1 Social functioning

Social functioning is described as an interaction between expectations of a social environment and an individual. The concept is a part of several main social work theories, such as psychosocial approach, task-centered approach, and later also the ecological model. But the concept of social functioning became connected with more than just some of the social work theories. Social functioning and its support have become one of the main goals of social work as a profession (Navrátil, Punová, Bajer et al., 2014, p. 50-51). Nowadays, it is also called reflexive social coping (Navrátil et al., 2014, p. 60-70).

According to the concept by Bartlett, an individual is not isolated and autonomous, he/she is influenced by the environment. She says it is important to distinguish two dimensions – coping with problems and the environment in which an individual is dealing with the problems. The societal expectations often linked with social roles or social and cultural norms and the specific reaction towards them can cause a problem (in Navrátil et al., 2014, p. 51).

Questions that can help understand the actual life situation and social functioning of the individual are the following:

- What is the capacity of an individual or a group to solve problems?
- What are the expectations of the social environment in which the individual or group are trying to solve their problems?
- What is the support provided to the individual by the social environment?
- What are the interactions of the environment and the individual?
- What demands of the environment are not fulfilled by the individual or group sufficiently?
- What could help to improve the social functioning?
- What are the causes of problems? (Navrátil et al., 2014, p. 52-53).

In this diploma thesis, the concept of social functioning is needed for assessing the meaning of *Bèlè* practices in Martinique nowadays. Do *Bèlè* practices help people that are practicing it in their social functioning? And in which way? To better assess the above-mentioned, the concept of vulnerability, capacity and resilience, as well as the holistic approach in assessment in social work are explained below. The main goal of this research will be fulfilled by assessing the benefits of *Bèlè*, what it brings to the participants in the four dimensions as well as looking at the issue through the lens of the vulnerability, capacity and resilience concepts.

1.2 Vulnerability, capacity and resilience

Vulnerability, capacity and resilience are concepts used throughout different sectors, as well as in social and community work. Social workers and social work researchers speak about realizing vulnerabilities, building capacities and supporting clients in becoming more resilient individuals, groups, communities, and societies (Masten, 2019, p. 102). Navrátil and Musil speak about barriers and resources for social functioning and the need to look at these situational factors closely (2000). In this thesis, the situational factors will be studied while using the terminology and concepts of vulnerability, capacity and resilience. They will be used when looking at *Bèlè* practitioners and identifying the meaning for social functioning. It will be used to uncover vulnerabilities, built capacities and a level of resilience that *Bèlè* brings to individuals, groups, and communities. Therefore, it will help in accomplishing the main goal of this thesis.

Vulnerability. Vulnerability is described as a set of characteristics of an individual or a group that can add to a potential harm. The degree of vulnerability determines the risk of someone being harmed. According to vulnerability degree, the capacity of people to prevent, cope with, resist and recover from harm can be reduced (UNDP, n. d.). Punová mentions that it is the antonym for resilience (2012, p. 96).

Capacity. Morgan states that capacity is about empowerment and identity, it is a system that helps people survive and grow. It is also linked to collective ability, of groups, organizations, communities (Morgan, 2006, p. 6). Brinkerhoff and Morgan describe capacity as “evolving combination of attributes, capabilities, and relationships that enables a system to exist, adapt, and perform” (2010, p. 3). Proag adds that capacities improve the resilience. (Proag, 2014, p. 374). France, Freiberg and Homel speak about the goal to build a capacity as part of social work intervention, and not only towards an individual, but towards the whole system, as a part of a holistic prevention and intervention (2010).

Resilience. As Navrátil states, the concept of resilience is central in today’s understanding of social work and social functioning/reflexive social planning and coping (Navrátil et al., 2014, p. 91). Patterson understands resilience as an ability to accomplish healthy functioning and successful adaptation to life challenges and risks (in Navrátil et al., 2014, p. 98). Punová adds that it is always linked to its social context. Individual resilience of a person is always assessed and described while also looking at the social environment of the person (Punová in Navrátil et al., 2014, p. 98). According to Patterson, the better the quality of the social environment of an individual is, the better his/her functioning probably is (in Navrátil et al., 2014, p. 98). Resilience can also be strengthened through working with communities, sharing local knowledge and resources (Ramsay, Boddy, 2017). As Masten says, resilience is about resources and processes to restore balance, to face and overcome challenges, and to transform (2019, p. 101). Punová uses a metaphor to describe resilience. She says: “it is possible to imagine resilience as a capacity to withstand the storm of life events and based on this experience, become stronger and more resilient towards future storms, maybe even cyclones”. She also adds that resilience is not just about surviving, but especially about well-being (Punová, 2012, p. 96). Masten mentions spiritual practices in connection with resilience. It can be one of the protective factors of a specific culture or

context (Masten, 2019, p. 102) which is interesting to look at and important to mention due to the linkage to this thesis' topic.

1.3 Holistic approach to assessing a life situation and social functioning

According to Navrátil and Musil, there are at least four general dimensions in life situation of an individual. They are the biological, psychological, social and spiritual (Navrátil, Musil, 2000). Based on Frankl's work, social functioning or coping is influenced by all the four of them (in Navrátil et al., 2014, p. 53). According to Navrátil and Musil, social functioning is based on a satisfactory fulfillment of needs in all the four dimensions (2000). Furthermore, life situation is not static, it changes over time. It can also be influenced by major societal events, such as change of the regime in the country, war or natural disaster (Navrátil et al., 2014, p. 55). The four dimensions will be further described below.

The first of the dimensions is biological. As described in the book of Navrátil et al., the physiological or biological dimension includes the following main points: alimentation, shelter, safety, health care and protection. The second one is psychological dimension. There, the matter of concern is self-esteem, self-acceptance and personal identity. The third one, social dimension, is looking at the sense of belonging, community and society (Navrátil et al., 2014, p. 87). According to Campbell, community plays an important role in healing processes especially if a community issue, as transgenerational trauma, which is the case here based on different sources (Mohn, 2019), is the matter of concern. Community building on different levels can be very helpful (Campbell, 2019, p. 223). In the spiritual dimension, values, morals, aesthetics, religion, cultural and national identity and meaningfulness of life are assessed (Navrátil et al., 2014, p. 87). DeGruy speaks about the importance of religion and spirituality when going through traumatic events, as the enslaved Africans and its descendants were. Spiritual connectedness in a community is suggested as a tool for short-term healing (in Campbell, 2019, p. 223). All the above suggests that there could possibly be a great force in dance and music therapy practices, as well as in *Bèlè*, in regard to social functioning, as *Bèlè* possibly addresses all the four dimensions. Hence, meaning of dance and music therapy in social and community work will be discussed next. Questions as *if techniques like these are used*, and if so, then *how* will be reflected on.

2 Meaning of dance and music therapy in social and community work

This chapter introduces the potential of music and dance used as a part of social and community work. It focuses on current knowledge in this sector, explains what music and dance therapy practices are and describes specific examples of the use of dance and music therapy in different contexts and with different target groups. This chapter gives examples of the use of these techniques in social and community work, building on the idea that performing art “offers significant possibilities for transformation and social change” (Antilla, Martin and Svendler Nielsen, 2019, p. 215). It also develops on the specific strengths that can be acquired through these techniques. It helps to understand the meaning of music and dance in therapy, and its possible role in social and community work.

Social work, for the purpose of this thesis, is understood as described by the International Federation of Social Workers:

“Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.” (2017).

Community work will be looked at from the angle of this definition:

“Community work is a planned process to mobilize communities to use their own social structures and resources to address their own problems and achieve their own objectives. Community work focuses on participation and fosters empowerment, emancipation and change through collective action. Community work is closely related to work for human rights. The community work process is about people in communities creating opportunities for growth and change.” (Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, n. d.).

According to Twelvetrees, “community work, at its simplest, is a process of assisting ordinary people to improve their own communities by undertaking collective action.” (1991, p. 1). The possible type of community work in connection with *Bèlè* could be a community action that is supposed to improve the living conditions of oppressed community (Musil, 1999), as it has been a part of the resistance since the slavery era. Although, specifics were to be studied during the research.

Community work can have many different forms, one of the mentioned examples is the use of art, and through that, celebration of the cultural roots of the concerned community (Twelvetrees, 1991, p. 1-2), which is very relevant for the purpose of this thesis. The relevant art forms used for therapy – dance and music – will be described below.

2.1 Dance and music therapy practices

As dance and music therapy practices differ and can be used separately as well as together, they will be described individually.

Dance therapy practices. Dance therapy or movement therapy practices are defined by the American Dance Therapy Association as “the psychotherapeutic use of movement to further the emotional, cognitive, physical and social integration of the individual, based on the empirically supported premise that the body, mind and spirit are interconnected.” (in Williams, 2019, p. 273). But Williams mentions it is most importantly based on the idea of body-mind integration. The current emotional state of an individual can be communicated through movement and the goal is to integrate body, mind and spirit. Different sources leave out the “psycho”, keeping just “therapy” in their definitions. It is also suggested there is a link of dance/movement therapy (DMT) to self-awareness, ego strength, and physical and psychic integration (Williams, 2019, p. 274). All the above suggests that these practices and techniques can be a powerful tool in social and community work as well. According to Chaiklin, DMT training programs should be registered under departments such as social work (in Williams, 2019, p. 279). In New Zealand, DMT is defined as the following by the Dance Therapy Association:

“The technique is based on the assumption that the body and mind are interrelated, and that changing movement patterns affects change in other areas. Dance Movement Therapy utilizes an active, client-centered approach, providing each person the opportunity to share thoughts and feelings and express themselves in an environment that is safe, supportive and uplifting, through both movement and words.” (in Williams, 2019, p. 283-284).

In his paper, Thornquist presents dance as balance, understanding and coordination of the body. He explores the potential of dance in the consumer society nowadays and suggests the great potential in different individual and communitarian aspects. He agrees with other authors on dance as a tool for mood expression, constitution of self and individual personality and helping to strengthen community cohesion through coordination of movement and the shared feelings it evokes (Thornquist, 2018). As Shim, Goodill and Bradt suggest, it is a strong relationship-based approach (2019, p. 99). According to Balgaonkar, it “strengthens the body/mind connection through body movements to improve both the mental and physical wellbeing of individuals” (2010, p. 69). Studies also show that dance/movement can help in self-controlling and controlling one’s emotions, and in general in social life of an individual (Thornquist, 2018). According to the World Health Organization, it improves the perception of “their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards, and concerns” (in Thornquist, 2018, p. 828). Different research in DMT also suggests that a methodological use of dance and music can improve psychosocial aspects of personality and treat depression and different psychological and emotional symptoms. It is in line with dance and exercise having a positive effect on mood. Studies present that regular physical activity connects people and improves the sense of being connected to them (Thornquist, 2018). According to Rossberg-Gempton and Poole, “the goal of dance movement therapy is a holistic integration of the patient's emotional and cognitive selves with the environment by combining expressive methods of dance with psychotherapy methods” (in Thornquist, 2018). But as said above, DMT has been used in social work and social institutions as well, with social work methods. To summarize, according to Antilla et al., “the fields of dance and arts (education) are multi-disciplinary...” (2019, p. 210). The Association of

Dance/Movement Therapists of the United Kingdom mentions that body movement and dance assist the “integration of emotional, cognitive, physical, social and spiritual aspects of self” (in Williams, 2019, p. 284). Shim et al. speak about release of tension and rigidity, and increase in flexibility at physical, emotional, cognitive, and social levels (2019). The specific effects of DMT discussed in literature include increased flexibility and decreased tension in biological dimension; increased self-awareness, self-acceptance, self-confidence and more open state of mind, as well as ventilating possibly toxic emotions, in the psychological dimension; trust, restoring normality, social validation, feeling safe (Shim et al., 2019), and connected to others (Thornquist, 2018) in the social dimension, and seeing new possibilities and hope for the future in the spiritual dimension (Shim et al., 2019). The different positive emotions of participants of DMT identified by Shim et al. were the following: “feelings of joy, excitement, relaxation, liberation, hope, gratitude, absorption in the moment/a state of flow, and social connectedness” (2019, p. 93). According to Fredrickson, the above-mentioned positive emotions strengthen the ability to build resources and coping strategies (in Shim et al., 2019).

Music therapy practices. In this thesis, music therapy practices are mostly regarded only as a part of DMT practices. As Bernstein states: “Carefully selected music enhances the creative process and all aspects of dance expression. ... Music is a springboard for stepping into new realms of symbolic imagination and has the potential to stimulate new expressive themes, previously unexpressed emotions and new life options.” (2019, p. 208). Bernstein also speaks about using drums as a part of the therapeutic process which “are especially useful for building relationships and a sense of community” when used in a group drum circles (2019, p. 209). This is especially important since *Bèlè* practices and *Bèlè* music is created by playing drums, to which the dancers are dancing, as will be explained in the chapter 3 “*Bèlè* practices and its context”.

All of the above suggests the holistic effect it has on an individual or a group while participating in dance therapy sessions, which goes well with the central idea of social and community work of accompanying the ones in need through a holistic approach, improving the life situation in all the four dimensions – biological, psychological, social and spiritual.

2.2 Examples of the use of dance and music therapy practices in social and community work

Music and dance therapy practices have been used in many different countries and with many different target groups. Dance Therapy Association of Australasia says it has been mostly used in hospitals, schools, prisons, treatment centers and private practice as psychotherapy. The Association of Dance/Movement Therapists of the United Kingdom adds that it has also been practiced in social services as both individual and group therapy (in Williams, 2019, p. 284). This subchapter shows examples of music and dance therapy in social and community work practice.

