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FOLKTALES OF MAYOTTE, AN AFRICAN ISLAND

LEE HARING

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1. Mayotte Is Ours

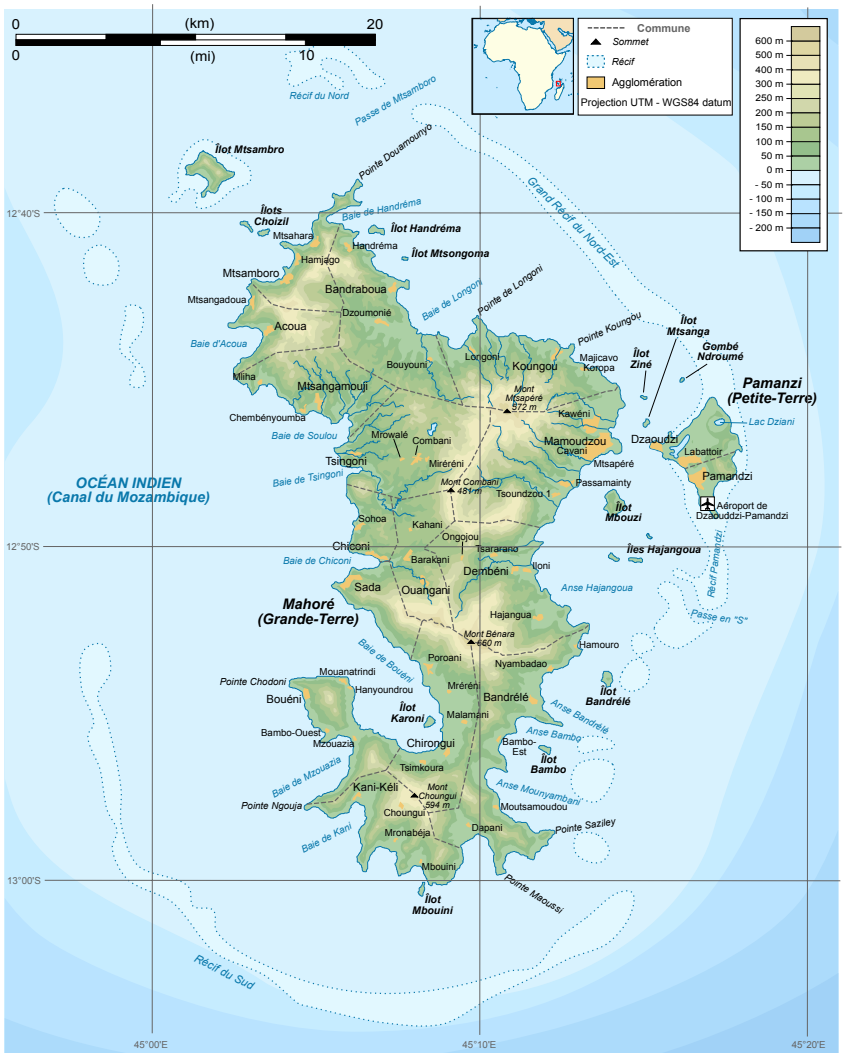

Fig. 1 Mayotte topographic map. By Rémi Kaupp, CC BY-SA 4.0, Wikimedia Commons, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f1/Mayotte_topographic_map-fr.svg

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'Although in the morning I was the *maître* [teacher], in our long afternoon and evening meetings they became my *mafundi* [teachers]'. This is how Claude Allibert recalls the rhythm of authority between himself and the schoolboys he was teaching, during his two-year posting to Mayotte (1973–1975). To convey the flavor of their exchanges, he switches between French and Kibushi, the Mayotte dialect of Malagasy. Throughout, he names nearly all his informants, most of whom are male. Others are probably persons he visited on non-school days. Trilinguals like Mohamed el Anrif, who lived in the Kibushi-speaking village of Mzoizia, told his tale in Shimaore (old Comoran), and sometimes used words from coastal African Swahili. Switching codes was normal; the new game between Allibert and the schoolboys was switching authority. His translations are clear and simple. Although Kibushi and French do not agree on things like word order and the sequence of verb tenses, the disagreement does not obscure narrative movement. The pieces sound traditional, and on examination the symbols are too.

Through his pages, storytelling in 1970s Mayotte looks like a politics of cultural survival. When Allibert arrived in September 1973, the Comoro Islands had not yet declared independence. During his two years training students to be proper citizens of a French dependency, they must have wondered about their future. Going to the French school, shouldn't some expect to become leaders in an independent Mayotte? Their tales draw on the past for content and style, but they also allude to the precarious present. Often, they seem to be referring to situations their home audiences would recognize.

Claiming the Place

Imagine being one of those students. You are asked for stories of the past. Semiconsciously you set a cultural strategy in motion. You are aware of differences of status, age and ethnicity, so the interview situation determines what stories you bring out to tell. You can rely on your hearer's knowledge, or his ignorance. Your story can give him a history lesson, but you don't want to lead towards a political discussion. The nearest choice might be a story you have heard about a certain place. That points to the past; it is the kind of thing newcomers should hear. A dozen or more of Claude Allibert's narrators made that choice. Whether

intentionally or not, they tell stories about particular places asserting the Mahorais, not the French, are the owners of the colonized island.

Fig. 2 Fisherman in lagoon. By Pierrick Lizot, CC BY-SA 4.0, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:P%C3%AAche_dans_le_lagon_de_Mayotte.jpg

Sufiana Ali, for one, told a little story explaining why the island of Pamandzi (or Pamanzi) has that name. A visitor would already know that it holds Mayotte's airport; formerly it held the capital, Dzaoudzi. It bore its name long before the arrival of the French, but, says the legend;

> Some Comorans left Pamandzi and went to the big place [Madagascar]. A few months later, the French also began to suffer. One after another went to settle at the big place. When the men were asked, "Why'd you come here?" [they said] "There's nothing to eat there!" But the Comorans, who didn't speak good French, would say, "Pas manger" (no eats). Two years later, with lots of work, the crisis ended and the people came back to Pamandzi. That's the name that stayed on this place.[1]

It is the kind of legend that gets quoted in Lonely Planet travel guides — told as true, set in the world we know. In the United States, figures like Paul Bunyan and Pocahontas are legendary because stories are told about them. Sufiana Ali, knowing what his interviewer represented,

chooses a story about economic depression and recovery, incidentally making the point that colonized people had better speak good French. His interview situation seems to have determined that choice, or strategy.

It is a strategy I first noticed far from Mayotte, in the 1970s. Not long after Kenya's independence, I visited Kisii, in the west. Local people learned quickly that I was interested in old stories; they probably assumed I was either a Christian missionary or a leftover government spy, and they welcomed me cordially. One of their pieces resembled the Mayotte stories in being about ownership of the land. It said that the Gusii (that is the adjective) prophet Sakagwa, also known as Eliamwamu, foretold the coming of British settlers sixty years before. (Kenyans have the habit of referring to white people as Europeans.)

> There was also a man called Eliamwamu, who was an old prophet. He prophesied that the Europeans will came [sic], but most of the Kisiis used to despise it because they thought that he was just joking. He was trying to tell them that there will come some people who are white, and then they will settle in our land here — before they came. And also there was a second man, a witch doctor Samwel Nyamao. This man also was trying to tell them the same stories. But most of the Kisiis did not believe them [...] When the people thought that it was not true — but when the Europeans came, they [saw] that they had built [...] houses which looked like mushrooms [this was Sakagwa's prophecy], and then the prophecy of Sakagwa became true.[2]

If Sakagwa's prophecies are mightier than the foreigner's gun, the lesson is that people in Kisii are a force to be reckoned with. Such situations of unequal power (as my late collaborator David Samper once wrote to me privately) engender expressions 'fashioned from the combination of divergent cultural forms, images, goods, and meanings appropriated from a variety of different countries, cultures, and ethnicities'. The narrators in this book practice that method.

The legends continually assert ownership of the land.[3] Here are two brothers, Muzidalifa and Asani Yusuf, instructing their instructor about bilingualism in their island. We notice their schoolbook style.

> Formerly, before other nations arrived, there were people living in Mayotte who spoke two dialects, one close to Malagasy language and the other to Swahili. The people of Mayotte lived on this island not knowing about foreigners. One fine day a village chief Mkolo learned in a dream that foreigners would be arriving on the island soon. Next

> day at dawn he brought his fellow citizens together and told them his dream. Then he proposed that they should move their island, so as to get rid of these people. After his speech he sent young men into all the villages to alert the inhabitants and ask their help. The messengers told the chiefs to appear before the dreamer with all their boats and strong ropes. A day was set, and on that day all the men set off behind Mkolo going towards the sea. They stopped near a point and put a hole in it. Then they put the ropes into the hole and fastened them to the boats. At the signal, everyone began to row. But the efforts were vain, the island didn't move. The men were tired and went back to their village. Since that day, that point is called Bwé Foro, Pierced Rock.[4]

The immovable home island still shows the scar caused by the threat of invasion; resistance is remembered and honored.

Yes, the story is a tourist item explaining the origin of a name, but consider the futile effort chief Mkolo demands of his men: they are to move their home away from foreigners. When the chief's dream accurately foresees the future, the threat of invasion requires instant compliance with its message. Any audience will see the hopelessness of his scheme. Probably the men with the ropes saw it too. The contradiction between aspiration and visible reality is enough to keep the story alive. Maybe some people laugh at it, but the legend asserts, 'Mayotte is ours'.

