

# FOLKTALES OF MAYOTTE, AN AFRICAN ISLAND

LEE HARING





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Lee Haring, *Folktales of Mayotte, an African Island*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0315>

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World Oral Literature Series, vol. 10 | ISSN: 2050-7933 (Print); 2054-362X (Online)

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-004-0

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-005-7

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-006-4

ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 978-1-80511-007-1

ISBN XML: 978-1-80511-009-5

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-010-1

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0315

Cover image: Mayotte (2016). Foto by Martine at <https://bit.ly/3odGEZL>.

Cover design by Margarita Louka

### 3. Giving an Account of Herself

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Fig. 11 Twentieth-century women. Photo by Jacquier-roux, CC BY-SA 4.0, Wikimedia Commons, [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/38/Mayotte\\_%287%29.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/38/Mayotte_%287%29.jpg)

How does a woman achieve recognition? Well before the tales in this book were collected and recorded, says a historian, '[w]omen play[ed] a more influential, even conspicuous role in public life [in Mayotte], for instance, than they [did] in the stricter Koranic paternalism of the other islands.'<sup>1</sup> In 1980s Grande Comore, perhaps also in Mayotte, women enjoyed 'particular respect and protection, as daughters — as sisters? — and as mothers, a deference sometimes justified by quotations from the Qur'an'.<sup>2</sup> Some achieve recognition by being artists of the word (some men do too). Before French TV invaded people's evening gatherings, an old lady in Kany Kely could draw on traditional narrative forms to dramatize the contradictions in male-dominated ideology. Maybe she still can. Noël Gueunier noticed older women enjoying a liberty of speaking about — well, delicate subjects. Sophie Blanchy found skilled *conteuses* commenting, through their stories, on the social system they live in. Her outstanding storytellers are women skilled in metaphor, irony, and ambiguity.<sup>3</sup> They understand that the aphorism of the American poet Kenneth Koch applies to them: 'There are a great many human

relationships and a great many situations inside other relationships in which there is no communication without disguise...'.<sup>4</sup> Koch, a master of irony, would have appreciated their ingenuity. By combining protection with disclosure, these storytellers become not legislators, but mediators of Mayotte's culture. If they are unacknowledged outside, they receive plenty of acknowledgment from their audiences. Some of their pieces give a symbolic account of the narrator herself.

The tone of their social criticism is not always playful.

### A Child Molester

Sometimes a girl in Wangani needs a tone subtler than parody. A bitter tale about child abuse reads like the sketch for a horror movie. A village teacher asks his pupils to bring him dry firewood from the forest every Monday and Thursday (not an exorbitant request: pupils of a Qur'an teacher are expected to serve him). In the forest they meet an old man, whose ceremonial dress of caftan, turban, and Arab-style fancy robe mirrors the suitor's disguise in *fille difficile* tales. From atop a rock he sings an incomprehensible song, directing them to answer in song and to dance (another clue to his identity: in a colony, pseudo-human beings who sing in a foreign tongue are all too familiar). Conventionally obedient, they comply; he comes down and dances with them, then pinches one boy. His big sister and then his elders refuse to believe that the old man keeps pinching the same boy, until someone in the village recognizes the children were deceived: 'THAT'S NO OLD MAN, IT'S A KAKA WANTING TO EAT YOU'. Aroused at last, the adults stop the children from going to the forest until the *kaka*, hungry by now, comes into the village. After Friday prayers, they all throw themselves on him and beat him to death.<sup>5</sup> In realistic detail, the young narrator, or her source, uses the *kaka* as a traditional symbol for allegorizing the relations of teacher and pupil, adult and child, *vazaha* (foreigner) and islander. It's the kind of unfunny story children learn from one another.

More vehement criticism comes in an equally unsubtle tale from Grande Comore, recorded from a man in the colonial 1930s. A certain king is so misogynistic that he forbids immigration by women and orders all girl children executed. Disguising as a man, the daughter of a neighboring king challenges him. Three times she avoids discovery;

before a fourth test, her dog sets fire to his village, she swims to her boat, and she shouts back, 'KING, YOU ARE A FOOL. I AM A WOMAN, A WOMAN WHO CAME TO PLAY ON YOUR STUPIDITY'.

In revenge, the king thinks to put her in her place by marrying her, not suspecting the stratagem she shares with other Comoran tricksters. In the wedding bed she puts a doll with a pot of honey as its head; she dons beautiful clothes and hides under the bed. The king slices the dummy, is pleased to see the goo oozing out, and victoriously runs away to his boat, only to hear her shout, 'MY LORD, DON'T REJOICE OVER YOUR BASE EXPLOITS. HAVE A LOOK AT THE BLADE OF YOUR SWORD AND TASTE WHAT IS STICKING ON IT.'