Catherine R. Phillips, a professor in the School of Social Work at Lakehead University in Ontario, Canada, writes about the use of dance/movement as a tool for understanding a child and its situation for the purposes of social work, related to child welfare. It can be specifically useful during an assessment, for interviewing, observing and documenting the situation. She suggests social workers should pay attention to the bodies of their clients and what they express through them, learning from DMT (Phillips, 2014). D'Errico states that: "the use of art, in any form, becomes a fundamental medium not because of its aesthetical beauty, but because of its capacity to convey a meaning." (2017, p. 368). And if social workers see and learn about the mentioned meaning, they can understand the situation of a client and support improvements even better. As D'Errico says, different art forms are used both in psychotherapy and psychosocial rehabilitation (2017, p. 370), which is a part of a social work forms of support. Antilla et al. present dance education as a powerful tool to work with youth and communities, to learn and live together better by performing difference, through creating third spaces. Different authors that have shown the potential for empowerment for women and girls are mentioned, specific examples about a workshop in Jordan for Muslim women were given. Through dance, they were able to open topics that would normally be difficult to discuss (Antilla et al., 2019, p. 209). Another example is given by Harris, as a dance therapist, he has worked with survivors of extreme human rights abuse and torture, they were often refugees. This evokes the need for culturally sensitive practice (Harris, 2019, p. 257). Bernstein also speaks about the use and usefulness

of DMT with people that have gone through traumatic events. She mentions an example of sex trafficking survivors and marginalized population in India, therefore underlining it is a broadly effective approach in the global community (Bernstein, 2019, p. 193). Shim et al. state that there is a growing number of empirical evidences on the positive effect of DMT on mental as well as physical health in people with complex health conditions. They also suggest that a psychological resilience being built through DMT then helps people to overcome difficulties, such as chronic pain (Shim et al., 2019, p. 87). Thornquist and other authors speak about the potential of ritualistic circle dances, that have been used across cultures. Stimulating circle dances with traditional music may still be very useful in therapy (Thornquist, 2018). In Martinique, *Bèlè* practices have already been used for music and dance therapy as well. The examples found in Martinique showed it is used as a dance therapy with different target groups such as persons with psychological, self-acceptance, self-esteem, and relational problems. Thornquist, focusing on the potential of dance and dance therapy nowadays, also points out the links between dance/movement and the self-concept, and the possibility to improve one's self-esteem and self-confidence, contrarily to today's cultural pressures. It is also mentioned it can support positive behavioral changes (Thornquist, 2018), which is also very useful in social and community work practices.

Concerning training in DMT in the sector of social work, it must be mentioned that in the Czech Republic there are currently trainings in this domain offered to all workers of helping professions (Společnost Podané ruce, n. d.), which suggests a multi-sectoral use and usefulness. Expressive therapies are also taught to students of Charitable social work and International social and humanitarian work programs at Palacký University Olomouc. The use of different expressive therapies is discussed also in the main social work sector journal in the Czech Republic – *Sociální práce/Sociálna práca* (Procházková, 2010). Another article speaks about the potential of sport as a tool for integration, in this article specifically with children and adults with physical disability (Nečasová, 2010, p. 23-27).

Anti-oppressive dance and music practices. This study also focuses on anti-oppressive elements in the use of dance and music therapy practices, as the mentioned above has been a very important part of the evolution of *Bèlè* practices in Martinique, as will be explained later in chapter 3. "*Bèlè* practices and its context". As Yarber says: "When voices

are silenced, the body can often be the most powerful instrument for social change and activism, or the expression of personal feelings and commitments”. She studied the effects of folk dance on a Jewish society – according to her, it countered the negative perceptions of others, during the anti-Jewish propaganda, empowered women and supported cohesion of the Jewish community. Even though, they were secular dances, they “had a profoundly religious impact on the Jewish society” that had gone through traumatizing events of the Holocaust in the past. The dances were to encourage unity and community during and after these times, showing that there is hope for the Jewish people. Second type of the oppressions was happening in the Jewish society itself, towards women. Women were denied some rights, for example to leadership in religious rituals, but were able to gain them through the folk dances. And finally, community links were strengthened, in Israel as well as in Europe after the Holocaust, and an Israeli identity has formed. The dances “united them amidst their differences”. To conclude, “Israeli folk dance created a sense of community that words alone simply could not” (Yarber, 2013, p. 289-298).

DMT is said to support people in re-building their identities and life-worlds (Shim et al., 2019, p. 105). In the paper of Antilla et al., similar ideas are presented, only during a dance education. The authors pay attention to dialogical or third spaces and how they could become a source of learning and living together for communities through performing and accepting what is different about them. They mention the problematics of today’s world and the communities that are more and more multicultural as a reason of migration and/or economic problems. Often, as diversity grows, people seem to be rather anxious. Communities are being divided rather than connected. Hate speech occurs regularly. But the authors want to work on living together better, through dance education and performing difference which is often marginalized and suppressed (Antilla et al., 2019, p. 209). Shim et al., also present related ideas. According to them, through DMT, people that were socially isolated and/or marginalized released their fear of judgement and felt free to express themselves, while feeling as a part of a community with the other group members (Shim et al., 2019, p. 99).

Yarber gives more examples of dance being used as an anti-oppressive practice in her paper. She says the dancing body has the power to overturn violent systems of

oppression, as it happened in Japan, USA, India, etc. As she states, “many ‘sacred’ dances create social change all over the world” (Yarber, 2013, p. 299). In the study of Campbell, DMT concepts were used in connection with post-traumatic slave syndrome theory in the development of a project for African American adolescents. Therefore, she suggests DMT as a possible healing technique from transgenerational trauma. DMT can help to “release pain through spirituality, social justice, and therapy” (Campbell, 2019, p. 221). Bernstein adds that DMT can have a “significant impact on human rights and social justice throughout our global community” (2019, p. 212). Other authors also present different art techniques being used for work with oppressed people, such as the Theatre of the Oppressed and Physical Theatre, as mentioned by D’Errico. These techniques are nowadays used by different professionals, such as artists, teachers, social workers and psychotherapists (D’Errico, 2017, p. 368).

This suggests a certain level of anti-oppressive ideas and techniques that can improve the situation of the oppressed individuals, as well as the community in general, which also links all the above to social and community work. In my opinion, *Bèlè* practices or of that kind can be used in group social work with various positive effects on the individuals and the community, too. Regarding community work, certain signs of *Bèlè* as a community work approach were seen, for example as a community action – one of the community work types according to Musil (1999), as *Bèlè* has been taking part in the resistance movements, which will be further discussed in the next chapter.

3 *Bèlè* practices and its context

The third chapter presents *Bèlè* practices and its context. Firstly, it concentrates on the historical and socio-cultural contexts of Martinique. *Bèlè* practices would not be the same without its context or would not exist at all. For understanding the meaning that *Bèlè* has for Martinicans, the context must be covered. Secondly, *Bèlè* practices are introduced, as the cultural practice studied throughout this research project. Finally, it is followed by information synthesis for clarification of this complex issue.

3.1 Historical context

This subchapter presents the historical background necessary for good understanding of *Bèlè* and its context. The history of colonization and slavery is described in a sufficient extent, although not exhaustively. Attention is paid to rebellions, revolts and resistance, as it is one of the key terms and elements of this research.

3.1.1 Slavery

Since *Bèlè* originated during the times of slavery in Martinique, the history of slavery is explained.

Everything has started with the discovery of the island by Europeans (Vaity, 2017). Later, there was a need for workers at the tobacco plantations on the islands (Handler, Wallman, 2014, p. 453). There were two types of workers – practically enslaved, but contracted Europeans and the enslaved Africans. Both were treated as badly, with long hours of hard work, insufficient nutrition, often whipped by their employer. The difference was that the Europeans finished with the work after three years, the Africans were supposed to stay for lifetime. When sugar started to be produced on the plantations, the number of workers became insufficient. Many slaves were needed in service for only few plantations' owners. This started the slave trade (Vaity, 2017). According to Armand Nicolas, the French trade started in 1638 in Senegal and the first enslaved persons arrived in Martinique in 1640 (in Vaity, 2017). The triangular trade was developed. First, big ships were leaving from Europe with luxury products to Africa, and then from there with the enslaved persons to

the Americas. From Americas, the ships were taking sugar, tobacco and coffee back to Europe (Vaity, 2017).

In colonial dwellings, working conditions were very poor, causing a high mortality and a very low natality among the enslaved population. The production was supposed to be as high as possible, through maximum use of the enslaved people, until the point of their neglect and harm. The life of the enslaved persons was extremely hard. They started working with the sunrise and stopped with the sunset, with two hours of pause for a meal. But sometimes, especially during a sugar cane harvest, they had to work during the night as well. The rhythm of work was managed by a whip. The inhumane conditions, hard work, abuse and malnutrition caused by very poor diet and sparse rations, were causing an enormous mortality (Vaity, 2017; Handler, Wallman, 2014, p. 447). Human beings, the enslaved persons, were downgraded, taken for an object. The enslaved person often lost their individual as well as collective identity. Later on, this has probably led to the necessary search for identity in today's Martinique (Vaity, 2017).

Regarding religion, Christian religion was imposed on the enslaved population. But for example, in Haiti, Brazil and Cuba, they found a way to express their own beliefs through Christianity as well. It was for example the Haitian Voodoo, Brazilian Candomblé and Cuban Santeria. In Martinique, spirituality was often expressed through *Bèlè* (Vaity, 2017).

Furthermore, it must be noted that the enslaved people had some “free” time, usually during the weekends. Generally, they used it for their economic gain or other interests. However, Saturdays were dedicated to growing crops since the enslaved people in Martinique were responsible for producing their own food. As Handler and Wallman write: “Activities pursued during this “free” time included tending gardens, collecting firewood and making charcoal, repairing houses, making handicrafts, engaging in food collecting activities, attending the weekend dances that were ubiquitous in Caribbean plantation societies, and marketing and trading.” (2014, p. 447-448).

During the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, thousands of people, enslaved Africans and their descendants, lived and died on the sugar plantations in the Caribbean (Handler, Wallman, 2014, p. 441). After the slavery was abolished,

the coloniality still persisted (Daniel, 2009). And what is more, as said by Campbell, “the connection between slavery and oppression created a form of trauma carried across generations.” The transgenerational trauma can be unconsciously planted in the culture until today (Campbell, 2019, p. 215).

3.1.2 Rebellions and resistance

Rebellions as well as resistance had already taken place during the triangular trade, in Africa as well as on the ships, on the way to the Americas (Vaity, 2017). But the resistance has not stopped after this. The acts of resistance or revolts were often hidden or camouflaged. The enslaved communities manifested their disagreement for example through slowing down the work on plantation, helping the runaway enslaved people or through suicidal acts (Daniel, 2009; Vaity, 2017). Vaity also mentions arson, self-mutilations and abortions as other types of revolt. Running away, or *marronnage*, was also an act of resistance towards the system. But if caught, the runaways faced various punishments such as the whip, cutting of ears and legs, or death (Vaity, 2017).

Even though the conditions were harsh, historian John Thornton notes that at least some of the enslaved persons were able to participate in the social and cultural life in the area where they were based. They were able to form communities and keep, develop and transmit their culture this way (in Daniel, 2010). Handler and Wallman say that the enslaved people were able to develop kinship groups and friendship ties. They preserved their rituals, danced their dances, cooked their food, had their own healing and spiritual practices (Handler, Wallman, 2014, p. 441; Browne, 2011, p. 451). In the geo-cultural zone of the Caribbean, music and dance is often seen as a part of resistance. It can be understood as a part of the heritage of the slavery (Cyrille, 2014). In Martinique, the enslaved persons had also searched for opportunities for emancipation. They created a solid cultural, spiritual and human foundation for this through their old cultural practices – celebrations, music and dance. Through these, they preserved their humanity, and fought peacefully and silently with the colonial regime (Vaity, 2017, p. 104).

Another period that is important, regarding revolutions and resistance, and for *Bèlè*, is in the second half of the nineteenth century with the ideas of abolitionism. This was then

followed by the abolition itself in 1848, after anti-slavery revolutions on 22nd May 1848. The newly freed persons mostly located themselves in the countryside and mountainous areas. Their gained freedom and emancipation supported and strengthened *Bèlè* practices even more (Vaity, 2017, p. 107-108).

3.2 Socio-economic and cultural context

This subchapter presents the socio-economic and cultural background necessary for further understanding of the meaning of *Bèlè* practices and its current functioning in the Martinican society. First, the societal and economic aspects relevant to this research are discussed. It is followed by a closer look at cultural aspects that have shaped Martinican society since long time.

3.2.1 Societal aspects

Population. Martinican population has been marked fundamentally by the history of slavery until these days. As Durand and Cousseau mention, *métissage*, or interbreeding, has been a great influential factor in the Creole society (2012). The society has been composed of the majoritarian afro-descendants, the mixed-race “mulattos”, the white Martinicans often referred to as *Békés* – the descendants of the colonists, and other communities with different origins, such as for example the Indian Tamils (Vaity, 2017; Durand, Cousseau, 2012), Syrians and people with different Asian origins (Vaity, 2017). Durand and Cousseau speak about a specific complexity of the population composition in Martinique (2012). Vaity adds that Martinican society and its population does not have only one collective identity but is composed of multiple identities that represent the different groups that live together on the island (2017).

3.2.2 Economic situation

Dependence, Békés, France. Martinique is heavily dependent on economy and politics of France, as it is a French department (Gerstin, 1998). In 1946, after three centuries of colonization, Martinique became a part of the French nation, and it is so until today. Cyrille speaks about just a different form of colonialism (2006, p. 151). The particularity of the situation in Martinique is also partly caused by the *Békés*. Nowadays, the white

descendants of colonists still own a big part of the arable land. The social injustice that had been done has not been forgotten (Cyrille, 2006; Vaity, 2017) and continue to happen until today. The *Békés* still totally control the economic life on the island (Vaity, 2017). Maddox-Wingfield discusses the relatively comfortable living in Martinique, compared to other islands in the Caribbean, but also mentions the difficulties such as high living costs, high unemployment rate and racialized labor division (2018, p. 296).