Some of the history narrated in the place legends is bloody. The narrator Mwananku Saindu takes his listener back to the time when the French were seizing Dzaoudzi (the capital on Pamanzi), and Bwana Madi, who ruled from 1817 to 1829, was unable to prevent them. He was attacked by his people. Willing to sacrifice himself for his land, he ordered them to kill him, but only at sea. If he were killed on land, he said, Mayotte would never grow. But they violated his command and killed him on a mountain. Furious at seeing his blood drying in the sun, the king cursed Mayotte with drought and poverty. The narrator's gloomy closing line brings the past into the present: The bloody rock has remained red until now, in a place named Red Rocks (*Maué Makudru*).[5] How useful the legend is: it explains why people in the present are not well-off.

Other place legends are flavored with morality and strange gods. Reinforcing the theme of resistance without the bloodshed, Haruna Rachidi tells of villagers so quarrelsome that their chief decided to divide them into three clusters. One moves to the islet Mbara and tries

to displace it by rowing it away (we've heard that before); the local god, angry, kills them. The second group tries to sweeten the river by throwing in masses of sugar (a local crop). The god of beauty, angry, kills them too, leaving only the third group. Thus all those who left the village were killed by the anger of the gods. And since that old event, the *ilot* of Mbara and the river of beauty have become *ziara*, [places to] pray and worship God.[6] Another narrator, Waldati Omar, moralistically portrays a gluttonous daughter who is about to eat the biggest of the family's squashes, until her parents tell her it's a *démon*. Paying no attention, she rolls it down to the river, then to the sea, where the *démon* drowns and eats her.[7] *Mali ya mjiga huliwa na wendza âkili*, says the proverb: the fool's fortune gets eaten by the clever ones.[8] It's hard to miss the implications for an island dominated by a foreign power.

Another legend of violating an interdiction, says narrator Ahmed Atumani,

> is a well-known story in the whole island, because Sazilé is kind of a sacred place. Long ago there was a king who had a village. All the people there led a happy life with never a care. The king was charitable and loved his people. There was a very pretty girl, who was loved by the prince from another village. One day the young prince came to ask her father for the princess's hand, and soon the marriage was arranged. As the king had only one daughter, he invited all of Mayotte for a big ceremony. The great day arrived and the celebration began. Twenty oxen were killed.

At this point the narrator inserts an ethnographic detail for the interviewer: in Mayotte, the bridegroom is escorted, crossing through the village and dancing, to the house the bride's father has built. Then he goes into legend for the origin of a place name, and of a feature a visitor might notice.

> The king wanted to satisfy this custom, but he didn't want his son-in-law to walk on the ground. They spread rice on his path, from the palace to the end of the village. Now, everybody in Mayotte knows that walking on food, especially rice, is forbidden by God. So, the Almighty became angry and the village was flooded by an extraordinary high sea. The nuptial procession was broken off and many people could not be saved. The rice was immediately transformed into white sand. That's why today we see white sand in the middle of the sea at that place. The few people who could reach Mutsamudu, or the Bambo coast at Mbwini, went there to tell their story and talk about the life they led

and missed. That's why they say *Sazilé*, "In those days." Since then that region is called Sazilé. There are spirits living there. They forbid that word to be pronounced when you go by there, because that recalls the event, and they punish whoever dares to do that.[9]

Fig. 3 White Sand. By VillageHero, CC BY-SA 2.0, Wikimedia Commons, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/53/Sable_Blanche_%28Mayotte%29_%2831357582336%29.jpg

Other versions of the same plot confirm how well-known the story is. One names the village, Majumeuni, and even the girl, Layraza; in an Anjouan version, where the violation is using milk for bodily hygiene, the result is the same: the visitor is shown the ruins. For Claude Allibert, the value of such orally transmitted narratives is their record of the past. This one, he says, might be historical memory of a tidal wave after a cyclone. Farther back, in Mayotte's earliest history, he writes, 'It is very probable that vestiges of India and Malaysia exist in certain tales', prior to the Bantu, Swahili, even Persian contributions.[10] While the place legends are local, and their concerns are of the 1970s, their fervent proprietorship, their clinging to tradition, can be heard in every other story in this book.

Tricksters

Students understood what M. Allibert was asking them for. Narrating a places legend is pretty straightforward. One performs it without

flourishes. The schoolboy *fundi* is more of a performer when he entertains his instructor. Why not offer him funny stories? Africa and Madagascar have bequeathed many trickster stories to Mayotte. Tortoise, for example, made his ponderous way from East Africa to Mayotte, where he triumphs over the ridicule of everybody around. The chief of a drought-ridden village, says Anli Ibrahim, makes a futile trip to find water, then learns the secret. On his return, he calls together all the birds and sends them to the place, carrying an axe and a pot. They are to plant the axe in the tree and repeat an incomprehensible magical song.

> Niregé patsu crain wano rakusin maji namukalatcha, magiao namukalakatcha,
> Niregé mabu crain wano rakusin maji namukalatcha, magiao namukalakatcha,
> Hi mambo hi namukalakatcha

We do not have the tune, but those weird words are a charm, in a modified kind of Swahili. They mean 'Big tree-trunk, Take the axe, take the pot, and bring back water'. It is no wonder that neither Crow nor Turtledove can repeat them. Tortoise happens to hear about the quest and offers to go. He successfully sings the song and plants the axe in the tree; water gushes out, everybody is happy, and he is rewarded with money. 'From that day on, he was named Gnamba Mali, and the stream is still running in the village'.[11] The stream is still there; Gnamba means Tortoise; therefore the story must be true — just as the hole in Bwé Foro confirms the story of its immovability. But the legend is a parody of myth: not only does trickster conquer ridicule, but his classic heroic deed earns him his real name. If trickster in a colonized island wins out like this, he could, in some eyes, be typifying the colonized 'native'.

Tortoise is not Mayotte's only East African animal trickster. One accomplished narrator, Bwanali Said, tells of an unlikely friendship between Porcupine and trickster Hare. After an epidemic kills all the game animals — which might be a topical reference — the two make a contract to plant banana trees. Hare violates their contract by convincing Porcupine to plant upside down, so his trees yield nothing while Hare gets many bananas.[12] Bwanali Said uses that tale to lead off a string of six pieces starring a well-known human trickster, who deserves a digression.

Bwanawasi

Bwanawasi is the folktale name for the distinguished poet Abu-Nawās, of the court of the ninth-century Abbasid Calif Haroun al-Rasheed. As acclaimed for his poetry on love and sex as he was notorious for homosexuality and drinking, Abu-Nawās played a politically oppositional role through issuing satires to convey his prejudice against Arabs. Thus, he became the ancestor of insurgents. In the *Arabian Nights*, we find a fictionalized version of him with clairvoyant powers, which make up for his scandal-mongering. He also escapes punishment for his homosexual carousing by reframing his plight in poetry, as a folktale character might escape by singing a song. Later oral fictions make him into al-Rasheed's jester. His fame spread in stories in Ethiopia, Egypt and (coming back towards Mayotte) among Swahili people on the Kenya coast. In tales from Grande Comore, he has been seen as a knight errant fighting on behalf of the people. There he is called *Buwaswia*, a creolized version of his name, which adds the title 'son of wisdom'.[13] Bwanawasi exists in variant forms. So do the tales about him, which audiences recognize as traditional. Equally traditional is this narrator's way of sequencing the pieces so that the trickster will triumph. As he becomes further and further off-color, he seems more and more confident of getting laughs with his theme of taking power by deceiving people. And as we shall see later, even imams can be fakes.

The account of him that Bwanali Said presents to M. Allibert looks like the well-rehearsed performance of a mature artist. One day, he begins, some villagers wanted to organize a *daira*. Strictly, that is a circle of adepts repeating the names of God to the point of ecstasy, but (as we shall see in the comedy routine in the next chapter) a *daira* can be just a big religious gathering. The trickster's robe, hat, and holy book are parts of his disguise.

> They wanted to kill an ox. People all over knew they wanted to kill an ox. Bwanawasi took his, killed it, and skinned it so it didn't get spoiled. He sold the meat and stuffed it with straw till it got its shape. Then he stood it up and tied it near the village. Next he went to the king and said, "I have an ox I can sell you. But be very careful, it's very wild. Go get it only at night". The king gave him the money and he left. That happened in the morning. Bwanawasi walked a long time. That evening

the villagers went to get the ox. As soon as they pulled the rope, the ox fell over. They went quick to the palace and told the king what happened. The king ordered them to chase him. Five men started out on the chase.

They walked all night. In all the villages they went through, they asked if Bwanawasi was there. They told them "No" and they kept going. Finally they reached the place where Bwanawasi was. They found him dressed in a *kurta* and a *kufi* and holding a Qur'anic book. They didn't recognize him. Bwanawasi asked, "Who are you and where are you from?" They told him their story. He told them he would give them something to eat and they would sleep in the mosque. The strangers-visitors agreed, they ate, then went to sleep.

Bwanawasi took some papaya and roasted it to look like excrement, then he put it between their legs. In the morning when they awoke, they saw the papaya and thought they had polluted the mosque, so they fled towards the village.