The roles are reversed when his people learn what has happened: they hang this misogynistic tyrant. 'THEN THEY WENT TO ASK THE PRINCESS-CAPTAIN TO COME REIGN OVER THEIR COUNTRY WHICH, THANKS TO THE EXTREMELY INTELLIGENT NEW QUEEN, WHO POSSESSED THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON, BECAME PEACEFUL AND PROSPEROUS.'<sup>6</sup>

Part of her intelligence is her verbal vigor, which may also have distinguished the several queens who ruled Grande Comore. It enables her to hit both men and hierarchy at the same time. A woman's tale, surely.

Men are not always the target. A scathing fable about a lazy wife was told to Gueunier by an old lady, Vavy Kombo Djabu, who probably learned it from a predecessor. This wife is so lazy that her husband must compromise his masculinity by cooking, drawing water, and pounding rice. After ten years of this upside-down version of marriage, he stages a feast, with help from his disapproving sisters. In preparation he teaches them an edifying song: he sings, WIFE, WIFE, GET WATER, and in chorus they must reply, I'M SICK, HUSBAND, I'M SICK. At the feast, the wife listens three times to the call-and-response. At last, she hides her head. At the beginning of the next rainy season, she has changed. She sends him out to clear land for rice, sweeps the house, goes to the river for water, and makes tea. Then she goes out to the bush and works all day, coming back at evening to make dinner. Reformed thenceforward, she does all the housework (except sowing the rice, which requires two people to work together). As her final gesture, she offers her husband that he repudiate her, in conformity with Muslim law, but he refuses, saying she was ill and he has cured her. Her family all confirm this idea and tell her to stay

with him. 'AND I LEFT THEM THERE AND CAME TO SIT HERE WITH MY BABY ON MY KNEES,' concludes the narrator.<sup>7</sup> Nothing allegorical about that. Isn't it a social function of art to enforce correct behavior?

## An Islamic Master

Islamic priests are not prominent in the tales collected in the 1980s, but in a twice-told tale, the aged Reny Daosy (remembering her sources) blends strong skepticism about Islam with the African theme of men's abuse of authority. The object of her censure is an epitome of hypocrisy: an Islamic master who fucks (*Fondy nikozany*).<sup>8</sup> Knowing that such a man should personify both religious and secular authority, she names him after the main Qur'anic teacher in her village. Her heroine, says Gueunier, 'is intelligent, being capable of exceeding her husband in casuistry, great master though he be. She brings off this feat by sleeping with him, doing only her wifely duty, while he, not recognizing her, commits in the same act the sin of fornication, the gravest possible since he is deflowering a virgin.' In the Comoros, deflowering is as offensive as rape in the West. By winning out over a *sheho* (sheikh), the young woman acts in the guileful spirit of Shakespeare's Helena in *All's Well That Ends Well*, whose innumerable counterparts are assembled in Wendy Doniger's fascinating book *The Bedtrick*. But none of her hundreds of bedtrick stories is a law case like this one.

At the outset Sheikh Said is quoting God. 'HE SAYS YOU MUST NOT COMMIT FORNICATION. YOU MUST NOT DEFLOWER ANYBODY'S DAUGHTER, THAT IS A SIN!' He overhears a woman saying, 'HUH! NOT ME.... SHOW ME A SCHOLAR WITH LEARNING UP TO HEAVEN, HE WON'T TEACH ME A THING'. Such defiance demands an arrogant response from an authoritative male. He goes into a dialogue with the woman's parents, who respond not quite as he expects.

"MY GOOD WOMAN, AND YOU MY GOOD MAN, I'VE COME TO ASK FOR YOUR DAUGHTER HERE IN MARRIAGE."

"AH, FATHER. ARE YOU THE MAN TO MARRY OUR DAUGHTER?"

"WHY DO YOU ASK?"

"WE ARE TOO POOR, WE CAN'T MAKE A PROPER HOUSE FOR THE MARRIAGE, WE CAN'T FIT OUT THE HOUSE FOR THE MARRIAGE, WE CAN'T AFFORD ANY EXPENSE."

HE SAID, "ALL THAT, I CAN TAKE CARE OF IT."

"OH NO, YOU ARE HERE ONLY TO SHAME US."

HE SAID, "ALL THAT, I CAN TAKE CARE OF IT."

A member of the audience questions Reny Daosy about the sheikh's overbearing manner: 'What does that word *kotsombolia* mean?' The narrator replies he's pulling rank: It means if he comes and tells them 'If not to me, you'd never marry her off... I've done the whole thing'. As soon as the marriage is held, the sheikh violates custom but follows folktale tradition: he removes the woman from her parents' domicile and silences her on a little island just offshore, guarded by an old woman. He sends food. After that day he never went there again. (Audience member: 'Whew!')