3.2.3 Cultural context

A process of transculturation and creolization was taking place throughout the years, decades, centuries (Daniel, 2010). But there were also ongoing efforts of assimilation into French and the global consumer culture (Gerstin, 1998). Cyrille suggests it was just another form of colonialism with the government controlling all radio and television broadcasts (2006). This postcolonial assimilation has contributed to the dissolution of cultural traditions, spiritual/religious belief systems and worldviews (Maddox-Wingfield, 2018, p. 298). It “has provoked a somewhat marginalized yet persistent search for locally defined identity” (Gerstin, 1998, p. 125). A period of intensified Martinican identity quest of afro-descendant communities in the 1970s and 1980s followed (Cyrille, 2006). As a result, in the 1980s a cultural revival of the Martinican traditions has begun and included music and dance practices as well as the Creole language and storytelling (Gerstin, 1998). The Martinican tradition is transmitted especially through the songs and storytelling, which safeguards specific situations, historical events, and characters (Cyrille, 2006). Even though Martinican society has become strongly Europeanized, the traditional music is still present and continues to play its role in number of functions. It continues being played at important events, community gatherings, or even collective work. It is still an important medium for discussing various matters from the community daily life. It can be neighborhood gossips as well as political messages (Cyrille, 2006).

The question of search for identity is very present in the Martinican society. Since the 1970s and 1980s, the African diaspora and its roots started to be discussed even more. A diasporic identity cannot stand by itself; the roots must be taken into an account. As it is mentioned by Gordon and Anderson, the continent of Africa is the key symbol for

the particularity of Afro-descendant identities (in Cyrille, 2006). The links to the African continent and their roots were clearly through the experience of colonization, deportation and slavery (Cyrille, 2006). Even though, the identity dilemma is still present in the Martinican society (Cyrille, 2002).

3.3 *Bèlè* practices

Finally, *Bèlè* practices will be closely looked at in this subchapter. So, what are *Bèlè* practices exactly? According to Maddox-Wingfield, *Bèlè* is “an ancestral drum-dance tradition” (2018, p. 296). The practices consist of dance and music originating during the slavery period in Martinique (Gerstin, 1998). Although, there are similar practices to *Bèlè* around the Caribbean, as well as in other areas affected by the slavery, as for example Brazil. Cyrille then points out the use of *Bèlè* drum that accompanies all African-derived dances in Martinique. She says the *Bèlè* drum was used until the late 1960s to synchronize collective work in the north (Cyrille, 2002). Although there are two types of *Bèlè* in Martinique. The most known regional styles were from the North Atlantic coast, performed by the poor rural afro-descendant populations around the town of Saint-Marie (Gerstin, 1998) and Basse-Pointe (La Maison du Bèlè, n. d.), and from the Southwest Caribbean coast (Cyrille, 2002; La Maison du Bèlè, n. d.), performed by the fishermen populations with a special role of women.

Adding to the historical and socio-cultural contexts, dancing connected with the origins of the enslaved persons was often prohibited by the colonists during the slavery era and often regarded as indecent (Daniel, 2010). Therefore, dancing of the Afro-descendants was often a form of resistance (Cyrille, 2006; Daniel, 2009), often disguised. It was a subtle challenge to domination, superiority and power. Even though the Catholic and Protestant churches encouraged the African descendants to forget their own dances (Daniel, 2009), they continued dancing. But it was not just the dancing that was prohibited. It was also the music and the drum (Daniel, 2010). The enslaved people used to play drums and dance with every occasion in their lives – when working, fighting, worshiping, celebrating and seducing (Montlouis, 2009). According to different sources, “Africans and their descendants savored their opportunities to dance; they rushed to their dance spaces even after

prolonged hours of horrendous work”. In their own community, it was a tool for liberation from their plantation existence. They performed the remembered African movements (Daniel, 2009, p. 148). *Bèlè* has been a tool for expressing emotions and feelings. Montlouis states it was a “way that slaves had found to exist as human beings in a hostile society” (2009). Vaity also speaks about an emancipation through creation of the music and human, social and cultural rehabilitation done through the *Kalennda* – one of the *Bèlè* practices, during the slavery era and in response to its consequences (2017). An evolution of different African music and dance practices, combined with European influence (Montlouis, 2009), as well as other factors, brought the form that *Bèlè* has today. Gerstin speaks about *Bèlè*’s social context in Martinique. *Bèlè* has been often regarded as an activity of traditional people, giving them a certain social identity. He notes that: “it belongs to the old rather than young, the rural rather than urban, the working class rather than bourgeois, and especially to those from the traditional Sainte-Marie *Bèlè* families” (Gerstin, 1998, p. 159). Then, for some time, the more radical Martinicans rejected *Bèlè* because it was performed in public for tourist amusement. Specifically, from the 1950s to 1970s, *Bèlè* was presented in a degrading way by tourist troupes. But as there were different reviving efforts since 1980s, in the 1990s *Bèlè* started to establish its base in the Martinican society again. The young activists managed to access the traditional practices of Sainte-Marie and connect to the elders of *Bèlè*. *Bèlè* has started to enter in the cities all around the island (Gerstin, 1998). Gerstin writes about a “New Social movement” seen in connection with *Bèlè*. It is no longer identified with the rural poor, but with Martinicans social group. The practices became a symbol and a tool of resistance again, this time against the assimilation to the French departmental system and the effects of globalization. According to him, *Bèlè* is no longer racialized and connected to one social class (Gerstin, 1996).

An important part of *Bèlè* practices is the *swaré Bèlè*, evening *Bèlè* event.

“*Swaré* are open public participatory events that draw audiences of as many as two or three hundred, at which performers of various levels of skill and various affiliations take turns throughout the evening dancing, drumming, and singing for their own enjoyment. *Swaré* are hosted by town councils, recreational centers, or one or more of the organized performing groups. They are held in school auditoriums, marketplaces, cockfight pits, or

wherever a large number of people may gather. They are held throughout the island (instead of only around Sainte-Marie, as previously), and during the mid-1990s, they occurred thirty to forty times a year.” (Gerstin, 1998, p. 125).

Maddox-Wingfield adds there are usually two drummers, lead singer, chorus of background singers, eight dancers which are composed of four female/male couples, and the audience (2018, p. 301).

Daniel brings up the issue of shared Africanity that can be seen in different Afro-Caribbean dance forms, suggesting a linkage to the identity formation of Afro-descendants (2011), as it is pointed out in Bensignor’s paper, too (2011). Motivation, courage and resilience in keeping the practices alive are clearly demonstrated. The positive impact of these practices is noted, for one’s physical and psychological conditions (Daniel, 2011). A great significance of the different dance practices in the Caribbean in general is seen, their humanizing nature, resistant throughout the years, decades, centuries (Daniel, 2010). It is also shown how dance can connect people to their countries, land, their history, and to their diaspora. Its great potential to unite people in spiritual and cultural citizenship is pointed out (Daniel, 2011). In another paper of hers, a social identity as a function of dance everywhere is presented – in this case, the enslaved communities declare who they are through bodily movements and music. It is suggested that there are neo-African and neo-colonial values that can be found in the Caribbean dances. She speaks about the centrality of dance in the culture, ancestor reverence, the colonial experience, and identity. It is also stated that: “these values have accompanied prolonged eras of injustice, to which Caribbean dance performers have had to accommodate or resist” (Daniel, 2009, p. 148). There is also moral, symbolic and spiritual importance of African dance. The role that dance and body have played in the construction and resilience of black identity cannot be forgotten (Gerstin, 1998).

Bèlè in today’s Martinique

The current form of *Bèlè* practices was probably formed and kept since the first half of nineteenth century (Gerstin, 1998). *Bèlè* has been regarded as something vulgar for a long time (Montlouis, 2009). Many middle-class and aspiring middle-class people looked down on *Bèlè* because it had been associated with rural poverty (Gerstin, 1998). But it has lately

regained its popularity among the Martinican population (Montlouis, 2009). Maddox-Wingfield says it “is currently undergoing a strong grassroots revival” (2018, p. 296). As the locally defined identity search was provoked, a generation of young urban activists started to revive *Bèlè* practices in the early 1980s. They started the effort to build a more populist base then. The activists, together with the elders of *Bèlè*, try to stress the skills needed for *Bèlè*, in order to win public respect for these practices. They also point out the personal and spiritual development potential of these practices for its participants (Gerstin, 1998). As it is a part of one of the key dimensions for social functioning, Donatien-Yssa speaks about spirituality in Caribbean art in general and how spirituality and religion are interlinked with art (2006). According to Bensignor, *Bèlè* is not just an ensemble with its songs, dances and costumes (2011). It is a cultural activity, and a foundation for the identity of Martinicans and their cultural unity (Bensignor, 2011; Vaity, 2017). Its goal is not only to create aesthetic pleasure but also to bring people together (Bensignor, 2011). The fellowship in *Bèlè* is still present, making it relevant even in the twenty-first century (Montlouis, 2009). Even though it is sometimes seen as an old-fashioned thing, at the same time, it is nowadays a bit idealized as a cultural resistance practice (Vaity, 2017). Many Martinicans play the *Bèlè* drum with pride today (Cyrille, 2002). Based on the work of Daniel, Caribbean performers are still longing to feel the accomplished equality, even nowadays. There is still a great need for freedom and dignity, after such long-term marginalization and inequality. This can be acquired through the traditional dance, even after centuries (Daniel, 2009). However, *Bèlè* is not just a cultural activity, it also represents a certain way of being, *une manière d’être* (Jean-Baptiste, 2008). There is a certain resistance connected with *Bèlè* nowadays, too. In the light of globalization, the traditional practices are disappearing, but *Bèlè* can be a great tool for expressing one community’s uniqueness against the western influence and globalization (Vaity, 2017). Nevertheless, people, communities and organizations practicing *Bèlè* in Martinique cooperate, as well as compete against each other in a certain way (Gerstin, 1998). But most importantly, it “enhances the quality of life of its practitioners” in many ways, as Maddox-Wingfield points out, especially spiritually and emotionally. They see the therapeutic value the dance has, relieving stress and tension, helping to overcome traumatic events, connecting with their spirituality and sensuality. Maddox-Wingfield presents *Bèlè* as

an emancipatory space of women's empowerment (2018, p. 296). According to one of the *Bèlè* practitioners in her research paper, "some people prefer to go lay down on a couch in a psychologist's office to find solutions to their problems, but me, I go to *bèlè*". Later, she added that *Bèlè* heals her and so there is no need for doctor's medical intervention (Maddox-Wingfield, 2018, p. 303).

Population – Afro-descendant communities. As mentioned by Gerstin in 1998, the *Bèlè* scene consisted only of a limited number of performers at that time. Most of them knew each other personally (Gerstin, 1998). But *Bèlè* in today's Martinique is present everywhere, in the countryside as well as in the cities, especially in the capital city – Fort de France. Ten years ago, only people engaged with *Bèlè* had access to it. But nowadays, it is becoming accessible to more and more people, and to very diverse groups of people. There is a *Bèlè swaré* practically every weekend. In the past, *Bèlè* was reserved only for a secluded group, around the Elders, but nowadays, it brings together people from different social environments (Vaity, 2017).

Preserving old traditions? Vaity explores the traditionality in *Bèlè*. She says it is understood as something that does not evolve in time. But this is not the case of *Bèlè*. She mentions Edmond Mondésir, a Martinican musician that proposes a modern *Bèlè*. The issue of preserving traditions or building on tradition and continuous evolution of *Bèlè* practices is also reflected on. She criticizes that the so-called "traditional" art does not have the same possibilities as the contemporary art or the national art. Being the traditional practice, it is not destined to be played and shown at the national scenes. Often, it must be performed at different informal places (Vaity, 2017). This is interesting to look at from the point of view of resistance towards today's globalization, as it will be done later on.

3.4 Synthesis

Bèlè practices have developed from different African dances, with a bit of European influence (Montlouis, 2009), during the slavery era, after many Africans were brought to Martinique through the triangular trade (Vaity, 2017). They were forced to work long hours, suffering from maltreatment and malnutrition. The mortality rate was very high (Vaity, 2017; Handler, Wallman, 2014). In these times, they were in need of something more, to ease their

existence. So, *Bèlè* has taken its form and it served to bring people together, to make them forget their struggles and hardships, to celebrate special occasions and process certain events with spiritual practices similar to the ancestral ones (Thornton in Daniel, 2010; Handler, Wallman, 2014; Browne, 2011). *Bèlè* has also been a part of the resistance and revolts, from the slavery era (Cyrille, 2014). Since then, it has passed different periods, as well as the Martinican society, but it is still present even in the 21st century. Different authors point out the benefits of *Bèlè*, especially in connection with the identity formation for the afro-descendant Martinicans (Gerstin, 1998; Cyrille, 2006; Vaity, 2017; Daniel, 2009; Daniel, 2011; Bensignor, 2011). Nowadays, it has been faced with new challenges – regarding overcoming the French assimilationist initiatives as well as balancing the effects of globalization (Gerstin, 1996; Vaity, 2017). Its anti-oppressive elements today were also studied and will be discussed more later.

Empirical Part

4 Methodology

In this chapter, the methodology of the research will be discussed. Firstly, the research questions and objectives are defined. It is then followed by the used research methods, including a short subchapter about qualitative research approach, data collections methods and techniques. A sampling process is explained, as well as the ethical aspects that need to be considered. After that, the focus will be on data processing and analysis.