For his next number, Bwanali Said inverts an episode found in many folktales. Finding an old lady, Bwanawasi offers to harvest her field, but violates hospitality by eating her sugar-cane, then burning the field, and devouring her food while she is out. Then he puts her plates and pots in the bed she has offered him, knowing she will be fooled into beating it and destroying her crockery. In Malagasy storytelling, putting something into the bed to enable your escape is a favorite trick.[14]

Fig. 4 Mosque in Mtsapere. By franek2, CC BY-SA 3.0, Wikimedia Commons, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4c/Mosquée_de_Mtsapéré_-_panoramio.jpg

Bwanawasi is not content with dishonoring one old lady. Knowing how much women like perfume, knowing equally that eating raw sweet potatoes will cause him to break wind, he farts into a pocket flask and closes it up. Then he buys some perfume, which he sprinkles on some women at a dance. When they want more of it, he takes them into a certain house and throws in the flask, which breaks and asphyxiates the women. Was M. Allibert laughing yet? If not, Bwanali Said sets Bwanawasi up more outrageously, for a defeat after all his successes. He finds a village stricken by an epidemic. He tells the women they can escape it by sitting on the little point sticking out of the water near the shore. That is his penis. They all fall for the trick until one smart old lady sticks it with a needle. Defeated, Bwanawasi flees.

But he is a trickster. His defeat must be followed by a success, which Bwanali Said gives him in his final trick. As effectual and familiar as the others, this one will award him with high rank.

> After that last misdeed, Bwanawasi left. By then everybody knew there was a man around there called Bwanawasi, who had to be arrested. In the village he went to, there was one man who knew him. When he got there, the man saw him and went to tell the king. The king called him to the palace and asked him, "Are you Bwanawasi?" He said yes. The king ordered him put into a sack and thrown into the sea. Fortunately the water was low. The king's servants left him on the sand and went back to the palace. Then Bwanawasi heard a herdsman going out to pasture with his herd. He started yelling, "No, I won't marry her! I will never marry her! You want me to marry the king's daughter, but I won't! You can throw me into the sea!"
>
> The herdsman heard what Bwanawasi was saying, so he let him out and got into the sack in his place. Bwanawasi closed the sack up tight and went off with the herd. He went and sold it, then went back to the palace saying, "King, O king! I'm coming from the sea. The king of the sea is inviting you, 'cause he's organizing a *grand mariage*. He told me to come and say he's inviting you, and you have to go with me. There's big fun in the sea, everybody is happy."
>
> He told every person to attach a stone to his foot, so as to get down to the kingdom of the sea faster. When they got to the reef, he had them lean over [the rail] and told them to listen to the orchestra. That was the sound the sea makes on the coral. He made them jump overboard one after another.
>
> As only the king's daughter was left, he gave her the choice to marry him or join her family. She agreed to marry him, and he went

> back to the king's palace, and the daughter became his wife. They lived happy and had many children.[15]

Material as familiar as that last trick is surefire; we'll meet it again. Stringing the tricks together, Bwanali Said follows what African and Comoran narrators often do, to alternate success and setback. Sooner or later, the trickster's successful trick will be followed by a successful trick against him by his dupe. Sometimes that final defeat succeeds, sometimes not.[16]

Bwanawasi triumphs again in a piece told by Hasani Miradji. Having no taste for forced labor (who has, in a plantation society?) and being unafraid of punishment, he refuses to help dig the king's well. Once it is finished, he comes back to drink the water, playing a little drum. Music, the king's soldier guards tell him, will not get him permission to drink, but he convinces them that what he is drinking is honey, and shares it with them. As his price for giving them a second helping, they agree to be fastened, and he gets to drink his fill. To punish him, the angry king offers his daughter to any captor of Bwanawasi. Tortoise offers, successfully trapping the trickster by playing Tarbaby — that is, he covers his shell with sticky stuff, as in the oft-reprinted African American tale.[17] Bwanawasi escapes decapitation by playing sage:

> In the morning the king led the trickster to the square where criminals were punished. "I'd like to die", said Bwanawasi, "but when you cut off the head of a *mataba* [supernatural], there's always a pretty girl next to him". So the king put his daughter next to him. The crowd shouted, "Death to the phony *mataba*!" When the big *oda* opened, that smart guy ducked, and the axe fell on the king's daughter. The king dropped dead. The soldiers waited for the order to grab the trickster, but the dead king couldn't speak, he had already gone to join his daughter. So Bwanawasi took power.[18]

All trickster tales are about reversing power relations.

Bwanali Said's sequence shows his skill in drawing pieces from Mayotte's repertoire to make his point: victory must belong to the powerless. In theoretical terms, he deftly manages the dialectic between tradition — conventions of African-Malagasy storytelling — and situation, the moment of being asked to perform. The West African narrator does it too: 'he must question himself at every instant, choose from his repertoire the action appropriate to the lesson he wants to

get across'.[19] What was 'tradition' in a village society of 1970s Mayotte, where the 'situation' was the imminence of town life? Bwanali Said's traditional-sounding performance speaks against Europeanization in favor of a loyalty to Mayotte's blend of African, Malagasy, and European discourse. That blend is the island's history of creolization.

Making and Breaking Friendship

Tricksters have friends but not for long. In the African-Malagasy narrative tradition, deceit between friends is ridiculed as often as power is reversed. Ahmed Atumani, who gave M. Allibert the legend of that sacred place Sazilé and four other pieces, holds up trickster Hare. When his friend Porcupine begins to choke on a piece of meat stuck in his throat, Hare, in an ostensible attempt to sustain the friendship, goes to fetch water. His quest is delayed by a sequence of progressively lucky bargains, distractingly amusing. In the end Hare leaves Porcupine to choke. So much for the friendship.[20] When interdependence is destroyed, a fundamental social value is being questioned. Trickster tales do look like social criticism.

In another unlikely friendship, Hare first asks a dupe his name. 'Me? My name is Hedgehog! And you?' 'Me? My name is Stranger [*vazaha*]!' lies the hare. Since *vazaha*, the key word in the story, means both stranger and European, using it alludes to the presence of foreigners (who equally might be Arabs or Indians). When the two friends reach a village and ask for hospitality, a servant brings food 'for strangers, that's what the chief said'. As counteraction, Hedgehog puts on Hare's clothes, goes out and eats all the sweet potatoes. Wait for their effect. After coming back and graciously returning the clothes, he goes to sleep. Then when the villagers accuse 'strangers' of destroying their fields, Hedgehog says, 'They're talking about *vazaha*, that must be you!' The trickster's violation has a consequence. The chief, seeing Hare's muddy clothes, accuses him and immediately sides with Hedgehog: 'How many whacks you want us to give him?' 'Not many', he replies, 'say two hundred'. As his escape trick Hare sets a test: 'Have us drink something that'll make us vomit'. Hare throws up the rice he ate; when Hedgehog throws up the sweet potatoes, that gets him three hundred whacks. Doesn't that end the friendship? No, Fasuru Isufa is not finished. He follows the African rule: tell trickster stories in strings.

Hare and Hedgehog are still friends; they keep swapping tricks. Meeting some smiths in the road, Hedgehog plays master: 'If you see a hare behind me carrying bellows, I give them to you'. The smiths pull off Hare's ears despite his protests, and he counteracts with the same trick: boys pull out Hedgehog's quills as he yells in pain. But he counteracts by prompting some hunters to catch Hare and kill him while Hedgehog looks on. His pleasure is curtailed, and the string of episodes ends, when a pack of dogs attack and kill him. To signal his tale is done, Fasuru Isufa ends with a moral: 'The one who hasn't reached the other shore must not make fun of the one who's drowning'.[21]

A formal note: the alternation of success and setback in Fasuru Isufa's story is like that climactic moment in Bwanali Said's series of deceptions when the trickster's success is followed with a counter-trick that defeats him. A textbook example of that sequencing, from Grande Comore: Cock and Hare each will plant a field. When Cock has a good harvest and Hare a bad one, and Hare proposes they exchange, all they exchange is more tricks. Cock finds he got nothing in the deal, so in revenge he hides his head and deceptively smears red coloring on his neck. Seeing him, Hare — duller than usual — goes home, takes a sharp knife, and cuts off his own head.[22] Again, the final defeat kills off the trickster. As a narrator, Bwanali Said learned to imitate performances he had heard and he doubtlessly absorbed these patterns. He would have got to practice in recitation in the Qur'an school. Successful reciters get recognition, the boys for their trickster repertoire, the girls for their readiness for the grandmother role.

The breaking-of-friendship pattern isn't all laughs; it can be parodied (as can almost everything else in Mahorais culture). For Mohamed Chakir, the trickster is a *ginnaru* or *djinn*,[23] who pretends to be an animal helping the dupe Sabuyama. A *djinn*, like a *lolo* or a *dyab*, is a useful supernatural for the storyteller. When this *ginnaru*'s serviceable soldiers clear a field in five minutes, Sabuyama is charmed: 'What a good *ginnaru* you are'. That kind of reply ought to come from a wise counselor: 'Don't say anything yet, wait for the end'.[24] The *ginnaru* keeps repeating the advice, and the audience keeps hearing it as ironic, until the soldiers destroy the field and kill Sabuyama and his family. We might have known 'that place was inhabited by very wicked devils', as Mohamed Chakir comments at the end.[25] Or that his neighbors are

sometimes unreliable, or that there are foreigners in his island who are quite capable of deceitful speech. A trickster *ginnaru* simultaneously personifies serious and playful attitudes. Ambiguity and play are a weapon of the powerless, laughing through their resistance and accommodation. It doesn't hurt when they laugh.

The Plain Style for Parody

If Claude Allibert's tales sometimes read like schoolroom reports, we should not be surprised. Other narrators — African, Malagasy — conventionally open and close their pieces with fixed-phrase formulas, but these schoolboy narrators don't use those. Maybe they were omitted in translating, but more probably it's the narrator's choice. The resulting style resembles those crime stories in French newspapers that are called *faits divers*, news in brief ('Just the facts, ma'am'.) When Mohamed el Anrif is asked for a story, he reports it soberly in plain style.