From the beach the young woman can hear the *shigoma* (dance). One night she sends the old woman to bed, dresses up, walks over the reef to shore, and joins the dance. There she spots her husband wearing religious-ceremonial costume, which accentuates the sin of fornication he is about to commit.

SHE ARRIVED, DRAPED IN HER VEIL, SMELLING SO SWEET! SHE CAME UP AND WENT BY AND DID LIKE THIS [TOUCHING HER HUSBAND WITH HER VEIL, AN INVITATION]. ("WHO, HER?" "THE YOUNG WOMAN, THE ONE HE'D MARRIED.") SHE DID LIKE THAT, AND WENT BY, AND WENT INSIDE. THE MAN GOT UP, THAT *SHEHO* — , BUT IT WASN'T *SHEHO* SAIDY.

Only at this point, Gueunier notes, 'does the narrator pretend to notice that it's insulting for her to meld together, as she has been doing up to this point, the village sheikh and the character in her story, who is about to commit a dreadful sin. One amusing point is that that honorable sheikh's own son is in the audience.' The man's hypocrisy is inseparable from his lust. He follows her into the shadows, and 'HE DEFLOWERED HER, HE DEFLOWERED SOMEONE ELSE'S DAUGHTER, NOT KNOWING THAT WAS HIS WIFE, THE ONE HE HAD MARRIED JUST SO...' After a second and third night she knows that by masquerading she has made the bedtrick into a rape, brought off a successful deception, and initiated the consummation of her marriage. She announces, 'I won't come back anymore.' Custom obliges him to award a compensatory gift to this seemingly compliant woman.

"WHAT AM I GOING TO GIVE YOU?" HE TOOK OFF HIS TURBAN TO GIVE IT TO HER. "I DON'T WANT IT". HE TOOK OFF HIS BIG LOINCLOTH, WHICH HE WORE ON HIS LOINS. "I DON'T WANT IT". "THEN WHAT DO YOU WANT?" "I WANT THAT RING YOU HAVE THERE." NOW, THAT RING HAD HIS NAME ON IT. HE TOOK IT OFF AND GAVE IT TO HER.

And she returns to the island, pregnant (to the duenna's horror), and in time gives birth. The duenna goes crying to the boatmen, thus launching the necessary message to the sheikh (whom Reny Daosy now calls the king, targeting masculinity, Islam, and secular authority).

HE CAME IN. "WHOSE BABY IS THIS?" SHE SAID, "ISN'T IT ME HOLDING HIM, SO THEY CAN SAY I'M HIDING HIM UNDER MY VEILS? LOOK AT HIM. WHOSE BABY IS HE?"....

"AREN'T YOU GOING TO TELL ME WHOSE CHILD THIS IS?"

"WELL," SHE SAID, "TAKE THIS MIRROR. WHEN YOU SEE THE IMAGE OF YOUR OWN BODY, YOU WILL SEE THIS CHILD".

BUT HE WOULDN'T BELIEVE HER. SO, SHE SHOWED HIM HER RING, THE ONE HE'D GIVEN HER. "THIS RING, WASN'T IT ON YOUR FINGER?"

"YES".

At this moment, an audience member says, 'He was caught?' and the narrator replies, 'CAUGHT.'

The sheikh, saying nothing to acknowledge his disgrace, turns away to his men to give orders and distract himself, or perhaps the audience. The narrator inserts a song (part in Kibushi, part in Shimaore), teaching the children around her to repeat the refrain. Back home, the sheikh drives away his childless first wife, and a meeting ensues.

SO — WHEN EVERYBODY WAS SEATED, THE WIFE SAID TO HER HUSBAND, "TELL ME, HOW LONG DID YOU THINK YOU WOULD LEAVE ME OUT THERE ON THAT ISLAND WITH THE OLD WOMAN? YOU WANTED TO TEST MY INTELLIGENCE?"... .  
 "BUT I," SHE SAID, "I DID KNOW YOU WERE MY HUSBAND, AND THAT'S WHY I CAME TO FIND YOU. WHILE YOU — YOU DIDN'T RECOGNIZE ME. SO, YOU REALLY DID COMMIT FORNICATION, SINCE YOU DIDN'T KNOW I WAS YOUR WIFE, AND YOU DEFLOWERED ME. BY DEFLOWERING ME YOU TRULY COMMITTED FORNICATION. YOU COMMITTED ADULTERY. BUT I, I RECOGNIZED YOU. YOU WERE TAKING ME FOR AN IDIOT (*MDJINGA*). YOU WANTED TO LEAVE ME ALL ALONE OUT THERE. WELL, I WON'T STAY HERE." SHE TURNED AWAY FROM HIM. "I WON'T STAY HERE. I CAME ONLY TO HAVE YOU SEE WHAT YOU DID TO ME. I'M GOING BACK TO MY MOTHER", SHE SAID. AND SHE LEFT.