4.1 Research question and objectives

This subchapter is dedicated to stating the research question and objectives. The main aim of this research and thesis is **to assess the meaning of *Bèlè* practices for the afro-descendant individuals in Martinique and their social functioning**. The main research question is then: “What is the meaning of *Bèlè* practices for the afro-descendant individuals in Martinique and their social functioning? “

The study has considered several categories of focus based on literature review and the theoretical background for social functioning, as described in the first chapter, for answering the main research question and to achieve the main goal. A holistic approach was used to assess the benefits of *Bèlè* practices on a social functioning of the afro-descendant Martinicans. Then, the categories identified were used to study other aspects of the meaning of *Bèlè*. The specific categories are presented below:

1. Studying the meaning of *Bèlè* as an anti-oppressive dance therapy practice for the afro-descendant Martinicans,
2. Reflecting on the vulnerabilities (history of slavery, poverty (Gerstin, 1998), search for identity (Gerstin, 1998; Cyrille, 2006)) and capacities and resilience to cope with difficulties of the Martinican community,
3. Reflecting on the spirituality in *Bèlè* practices,

4. Studying the links between *Bèlè* practices and community cohesion in the Martinican community (Daniel, 2011).

4.2 Qualitative Research and Research Methods

The research was conducted using a qualitative approach in research which is known for its wide use in social sciences (Perumal, 2014), explaining social phenomena (Perumal, 2014; Hancock, Windridge, Ockleford, 2007). Based on Denzin and Lincoln, “a qualitative research focuses on interpretation of phenomena in their natural settings to make sense in terms of the meanings people bring to these settings” (in Perumal, 2014). Mohajan adapts similar stand, the researchers must go to people, settings, sites, institutions in its natural settings (2018). Qualitative research methods include non-structured or semi-structured interviews, observation, but also documents, books and videos analysis (Strauss, Corbin, 1999, p. 10). In this research, the semi-structured interviews, as key informant interviews, and participant observation were used. Different documents and videos were analyzed as well, as part of my initiative during the pre-research phase.

4.2.1 Data collection method

Thanks to a student mobility in Martinique, the researcher spent four months among the local community, participating in the everyday life of the Martinican people, joining a dance school/group AM4, going to different cultural events linked with *Bèlè*, and finally, gained the trust of people included in the research. Thanks to this opportunity, field research was conducted. As mentioned above, the researcher went to people, settings, sites and institutions in their natural environment.

4.2.1.1 Field research

Field research is characterized by the field where it is taking place, often in a foreign country. Field research allows the researcher to overcome geographical, cultural and social barriers and to get to know the studied phenomenon from a different angle than during other types of research. The phenomenon shall be studied in its most natural environment. Participant observation is often used as the main data collection method (Miovský, 2006, p. 103-104). This research was guided by the above mentioned. Furthermore, Yin describes

the setting for fieldwork rather as a real-world with people in their real-life roles. One of the main requirements for this type of research is establishing and maintaining relationships with people from the studied group, being able to gain their trust and discuss with them comfortably (Yin, 2011), which does not happen immediately. Therefore, it takes a certain amount of time spent in the field. Miovský stresses that the participants in the field research are not studied objects, but rather partners and subjects (2006, p. 104). Fieldwork is a very uncertain type of research, one can never know how the first encounters in the field will be (Yin, 2011). Therefore, it was very beneficial that the time spent in the field was as long as four months. It allowed the researcher to become integrated into the community, create important links, build relationships and gain people's trust.

Miovský mentions requirements for field research as follows:

- 1) The field must be accessible to the researcher.
- 2) There must be a specific role to take on, without endangering the natural processes of the studied phenomenon.
- 3) The researcher must be well-prepared and trained for the field research – flexibility, improvisation, risks awareness and preparedness.
- 4) The objectives and goals of the researcher must be ethically justifiable (Miovský, 2006, p. 106-107).

Yin underlines the importance of being well-prepared for entering the field, which means to get to know the setting in advance through relevant documents, media coverage, previous research (2011), as was done during this research as well, specifically during the literature review and the whole pre-field-research phase. All the relevant data was recorded through notetaking.

Field research allows researchers to gain insights into cultures, social organizations and lives of people on how they interact, cope and thrive (Yin, 2011). As in this research, a case study focusing on *Bèlè* practices in Martinique can define the meanings of such practices and their potential for possible use in social and community work. This research has been conducted as a case study. Perumal says that specific cases are examined to investigate the relationship between the phenomena and its environmental context to

understand the issue or to provide input to existing or new theory (2014). According to Mohajan, a case study means exploring an individual, group or phenomenon, usually focusing on a single or a few cases (2018). Ethnographic elements are present in this research as well. The topics in ethnographic studies are linked to social and cultural processes and shared meanings in a given group of people (Hancock et al, 2007). The studies try to describe and analyze the culture of a given community through participants' practices and beliefs (Mohajan, 2018). Extensive fieldwork, that includes formal and informal interviews as well as participant or non-participant observation, is usually being done. The researcher spends long periods in the field. Hancock et al. also mention the language barrier as a possible difficulty when conducting an ethnography (2007). It must be admitted that this research was done in most cases in French, partly in English and Creole. This has posed a great challenge, adapting the researcher's French skills to the local accent and typical words used in the region, as well as learning the local language – Creole. Throughout the diploma thesis, Creole phrases are used and explained for simplification of the often-impossible translations of their complete meaning.

Before entering the field, eleven different *Bèlè* associations were identified. Eight of them were later contacted. Some redirected me to AM4 or to La Maison du *Bèlè*, some did not respond. The contact was first established with Lakou Samble Matnik and Tambou bo kannal, later also with AM4 through a collaborator. The associations contacted were not very responsive in the beginning, entering the field proved not to be as easy as planned. Yin speaks about the great advantage of having a collaborator. Gaining an access to a field can be much easier with the right collaborator that is familiar with the setting. He or she can help to identify the key persons and get the researcher in contact with them (Yin, 2011, p. 114). While researching in Martinique, several collaborators were found. They helped to get the research going and introduced me to other important people. Without their support, it would be very difficult to accomplish all the efforts.

Yin reminds that it is important to have a certain set of rules while researching. Permission to research can be essential in some settings. Another important question is whether the studied group should be aware of the research being conducted (Yin, 2011). Ethical standards should be kept and therefore an informed permission of the people

involved in the research was needed. After receiving a permission to join the Association AM4 and conduct the research, the researcher was presented to all members, explaining the aim of the research so that everybody was aware of all its aspects.

The time spent in the field in classical qualitative research often needs to be long enough to understand a certain culture or social structure of a place or people in detail. Some research is done throughout many years, but some can be done during only few months (Yin, 2011, p. 113-114). This study was done for over four months. The direct participant observation itself took place for two months, with the previous one month and a half of introductory observation and gaining access to the field and the community. The key informant interviews were conducted during the last month of the stay in Martinique, after identification of the experts and organization of meetings with them.

4.2.2 Data collection techniques

This subchapter focuses on the data collection techniques. The participant observation and semi-structured interviews methodology is defined. A brief reflection of the process is also included.

4.2.2.1 Participant observation

The participant observation is one of the common methodologies associated with fieldwork. All five senses are used to measure and assess the studied situations in the field. The researcher becomes the main research instrument. According to Emerson, he or she has a “close, intimate and active involvement, strongly linked with the goal of studying others’ cultures” (in Yin, 2011, p. 122). The researcher is right there where the studied subjects are and becomes part of the phenomenon. That is why he or she can better understand and describe the studied topics. A disadvantage can be seen in very high requirements for the researcher’s communication and social skills (Miovský, 2006, p. 152), which has been a challenge in this diploma thesis as well, not only because of the different foreign languages used but also because of the maintenance of different relationships with different key actors. Although it was challenging to manage all the above, the researcher felt like a part of the *Bèlè*

community, getting access to valuable information, and finally, understanding the meaning of *Bèlè* for the afro-descendant Martinican *Bèlè* practitioners.

In this research, specific categories that were focused on were identified well in advance. In this case, according to Miovský, the reductive description strategy is used. The observation is structured, based on specific areas of the interest of the researcher. Usually, several categories of interest are identified in advance and assessed later, limiting the scope of the research as well as the researcher's attention to other areas. This can also simplify the following work with data and its analysis (Miovský, 2006, p. 150).

Observation can help to verify the data collected during interviews, and sometimes to provide more valid data. It can also provide valuable data about the environment and the background of the studied topic (Hancock et al., 2007). The participant observation technique was used to gather not only environment and background data while in Martinique, but also to crosscheck the data collected during the key-informant interviews.

First, *Bèlè* dance therapy session was attended. Unfortunately, the therapeutic sessions were soon after canceled due to personal reasons. Nevertheless, the researcher has experienced one dance therapy session using *Bèlè*, discussed with the therapist and talked with the participants about the positive effect *Bèlè* dance therapy has on them. Later, several of the key-informants interviewed spoke about the dance therapy sessions as well.

Next important step was joining the dance school/group AM4 and attending their trainings. First, an introduction was done with all the members, explaining the research objectives. Then, the classes of *Bèlè* were attended for two months. The researcher attended the dance practice once or twice a week, participating in the classes as an ordinary participant. My role in the field was a participant of *Bèlè* classes/member of AM4. Various events linked to the *Bèlè* and Martinican culture were also attended as a part of the research and allowed to gain extra knowledge about the setting.

All data recording was done by note-taking immediately after the return from the classes. A note-taking technique consists of writing down observations that were made by the researcher (Hancock et al., 2007). There does not need to be a specific form for field notes. The researcher might need to capture various thoughts and ideas that would not fit

into pre-prepared forms (Miovský, 2006, p. 203-204). In this research, note-taking forms were not used either. Although, four specific categories of focus, as mentioned in chapter 4.1 “Research question and objectives”, were identified and received special attention during the participant observation, as well as during the key informant interviews.

4.2.2.2 Semi-structured interviews

Interviews are one of the most difficult but at the same time most beneficial methods for qualitative data collection. Social and communication skills, sensitivity and ability to observe well are needed (Miovský, 2006, p. 155-156). Semi-structured interviews in the form of key informant interviews were chosen as another data collection technique. They are usually used by qualitative researchers, consisting of a number of open-ended questions focused on the topics covered by the research. This type of questions defines the topic or category of interest but provides enough space to discuss specific points in bigger detail. The researcher often reacts on what is said by the respondent and can opt for an elaboration of the topic (Hancock et al., 2007). Preparation for the semi-structured interviews consists of creation of a list of topics or categories that should be discussed. But the interview itself does not have to strictly follow the prepared questions (Miovský, 2006, p. 159-160; Hancock et al., 2007). It rather needs to be conducted sensitively and flexibly, which demands certain skills – such as putting the respondent at ease, good listening skills, and managing to get a valid and true data (Hancock et al., 2007). Although conducting interviews can be challenging, it seemed like the best way to acquire the needed data. Specific categories, important for accomplishing the main objective, were identified and focused on. There were the following: meaning of *Bèlè* as anti-oppressive dance therapy practice; vulnerability, capacity and resilience; spirituality; and community cohesion. The categories were explored with each respondent, even though not all of them knew regarding all the categories. Thanks to the breadth of the categories, the respondents were able to elaborate on the meanings they had given to the questions. The researcher then built on their responses to learn about the studied topic.

The key informant interviews were chosen because of their great potential in social sciences. First, they started to be widely used in social and cultural anthropology as an

ethnographic technique, but are nowadays utilized often in other social sciences, as the expert source of information. The potential respondent should therefore fulfill certain criteria, as an expert in the specific topic (Marshall, 1996, p. 92). This technique was chosen due to a limited time in the field and the need for informed respondents, “experts in the specific topic” that could provide “expert information”. During the time the practice of AM4 was attended, knowledge about the participants and important persons of *Bèlè* was gained. The identification of the possible key informants for the semi-structured key informant interviews had started that way. After spending time in the *Bèlè* community and gaining trust of the possible key informants, they all agreed to be interviewed.

Data recording was done by a voice recorder. It is one of the most practical and used equipment while conducting research (Hancock et al., 2007). It allows to capture data easily and to be able to focus fully on the interview, asking questions and reacting to the respondent’s answers (Miovský, 2006, p. 197). As it is said, it helped in focusing more on the present moment and understanding what the respondents are saying, without having to be afraid of not capturing some of the information.

4.3 Sampling

Yin writes about the importance of sampling – a selection of the specific study units and their number. Knowing which specific units to choose and why is the challenge (Yin, 2011). The key informants in this research were chosen based on purposive sampling methods, few of the respondents were also chosen thanks to snowball sampling. As Miovský mentions, in practice, the non-probability sampling methods are often mixed, due to the thin borderline between each type (2006, p. 130). A detailed methodology explanation follows.

4.3.1 Purposive sampling methods

Based on the book of Miovský, purposive sampling is the most largely used method (2006, p. 135). According to Yin, a sample selection is likely to be done deliberately. The purpose is to select specific study units that will produce the most relevant data about the topic of the study. They should have the broadest range of information and different perspectives about the studied subject, possibly offering contradictory views (Yin, 2011).

The respondent should fulfill certain criteria that are set before the actual sampling starts (Marshall, 1996, p. 92).

4.3.1.1 Criteria

Tremblay explains in detail the criteria that an “ideal” key informant should fulfill. He mentions the following: role in community, knowledge, willingness, communicability, and impartiality (in Marshall 1996, p. 92). The following criteria were the ones according to which the key informants were selected for this research:

- Willingness to participate in the research,
- Certain connection to, or knowledge about *Bèlè*,
- Certain role in the community,
- Communicability.

After spending time in the *Bèlè* community, the researcher has gained contacts as well as trust of the people linked to *Bèlè*. The best personalities to interview were identified, according to the above-mentioned criteria. The most important was a certain knowledge about and connection to *Bèlè*, and a certain role in the *Bèlè* community. Communicability and willingness to participate in the research were also vital factors. Tremblay also suggests a criterion of impartiality (in Marshall 1996, p. 92) which was also considered, even though it was difficult to assess. Most of the people interviewed were actively involved in *Bèlè*. Therefore, their opinions were influenced by their participation.

4.3.1.2 Key Informants

The key informants in this research were chosen carefully according to the criteria mentioned above. There were ten of them participating as respondents during the key informant semi-structured interviews. A list of the number of respondents with basic characteristics can be found in the annexes of this thesis.

4.3.2 Snowball sampling

Snowball sampling is one of the most commonly used methods in qualitative research. It is based on combining the purposive sampling method with the method of simple

random sampling (Miovský, 2006, p. 131-132). Snowball sampling method suggests a selection of respondents through already existing study units. Throughout an interview with an existing respondent, a potential candidate for a key informant might be identified. A snowballing occurs when new contacts that were made through the already existing ones identify new possible interviewees that could potentially broaden the information about the studied topic (Yin, 2011). In this study, few of the respondents were identified this way. At the end of every interview, the respondents were asked if they knew anybody else that could be interested in participating in the research and would have important information to share.