> A man was weaving a rope. He had to go out to the country to get leaves. He dried them in the sun. He noticed that among the leaves he cut, there was one that wasn't drying out. Every morning he went with the villagers to the country. On his return he found his meal ready. He wondered who did that. "It can only be a woman!" he said to himself.
>
> That went on three to four days. Then he hid and pretended to leave, to see who was doing that work. He hid in the house. He gathered leaves under the bed. Then he saw one leaf shake and become a beautiful woman. That beautiful woman wasn't from the village. He saw the woman draw water, make the bed, prepare the meal. At the moment when she was going to transform herself back into a leaf, the man proposed marriage to her. She accepted, but told him he could not go against her conditions. He must keep his wife's secret.

Every sentence moves the narrative one step ahead, never decorating it, never digressing.

> The king of the town, who had an ugly wife, found something wrong with a poor peasant having a prettier wife than his own. He summoned him. The man told it was a woman he found during a trip. The king didn't want to believe him. Then the man confessed his story.
>
> The king sent his son, to tell the woman [he knew] she was a leaf of date-palm. Then the woman showed her horns, her tail and her long hair, and her eyes got red. She was a *djinni*. As she had married children

> all over the place, she began singing to call them, "*Kumlala kuetu*, Date-palm children, you are asleep, come, you are from date-palms". The children answered "*Aéé*", yes. The *djinni* began turning, going around the yard, repeated her song three times, and the children came. They all sang together, moved off together, went out to the country and turned into date-palms.[26]

The eerie transformation of these *djinn*s into trees is subdued in the plain, anti-performance style. Mohamed el Anrif just gets her offstage, so compact and brief is his performance.[27]

His story honors tradition. For one thing, he probably learned it from someone before him; oral transmission is the defining feature of these pieces. For another, it is an adaptation of Madagascar's best-known legend (which he may not directly know). In the legend, Ranoro, a water-princess from the sea, comes on land and marries a mortal. Her one condition is that her origin must be kept secret. When her husband breaks her taboo, she instantly returns under water, but by leaving her children behind, she becomes the ancestral mother of a clan. Rather like the figure of Liberty in the United States or Marianne in France, the female body of Ranoro is a political symbol. She comes from a family whose members cannot be seen or mentioned. Her watery origin symbolizes her foreignness. Even the euphemism 'salt', which would remind a hearer of the sea, cannot be spoken. Because she dies in water, Ranoro has no tomb, hence no family who might make demands on her husband.[28] In the legend, losing a wife is the man's tragedy. In Mohamed el Anrif's adaptation to the folktale genre, the husband accepts the king's rejection of her. The essential remodeling is to adapt the search for a wife — the main plot line of so many Indo-European folktales — to Mayotte's values: to transform it into a warning against marrying outside your social group. The plain style contrasts with the reverent attitude of the legend, yet the taboo has the same force as before, because marriage is the heart of all the social politics.

Ranoro (taking her as an 'original') undergoes many transformations in Southwest Indian Ocean folklore. It's less easy to determine the attitude in a piece told by Mansour Kamardine, of the village of Sada. A man catches an octopus thinking to dry it, but secretly it cooks and cleans for him. Hiding under the bed, he discovers the secret and insists on marrying this woman. But one day in an argument, he mentions

her octopus nature, and instantly she leaves for the water in a huff.[29] Obviously a husband isn't allowed to cast aspersions on his in-laws, but the difference of species already has tipped off the audience. Is the octopus a parody of that revered ancestor from long ago? 'Parody [says Herbert Lindenberger, about European operas, of all things] stresses the continuity of a tradition at the same time that it deflates earlier works within the tradition'.[30] Both stories deflate Madagascar's nostalgia and reverence for ancestors into Mayotte's favorite concern about the dangers and contradictions in marriage. As one reads more and more tales collected by Claude Allibert, parody and kindred remodelings are seen to constitute tradition in this society.

Parody is obviously mocking when El Hadad Mohamed reworks the Indian fable of The Ungrateful Snake Returned to Captivity. An ugly, hairy giant is released by a poor fisherman from a copper pot he has accidentally landed. The witty giant shouts to his captor, 'Choose how you're going to die', and explains his threat: 'In my first year of prison, I promised bags of diamonds to whoever would let me out. Second year, I promised seven houses with servants, but nobody let me out. So this year I promised that whoever opened the pot would die. Unlucky you'. In ancient versions of the fable, another character advises the man to put the creature back into captivity, but in Mayotte the fisherman does it alone: 'I accept, but I have to say, I don't believe you were in that pot, because how could you, so big and fat, have done that? Not even your foot could have got in there'. The giant falls for the trick and goes back into the pot. The softhearted fisherman lets him out only when he pleads. Since that day, he is the richest man in the world — an inexplicable ending, but a cute one. He must have got those diamonds.[31]

At first an outsider won't grasp a local person's attitude towards the authority figures in Sharifuddin Emile Nizari's tale of a father and his two sons, but the mockery of Islamic education makes for a well-told story with a rapid-fire ending and justifies translating it in full.

> Magandja took his two sons to enroll them in the Qur'an school. The father entrusted them to the fundi, because the boys couldn't go there every day and return next day. The elder studied bravely and willingly, but his little brother refused to make the smallest effort. When he left school, the big one learned his lessons while the little one played with his friends. After three or four months, the older one said to his

father, "If you come and get us, you have to take me, because I know lots of things and my brother doesn't know anything!"

After they spent many years in school, the boys were again visited by their father. He thought now his sons had a good education. He said to the master, "I've come to get my sons, but I'm leaving one of them with you". The *fundi* thought [it over] and said, "Take the little one". But the father wanted the bigger one. After a long discussion the *fundi* agreed that the father would take the older one. When the father and the older one had left, the *fundi* said, "Now I'm going to do everything I can to educate you".

The older one, after spending two or three weeks with his father, said to him, "I want to find a way to have money". "What, son?" "I want to change into a billygoat, we'll go from village to village and you'll sell me. But you have to be careful not to sell me if we get near my *fundi*." The father agreed and they started out.

They came to a village. As soon as the father said he was selling his goat, a man bought it for a lot of money. The father took the money and left. Hardly had he gone before the goat escaped from his buyer. Just as he reached the other end of the village, he turned back into a man and followed his father. Then they were near a village. The boy turned into a goat again. But the father met his son's *fundi* at the entry to the village. He bought the animal. He took it home and told his little pupil to take the knife and kill the goat. But as the boy knew that goat was his big brother, he hid the knife. The *fundi* told him to come and hold the goat, and he went looking for the knife himself. As soon as the *fundi* went into the house, his pupil let the animal go. When he was far off, the boy said to his *fundi* that the animal had run away.

The master went out of the house and chased the animal. When he was close to catching him, the animal transformed into a little bird and turned the master into a sparrowhawk. When the sparrowhawk wanted to grab the bird, it turned into a piece of money and fell into a pocket of a man there. The sparrowhawk turned into a man and told the man with the coin in his pocket to give it to him. The other one answered, "You didn't give me anything". "Lean down a little and shake your pocket". As soon as he leaned over the coin fell out. The *fundi* bowed and put out his hand to take it. But it turned into a grain of rice, and the *fundi* into a chicken wanting to eat the rice. Before it had time to eat, the grain turned into a wild cat and ate the chicken.

After that day, people knew the pupil can be smarter than the master.[32]

No doubt Maître Allibert was listening.

Parody points to the capacity for plural meaning that Mayotte inherited from its plural ancestors. From Madagascar's storytelling tradition, it learned how to renegotiate culture through irony. Only a generation after the French conquest (1896), local storytellers in Madagascar ridiculed style and structure in a parody myth about how Europeans were inflicted on the Malagasy for a broken taboo. At the beginning God has already withdrawn from earth, and the Malagasy are praying to him for a deity to live with them. In answer they receive a sealed chest which they must not open; 'OTHERWISE BIG TROUBLE WILL COME TO YOU'. They violate the prohibition and release the first European. Thenceforward they are punished by the presence of Europeans among them — more capable and clever, better educated, and never to leave.[33] Making satiric use of mythic motifs — the taboo on looking into a box, and the release of troubles when a forbidden casket is opened — the piece is an image of the style of myth. It honors and twits tradition at the same time; through parody it invents a new genre, the pseudo-myth.

Fairy Tale in Parody

Serious, satiric, and playful imitation are all present when our friend Mohamed El Anrif narrates a Hansel-and-Gretel-like tale, a version of the ubiquitous cycle The Children and the Ogre (no. 15 in Grimm). He says, it's the story of a brother and his sister, seemingly orphaned, she pregnant. They go out to gather some of the delicious legume *ambatry* and come upon a trove of eggs under a tree. Like all pregnant women, the sister had a keen interest in those eggs. Although she wants them all, at first they take just one, wondering, 'WHOSE ARE THESE?' She puts a batch of them into her basket and covers them with *ambatry* (secrecy rules). As the two flee away, they meet the owner of the eggs, a frightening *djinn*, who interrogates them: 'WHERE ARE YOU COMING FROM, YOU HUMANS?' They already have the object of their search, but the boy also has a magic drum, which forces the *djinn* to dance while the boy sings his answer and the girl trembles. They get out of there and run home, where the girl eats all the eggs raw. The narrator excuses her *faux pas*: that's an action she isn't responsible for, a pregnant woman's act is involuntary. She confesses when her brother comes home. They repeat the theft and the gourmandizing the next day, but on the third

day, she goes alone (unaccompanied by scary movie music), her brother following behind. When the angry *djinn* threatens them, the brother comes out and vanquishes the *djinn* by beating the drum. They escape and resume their domesticity.[34]

The plot — children undergoing dangers, helped by a magic object — is adapted to conflicting values. Is it a touch of Islam, or mere folktale convention, or both, that to survive, human beings require more than their own strength? We are to identify with a thieving boy and girl who escape, not through commendable behavior, but only by way of the magic drum the boy has been carrying all along. Well, where did he get that drum? (A tale in the next chapter gives the answer.) Is Mohamed el Anrif's wisecrack about a pregnant woman's desires bringing trouble a clue to the attitude of his piece, or just a wink at his audience? Different values are juxtaposed.