The sheikh admits to village notables that he's in the wrong, but she is resolute.

"HE TOOK ME FOR AN IDIOT. BECAUSE HE SEEMS TO BE A SCHOLAR, WHILE I, I SAID, 'HIS KNOWLEDGE CAN GO UP TO THE SKIES, NOBODY WILL BE ABLE TO TOP ME FOR INTELLIGENCE.' AS FOR HIM, IT SEEMS HE WANTED TO KNOW IF I WAS



REALLY INTELLIGENT. BUT I AM MORE INTELLIGENT THAN HE. WHY DID HE COME AND DEFLOWER ME? WHY DID HE COME AND DRILL ME? HE DIDN'T NOTICE THAT IT WAS ME, HIS WIFE!"

HE WAS BEATEN. HE WAS COMPLETELY BEATEN. THE NOTABLES PLEADED WITH THE WIFE SO MUCH THAT THEN SHE WENT TO LIVE WITH HER HUSBAND, AND HE GAVE HER ALL HIS WEALTH, SO THAT SHE WOULD COME BACK AND LIVE WITH HIM. HE GAVE HER HIS STONE HOUSE. HE GAVE HER HIS GOLD, HE GAVE HER EVERYTHING SHE COULD WISH, SO MUCH THAT SHE CAME BACK TO LIVE WITH HIM. BUT SHE DID NOT WANT TO LIVE WITH HIM ALWAYS, BECAUSE HE'D REALLY TAKEN HER FOR AN IDIOT.

IT'S FINISHED.<sup>9</sup>

Is the target of the tale Islamic religion, or men in general? In it Gueunier finds

a kind of women's revenge. The storyteller's visible pleasure as she insists on the husband's shame and confusion of the husband leaves little doubt on this point... At the end of the account, the young woman's only way to show her superiority is to give her husband a legitimate child, although he has intended to prevent that by refusing to cohabit with her. The *maître* is at fault for wanting to challenge the woman's properly feminine privilege of childbearing. In short, a woman's 'intelligence' and virtue are first shown by her accomplishing this duty, if necessary against her own husband. Beyond the piquant aspect of the casuistic controversy lies a quite traditional moral, which even the most misogynistic of the learned would have difficulty disputing.<sup>10</sup>

The hearer is left free to choose how much this hypocrite represents Islamic religion or the male sex. Women's power shines out in the wife's passionate dialogue.

## The Orphan Girl and Her Sisters

In a more positive vein is Sophie Blanchy's revelatory discovery: several women storytellers narrate pieces in which a young orphan girl is mistreated by another female character to the point of real or symbolic death, then is recognized and restored to her proper place through the intervention of her dead mother, or both parents, in supernatural form.<sup>11</sup> The plot pattern of this group can be illustrated from one prosaic version.

THERE WAS A GIRL WHO HAD NO MOTHER.

HER FATHER HAD TAKEN HER TO HER STEPMOTHER'S, WHO DIDN'T LOVE HER... DIDN'T GIVE HER THE SAME THINGS AS HER CHILDREN. SHE DIDN'T DRESS HER HAIR, SHE DIDN'T TAKE HER TO THE RIVER. THE CHILD GOT VERY THIN... ONE DAY THE CHILD WENT TO HER STEPMOTHER TO GIVE HER A PIECE OF POTTERY AND THE STEPMOTHER TOLD HER TO KILL HER MOTHER. "YOU ARE GOING TO WEEP AND SHE'S GOING TO ASK YOU WHY. SO, TELL HER THAT YOU WANT TO BATHE, BUT NOT IN THE RIVER WATER, NOT IN RAINWATER, BUT IN WATER FROM THE WELL." THE GIRL WAS TOO YOUNG TO KNOW WHAT SHE WAS GOING TO DO.

She endures a period of isolation outside society, a period of liminality or marginality. Finally, she achieves restoration and acceptance into the social world through the intervention of her dead mother.

ONE DAY THE CHILD SAW HER DEAD MOTHER. SHE INVITED HER TO GO TO HER TOMB TO GET *TCHIIRIS* [A KIND OF WATERMELON]. SHE FOUND THEM ON HER MOTHER'S TOMB, NEAR THE WAY FROM THE QUR'AN SCHOOL. SHE ATE SOME AND WENT BACK TO HER STEPMOTHER'S. EVERY DAY SHE WENT TO EAT AT HER MOTHER'S TOMB. THE GIRL BEGAN TO GAIN WEIGHT AND LOOK WELL. THE STEPMOTHER WANTED TO KNOW WHERE SHE WAS GETTING HER FOOD. SHE HAD HER CHILDREN FOLLOW HER. THE GIRL HID TO GO EAT.