4.4 Ethical aspects of Research

While doing a research, it is important to keep in mind the ethical aspects. Even more, it is the case in qualitative research where the designs and procedures are possibly more flexible (Yin, 2011, p. 41). That is why special attention was paid to the ethical aspects during this research as well.

4.4.1 Code of Ethics and Research Integrity

Ethical standards or guiding principles exist in research to keep its integrity. The researcher should behave properly – choose the data to be analyzed carefully, and the ones to be excluded. Honesty, fairness and respect should be the values while conducting research (Yin, 2011, p. 39-40). This approach and attitude were kept during the whole time of the research.

4.4.2 Protecting the respondents

The respondents of the research must be informed about the purpose and nature of the research. Then, they decide whether they accept participating in the research. The voluntary informed consent should be obtained. Any possible risks to participants should be assessed and minimized as much as possible. Confidentiality is suggested regarding the participants' identities (Yin, 2011, p. 46). All the respondents in this study accepted to be mentioned throughout the diploma thesis. They were informed about the study's purpose and goals, and they have given informed consent to participate as well

as to be named. Concerning participant observation, as an open participant observation was used during this research (Miovský, 2006, p. 154), the members of the association where the dance lessons took place were all informed about the research. The participants were also encouraged to behave as usual and to ask any questions if needed. As Miovský says, the advantage of open participant observation is its ethical correctness (2006, p. 154), when the participants know about the research happening.

4.5 Data processing and analysis

In this subchapter, data processing and analysis are discussed. The first part of the subchapter focuses on data processing and organization and speaks about transcriptions, organization and coding. Then, a data analysis approach is explained. The main goal of data processing and analysis according to Côté, Salmela, Baria and Russell is to reduce the amount of data and obtain a unified image of the studied phenomenon (1993).

4.5.1 Data processing and organization

Data processing and organization is an important part of each research, even more within qualitative one. There is usually a large amount of unstructured data after the fieldwork is finished. That is why organization and coding of meaningful text segments are very important. Then, regrouping of similar text segments needs to be done, to create thematic categories (Côté et al., 1993). That is what was done during the data processing and organization. It proved challenging, with a lot of data to sort.

4.5.1.1 Transcriptions

Transcribing means producing a written version of an interview. This procedure can help in becoming even more familiar with the data collected (Hancock et al., 2007). But it can also cause loss of important data or their distortion. Therefore, transcription is an essential part of the whole research and needs to be done with attention (Miovský, 2006, p. 205). Transcriptions of the interviews were partly done with the help of voice recognition software and were reviewed later for the final transcription version. Partly, they were done only manually. Transcribing proved to be very time-demanding, as well as challenging when transcribing from a foreign language, mostly from French, with two respondents from

English, and with all of them partly from Creole, as many Creole expressions were used during the interviews.

4.5.1.2 Organization

Organization, according to Miovský, is a part of data management that cannot be completely separated from the data analysis itself (2006, p. 209). First, the data needs to be divided into meaningful segments of information and then categorized according to an organizing system based on the data itself. It can be presented in categories or described in themes or elements of the data (Côté et al, 1993). In this phase, reduction of the data happens as well (Miovský, 2006, p. 209). The transcribed data was read through several times and divided according to the categories. Then, specific elements or themes were identified, grouped and named according to their meaning. Unnecessary text was deleted from the transcriptions.

4.5.1.3 Coding

Coding is a procedure that happens already from the start of data organization. The researcher separates data in smaller segments. The segments are identified and named according to their meanings (Miovský, 2006, p. 209). First, open coding should be done which includes reading through the transcripts, familiarizing the researcher with their content and summarizing shorter sections of text in a few keywords. The researcher searches for different and the most important categories of meanings in the data (Hancock et al., 2007, p. 27). After that, axial coding follows. According to Côté et al., this phase includes identification of “common features which characterize the text segments in order to create and understand the relationship between topics” (1993, p. 130). Strauss and Corbin mention that they found “categories are systematically developed and linked with subcategories” (in Yin, 2011, p. 187). To analyze data for this research, both explained types of coding were used, and the explained process was followed.

4.5.2 Analysis

When all data is transcribed, organized and coded, the data analysis proceeds. According to Clifford, “qualitative data analysis is complicated by the volume of data

generated, and the challenge for the researcher is to conduct an in-depth analysis, and yet present the findings in a concise and logical way” (in Mohajan, 2018, p. 16). It is a dynamic process that consists of searching for similar emerging themes or key ideas and putting them together into bigger units (Mohajan, 2018). The researcher needs to uncover patterns through the analysis and make sense of the information (in Côté et al, 1993). Phrases and paragraphs that have extra value for the research are identified throughout all the transcripts. Then, the participants’ quotes are chosen, to portrait the thematic categories even better (Mohajan, 2018). This process was strictly followed during the data analysis. It must be admitted that this was a very challenging process. Meanings were uncovered and grouped according to themes. During the analysis, a holistic approach was used for the assessment of the data, as well as the specific categories. Data saturation was reached regarding most of the categories and questions focused on. The data collected started to be repeated, supposedly thanks to the knowledgeable key informants.

5 Results

This chapter presents the results of the field research conducted in Martinique that respond to the main research question – “What is the meaning of *Bèlè* practices for the afro-descendant individuals in Martinique and their social functioning?” The holistic approach for assessing the meaning for social functioning is used. Then, the meaning of the practices as an anti-oppressive dance therapy practice will be assessed.

To introduce the following subchapters, a quote from the field notes from the participant observation was chosen:

“During the training, the atmosphere and the energy that was in the room was amazing. The music and dance that made the floor vibrate... The singing and the response from the dancers that seemed to bring them all together even more, that connected them all. There were around forty people in the training room. All of them dancing with the tambour rhythms, smiling, singing... In my eyes, they were really a community! ... Smiles, friendly atmosphere, sharing... Even during the stretching part, everybody was singing and dancing ... The whole training finished with clapping hands!”

5.1 Meaning of *Bèlè* practices for social functioning of afro-descendant Martinicans

At first, the collected data were looked at through the optic of holistic approach. The transcribed interviews and notes from the participant observation were assessed while specifically searching for meanings in the four different dimensions – biological, psychological, social and spiritual, and how it can possibly improve the social functioning of *Bèlè* practitioners. The data was also analyzed in connection with the vulnerabilities in Martinican society, and capacities and resilience possibly gained through *Bèlè*.

5.1.1 Biological dimension

According to various sources, cited in chapter 2, dance and music therapy practices along with different sport activities can help in keeping people in a good physical condition (Daniel, 2011; Williams, 2019; Balgaonkar, 2010; Shim et al., 2019). In the past, during

the slavery era, *Bèlè* practices were a means to stay in good condition, too. The respondent 2 says: “It was a way to keep themselves fit. It was gymnastics!” Based on the field research, *Bèlè* and the trainings are physically very demanding, which is supported by findings during participant observation, while the researcher had been participating in two-hours-long *Bèlè* classes each week. This is supported by a statement from the field notes:

“After a while of practicing *Bèlè*, I started to see the improvements in my physical condition. Even though *Bèlè* trainings were physically very demanding, I did not feel tired after. My muscles were sore in the beginning, but there was no tiredness. It was exactly the other way – I was full of energy after!”

Another benefit related to the biological dimension that was mentioned by the respondents was a disappearance of aches and pains when practicing *Bèlè*. This might have been due to the effects of *Bèlè* on psychological, social and spiritual side, too. When they felt well mentally, the pains went away. Another reason could be exercising regularly which improves the overall health condition, keeping people fit.

According to some of the respondents, there are also new forms of *Bèlè* emerging. One of them is Fitness *Bèlè* that combines a sport activity – fitness with *Bèlè* music and steps. It is an interesting way to popularize *Bèlè* for younger generations, and it is also benefiting the physical condition of the body, as any other physical activity. What is more, this activity has even more to offer than just a workout and improvements in physical condition, as described in the following subchapters.

5.1.2 Psychological dimension

Dance and music are used for therapy in psychotherapy, showing that it has a potential to treat people from depression, different psychological and emotional problems, as stated in chapter 2. Several authors also speak about the potential to improve the overall mental well-being of an individual. (Williams, 2019; Balgaonkar, 2010; Thornquist, 2018; Shim et al., 2019). During the research, the respondents spoke about different benefits of *Bèlè* on their lives, and the psychological dimension of their life situation and social functioning. The respondent 8 says:

“People say that when they arrive to *Bèlè* sessions, they have their personal problems. They are little depressed, not well. But when they go home, they are not the same. It is good for them to come; it makes them forget their problems. Me too, I turn a music on, I dance, and I feel good.”

Several times, respondents mentioned during the interviews and informal discussions that they started to participate in *Bèlè* after a difficult period in life. The respondents spoke about how *Bèlè* and the whole community helped them to overcome the struggles. Some of the examples of difficulties were recovering after a death of a close person, abuse or trauma, various family and relational problems, different personal problems – for example with self-acceptance, self-esteem etc., or just a mental fatigue. Respondent 1 says: “To say that I am beautiful? *Bèlè* helps with this! In *Bèlè*, if I am big, small, or skinny, nobody judges me. We all dance together and there is no judgement.” Participants also talked about relaxation and therapeutic effects of *Bèlè*, through being in the community and living the *Bèlè* moments together, with the feeling of belonging. Knowing who you are, thanks to knowing one’s own culture was mentioned as another positive effect gained through *Bèlè*, improving the social functioning, in psychological as well as other dimensions.

The subchapter will be concluded with the words of respondent 1: “We need to get together, be together, rebuild ourselves personally, but together. We need to change together. And in *Bèlè*, we work on ourselves in a community. It is beneficial for everybody.” Therefore, the next subchapter is focused on the social dimension.

5.1.3 Social dimension

As it was already stated in the chapter 3, *Bèlè* has been a cultural practice that united people, brought them together and helped them to live through difficult times (Daniel, 2009; Montlouis, 2009; Gerstin, 1998; Daniel, 2011). The respondent 4 summarizes: “*Bèlè* has always been a collective activity that engages a community, a group, a society. It is made for harmonizing relations in a group...” There is an uncommercial exchange, solidarity, participation, mutual support and responsibility, respect and striving for harmony in *Bèlè* practices. Regarding the social dimension, the respondents spoke about *Mun Bèlè*, or *Bèlè* people. They say “*Nou se monmay Bèlè*”, we are the *Bèlè* people, according to the respondent

1. A question then came up – who is actually part of the *Bèlè* community? According to different respondents, there is a small and big *Bèlè* community. The small community is usually from the same association, that practices together as well as spends their free time with activities linked to *Bèlè*. The big community included all the associations that practiced *Bèlè*, an umbrella-organization coordinating all the associations - *Lawonn Bèlè*, as well as people that were not practicing but went to *swaré Bèlè* from time to time, even if only to watch and enjoy the atmosphere. An extract from the field notes supports this idea:

“The connection of all the dancers! And all the musicians! And everybody that was inside the little wooden dance room. We were also included. We were spectators, but also singers (choir), as many in the room. We contributed to the atmosphere. ... We lived the moment with everybody and were part of the family.”

The respondent 1 explains:

“*Bèlè* community is not just about the dancers. There is no exclusion. It is not because you do not dance that you are not part of the community. If you share the same values, you are *mun Bèlè*! Maybe I don’t know how to dance *Bèlè*, but I live *Bèlè*. I breathe *Bèlè*. I eat *Bèlè*. *Voilà*, it is a way to live!”

Although, it must also be mentioned that not the whole population in Martinique practices *Bèlè* or attends *Bèlè* sessions. There are even some that reject it.

Bèlè community and communion were words that were said in every interview. The social dimension of *Bèlè* showed a great significance for all the respondents as well as other participants, as observed in the dance classes and at *swaré*. Although community was a key point, individuality was mentioned right after. Individualism was resented, but individuality supported. The respondent 5 explains:

“The dancer has his freedom. He dances with his partner, but he is not obliged to do the same steps. ... I do my steps and you do yours. We cooperate. I search for steps that can go well with yours. I mind my own business, but I also care about you. This is fundamental. *Sé yonn a lot, yonn épi lot.*”

The respondents also discussed the need for having a community and for belonging somewhere. During the field research, links in the *Bèlè* community were closely focused on to find out if the practice has a potential to strengthen ties and reinforce the cohesion of the community. According to the respondent 6: “The ties can be strengthened ... through sharing *Bèlè* experience.” The respondent 10 adds to that by saying:

“We feel the strengthening of the links between people, because there is something beyond our comprehension that circulates among the individuals. People will say the *swaré* was great, that there was an energy, that it was vibrant. They are not really aware of the spiritual circulation, but it is there.”

Another factor that helps in strengthening the ties in the community is the principle of individuality and community, as reflected on by the respondent 5. All the *Mun Bèlè* form a community, but the individuality of each person is respected and accepted. Other important points of ties-strengthening factors are discussion, listening to each other and comprehension in the *Bèlè* community, in the small as well as the big one. Similar theme emerged during participant observation, regarding communication, as an extract from field notes suggests:

“*Bèlè* dances were not always easy to dance. Since it was mostly in group and knowledge of choreography was required, it often demanded a lot of attention, communication and coordination among the dancers. ... Communication and coordination helped them to get to know each other and involve in relationships.”

Bèlè is also about *manié viv* – a way of living, the way we live with ourselves and with others, as well as the environment. Based on the way people live together, the community cohesion can be strengthened. Some other principles are sharing and conviviality, as well as communion and cooperation. This is also a part of the *manié viv*. Certain principles and transcendent values are linked to *Bèlè*, and the *manié viv*. Respondents spoke about a relations protocol or societal values, that lead people in their lives, relationships, and help them to improve or keep their relationships functioning. The respondent 5 says that: “*Bèlè*, it is here to make us stronger, to live better and live better with others. It helped me to live better with my children, with my parents, my friends, my

students, colleagues, neighbors... It helps me to live better.” The societal values are discussed more in the next subchapter.