Theoretical, formal patterns like the making and breaking of friendship reside half-recalled in the memory of tellers and audiences. Folklorists use them to handle the huge numbers of texts they have assembled. One such, early in the Stalin era, was the Russian formalist Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp. Wanting nothing to do with live storytellers or any obscure African island, concentrating on his texts of Russian tales, Propp discovered an interesting three-part sequence. Firstly, the hero is tested. Secondly, he reacts appropriately, and thirdly, he is provided with a magical agent, like that drum. Though it's missing from Mohamed el Anrif's brother-and-sister tale, the 'donor sequence' is essential in many tales. Take a story collected by Noël Gueunier. Two young wives seeking a cure for barrenness (which can lose them a husband) seek help at the house of an ancient woman, the donor. Her door will open only if she speaks a magic formula: 'If you are human children, may the door open! If you are spirit (*lolo*) children, may it stay tight shut!' That is their first test; the door does open. They then light her fire (common courtesy getting them past another test), and she rewards them by providing magic rice in a magic pot, with magic meat. Later both get pregnant.[35] It's possible to read an entire piece as being organized around Propp's donor sequence.

The Maiden in Mayotte

An example is a tale widely told tale in Europe and North Africa, The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers.[36] Typically, the young heroine is isolated, separated from her seven or twelve brothers; she must find them after they have been transformed into ravens or animals. Through most of the plot, her test is to keep silent, which doesn't prevent her getting a royal husband. What gets her through the test is submissiveness to wrongful accusation, exile, and almost death. At the end the family is reunited. In real-life Mayotte, keeping a family together is challenged by the potential conflict between a mother's ownership of her house and a father's authority outside the home. The image of a woman respected for keeping silent ought also to be popular, but only one version has been collected, from Bwanali Sanda (not to be confused with Bwanali Said).

At the outset, he says, the girl is orphaned. The audience will understand that she therefore requires a husband, and any marriage arrangement would have to be made by her brothers. So they set out.

> Once there lived a family made of the father, the mother, and seven children, the last a girl. One day after their parents' death, they decided to go visit some villages.

The maiden is offstage. They meet a man (not found in European versions of the tale) who lays on the boys the kind of interdiction they ought to have got from their dead father.

> On the way they met a man who asked them where they were going. Then he added, "Boys, you will find a river next to the forest, and the water from that river is sacred. That means no one has the right to drink it." The children kept going. When they got to the river, one of them stayed deaf to the old man's advice and drank. He was instantly transformed into a sheep. They continued on their way, and when they got to a village, they saw an old lady relieving herself. The other five boys broke out laughing and were immediately transformed to stones.

They were being tested; they have failed; they are punished. But the sheep, as the remaining male, retains responsibility for her.

> The only ones left were the girl and the sheep. They went into an old woman's house; she went to the king's place to report their presence.

This character, who profits by carrying news to the king, is the first of many old-lady messengers, or tale-bearers, we meet in Mahorais tales. Her speaking is crucial. The girl is silent — not forbidden to speak but enhancing her mystery by keeping her transformed brother's secret.

> The king came to get the girl and took him back to his place, with the sheep. The girl said not a word. The sovereign married her but she stayed mute. The sheep ate everything the girl ate.
>
> A few years later, the king and the girl had a baby. [The narrator reminds his hearer,] Everybody in the village said that the king's wife was mute. Their son grew up.

Now the story has a self-declared hero.

> He decided to do something to make his mother speak. He tied himself up by the neck, climbed a tree, and let himself hang at the end of the rope.

That does it. The threat of losing the last member of her family makes his mother speak at last.

Only now does the maiden, a wife at last, break her silence; she speaks from her maternal role to save her son and maintain family.

> "I had six brothers, five got transformed into stones and the sixth is a sheep. If you died that would be awful for me!" said the baby's mother.

But keeping the hero in the foreground, Bwanali Said goes into another donor sequence. The old-lady-magician-donor tests the boy; by imitating his mother's silence, he is provided with a magic object, which will enable him to get his reward, and her secret, which gives him power over her.

> The boy decided to go find the old woman's place, where his uncles had been turned to stone. The woman did all her wonders, but the boy didn't laugh. The old woman told him to live with her. She taught him what had to be done to transform people to stone and to human beings. Then she showed him a calabash where her soul was. "If that gets broken, I will die", she said.
>
> A few days later the old woman went out into the countryside. The boy broke the calabash and the old woman died. Then he transformed all the stones into human beings. The little prince went back to the house with all his uncles.

> The men could be recognized by the marks they had on their thumbs before dying. The king's wife was overjoyed. She cried, walked up and down, said to the villagers to come congratulate her because her brothers were resuscitated and were human beings again. "Oh! Such joy in the village that day!"[37]

Yes, the male hero has taken over, but for him to be saved, the woman had to break silence. Here, as in the 'women's tales' in chapter 3, a woman's speaking, even if delayed, is a crucial assertion of the importance of her sex and models the act of a female storyteller.

How did Bwanali Sanda learn The Maiden's tale? Often, especially in Madagascar, storytellers say they are closely following or copying a performance they heard, but we can't ask him to identify his teachers. His version conforms to the tale type; he didn't make it up. Folktales in Mayotte generally come from Bantu African, Arab, Malagasy, or European traditions, which don't seem to know the maiden.[38] We are lucky to have his name attached to this unique text; many of this region's storytellers have been kept invisible and anonymous.

The Swallowing Cock

The plain style of Allibert's translations reveals plain style in his narrators, which seems to reflect being interviewed. The trilingual, never loquacious Mohamed el Anrif uses a plain Shimaore to narrate a swallowing-monster tale. Does his one-sentence, one-image style seem plain because he's translating from another of his languages?

> A king had a yard with many hens. There was one of them he loved a lot. She had chicks behind her, future cocks and hens. A young cock, when he saw those chicks, he ate the He ate all the chicks in the village. The villagers came to complain to the king. The king told them, "Everything is mine, you're mine, your hens are mine, the cock is mine. You have nothing to say!"
>
> The cock grew up and began eating the hens of the village. People complained, told the king everything was his, but he had to think things over. The king answered, "It's all mine!"
>
> The cock got to be as big as an ox. He ate the goats. He grew some more and ate the oxen. The king always answered the same thing. The cock became a monster, went into one house and devoured a little boy, left that house and ate the neighbor's baby. The parents discovered

their baby was gone and went to the king. They suspected the monster was next going to eat people. The king gave the same answer.

The monster attacked the men. It ate all the men. Only the king was left, and the monster ate him. Nothing was left in the village. The monster could eat forty or fifty people.

The swallowing monster is well known, always a male though seldom a literal cock. Many people know about a culture hero who rescues numerous victims from the monster's belly.[39] Historians love this monster so much that they want him to be real. François Martin, who spent 1665 to 1668 in Madagascar, reported that some French colonists had seen a four-headed snake. People of the 1830s said that in early times, a monstrous snake encircled large villages, some containing as many as three hundred families, and bit them with its seven-forked tongue. The good prince Dérafif was said to have killed it with a huge weapon and scattered pieces of its body all over the country. A hundred years ago, the monster's cave and swimming pool could still be seen at Tanifotsy. That proved these events really happened.[40]

A few years later, Malagasy people asserted that the seven-headed snake came out of the intestines of dead chiefs. When it had grown to adulthood, they said, it was large enough to encircle a village and eat all the contents. Then it would plant its tail in the ground, stand straight up, and disappear, either into the sky or into a deep lake such as Tritriva. The variant forms of this popular legend attest to the monster's tremendous vitality; contending interests can all make symbolic use of him.[41] For some, the legendary hero Darafify (same name, another form) personifies the Arab immigrants to Madagascar. Famous for his gift of prophecy, after landing at Vohémar in the northeast, he leaves traces of his travels all along the coast. At Sakaleona he leaves dishes and utensils on a little hill. In an early effort at marketing Malagasy folk art, the colonist Alfred Voyard shipped one of his relics to France.[42] Having heard or read all this, I once felt obliged to visit the restaurant named Darafify, near Toamasina on the east coast. No monster showed up; dinner was delicious; but dining as a *vazaha* (foreigner), I suppose that despite my insignificant stature, I became a swallowing monster. As for the tales, one critic calls them 'a transparent criticism of the abuse of power', and so indeed they must appear when one man releases the victims from the swallower's belly and makes them his, well, servants,

thus founding a two-class system all too familiar in Madagascar's history.[43]

Back to Mohamed el Anrif's story:

> While it was eating the people, it didn't see one old woman with her son, twenty or twenty-five years old. They left the village to hide.
>
> The boy went to the smith to get a sword made. The old woman advised her son not to go fight the monster. The boy did go. He asked his mother for a cake, and left. A few days later, he went to find the seven-headed monster.

The necessary scene of struggle between hero and villain turns the monster adversary into a donor.