Only in a folktale can a woman gain weight by eating watermelon.

The narrator goes on.

THE CHILDREN FOUND OUT WHERE SHE WAS GOING. JUST WHEN SHE WAS EATING, HER PSEUDO SISTERS CAME AND ATE WITH HER. THEY ATE TOO MUCH AND COULDN'T CARRY WHOLE FRUITS BACK TO THEIR MOTHER. WHEN THEY GOT BACK, THEY TOLD THEIR MOTHER THAT THEY'D FOUND OUT THEIR SISTER'S SECRET, THEY GAVE THE GIRL'S STEPMOTHER A TASTE OF THE *TCHIIRI*. THE REAL, DEAD MOTHER WAS ANGRY. THE PLANT FADED, ONLY LITTLE FRUITS WERE LEFT. THE GIRL GOT MISERABLE AGAIN.

ANOTHER DAY SHE SAW HER MOTHER IN A DREAM. SHE TOLD HER THAT THERE WAS A BLACK AND WHITE COW IN HER FATHER'S HERD, WHICH WAS HERS. SHE TOLD HER SHE HAD TO SING, "PAPA'S AND MAMA'S COW, OPEN A WAY!" SO, THE COW WOULD OPEN HER MOUTH, SHE WOULD GO INSIDE, SHE WOULD BE HAPPY.

THE NEXT DAY HER FATHER TOOK HER TO HIS HERD. SHE SAW THE COW, SHE SANG. THE COW OPENED ITS MOUTH AND SHE WENT INSIDE. INSIDE THE COW'S STOMACH SHE FOUND WOMEN WHO GAVE HER FOOD, DRESSED HER HAIR AND GAVE HER CLEAN CLOTHES. THEN SHE CAME OUT.

THE STEPMOTHER ASKED HER WHAT HAPPENED, AND SHE SAID SHE'D GIVEN ALMS AND A FRIEND HELPED HER. THE GIRLS AGAIN WERE SENT TO SPY ON HER. THEY FOLLOWED HER AND SAW HER GO TOWARDS A COW. SO, ONE GIRL WENT UP TO THE COW AND SANG, BUT THE COW REFUSED TO OPEN HER MOUTH. THE

ORPHAN TOLD HER HOSTESS TO GIVE THE GIRLS FOOD. SO, THE WOMEN GAVE THE GIRLS A FEW CRUMBS, AND ONE OF THEM LICKED HER HAND SO MUCH IT MADE A WOUND. WHEN THE WOMEN SAW THE HOLE, THEY STOPPED IT WITH GOLD.

AT THE HOUSE, THE GIRL SHOWED HER HAND AND ACCUSED THE ORPHAN. THE [STEP]MOTHER WANTED TO KILL THE COW. SHE WENT AND FOUND A *FUNDI* [HEALER] AND ASKED HIM TO MAKE HER ILL AND SAY A COW HAD TO BE KILLED AS A SACRIFICE. SHE TOOK TO HER BED AND PRETENDED TO BE ILL. THE FATHER SAID TO GO SEE THE *FUNDI*; HE SAID WHAT HE WAS SUPPOSED TO SAY TO THE FATHER.

WHEN THE GIRL FOUND THAT OUT, SHE TOLD HER FATHER HE MUST NOT KILL THE COW. THE FATHER OBEYED THE STEPMOTHER. THE COW WAS KILLED. THE GIRL ASKED THE MEN NOT TO THROW AWAY THE COW'S BONES, BUT TO MAKE A PILE OF THEM. WHILE EVERYBODY WAS EATING, SHE THREW THEM INTO THE SEA.

A FEW DAYS LATER, THE BONES TRANSFORMED INTO JEWELS AND TURNED INTO A GOLDEN TREE. A FISHERMAN TRIED TO PICK THEM, BUT EVERY TIME HE PUT THEM IN HIS *PIROG*, THE JEWELS MELTED AWAY. THE FISHERMAN WENT AND TOLD THAT TO THE VILLAGE KING. THE KING WENT WITH HIM BUT HAD NO BETTER RESULTS. SO, HE ASKED THE VILLAGE WHO COULD PICK THEM. THE GIRL WANTED TO GO, BUT THE STEPMOTHER FORBADE HER. EVERYBODY TRIED, THEN THE GIRL WENT AND BROUGHT BACK THE TREE. THE KING MARRIED HER. THE STEPMOTHER'S DAUGHTERS BECAME HER SERVANTS.<sup>12</sup>

Being married, the girl eradicates her orphan status and vanishes into a kind of identity with her mother.