In *Bèlè*, the links were strong, and strengthened, also because of different festivities of the associations. From time to time, they all brought some homemade food to spend some time together after the training, chatting and strengthening their feeling of community belonging as well as improving community cohesion in general. The respondent 10 adds that other factors which improve the community cohesion are festivities during Christmas, Carnival or summer holidays, and smaller events where people sing and dance together. The love they have for *Bèlè* unites them. Most of the respondents spoke about feeling unified with the community while participating in *Bèlè* sessions. Lastly, speaking Creole was discussed as another characteristic of the *Bèlè* community. Although, it is not possible to assess and cover the meaning of the Creole language for the afro-descendant Martinicans, its significance in relation to *Bèlè* must be pointed out.

Family participation is another ties-strengthening factor, this time for the basic unit of the community and society – the family. Several family members often participate in *Bèlè* and it becomes a regular family activity. Therefore, the family ties are also strengthened through sharing their passion and the time actively spent. The respondent 10 says: “The modern times disperse families. Everybody has their own interests and things to do. But when we practice *Bèlè* as a family, we have the *swaré* or days at the beach spent together.” *Bèlè* has shown some therapeutic effects in relation to the community life – being in the community and living the *Bèlè* experience together, as well as strengthening the ties in families, due to family participation, and cohesion of the whole community.

Some respondents warn about the flaws of the community and the existent romanticism when speaking about *Bèlè*. The respondent 5 says that: “The *Bèlè* community is like every other community. There are all the possible defaults as well as the qualities. There are all the possible problems people can have, as well as all the good things they can produce.” There can be rivalry between members and associations, difficulties for beginners to dance in the *swaré*, some egoism, jealousy... It is a model for society, but with contradictions, as

the respondent 9 says. “They are making things seem more beautiful than they actually are. The ideas are beautiful, but what is said is not always what is done in real life,” he adds.

As a bridge from the social to the spiritual dimension, some of the participants have also spoken about the way that spiritual experience, that one can live through *Bèlè*, strengthens the ties in the community. The respondent 10 mentions the following, as an example of the interlinked social and spiritual dimension in *Bèlè*: “When the singing works at 100 % and you have this vibration from the voice. You feel it going through the whole body, the head, the stomach, the limbs... At this moment, we are a community, not a series of individuals.” The researcher’s personal experience during the participant observation supports this idea, too:

“I felt like we were in our own world. In a world of *Bèlè*... There was nobody else than us – dancers, dance teachers, musicians, singers and few spectators. We were in our bubble. We were composing the whole world at the moment. And we were so tied to each other. Through the music, through singing all together. Through all the elements of *Bèlè*. Everybody brought a part of them into the whole atmosphere. Even though we were many and could not communicate with everybody, we all lived something great together. And it made us feel closer to each other. The ties got stronger every week. Even though we did not always have time to speak, we felt we were there together, and we were part of all this, part of something bigger.”

5.1.4 Spiritual dimension

Bèlè has played an important role as a spiritual practice in Martinique, as other ancestral spiritual or religious practices were forbidden and persecuted in the times of slavery. *Bèlè* has been a reminder of African roots and ancestral spiritual practices (Gerstin, 1998; Donatien-Yssa, 2006; Maddox-Wingfield, 2018). The respondent 3 adds that: “*Bèlè* is the spiritual cement within the society. ... It has been restored as a strong element of our composite identity, it is no longer debased or rejected as a feature that reminded us of slavery or Africa. On the contrary, it is now considered as a powerful link with our ancestors which will help us to face the future.”

As a part of the spiritual dimension, philosophy and transcendent values are one of the mentioned aspects, seen also during the participant observation. Humanism, love, respect and mutual support were stated as the core societal values. Creole garden and eating creole were other symbols of *Bèlè* – being responsible towards their community and the environment, trying to cultivate their own food and support local produce by buying and eating locally. As the respondent 1 says: “The *Bèlè* community is recognizable by its values that are shared by everybody. It is a way to live, to eat, to sleep, to say *bonjour*...” It suggests a certain life philosophy, as they would say *manié viv*, that is an inseparable part of *Bèlè* and the *mun Bèlè*. Through *Bèlè* classes, this philosophy, or wisdom, is transmitted to other *Bèlè* practitioners. As the respondent 8 stated: “We, in the association AM4, we reflect a lot. We discuss a lot. We exchange a lot.” *Bèlè* practices are not just about music and dance, it is about spirituality, meditation, philosophy. It is about individuality, but not individualism. In the previous subchapter, communion was named as one of the key elements in *Bèlè*. Although, it is not only a communion for participants. It is also a communion with nature, with everything around us. These transcendent and societal values help people with their social functioning, leading them in their relationships, and in their lives in general.

Spirituality in Bèlè practices. As identified during the literature review, spirituality is a very important aspect in connection to *Bèlè*. Therefore, one of the main categories focused on during the research was spirituality in *Bèlè*. As the respondent 5 reflects:

“Spirituality, it is the need we as human-beings have, to go beyond the daily life. It is this need to ask the fundamental questions – Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? What are our goals? It is an individual experience, but collective, too.”

In the past, *Bèlè* was often forbidden and repressed, because it kept elements of the African spirituality that was not welcomed by the colonialists. The African spirituality in *Bèlè* is connected to nature, to energy, to Cosmos, say some of the respondents. Even though many afro-descendant Martinicans are Catholic, the African spirituality is somehow present in different aspects of the life, and in *Bèlè*. Even if it is hidden or not yet completely understood. The respondent 5 explains it this way: “It is not a particular religion. It is more or less civil. But it still builds on certain beliefs, in the vital Force. In different religions, it

can be called differently.” He also adds: “One old man told me, „Do you know what is the only religion in my opinion? It is to live well with myself and with others. If we understood this, ... we would live well together. “” It is the beliefs and the values that are transmitted through *Bèlè* that help the afro-descendant Martinicans to live better.

Still, religion in Martinique is not a simple issue. As the respondent 4 explains: “One of the things that determined colonization was the church, the Catholic religion. The African spirituality was forcibly replaced, with the ideology of Catholicism.” *Bèlè* moments could have possibly been the time to forget about all the repression done by the church and the imposed religion, fleeing to another spirituality, as the respondent 9 suggests. This is another sign of *Bèlè* helping the enslaved Africans and their ancestors to survive. The respondent 4 adds: “There is something sacred in *Bèlè*. I call it modern sacred, where we also find the transcendent values.” Other respondents also often associated *Bèlè* with something sacred. Even though, the spirituality can be seen as described by the respondent 7, too: “For me, ... it is the idea that we forget ourselves and that we feel unified with others ... and with the drum, it is spiritual.” The respondents spoke about spirituality in communion and about certain harmony that is felt during *Bèlè* classes and *swaré*, through connecting to a drum and its sound and vibrations. The respondent 5 posed an interesting question: “What are we looking for in *Bèlè*? We look for the moments together, energy, drum... The drum is essential. Its vibrations, it gathers people together.” *Bèlè* gives its participants the feeling that they are part of something bigger. It gives the spiritual background to their lives.

Another phenomenon discussed during several of the interviews was trance, while practicing *Bèlè*. Different respondents named it differently – trance, being inhabited by someone else, entering another dimension, being extremely enthusiastic or relaxed. According to the respondent 8, the trance can mean not knowing about oneself and just dancing, being connected to the drum and a drummer. The respondent 8 also adds from her personal experience: “I was disconnected from everybody. I don’t know where I was. You feel like you’re traveling. ... while dancing ... I did not have any idea about the time. I just knew something was happening and that I had chills/goosebumps.” This is connected to another topic that was brought up during the interviews. Some women were said to have sexual experiences while practicing *Bèlè*. Similar observations were made in the research

paper of Maddox-Wingfield (2018). This suggests a very high level of relaxation, feeling comfortable with other participants around and spirituality of the moments themselves.

A very spiritual moment for the respondents was a *swaré Bèlè*. To prepare for moments together, there is a special ritual that happens at the beginnings. As the respondent 1 says: “When we start to dance, in a circle, we first turn counterclockwise to gather all the positive energy. When we turn clockwise, we let all the negative go. We do this before we start, to be together.” The respondent 8 mentioned another ritual during an informal discussion at one of the trainings. When people come to dance, they should let all the negative things behind them while stepping over the doorstep and entering the dance room. All the different factors already mentioned above play a role in creating the atmosphere and energy, that can become a spiritual moment for everybody. The respondents spoke about a special energy circling around the place – often a circular pit, where *swaré* happens. The respondent 10 adds to that by saying: “In *Bèlè*, spirituality is very present. In the music, in the drum practice, in the sound, in the vibrations... The instrument addresses an energy directly. A corporal energy. Or a brain energy... So, there is this communication that happens.” From the interviews and observation, it was apparent that spirituality in *Bèlè* plays a very important role, although it is not always spoken, known or understood. Spiritual moments as these, with the special therapeutic rituals mentioned above, improve the social functioning in spiritual, psychological and social dimension. As it was suggested in the theoretical part by DeGruy, spiritual connectedness in a community supports short term healing (in Campbell, 2019, p. 223).

Lastly, as *Bèlè* safeguards some of the African ancestral spirituality, it also reminds its participants of their origins, helping them to form their identities. In addition, knowing one’s culture, helps in knowing who we are and therefore in answering the fundamental questions of the spiritual dimension.

5.1.5 Vulnerability, capacity and resilience connected to *Bèlè* practices

Vulnerability, capacity and resilience were also one of the main categories identified and focused on, as an interesting element and a source of information for assessing

the meaning of *Bèlè* practices for social functioning of the afro-descendant Martinicans, especially the ones that could normally be at risk of exclusion.

As one of the possible vulnerabilities of the Martinican afro-descendant population, undefined identity seemed problematic during the interviews with the respondents. But through *Bèlè*, the lost or not-yet-found identity could be finally distinguished and completely formed, as it helps to uncover and accept the roots of the Martinican afro-descendant population. Thus, it can be considered as a capacity gained through *Bèlè*, helping the participants in knowing their own culture and themselves, supporting their identity formation. The respondent 3 says: “It plays a relevant part in the shaping of our identity, as its roots reveal our African-ness.”

Since a very long time, the afro-descendant population has been under an oppression. First, during the times of slavery. They were in some ways very vulnerable, although very resistant and resilient. It continued after, in the assimilation period. Some say that it still persists until today, with the rule of France and the *Bekés* who still own the majority of the island. The Martinicans are still in some way oppressed, but still as resistant and resilient. *Bèlè* helps them to cope, even resist, and strengthen the communities to become resilient – through knowing their culture, themselves, accepting where they came from, and through strengthening community cohesion and a sense of belonging within the community. This is also connected to the topic of transgenerational trauma, from the slavery era.

It is said that: “transgenerational trauma is trauma passed from one generation to the next through genetics and through experiences. This form of trauma often affects large groups of people who have experienced collective trauma. For example, African Americans ...” (Mohn, 2019). Through practicing *Bèlè*, the afro-descendants can get over the trauma, accept their history, who they are, where they came from etc. As the respondent 10 says: “*Bèlè* allows us to keep a connection with our African ancestry. It is a very valorizing way to accept ourselves the way we are, as black. To accept ourselves as people with this historical context that was very hard, very violent, without devaluing ourselves.”

People with disabilities and people who have experienced some sort of abuse also participate in *Bèlè* or *Bèlè* dance therapy sessions, where the vulnerable can be for example

people/children that were abused or neglected, people with disabilities, with self-acceptance and relational problems or mental pathologies. But thanks to *Bèlè*, they acquire certain capacities and improve their resilience, through re-appropriation with their bodies, self-acceptance, acceptance of the community/group and feeling of belonging. The gained capacities that were presented by *Bèlè* practitioners, acquired through *Bèlè*, were also self-confidence and body acceptance. All this was supported by sharing and conviviality in *Bèlè* classes and *swaré*. Some respondents also spoke about sharing their pain during the *Bèlè* sessions. Repeatedly, they mentioned feeling well and forgetting their troubles. These capacity- and resilience-related factors were brought up by many participants as well as respondents. “All troubles are forgotten when dancing *Bèlè*!” as one of the participants said. *Bèlè* and its techniques are very demanding, pushing the participants to live the present moment and focus fully on *Bèlè* and the people around. Through occupying participants’ minds and forgetting all their troubles, they enjoy the communion, sharing and conviviality.

Another capacity that is acquired through *Bèlè* is the knowledge and adoption of transcendent values – humanism, respect, societal values and a certain social protocol, and support for local production. All of that leads the participants in their everyday life – how they should live with themselves, with others, environment and nature. The respondent 5 says that:

“When we start *Bèlè*, we start a journey with ourselves. ... We learn many things about ourselves, about the relation to ourselves, our bodies, our history, our language, our manners. We start a journey with others – how we position ourselves in relation to others. And finally, we start a journey with everything that exists – for example the energy that is everywhere around.”

Several key informants brought up the thought of *Bèlè* practices being an educational tool as well as medium for transmission of certain wisdom. When looking at *Bèlè* as an educational tool, during a drum practice, students can achieve better concentration, relations with their classmates, space occupation and movement of every part of their body.

Violence management has been mentioned as another outcome that helps participants to be more resilient, that can be achieved through *Bèlè*. Music therapy with drums is practiced in the prisons according to the respondent 2. Playing the drum can channel violent energy, calming the possible young delinquent and help to prevent violence later. Other sources also speak about the violent energy channeling through DMT, supporting violence prevention or better violence management (Koshland et al., 2004).

As stated by the respondent 5: “*Bèlè* transforms lives. It helps us to transform.”

5.2 Meaning of *Bèlè* as an anti-oppressive dance therapy practice in Martinique

This subchapter describes the meaning of *Bèlè* practices in general, as well as for the afro-descendant individuals, from the point of view of an anti-oppressive dance therapy practice, looking at the historical context and the situation nowadays. Even though, it considers the meaning of the practices in general, for the afro-descendant community, the aspects mentioned below play an essential role in the social functioning of the individuals, too. The results based on the collected and analyzed data are presented below.