> The monster was asleep at the foot of a huge tree. The boy climbed a branch and tickled the monster from above with his sword, under its ear. He cut off one head. He came down and got out of the way. The monster wanted to get revenge and had another head cut off. The monster came up again and had his third, fourth, fifth, and sixth heads cut off. The monster was worn out and fainted. He said, "Kill me!" and the boy refused to cut the seventh head. The boy would agree if the monster revealed his secret. The monster told him to cut off his little finger, hang it from a tree, heat it up and it would turn black. He told him, "You make a big *couscous*, you set a certain day, and you cut the finger to make the people come out." The boy cut the finger; everybody came out and rushed to the *couscous* pot and ate.

Now a donor sequence will test the suitor, to ready him for high position. Mohamed el Anrif brings in another fowl, who can't keep a secret but speeds the tale to its end.

> The king told the people of the village that whoever killed the monster would marry his daughter. The boy was with his mother. All the village boys said it was them. The king said whoever would sit on the harpoon without getting pricked would have killed the monster. No one was up to it. The boy went into the village and found an old woman, and told her not to say he was the one who killed the monster. He covered himself with charcoal and hid in that woman's house. But that woman had a cock who had heard it all. The king made an inquest. One day, the cock sang, "Cocohico! The boy is in the old woman's house!" They seized the boy, took him to the king and he got married to the daughter.[44]

Probably the narrator learned his plain, unselfconscious style from a predecessor. His text suggests he was no schoolboy. No Hemingway could write more plainly than he speaks.

Sparrow as Doctor Know-All

Another experienced-sounding narrator, Maulida Isufa, tells a fine version of Doctor Know-All. This is the tale of a self-mocking charmer (no. 98 in Grimm), whose ingenious victory over authority has had special appeal to African, Caribbean, and African American hearers. It is suitable to matrilocal Mayotte for another reason: it declares that a woman. even symbolized as an insect like the *valala* of Madagascar, is not to be separated from her house.

> Sparrow was a poor man, smart, with a wife called *Valala*, Locust. One day as they had nothing to eat, they moved to a different place. When they got to a new town, they went up to the royal palace. Just then the king and his wife were out walking on the road. Suddenly the king's ring fell to the ground and a cock going by swallowed it. Well, Sparrow saw the cock swallow the ring. The next day, the king called everybody together to ask if anyone had seen the ring. Obviously nobody knew except Sparrow. It was up to Sparrow to go before the king. He told the king to gather all the people and animals together and to give him a stick and a chair to sit in. In five minutes the square was full of animals and people. Every time someone passed close to Sparrow, he touched him with his stick and said, "It was you, wasn't it?" When it was the animals' turn, he touched the cock and told the men to kill it. They found the ring inside the cock. The king took Sparrow to be a magician and gave him thirty bags of rice. When he got home with the bags, Sparrow told his wife to get ready to leave, but Locust refused.

Maulida Isufa remembers the rule with trickster stories: tell them in strings.

> Another day, a man stole the king's treasure; the king quickly called Sparrow. The rascal begged the chief to give him a day to think. As the thief was afraid that Sparrow-the-magician found him out, he went to Sparrow that evening and said, "Don't go telling the king I was the one who stole the treasure, and I'll give it back without a penny missing."As Sparrow was clever, he told him, "I already knew it was you, and if you hadn't come to see me, I'd have denounced you to the king." Sparrow got up early and went to take the treasure to the king.

The king had him offered a lot of food. Back home, Sparrow told his wife to leave that town, because he was afraid he couldn't answer the question the third time. He was afraid the king would have his head cut off. But Locust refused.

From being a clever peasant, Sparrow turns into Ali Baba.

Following day, some men stole all the king's treasure and goods. The king called Sparrow and asked him who stole it. Sparrow, very worried, asked for a delay of forty days to answer. He bought forty chickens and gave them to his wife. Well, there were forty of the robbers.

The first day, Locust cooked a chicken. The head robber sent one of his accomplices to listen to what Sparrow was saying. The accomplice, arriving in front of the door, heard Sparrow, eating his first chicken, say these words: "That's the first one out of the forty!" The thief, very worried, thought Sparrow was talking about him, and rushed back to his chief to tell him what he'd heard. The second day, the chief sent another man to Sparrow, to listen if he was talking about them. That night he arrived in front of the door and he heard Sparrow say, while eating his second chicken, "That's the second one of the forty!" The thief hurried to go tell the chief what he'd heard. And every night the chief sent another thief. The night of the fortieth day, the chief went himself and hid behind the door and heard Sparrow say this as he was eating: "There's the last, the head of the forty!" Then the chief was convinced Sparrow was talking about them. At night they went to apologize in front of Sparrow, saying they were going to give back the treasure. The next day the king got back all his goods.

To escape the king's questions, Sparrow disguises himself in rags, like a poor farmer, and starts throwing stones at birds. Maulida Isufa adds punning (untranslatable) to his other skills.

One day the king and his ministers got together to find a way of killing Sparrow. Just then a sparrow and a locust came into the room. The king caught them and put them under a plate. He called Sparrow and said, "If you manage to guess what's under that plate, I'll give you all my fortune, but if you don't, I'll have your head cut off!" Sparrow, not knowing what to answer, said, "If it wasn't for Locust, Sparrow would not be caught today!" Then everybody applauded that good answer. He explained then that his wife was the cause of what had happened. As he was poor, the king gave him his place. Sparrow then said to Locust, "Let's leave town!", but Locust refused.[45]

If not for Locust, who identifies herself with her house, Sparrow would have flown away. That stubborn wife cannot be moved, as if she were a human Bwé Foro. A wife is almost identical with her house.[46]

Being a narrator means making your own choices about what to offer and how closely to imitate your source. Bwanali Said knows very well how to string trickster episodes together. Mahamudu Abiamri makes an attempt to join two tales, but the result is unsatisfying.[47] Musbahu Abderhamani and Abdourahmane Hamada have absorbed some of the Arabian Nights, whether from reading or hearing.[48] Every one of their sixty-seven performances, however we evaluate it, is a response to its particular interpersonal situation, using plots and characters from the past to allude to the present.

Remodeling the Dilemma

In Africa, the dilemma tale is an interactive genre that encourages the audience to guess out loud its response to the story. The narrator takes the plot to an unresolvable point; then the hearers must chime in to determine how it will end. (It took Internet sages a while to invent the interactive.) They are expected to attribute thoughts and desires to the characters, and to discuss and evaluate their behavior. The genre is not much known in Europe, where audiences remained better behaved until the arrival of rock and roll, but in Africa it heightens the close relation between narrator and audience. The genre did travel to the Indian Ocean but didn't sink deep. In one Malagasy example, three men meet at a crossroads and vow to learn shooting, woodworking, and thievery. They go off to acquire their skills, and when they meet again, they see a *drongo* bird laying eggs. One shoots a single egg, the second steals the rest but breaks one, and the third repairs the egg. Hearers are to decide which man is the cleverest.[49]

Maanli Fayadhinddine told M. Allibert one unresolved tale that looks like an adaptation to Mayotte's marriage customs. Four brothers are suitors of the same girl but don't know it. Her father does know it, and profits from the knowledge by playing trickster.

> One Monday morning, the eldest went to the girl's parents to ask for her in marriage. That was Sumbui. The parents told him to get ready first and come back on the fifth day. Bunku went next. The parents told

> him to come back on the fourth day. Mladjé got there; he was told to come back on the third day (that is, in three days). As for Laul, he had to come back the second day, the next day.

Now the narrator, or his source, stages a farcical scene. The four travel separately and come in together. Each one sat down on a chair and lowered his head, so as not to see the others' faces. The father offers his daughter to the one who can come back from a long trip with 'something interesting and necessary'. Departing separately, they return with good stuff: a resuscitating perfume, a flying carpet, a mirror showing what's happening far away, and a magic protective ring. Each one keeps his hand under his shirt, because they didn't want to show the others what they'd got. Then the one with the mirror said, 'Come and look! The mirror shows the girl is dead!' Time to cooperate: they use the carpet to transport them, the ring to protect them from a band of enemies, and the perfume to bring her back to life. The narrator catches not his audience, but the girl's father in the dilemma. The father could not choose among them, and the girl remained with no fiancé. The four brothers end as separate as they began.[50] Who is the trickster here, the father for breaking contract? The narrator, for that skillful twist? The person he learned the story from? Is none of the suitors of proper descent? Creolization loves to blend genres.

'Tradition is the creation of the future out of the past'

Henry Glassie's epigram points to Claude Allibert's motive for collecting folktales.[51] What would they tell him about Mayotte's early days? The African tricksters and the swallower, the Indian seven-headed monster, the creature (woman, *djinn*) whose name must be concealed, the messenger bird who transforms itself, the cow as a mother symbol, the self-created hero — all are relics and survivors of the corpus of narratives (collected and uncollected) he calls mythology. Convincingly he argues that the various swallowers in Mahorais narratives are a blend of the African swallowing monster, the seven-headed snake from India, and the dragons people saw on Chinese porcelain. 'The seven-headed snake becomes a seven-headed cock, and the Bantu trickster Sungura is baptized Bwanawasi… under the Perso-Swahili influence of the Shirazi Uba-Nawas'.[52] A crucial moment for storytelling, and for the island's

social structure, came when Persian-style patriliny and patrilocality was introduced to the matriliny and matrilocality practiced by the Bantu-Malay population. Whether the immigrants in the thirteenth century were greeted with celebrations or fear, whether Islam was forcibly imposed or welcomed, the confrontation of dissimilar languages and traditions caused languages and narratives to mix and hybridize. Cultural mixing became normal practice of the contributing cultures: Bantu African, Swahili, 'Indo-Aryan', the supposedly Persian Shirazi, and whatever elusive settlers had come before them. M. Allibert's deep searches into Mayotte's past lead to the mildest possible conclusion about cultural mixing: 'It seems that diverse influences have piled up to form the mythology of the islands and archipelago of the western Indian Ocean'.[53]

Diverse influences show Mayotte to be a mixed society from the beginning. Its history is an example of creolization, the process whereby people in situations of unequal power renegotiate their cultures and thereby create new folklore. In the Southwest Indian Ocean islands as in the Caribbean, songs, stories, and displays were created from 'violent, fragmented, and disjunct pasts'.[54] Since new stories and songs continue to be created, it's ironic that our three collections are such excellent documents of the mixing in Mayotte's village life. The nostalgic picture of such a past is drawn by a writer from Grande Comore.