This plot encapsulates the ideology of women's tales in Mayotte. Marriage relations, which are negotiated by father and groom, are unstable, as we know from the *fille*. The mother-daughter relation is permanent and enduring: you inherit her house, she survives in the spirit world. Blanchy found that the initial fictional situation — the mother dying, the father remarrying, the stepmother's villainy — corresponded to real-life internal tensions in 1980s Mayotte. Thus, a narrator, consciously or unconsciously, invites her hearer to apply the tale broadly. Her relation to her mother is her weapon against change, which was impending then in real life. Try, for instance, to practice Islamic marriage under French law. The recurrent plot answers out of tradition: your mother, and everything she represents, will aid you. Thus, the plot pattern Blanchy discovered, preaching a woman's reliance on matrilineality, is as potent as the message about interdependence in the making-and-breaking of friendship pattern, or the *djinn* husband symbolizing the oppressor in the *fille* tale.

Naturally it undergoes ingenious variations by the best performers. The version quoted above is told in a bald, unornamented, anti-performed style, which doubtless resulted from the pupil-teacher interview situation. Blanchy's women are more engaging, being ready to modernize a traditional tale, The climactic moment in many of the pieces is an impassioned speech in which the heroine reclaims her place by giving an account of herself.



Fig. 12 Zebu. Photo by Christophe Laborderie, CC BY 2.0, Wikimedia Commons, <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8e/Z%C3%A9bu-Mayotte.jpg>

## Her Parents' Cow

Fatima Maolida dictated her version, with her children nearby, to Sophie Blanchy in la Réunion in July 1984. She begins it at Qur'an school. The orphan is befriended by another girl, whose mother first feeds and takes care of her, then proposes that the widowed father marry her. He sees the danger, labeling this stepmother-to-be as a *mama kambo*, an artificial mother, but reluctantly he agrees. The sign of the stepmother's predictable hate is that after her own daughter has eaten her fill, SHE FED HER HUSBAND'S DAUGHTER *PANGU*, the hardened, tasteless rice that sticks to the edge of the pot. As the girl loses weight on these leftovers day after day, her real, dead mother comes to her in a dream. She directs her to go find the white-and-black mother cow in her father's herd, and teaches her the charm to say:

PAPA'S AND MAMA'S COW,  
 OPEN, OPEN MY WAY IN!  
 PAPA AND MAMA'S COW,  
 OPEN, OPEN MY WAY IN!

That works: the cow opens its mouth, in she goes, and inside the cow she finds her real mother, who feeds her, dresses her hair, and gives her jewelry and fine clothes. Back at home, the stepmother tears them off her, accusing her of theft. The quarrel repeats next day, but she is warned by her mother that if she doesn't allow the jewels and clothes to be torn off, her father will die. So, the stepmother returns her to wearing rags, and sends her own daughter to follow the girl. Stepsister overhears the charm, repeats it, and now both girls enter the cow. The narrator gives this stepsister more realistic, envy-filled dialogue: 'HEY, YOU KNOW THIS PLACE, YOU NEVER BROUGHT ME HERE, ALL THESE BEAUTIFUL THINGS, YOU DIDN'T TAKE ME TO YOUR MUM', claiming credit for a liberality she has never manifested.

When the stepmother hears this news, she is ready to lie and kill. Disregarding the bad luck that will come from killing the first cow of a herd, she finds an ally, an evil old-lady donor, who tells her to sham illness and instruct the healers that she will get well only if that cow is killed. The mother-in-the-cow, source of truth, tells her daughter to accept that, to eat only a tiny bit of the meat, and (with her father) to save the bones in a sack and throw them into the sea. 'YOU WON'T DIE', she says. Once the cow is killed and the bones have been thrown out, the stepmother gets well at the mere sight of all that meat, but as instructed, the girl refuses it.

After blending these naturalistic details of diet into the traditional opposition of good and bad mothers, Fatima (or her source) introduces an Islamic symbol of hope, which is the real mother's last incarnation and her own most startling innovation.

THEY WERE IN BED WHEN THEY SAW SOMETHING BRIGHT, A STRONG LIGHT ON THE WHOLE VILLAGE. EVERYBODY GOT UP TO SEE WHAT IT WAS. THE BONES HAD TRANSFORMED INTO A LUMINOUS MINARET RISING OUT OF THE WATER.

The king sets a suitor task, another element from tradition: whoever retrieves the minaret will have his daughter in marriage. All attempts are unsuccessful: always it recedes out of reach.