5.2.1 Significance of *Bèlè* practices in Martinican society

The respondent 5 says about *Bèlè* that: “*Bèlè* practices are a tradition. It is the roots of a tree. The leaves, they fall. But the roots, it is what keeps the tree standing.” As already mentioned, the respondents attributed the meaning of *Bèlè* for identity formation of the Martinicans, transcendent values and philosophy as well as *manié viv*. *Swaré Bèlè* as a main element of the community cultural life brings people together, as it had done in the past, too. The respondent 9 supports this idea by saying:

“*Bèlè* has really functioned as a lantern in the society. The history of *Bèlè* shows that it has been an alternative of the social life, to the suffering at the plantations. It has been music with therapeutic effects. We ask ourselves how the enslaved people, that worked as brutes, went on after the whole day of work to play music and dance until early morning hours. It was the effect of being together among themselves.”

They also talked about *Bèlè* being a certain tribute to their ancestors and a reminder of ancestral Africa. The respondent 1 says: “*Bèlè* is the only culture that we have left from our ancestors. Otherwise, everything has been taken away from us!” The history as well as current topics are told through the songs today. It is pointed out that it is a good way to transmit and teach about important historical events which are not always taught at schools. The meaning of all the above for identity formation and therefore for a social functioning is indisputable.

In the past, there was certain humanization that was happening through *Bèlè*. The enslaved persons were able to self-express through these practices, to express their pain, little joys and humor. Through the community and communion, they were able to overcome their everyday struggles. The respondent 4 explains that:

“The enslaved Africans, they were used as objects, animals or personal properties according to the *Code noir*. But after work or at the end of the week, they were their own masters. They could choose what to do and by this action, they felt humane, through art and the culture.”

Every human-being has a need to belong somewhere, in a community or a group of people. As presented in the subchapter about social dimension, *Bèlè*, with its principles of sharing, conviviality and communion, through the activities and time spent together, while strengthening the bonds in the community and the feeling of belonging, can give this needed community to its participants. It creates strong and positive relationships. But the respondent 5 poses a question as follows: “What is missing in our *Bèlè* community? Maybe a reorganization of the spiritual system. A collective system, aware of its strengths and indispensability for the country and for humanity.” This citation suggests a special meaning of *Bèlè* practices for the Martinicans. Although, not everybody is aware of its spiritual strengths yet, in contrast to the benefits in biological, psychological and social dimensions.

According to the respondents, “*Bèlè* is for all” and has become a great inclusion tool that brings people from different backgrounds together – young, older, women, men, people with disabilities or from different social classes. It gives an extra meaning to *Bèlè* practices in the Martinican society, as well as in relation to social and community work. It empowers

those who could be prone to exclusion, marginalization and oppression. Their inclusion in the community life prevents different negative effects otherwise resolved by professional help – through doctors, psychologists, social workers or other professionals. As it is often the case in social and community work where prevention activities take place.

Another aspect that shows the significance of *Bèlè* in the Martinican society is its development in time. At present, several new branches of *Bèlè* are developing, such as Church *Bèlè*, Fitness *Bèlè* and Beach *Bèlè*. If there are new forms of *Bèlè* emerging, it proves that it is a living art. It is not just a tradition and folklore. There have also been numerous efforts to research *Bèlè* from different angles – by historians, musicologists, therapists, anthropologists, *Bèlè* practitioners as well as a social and community work student now. This shows the meaning of the practice locally as well as an interest in the topic from the international community. Even somebody from a different culture can see and feel the benefits of practices like *Bèlè*, as confirmed during the participant observation. The different professionals' interest in *Bèlè* suggests the multidisciplinary use of such practices and its possible use in the helping professions, therefore in social and community work, too.

Bèlè has a strong meaning as an anti-oppressive tool for the afro-descendant Martinicans, too. This will be further discussed in the following subchapter.

5.2.2 Anti-oppressive dance therapy elements in *Bèlè*

Anti-oppressive elements. As it was already reflected on in the third chapter about *Bèlè* practices and its context, there have been anti-oppressive and resistance elements in *Bèlè* since the beginning. The respondent 10 states, as an example: “It is a resistance practice that allowed people to keep their balance in life in a system of very strong oppression.” Some would say that with the end of the slavery era, the need for resistance had vanished. But according to the respondents, the afro-descendant Martinicans were faced with new challenges. The period of assimilationism, the economic problems linked to *Békés* heritage, the struggle in identity formation, as well as issues connected to globalization – these are some of the factors that cause some form of oppression and result in a kind of resistance. The respondents agree that one of the roles of *Bèlè* and *tambou Bèlè*, the drum, is being a

symbol of resistance and strength of the afro-descendant population, even a symbol of rebellion and revolt. The respondent 1 says: “It is a culture of resistance, the *Bèlè* practices! And we have to continue to resist!” The respondent 2 adds that: “*Bèlè* drum has been used as political weapon during different strikes throughout the history of Martinique. That is why *Bèlè* was not welcome for some...” Then, during the period of assimilationism, as he also points out:

“*Bèlè* and the drum were sort of forbidden for some time, because of the assimilation, as we are a French department. The governors always tried to make us forget the past, regarding slavery. They wanted that we turn the page. And we would like to, but we have to read it and understand it first.”

Bèlè has still been used as a symbol of resistance, even recently in the economic and political strikes, for example due to a sort of oppression from the *Békés*, persisting even today, with their control over the Martinican economy. The respondent 1 says: “There is still some kind of slavery. Not physical, we do not have a chain on our leg, but we still work for them,” as the *Békés* own most of the companies in Martinique. Another occasion where *Bèlè* is performed and where “the drum has its revolutionary place, is at the celebration of 22nd May – the anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Martinique”, as the respondent 2 presents. A discussion about the different forms of oppression and resistance followed with several key informants, reflecting on the differences between vital, cultural, economic and political resistance. In the past, it was rather about a vital resistance, the afro-descendants had used *Bèlè* to survive and at some point, to revolt. Nowadays, the resistance is more cultural – due to globalization, economic – due to economic problems as a heritage of the slavery era, and political – as a result of being a French department, ruled by France. As the respondent 5 reflects: “It is in France where all the decisions are made. The future of the country is not in our hands.” So, the resistance and revolt elements are still present. For example, in demonstrations, *Bèlè* community is called upon to participate more and more. The respondent 2 says: “The socio-cultural resistance really exists. When there is a strike of any institution, the drum is there! It is to give force and courage.” When discussing about *Bèlè* songs and their meanings, in the past they were not explicitly political, according to

some respondents. But today, the texts of *Bèlè* songs are sometimes directly political and show political and cultural resistance signs, as pointed out by the respondent 9.

The respondents have also spoken about the education system in which the Martinican population is educated about all aspects of the history of France but hardly knows as much about the culture and history of Martinique. The respondent 1 mentions: “We learn about the same history as the French, but our own history – from Africa until the Martinique, we go over it very quickly.” Due to this, they feel incomplete. She adds: “I think that all Martinicans want to know their real history and to re-appropriate themselves with their culture. And that is how I started with *Bèlè*.” So, *Bèlè* practices are changing this. The important role of different associations and cultural militants was mentioned. They also try to include more of the Martinican history and cultural practices in the school curriculum. It is part of the cultural and political resistance. The respondent 7 have brought up an interesting issue, relating to the Martinican culture as a counterculture, in relation to the French culture, but also to the globalized world of today. She explained the counterculture as “a culture that comes from a group that rises against the majority group. We could say it is a minority group that has a need to be recognized in its specificity.” She also adds: “In one sense, we can consider that the culture produced in Martinique is a form of counterculture in relation to the metropolitan French culture.” What is more, all this influences the lives of the afro-descendant individuals and affects greatly their social functioning. The anti-oppressive elements in *Bèlè* help to deal with the injustices and improve their life situations.

Dance therapy elements. This part adds some more information that was not mentioned in the holistic assessment. Through its physical, psychological, social and spiritual potential and positive effects in the holistic point of view, *Bèlè* helped people keep going, as it does even nowadays. The respondent 8 confirms it by saying: “We at AM4 are very sensible to people’s well-being. We are not teaching *Bèlè* for people to come to sweat. We always take time to discuss. Because there are more and more people with personal problems.” As it was already presented, art – such as dance and music – is used in expressive therapies. *Bèlè* itself has been used as a dance therapy in Martinique with different target groups – people with psychological problems, children, people with disabilities and

prisoners. According to the respondent 7, some of the *Bèlè* dances, such as *Mango woulé*, were used similarly to contact improvisation techniques which are useful in dance therapy. The similarities are the contact maintained with the ground – dancing barefoot to be in contact as much as possible, as well as the contact with other dancers, and being connected with them.

What participants often mentioned during the participant observation, along with the respondents during the key informant interviews, was that they were feeling very energetic and relaxed after *swaré Bèlè* and the classes. Even though it was usually two or more hours of intensive workout. An extract from the field notes supports the above said: “For me, *Bèlè* really has a therapeutic effect. We come with our difficulties and leave with enough force to deal with them. We arrive tired and hopeless, but we leave full of energy and motivated to go on.” The respondent 9 confirms the same for playing the *Bèlè* drum: “To play a drum in *swaré Bèlè* is very physically exigent. It is really tiring. I have always been surprised to come back home completely zen and rested.” The respondent 7 adds to that by saying: “It is therapeutic, because we forget everything else. We have to stay completely focused on what we are doing. And it is really strong.” The respondent 5 mentioned other effects *Bèlè* has on the well-being of a person:

“When people come to *Bèlè* sessions, they let go. All the pressure that is caused by the functioning of the society nowadays. It is a way to get together, to work on ourselves, to realize ourselves and to get rid of all the pressure.”

Some participants mentioned other interesting facts. For example, the respondent 10 says:

“When I started *Bèlè*, it was a little in the sense of dance therapy for me. It allowed me to feel well, in my body as well as my psyche. I felt welcome, because we often see *Bèlè* as a *Bèlè* family. And then, the repossession of my own body through its movement in space... It has reestablished an equilibrium in my life.”

Bèlè has helped to find balance in their lives – through the interactions with community, physical activity and improvements in body and movement coordination, gaining self-confidence and learning to accept themselves and their body. For others, it was

realization of themselves in space. “When a dancer dances *Bèlè*, he says he exists!” as the respondent 5 presents. The respondent 4 also reflects on the issue of existence and the meaning of *Bèlè* for existence in the past. He sees *Bèlè* as a therapeutic tool especially because it helps with this issue. Questions such as how the enslaved persons found strength and such passion to dance after a whole day of work were examined. He states that: “They might have been tired physically, but they were regenerated in their being and existence.” He applies a similar logic today, when people still need art and culture to live and feel well.

Other dance therapy elements were already presented in the previous chapters.

5.3 Summary of the results

The results chapter was divided into two main parts – meaning of *Bèlè* practices for social functioning of the afro-descendant Martinicans and meaning of *Bèlè* as anti-oppressive dance therapy practice.

In the first subchapter, regarding the meaning of *Bèlè* practices for social functioning of the afro-descendant Martinicans, assessed through holistic approach, it was found that *Bèlè* brings benefits in all the four dimensions – biological, psychological, social and spiritual. A summary of the benefits in each dimension follows:

- Biological: improvements in physical condition, energy restoration, disappearance of aches and pains;
- Psychological: feeling well, distraction from problems, self-acceptance, self-confidence, emotional support, recovery after difficult life events (death of a close person, relational problems, abuse/trauma, ...), trauma resolution, mental fatigue disappearance, relaxation, sense of belonging;
- Social: bringing people together and uniting them, harmonizing relationships in group, solidarity, participation, mutual support, sense of belonging, community, societal values and *manié viv*, *swaré* and festivities, communion, individuality and acceptance of a group, strengthening ties in community and families, spirituality lived together;

- Spiritual: helping in identity formation, re-appropriation with culture and history, ancestral spirituality/the sacred in *Bèlè*/philosophy and transcendent values – as a religious or spiritual background, spiritual experience/*swaré*/communion, connection and harmony – as spiritual moments with positive effect on well-being, trance/modified state of consciousness/sexual experience – as a proof of the level of relaxation and the depth of the spiritual experience lived.

The collected data was also examined through vulnerability, capacity and resilience perspective. Different vulnerabilities were identified, such as undefined identity, oppression, transgenerational trauma, disabilities, experienced abuse/trauma, anger and violence, and different personal problems. They were reflected on in relation to the capacities and resilience gained through *Bèlè*, according to the key informants and participant observation. The gained capacities and resilience in relation to the vulnerabilities are listed below:

- undefined identity: process of identity formation, accepting African as well as European roots;
- oppression: coping, resistance, strengthening communities and community cohesion;
- transgenerational trauma: getting over the trauma by learning about and accepting the history, who they are and where they come from, self-acceptance;
- disabilities: body re-appropriation, community acceptance, self-acceptance, feeling of belonging, self-confidence, trust;
- experienced abuse/trauma: body re-appropriation, community acceptance, self-acceptance, feeling of belonging, self-confidence, trust;
- anger, violence: violence prevention and management, violent energy channeling, calming down;
- personal problems: body re-appropriation, community acceptance, self-acceptance, feeling of belonging, self-confidence, trust, feeling well, distraction from problems, relaxation;

- other capacities gained through *Bèlè*: transcendent values, better concentration, improved relations, better space occupation, better body movement.