> As soon as a child is able to understand the language, his/her grandmother teaches him/her folktales, taboos, and riddles. Generally tales and riddles are said on nights of the full moon. She recites tales and poses riddles, and the children come around her to listen. They are very attentive to the tales.[55]

The picture is a favorite memory, whether accurate or not, of western-educated African diplomats. What Claude Allibert's fifty-three narrators do not do is to tell him accounts of spirit possession, which is a frequent and important experience for people in Mayotte.[56] Obviously they and he agreed on what sort of story he was looking for. Usually imitating or recalling someone else's performance, they show deep attachment to the land and its history; they offer him old trickster stories, interpretable as social criticism; sometimes they offer serious, playful, or satiric pieces without discoverable sources — Mayotte originals. Often they are alluding to the subordinated status of their island.[57] To me their

narratives seem to say more about 1970s Mayotte than about its history. Analogously in Mauritius, Patrick Eisenlohr finds the life stories of Hindus to be bringing the past to their present, 'building relationships of experienced closeness and distance between remembered events and places and the narrator's self'.[58] In Madagascar, anthropologist Philippe Beaujard finds Tanala narrators continually sounding the theme of conflict between those who claim to have sprung from the soil (*tompontany*) and nobles who assert power over them and claim their land. Narrative performances are ideological thrusts.[59] Paul Ottino traces this technique far back into the Malayo-Polynesian secret languages of Madagascar's remote past, and the well-recognized habit, in Malagasy oral literature, of alluding to the unspoken.[60] So often, M. Allibert's informants — the students anyway — seem to be performing for their interviewer, alluding to their relationship to him. As he listens, the thrusts are gentler, but a similar conflict is behind their stories. Stories in the following chapters ask to be read as alluding to other, untold stories.

Endnotes

1 Claude Allibert, *Contes mahorais* (Paris: Académie des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, 1977), p. 113. 'Origin of place-name' is catalogued as Motif A1617 in Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature. a Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955–58). Subsequent notes throughout this book refer to Thompson's index.

2 Lee Haring, 'Performing for the Interviewer: A Study of the Structure of Context'. *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 36.4 (1972): 383–98.

3 M. Allibert collected a good many other place legends, which treat the ownership issue indirectly: about the origin of a tree name (p. 42), or of natural features (pp. 110–11, 112, 117–18), the fatal power of a cemetery (p. 122), and the fear of foreigners (pp. 78–79).

4 *Contes mahorais*, p. 127. Motifs: F703, Lands with extraordinary names; J2287, Belief that island may be towed by ships to new location; D1812.3.3, Future revealed in dream.

5 *Contes mahorais*, p. 34. Motif Q552.3.3, Drought as punishment.

6 *Contes mahorais*, pp. 104–05.

7 *Contes mahorais*, p. 109. *Démon* may be translating the Kibushi word *kaka*, or it may designate some other hostile being. Motifs: W125, Gluttony; Q325, Disobedience punished.

8 Sophie Blanchy, 'Proverbes Mahorais', *ASEMI* 12, 3–4 (1981), 109–32 (p. 113).

9 *Contes mahorais*, p. 14. Motifs: T100, Marriage; C520, Tabu: touching ground; C984.3, Flood because of broken tabu; reversal of D452.3.1, Transformation: sand to rice; A1617, Origin of place name; C430, Name tabu.

10 *Contes mahorais*, p. x.

11 Ibid., pp. 69–70.

12 Ibid., p. 6.

13 Noël Gueunier and Madjidhoubi Saïd, *Contes comoriens en dialecte malgache de l'île de Mayotte. La Quête de la sagesse* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 2011), p. 106, n. 1. Richard F. Burton, trans. *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night, a Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights Entertainments* (N. p., n. d.), 4:261–65. Hasan El-Shamy, *Folktales of Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 219–20. Inea Bushnaq, trans. *Arab Folktales* (New York: Pantheon, 1986), p. 273. Abdallah Daoud and Amina Kassim Bashrahii, *Zamani. Hale za shikomori. Hadisi za kikomori* (Moroni: CNDRS, 1983), p. 109.

14 It is found in Émile Birkeli, 'Folklore sakalava recueilli dans la région de Morondava', *Bulletin de l'Académie Malgache*, 6 (1922–1923), 185–417 (pp. 240–45, 258–61); L[ars] Dahle and John Sims, *Anganon'ny Ntaolo'* (Tananarive: Trano Printy Loterana,1971), pp. 52–53; Charles Renel, *Contes de Madagascar* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1910), 1: 77–81 and 2: 265–67. Mayotte is part of Madagascar's large culture area.

15 *Contes mahorais*, pp. 25–27. Motifs: K139, Other worthless animals sold; K1827, Disguise as holy man; K525.1, Substituted object left in bed while victim escapes; K1410, Dupe's goods destroyed; F981.3, Animals killed by trickster's breaking wind; Q583, Fitting bodily injury as punishment; K842, Dupe persuaded to take prisoner's place in sack; killed; K843, Dupes persuaded to be drowned in order to get riches. In several Malagasy stories as in this one, the drowning trick is placed at the end and leads to motif

L161, Lowly hero marries princess. That last trick, persuading a dupe to be put into a sack and thrown into the sea, is told in eastern and western Europe, India, Indonesia (did it migrate from there, with the earliest settlers to Madagascar?) and all over Africa. It is also told by both Native Americans and Black people in the United States. M. Allibert heard it as an independent story from Hamada Sufu (pp. 115–16). Like Bwanali Said, Hamada Sufu credits Bwanawasi with playing off the imaginary king of the sea against the real king of the village. The heart of their method is to use traditional material as a critical perspective on the power relations in which they live. Motif K842 forms part of types ATU1525A, ATU1535, and ATU1737 in Hans-Jörg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography*, FF Communications no. 285 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 2004). This work, the standard reference for the folktale, is referred to in subsequent notes throughout this book.

16 Denise Paulme, *La Statue du commandeur: essais d'ethnologie* (Paris: Le Sycomore, 1984), pp. 13–54.

17 The classic American version is Joel Chandler Harris, *Nights with Uncle Remus: Myths and Legends of the Old Plantation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1883), pp. 23–25. Type ATU175, The Tarbaby and the Rabbit.

18 *Contes mahorais*, pp. 31–33. This is a cognate of a tale I collected in Mauritius (*Stars and Keys: Folktales and Creolization in the Indian Ocean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), pp. 85–90). Trickster's refusal to help dig a well was told to me in Kenya. The capture by tarbaby is part of tales 2.3.103 (Sakalava) and 3.2.175 in my *Malagasy Tale Index*. Motifs: D1840, Capture by deception; K741, Capture by tarbaby (= ATU175, The Tarbaby and the Rabbit). The unusually lively dialogue between tortoise and king in this version marks the teller's skill.

19 Paulme, *Statue*, p. 97. Dell Hymes expounds the dialectic idea in 'Folklore's Nature and the Sun's Myth', *Journal of American Folklore*, 88, 350 (1975), 346–69.

20 *Contes mahorais*, pp. 1–2. This is a version of ATU2034C, Lending and Repaying: Progressively Better Bargain. The progressively lucky bargains (motif N421.1) dominate several Malagasy tales with different characters, without the trickster frame (*Malagasy Tale Index*, pp. 155–56).

21 *Contes mahorais*, pp. 35–36. The animal translated as Hedgehog is the Malagasy tenrec (*trandraka*), an animal almost as big as hare. Motifs: K359.2, Thief beguiles guardian of goods by assuming equivocal name; K475, Cheating through equivocation. The symmetrical counteractions of this pair appear to be modeled on Malagasy stories about the inseparable

tricksters Ikotofetsy and Imahaka (*Stars and Keys*, pp. 117–33). When Hare and Hedgehog make and break friendship, they are acting out a durable narrative template that shapes many African tales. A trickster and dupe, whom any audience will recognize as real-life enemies, make a contract with each other for their common benefit. Predictably, trickster betrays his partner's trust and the friendship falls apart. I recorded one case of it in Kenya, then recognized it in an African-derived story, collected by one of my students from a church friend of Jamaican background (Alan Dundes, 'The Making and Breaking of Friendship as a Structural Frame in African Folk Tales', in *Structural Analysis of Oral Tradition*, ed. Pierre Maranda and Elli Köngäs Maranda (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), pp. 171–85; Lee Haring, 'A Characteristic African Folktale Pattern', in *African Folklore*, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), pp. 165–79). The pattern is not aesthetically neutral: it carries a poignant message about the precariousness of interdependence. As T. W. Adorno observed, the truth content in art 'speaks primarily through the form rather than through themes or opinions'. Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought: Theodor W. Adorno* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), pp. 84–85.