Now the king's cock, playing messenger and moving the plot ahead, reveals where to find the girl, as the one who can accomplish the task. Six times his servants go to the stepmother's house and are refused. They have to threaten her before the girl is brought out, taken to the king's house, washed, dressed, and made beautiful. Six times she calls to her transformed mother, 'Papa and mama's minaret, come ashore, come!' At last, it does, and all is quickly resolved. The girl is recognized, the king marries her, his first wife and the stepsister are made servants, and the girl's father becomes a king's minister. The dead mother has performed her principal function, to reinsert her daughter into the real world.

You may feel the plot should end there. Why doesn't Fatima Maolida stop? Evidently she has decided, or has learned from another storyteller, that there has to be a second part, into which she will bring more realistic details and justify inventing that otherworldly minaret. As transition she uses the punishment of the stepsister. Dressing the newlywed's hair (in her servant role), this unpleasant person violates a *miko* (taboo) not known before: she must not use *munyongo* (a sort of Q-tip for the hair).<sup>13</sup> She does that. Instantly the heroine transforms into a bird and goes to join her mother, now also in bird form. Listeners who remember false-bride stories can expect that having returned to a marginal state, the heroine will call for recognition in song. She sings to a new character, the king's gardener Makame, to ask for food.

She told him her name was Bibi. She flew around him and perched for a minute.

MAKAME, MAKAME?  
GIVE ME SOME NUTMEG TO EAT!  
MAKAME SAID,  
EAT, BIBI, EAT!

[SHE] GIVE ME SOME HALUA TO EAT!

[HE] EAT, BIBI, EAT!

[SHE] YOUR MASTER, WHERE'S HE GONE?

[HE] GONE TO THE MOSQUE.

[SHE] WHAT WILL HE DO AT THE MOSQUE?

[HE] PRAY AND STUDY.

[SHE] WHEN HE COMES BACK, GREET HIM FOR ME!

SHE FLEW AWAY.

Now strictly, *halua* is that confection of crushed sesame seeds and honey, which Americans and Europeans can buy online, and which Mayotte inherited from long-ago Persians. But in the king's folktale orchard, it somehow grows among other sweet fruits. She knows the gardener will carry the message, and will allow her to live on the fruits in the meantime. Of course she will sing again.

But the king has returned home heavy-hearted; the minaret and even his multi-story house have disappeared. He hears his wife's story from Makame's recounting it. The two try to catch her by spreading birdlime on the branches, but she eludes capture as smoothly as the minaret did. Having learned from her bird mother that her father will die otherwise, she allows herself to be stuck, captured, and caged. The king, stroking her (the same motion as when her hair was being dressed, with the opposite effect), accidentally undoes the taboo, and she is retransformed. The minaret comes back, so does the king's house. Given a place to live, they have what no one will remember is their second *grand mariage*. The stepmother's punishment is to be thrown into a sack on the ground, where the heroine will trample her every day.<sup>14</sup>

Fatima Maolida, or her source, blends traditions with fidelity to the message about the mother-daughter connection. From Malagasy tradition Fatima draws characters (heroine, donor, king, stepmother), magic objects (the *munyongo* and the minaret), and incidents (a dead mother's helpful return, a person enclosed in an animal, bones that transform). With these elements she combines real-life details like nutmeg, coffee, *halua*, dates, and the *munyongo*. Her characters — the gardener, the evil donor woman, and the caustic stepsister — are original touches, but no one will miss the importance of the mother-daughter connection.<sup>15</sup> Only that second marriage, resulting from the two-part form she is inventing or repeating, presents a problem to the reader. It looks like a mistake. Narrators do sometimes make mistakes; they may get help from listeners, as Gueunier noticed several times. We can forgive that oddity from a narrator who is inventive enough, or recalls tradition well enough, to produce both a luminous minaret and an orchard where a woman can live on *halua* and nutmeg. Her blend is striking.

## Performativity in Performances: Fatima Maolida and Anfiati Sufu

The principle of these women's narrating places them firmly in tradition. They confront the Mayotte they live in with plots and characters inherited from Africa and Madagascar. They enact, in their artistic communication, a dialectic between (old) tradition and (new) situation that distinguishes all folklore. For the anthropological folklorist Dell Hymes, that dialectic is the matrix for 'creativity in the senses of adaptation, re-creation, and the mark, I think, of true creativity within a tradition, innovation at need'.<sup>16</sup> Creativity like that minaret? Visualize Fatima Maolida in performance. The most subjective aspect of her performing is a kind of confession. Her heroine's narrating about herself is a narration about Fatima.