The second subchapter focused on meaning of *Bèlè* as anti-oppressive dance therapy practice in Martinique. First, significance of *Bèlè* for the Martinican society is assessed, to improve the understanding of its meaning as it plays a role in how *Bèlè* helps in the afro-descendants social functioning, too. *Bèlè* is cultural practice and heritage, tradition, tribute to ancestors, resistance practice, educational tool and expressive therapy. It is about life philosophy, community and Martinican identity. As the respondent 4 says: “It is not just a question of dance. It is so much more than that!” It was concluded with the inclusion potential of such practices and their possible multidisciplinary use. Anti-oppressive and dance therapy elements’ identification followed. The anti-oppressive elements identified were, for example, the drum as a symbol of resistance, as the respondent 2 says that: “For France, the drum was a dangerous object that called for revolts.” *Bèlè* gives courage and strength to people in fighting for improvements in their lives. Another element was the oppression today. The term of counterculture was discussed, as well as the different types of resistance that are linked to *Bèlè*, both in the past and today. The dance therapy elements found in *Bèlè* were the effects such as energizing, relaxation, finding equilibrium, improvements in personal and relational problems, along with the elements mentioned in the subchapters regarding the holistic assessment. This chapter has shown how the meaning of *Bèlè* in general, and as anti-oppressive dance therapy practices, can influence the social functioning of the afro-descendant Martinicans and how it can help in improving their individual life situation, as a result of improvements in the whole community.

6 Discussion, consequences and recommendations

This chapter focuses on evaluation of the research, responding to research question, summarizing and discussing the results. Possible weaknesses as well as strengths of the whole process of the research are reflected on.

The main research question: “What is the meaning of *Bèlè* practices for the afro-descendant individuals in Martinique and their social functioning?” was answered through assessing the data using the mentioned holistic approach, as well as other defined categories used to better explain the meaning of the practices for the afro-descendant Martinicans. Even though a response to the research question cannot be easily summarized, the results presented in the previous subchapters give a good insight into the topic. All in all, *Bèlè* practices are valuable cultural heritage that helps the afro-descendant Martinicans accept who they are and form their identities. It is a tool for resistance as well as dance and music therapy, a tool that helps many people with their social functioning. The specific benefits on social functioning of the afro-descendants were identified and therefore it has shown the potential similar practices have for the use in social and community work.

The literature research and theoretical part have shown the positive effect that dance and music therapy, or dance, or movement, or dance education, can have on the well-being of people, on preventing different problems, on personal development. But this research has demonstrated that *Bèlè* has even more to offer. As a cultural practice, specific for Martinicans and their history, with a profound spiritual base, it is not only affecting the biological, psychological and social dimension, but very much also the spiritual one. The spiritual dimension seemed to be the backbone of the whole practice. That is what gives *Bèlè* its power, along with the historical meaning. There can be found certain similarities with the example of Israeli folk dances (Yarber, 2013) that were presented in the theoretical part. It must be noted that these two peoples are not the only ones that have gone through very difficult times full of oppression and suffering, there are surely other practices in other places that helped people in surviving and existing. So, why not to use these practices to help people thrive through social and community work, too?

After reflecting on the signs of social and community work in *Bèlè*, I must add to what was said in the theoretical part of the thesis. *Bèlè* has been used as a therapeutic approach while working with different groups of people – with psychological problems, disabilities, prisoners, children, etc. The work done with them was often very similar to social work, through expressive therapies. But *Bèlè* practices in themselves, they were a sort of community work, even though not being spoken about that way. Several types of community work would fit to what has actually *Bèlè* been for the Martinicans. Before the field research, I was only guessing it could be part of community action type. Today, I can say *Bèlè* plays its role as an actor in community development, community education and community action, as some of the community work types presented by Musil (1999).

Evaluation – strengths and weaknesses. Comparing with the previous research for my bachelor's thesis, this one was somehow easier to manage, as it was solely my personal work and I relied mostly on myself. Even though, accessing the field and getting in contact with the different actors in Martinique was a challenge, as well as the planning of interviews with the respondents. Canceled sessions at the last moment, limited communication in the beginning and no responses from the different organizations, and transportation companies being on a strike for more than two months, have all complicated my way to success. But I did not give up and did my best to reach the defined goals. A great advantage for the whole research was the ability to quickly learn languages and having already a good level of French language. This helped me very much to communicate with the local actors and connect with them and the *Bèlè* network. Without that, I would not have been able to capture as much of the relevant information. Creole language and its understanding was crucial during the dance lessons, as well as different conferences and cultural events related to *Bèlè*, where they spoke mostly Creole. Many Creole expressions are also essential for understanding the meaning of *Bèlè*, therefore the ability to learn quickly and understand what was said was immensely helpful. Nevertheless, I was still limited by the lack of understanding of Creole and ideally, I would need to spend more time in Martinique to reach sufficient fluency in the local language. As a possible weakness, I could see the selection of key informants. Most of them were from the *Bèlè* community and actively participating. Even though, there were also respondents that were able to provide critical opinions and

were not directly linked to the *mun Bèlè*. Another possible negative was the limited time spent in Martinique. Although I had four months to conduct the research, I was limited in leading the interviews and participant observation. In some cases, it would be interesting to speak more to some of the respondents, for a longer time or hold a follow-up interviews, but there was no time left. Unfortunately, I was also not able to conduct an interview with the *Bèlè* dance therapist, due to unplanned personal circumstances, who would surely be another valuable source of relevant data. At least, I had the opportunity to participate in the dance therapy session once. Lastly, I see as an important variable that I am a passionate dancer as well as a social/community worker. I must admit that the results might not have been the same if the research was conducted by someone else, especially regarding the participant observation. I am also passionate about learning from other cultures, actively listening and understanding the meanings people give to their cultural practices. Besides, qualitative research is said to be subjective, rather than objective, and is always influenced by the researcher.

Conclusion

This diploma thesis focused on cultural dance and music practices called *Bèlè* that have a very long history in Martinique, with the main objective to assess the meaning of *Bèlè* practices for the afro-descendant individuals and their social functioning in today's Martinique.

The thesis was composed of a theoretical and empirical part. In the theoretical part, the following chapters were included: firstly, "Social Functioning of Individuals", followed by "Meaning of dance and music therapy in social and community work", finishing the theoretical part of the thesis with "*Bèlè* practices and its context". They discussed in detail all the necessary background information for the research conducted in Martinique. The first chapter focused on the theory regarding social functioning, including defining vulnerability, capacity and resilience, and holistic approach in assessing a life situation. The second chapter presented a theoretical background for dance and music therapy and specific examples of these practices used in social and community work, as well as with anti-oppressive elements. The third chapter covered the context of *Bèlè* – historical, socio-economic and cultural, and lastly *Bèlè* practices themselves. The empirical part of the thesis started with discussing the used methodology – qualitative research through participant observation and semi-structured interviews being done as a part of field research. Then, results of the research were presented. The main research question was answered through the research, using identified leading categories, as well as the holistic approach, that helped to analyze the data. The results were presented in chapter 6, fulfilling the objective while looking at *Bèlè* in Martinique through the lens of holistic approach in assessment in subchapter 6.1 "Meaning of *Bèlè* practices for social functioning of afro-descendant Martinicans", as well as another important category identified through the literature review and studied during the research, in the subchapter 6.2 "Meaning of *Bèlè* as an anti-oppressive dance therapy practice in Martinique". Summary of results and discussion followed.

Based on the results, it has been demonstrated that *Bèlè* has a special meaning in the Martinican society, since the slavery era until today. The holistic assessment has shown that there are benefits in every of the four dimensions of individuals' life situation. *Bèlè* helps

to keep its participants fit, it helps them to feel good about themselves and to overcome difficult periods in life, it gives them a community and strengthens their relations through the time spent together, and finally, it guides them in their lives with a certain philosophy and transcendent values, allowing them to live spiritual moments in communion with others. The respondent 5 demonstrates the meaning of *Bèlè* by saying:

“*Bèlè*, it is here to make us stronger, to live better and live better with others. It helped me to live better with my children, with my parents, my friends, my students, colleagues, neighbors... It helps me to live better.”

The meaning of *Bèlè* in general and as an anti-oppressive dance therapy practice in the Martinican society must have been studied, too. Through *Bèlè*, individual life situations are improved. Through the community’s efforts, changes in the system happen. It affects the whole society, as well as the individuals and their social functioning. These efforts share similarities with community development, community education and community action as the types of community work.

This research adds to the body of literature regarding dance/movement and music therapy practices and its use in social and community work. It shows the potential of similar practices and their various benefits for their practitioners, stating the specific healing effects that it can have on societies, communities and individuals. It also supports the idea of dance and music having the potential to be anti-oppressive – fighting the current structures and giving a voice to the people that were silenced by their countries, the regimes in their countries, etc. It shows us that we should build on the cultural practices of the communities we want to support; we should draw from their history and from the things they know and want to participate in. We should learn from them and about them and their practices, learning how to accompany and support them in the best way. The specific case of *Bèlè* in Martinique was studied but it can surely be compared with other cultural practices all around the world, using the practices that are relevant in each country. I believe in the potential of similar activities, empowering people, helping them to feel they belong to a group or a community, supporting them in learning about themselves and about each other. The findings suggest that culturally relevant expressive practices can bring a lot of positive

effect to people, as a powerful tool that improves social functioning of individuals, as well as possibly strengthen relations and ties in groups/communities. Therefore, this thesis can give inspiration to social and community workers, as another possible approach to working with individuals, groups and communities. Secondly, this thesis is a study of cultural practices that have not been studied from the same perspective, regarding *Bèlè*. It brings an insight into lives of people and how such practices can affect them. It broadens the literature available, on dance/movement and music therapy, on social and community work through expressive therapies. Lastly, I see the usefulness of the findings for my personal use in social and community work.

This research and all the time I have dedicated to this thesis helped me to learn more about this topic and gain valuable knowledge for my future practice – hopefully as a dance therapist in social and/or community work. It also allows me to share this knowledge with other people, other social workers, other therapists or other people that are interested in this issue. The thesis, and the whole research behind it, was a valuable experience, as a research itself, as a time for personal and professional development, as an opportunity to meet so many inspiring people. It was a time to learn, to share, to be inspired.

Concerning possible future research, follow-up research could be done in Martinique in few years from now, comparing the results in this thesis with the ones in future, as *Bèlè* has been experiencing a lot of development in recent years. Another suggestion for future research is to conduct another case study of a cultural practice in a different country, to see if similar potential is found elsewhere, and try to compare the meaning of the cultural practices in these countries. Last idea suggested is tied to social and community work practice, taking such cultural practice, *Bèlè* or similar, and using it in working with individuals, groups or communities, and finally evaluating the results of the application, finding what benefits such practices have when realized by social/community worker, and proving or not the results found through this research on a different group of people.

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Annexes

Key Informants Table

Respondent No.	Basic characteristics of the respondent
1	Teacher of music Researcher in AM4; drummer, dancer, starting singer; part of AM4 and Lakou Sanblé Matnik
2	University assistant professor; President of the association Comité Devoir de Mémoire de Martinique Interest in the history of <i>Bèlè</i> and its development, in the history of oppression, advocate for “slavery as a crime against humanity” recognition
3	University assistant professor (English & Caribbean Literature, Culture & Globalization) Interest in resistance, history of slavery, women’s studies, postcolonial literature
4	Known <i>Bèlè</i> musician and philosopher <i>Bèlè</i> research since 60s, association Bèlènou
5	Head of AM4, cultural militant and <i>Bèlè</i> researcher, geo-history teacher <i>Bèlè</i> research since 60s until today; books published on <i>Bèlè</i> (with AM4 research team); lecturing about <i>Bèlè</i> in the past and today
6	Martinique Tourism Authority Manager <i>Bèlè</i> singer in AM4, present during the renaissance of <i>Bèlè</i> in 60s
7	University assistant professor (Hegemonism & Contra-culture, Culture of the Caribbean, Literature); Art and spectacle critic Unique experience living in Guadeloupe and Martinique, in contact with different Martinican artists; in her work focused on subjectivity, alterity, identity, stereotypes (gender, racial)
8	Dance teacher/trainer <i>Bèlè</i> research since 60s; <i>manié viv</i> and positive energy – the heart of AM4
9	<i>Bèlè</i> drummer in association ALAC; have learned from the <i>Bèlè</i> elders/masters
10	University assistant professor (English & Literature, ...); Artist-Painter <i>Bèlè</i> dancer; Interest in resistance, history of slavery, religion and spirituality, women’s studies, performing arts

Abstract:

The diploma thesis focuses on the meaning of *Bèlè* practices for the afro-descendant Martinicans and their social functioning. *Bèlè* is a cultural practice that combines dance and music, with origins in different African dances, accompanied by drums. *Bèlè* has been developed in Martinique since slavery era, therefore, it has a great historical value for the afro-descendant population of Martinique. In the theoretical part, social functioning, dance and music therapy practices and its use in social and community work, *Bèlè* practices and its context are presented. The practical part of the thesis offers an insight into the benefits of *Bèlè* for social functioning, assessed through the holistic approach. Furthermore, it covers the meaning of these practices as an anti-oppressive dance therapy practice and its potential to improve the lives of the individuals along with the community's living conditions.

Key words: *Bèlè*, cultural practice, social functioning, expressive therapy, anti-oppressive dance therapy, social and community work, slavery, Martinique

Anotace:

Diplomová práce se zaměřuje na význam *Bèlè* pro martinické afro-potomky a jejich sociální fungování. *Bèlè* je kulturní praxe, která kombinuje tanec a hudbu s původem v různých afrických tancích, doprovázených bubny. *Bèlè* se vyvíjelo na Martiniku již od dob otroctví, má tedy pro populaci s africkými kořeny na Martiniku významnou historickou hodnotu. V teoretické části se práce zabývá sociálním fungováním, taneční a hudební terapií a jejím použitím v sociální a komunitní práci, praxí *Bèlè* a jejím kontextem. Výzkumná část přináší vhled do přínosů *Bèlè* pro sociální fungování identifikovaných na základě holistického přístupu. Dále pak popisuje význam této praxe jako antiopresivní taneční terapie a její potenciál zlepšit životy jedinců, spolu s životními podmínkami komunity.

Klíčová slova: *Bèlè*, kulturní praxe, sociální fungování, expresivní terapie, antiopresivní taneční terapie, sociální a komunitní práce, otroctví, Martinik