22 Maurice Fontoynont, and Raomandahy, 'La grande Comore', *Mémoires de l'Académie Malgache* (1937), pp. 76–77. Motifs: K890, Dupe tricked into killing himself; G523, Ogre deceived into stabbing himself.

23 Storytellers don't rigorously distinguish a *djinn* from a *lolo* or a *dyab*. A *djinn* from the Islamic point of view is 'an alternative species of being'. All three are regarded as more or less fictional, in contrast to the real spirits that often arise in people. Michael Lambek, *Island in the Stream: An Ethnographic History of Mayotte* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), p. 152.

24 A less cynical tale featuring the advice to 'Consider the end' was collected a century ago among Sakalava, in northwest Madagascar: André Dandouau, *Contes populaires des sakalava et des tsimihety de la région d'Analalava*, Publications de la Faculté des Lettres d'Alger (Algiers, 1922), pp. 347–56. Many Mahorais and their tales have Sakalava ancestors.

25 *Contes mahorais*, pp. 49–50. Motifs: F271.5, Fairies clear land; J21.1, 'Consider the end.'

26 *Contes mahorais*, pp. 8–9. Motifs: D1030.1, Food supplied by magic; D431.3, Transformation, leaf to person; C31.2, Tabu: mentioning origin of supernatural wife; C952, Immediate return to other world because of broken tabu.

27 He probably chose his style in response to the interview situation. In the very different setting of western Oregon (U. S. A.), the anthropologist Melville Jacobs discovered the same style when he recorded and translated over a hundred narratives from Mrs. Victoria Howard, one of the last surviving speakers of the Clackamas Chinook language. 'She translated her dictations adeptly into English', he explains: 'Story dictations in a native language, and renderings in English by bilingual informants, display... compactness and brevity'. Melville Jacobs, *The Content and Style of an Oral Literature: Clakacamas Chinook Myths and Tales* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 266.

28 R. P. Callet, *Tantaran'ny andriana*, trans. G.-S. Chapus and E. Ratsimba (Antananarivo: Librairie de Madagascar, 1958), 1:573.

29 *Contes mahorais*, p. 134. A similar parody is in Noël J. Gueunier, *L'oiseau chagrin: contes comoriens en dialecte malgache de l'île de Mayotte*, compilers Noël J. Gueunier, and Madjidhoubi Said, trans. Noël J. Gueunier, illustrator Razafintsalama, Asie et monde insulindien (Paris: Peeters, 1994), pp. 66–77. Motif: C932, Loss of wife for breaking tabu. Mansour Kamardine, who appears in the documentary film 'Mayotte, le département abandonné de la France', by Sebastien Daguerressar, has served as Mayotte's representative in the French National Assembly..

30 Herbert Lindenberger, *Opera, the Extravagant Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 102. I am grateful to Rachel M. Brownstein for this reference. I discuss the topic in 'Parody and Imitation in Western Indian Ocean Oral Literature', *Journal of Folklore Research*, 29, 3 (1992), 199–224.

31 *Contes mahorais*, pp. 47–48. ATU155, The Ungrateful Snake Returned to Captivity.

32 *Contes mahorais*, pp. 96–97.

33 Dandouau, pp. 358–59. Motifs: C321, Tabu: looking into box; C915.1, Troubles escape when forbidden casket is opened.

34 *Contes mahorais*, pp. 4–5. Type ATU327, The Children and the Ogre, comprises this and dozens more tale types; it is a 'supertype'. Motifs: H1212.4, Quest assigned because of longings of pregnant woman; F359.1, Eggs stolen from fairies, an Indian motif; K772, Victim enticed into dancing, captured; D1415.2, Magic musical instrument causes person to dance; T571, Unreasonable demands of pregnant women.

35 Gueunier, *L'Oiseau*, pp. 2–19.

36 ATU451. Nos. 9 and 49 in Grimm.

37 *Contes mahorais*, pp. 120–21. Type ATU451, The Maiden Who Seeks Her Brothers. The ATU catalogue (pp. 267–68) shows how seldom this tale has been told in Africa or Madagascar. Motifs: C273, Tabu: drinking water; C960 and D510, Transformation by breaking tabu; D135, Transformation: man to sheep; C460, Laughing tabu; N711, King accidentally finds maiden and marries her; D758, Disenchantment by maintaining silence; H1194.0.1, Task: causing silent person to speak; H1194, Task: making person laugh; E711.2.1, Soul in gourd; H64, Recognition of disenchanted person by physical attributes.

38 Could tale type ATU451 have been brought from France? Only if Bwanali Sanda's version looked anything like, say, the thirty-six French versions carefully catalogued by Paul Delarue. It does not. Paul Delarue and Marie-Louise Tenèze, *Le conte populaire français: catalogue raisonné des versions de France* (Paris: G. P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1976–2002), 2: 129–40. The maiden's passivity can be seen in three related Grimm tales: The Twelve Brothers, The Seven Ravens, and The Six Swans.

39 Fictional versions come from Swahili traditions: George W. Bateman, *Zanzibar Tales Told by Natives of the East Coast of Africa* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1901), pp. 155–79; Jan Knappert, *Myths and Legends of the Swahili* (Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books, 1970), pp. 187–89.

40 Dandouau, pp. 380–85.

41 *Malagasy Tale Index*, pp. 131–35.

42 Dandouau, pp. 382–85.

43 Paul Ottino deftly uses the swallowing monster to explain the dynamic of creolization in Madagascar and the Comoros: 'Between the African coast, the Comoran archipelago and Madagascar, these Islamised people of Arab, Persian, even Indian origin, accompanied by Zanj Africans (themselves coming from the ensemble of the old coast of Azania from southern Somalia as far as the Mozambique of today), were to constitute, by the very extension of their religious, economic, and familial networks, a true bridge that facilitated the circulation of men, goods, and ideas, among them themes like that of the swallowing monster [so] widespread in Madagascar'. 'Le thème du monstre dévorant dans les domaines malgache et bantou', *ASEMI*, 8, 3–4 (1977), 219–51 (p. 247). A classic version: Renel 3: 59–62.

44 More or less ATU300, The Dragon-Slayer. Mohamed el Anrif stays close to a Betsimisaraka dragon-slayer tale recorded a century earlier, Renel 3: 140–42. Motifs: F911.6, All-swallowing monster; W151, Greed; B11.2.3.1,

Seven-headed dragon; B11.11, Fight with dragon; F913, Victims rescued from swallower's belly; C422.1, Tabu: revealing dragon-fighter's identity; H83, Rescue tokens; H1531, Spine test; L161, Lowly hero marries princess.

45 *Contes mahorais*, pp. 39–41. ATU1641, Doctor Know-All, is well known in mainland Africa. A sample is Robert Cancel, *Allegorical Speculation in an Oral Society: The Tabwa Narrative Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 184–90. Motifs: K1956, Sham wise man; N611.1, Criminal accidentally detected: 'that is the first' — sham wise man; N688, What is in the dish: Poor Crab.

46 Sophie Blanchy, *Maisons des femmes, cités des hommes. Filiation, âge et pouvoir à Ngazidja* (*Comores*) (Nanterre: Société d'Ethnologie, 2010), pp. 239–69.

47 *Contes mahorais*, pp. 82–85.

48 *Contes mahorais*, pp. 51–54, 57–61, 82–85.

49 Renel 3: 118–19. William R. Bascom, *African Dilemma Tales* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), p. 52. The dilemma tale, as known in Madagascar and Mayotte, comes closest to one tale type, The Four Skillful Brothers (ATU653), but the Indo-Eurocentric type classification fails to capture the genre because it leaves out the audience. Dilemma tales demonstrate that non-western people engage in discussions of moral problems that are as deep as anything dreamt of in your philosophy.

50 *Contes mahorais*, pp. 86–87.

51 Henry Glassie, 'Tradition', in Burt Feintuch, ed., *Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), p. 176.

52 *Contes mahorais*, pp. x-xi.

53 Claude Allibert, *Mayotte: plaque tournante et microcosme de l'océan indien occidental* (Paris: Éditions Anthropos, 1984), p. 207.

54 Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *An Anthropological Approach to the Afro-American Past: A Caribbean Perspective* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976), p. 302.

55 Djoumoi Ali M'madi, 'Transmission traditionnelle des savoirs et des savoir-faire à Ndzaoudze, M'Vouni', master's thesis (M'vouni, Grande Comore), 1989).

56 Michael Lambek, in *Human Spirits: A Cultural Account of Trance in Mayotte* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), makes it clear that Mahorais people classify their narratives and separate their genres.

57 I paraphrase Fredric Jameson: these fictional themes or characters 'are themselves simply so many allusions to a more basic ideological "sign" which would have been grasped instinctively by any contemporary reader but from which we are culturally and historically somewhat distanced' Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 200. Bridging that distance are the notes by our three collectors, which translate the symbolic language of verbal art into a language their readers will understand.

58 Patrick Eisenlohr, *Little India: Diaspora, Time, and Ethnolinguistic Belonging in Hindu Mauritius* (University of California Press, 2006), p. 142.

59 Philippe Beaujard, *Mythe et société à Madagascar* (*Tanala de l'Ikongo*)*: le chasseur d'oiseaux et la princesse du ciel* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1991), p. 421.

60 Paul Ottino, 'Un procédé littéraire malayo-polynésien: de l'ambigüité à la plurisignification', *L'Homme* 6, 4 (October-December 1966), 5–34. The British Protestant missionaries in the nineteenth century did the best they could to eliminate ambiguity and irony, with notable success (Lee Haring, 'Interpreters of Indian Ocean Tales', *Fabula* 44 (2003), 98–116). Translation changes everything.