Then (after taking a breath) apply the abstract terms of a philosopher like Judith Butler, writing about confession. 'A certain performative production of the subject within established public conventions is required of the confessing subject and constitutes the aim of confession itself.'<sup>17</sup> Public convention makes Fatima Maolida a storyteller and gives her occasions to perform. She is an instance of Butler's performative production. As much as Emily Brontë or Zora Neale Hurston narrating in a novel, the Mahorais storyteller performatively produces herself as Woman. Her 'narrative capacity constitutes a precondition for giving an account of oneself and assuming responsibility for one's actions through that means'.<sup>18</sup> For a particular audience, she can select this story, which dramatizes the contradictions in male-dominated ideology and shows them to be unresolvable. That is the truth she tells; by narrating, she also tells the truth about herself.

Blanchy's outstanding performer, Anfiati Sufu, is a master of this technique. She is at her expansive best in one mother-daughter tale, which looks to be as much a Mayotte creation as Fatima's tale.

## Grandmother Shark

Its character, plot, and texture are totally traditional; a cruel stepmother drives the heroine's persecution, and the familiar plot includes her adoption into a foster family, her quasi-death and resuscitation, and her marriage.



Anfiati Sufu obviously knows the standard repertoire of her sources, but her piece does not recapitulate any text previously recorded. Like many of her sisters-in-narrating, she keeps her tale close to home, emphasizing the sense of place by identifying herself explicitly as a mother.

As the tale begins, Shura is her father's only daughter, a bit spoiled. After she loses her mother and her father remarries, he rejects the protests of other family members and takes his daughter to his new wife's house, where he lives (remember, it's women who own the houses). There she undergoes malnourishment from her stepmother, who gives all the food to her own children. God keeps Shura alive until the stepmother murderously throws her into the water. Instead of drowning, she is taken up on the back of a foster mother. Grandmother Shark is several kinds of role model: donor, female ally, queen of the sharks, and reincarnation of her dead mother. At the bottom of the sea, she gives all her attention to restoring Shura to her proper station and helping her achieve recognition.



Fig. 13 Under water. Photo by VillageHero, CC BY-SA 2.0, Wikimedia Commons, [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/76/Snorkeling\\_at\\_Ngouja\\_Beach\\_1\\_%28Mayotte%29\\_%2831371866746%29.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/76/Snorkeling_at_Ngouja_Beach_1_%28Mayotte%29_%2831371866746%29.jpg)

Every night, Grandmother Shark takes her to the shore, where she sings her song.

MISTRESS SHARK  
 YOU HAVE NOT MISTREATED SHURA  
 MISTRESS SHARK  
 YOU HAVE NOT MISTREATED SHURA  
 SHURA HAS NO FATHER, NO  
 SHURA HAS NO FATHER, NO  
 MAMA, WHERE DID SHURA GO?

SHE WENT INTO THE WATER  
DIDN'T ASK FOR ANYTHING, ANYTHING!

Seeing her beauty, a bystander wonders if that's the drowned girl, but says nothing until he can confirm his hunch the next day by repeating her song to the king. At first, he is not believed, but when 'they' decide to catch her, Grandmother Shark suggests Shura allow herself to be caught. On shore, her radiance causes everybody to faint as she sings her song. She brings them all back to life by touching them with her garment (another female power). After the king too faints and is resuscitated, he takes her to a chamber high in his house, as a sign of her now-high rank. Having sung her song three times, she switches channels to claim recognition.

"I WAS AN ONLY DAUGHTER" ('CAUSE THE SHARK TOLD HER WHO HER MOTHER AND FATHER WERE), "MY REAL MOTHER DIED, BUT I DON'T REMEMBER HER. MY FATHER WENT AND MARRIED ANOTHER WOMAN. THAT WOMAN CAUSED ME MUCH PAIN, AND ONE DAY SHE TOOK ME TO THE SEA WITH HER CHILDREN, SHE THREW ME INTO THE WATER, AND AS I FELL IN I FOUND SOMEONE WHO CAUGHT ME."

"BUT WHO CAUGHT YOU?"

"SOMEONE CALLED *PAPA DADI*, GRANDMOTHER SHARK, SHE BROUGHT ME UP TILL I WAS GROWN UP; THEN EVERY DAY AT *MAHARIBI* TIME [PRAYERS AT DUSK] SHE LED ME SAYING, 'I WANT YOU TO KNOW YOUR MOTHER AND FATHER, YOUR MOTHER IS NO MORE BUT YOU WILL KNOW YOUR FATHER.' SO THE DAY BEFORE YESTERDAY, WHEN SHE BROUGHT ME, I SAW TWO PEOPLE ON THE SHORE. SO WE WENT HOME AND TODAY MY MOTHER GRANDMOTHER SHARK SENT ME WITH ALL MY THINGS."

"AND YOUR MOTHER, WHO WAS SHE?"

"SHE WAS NAMED *SOANDSO*."

"YOUR FATHER?"

"MY FATHER WAS CALLED *SOANDSO*, AND HE IS STILL ALIVE."

One scrawny man matches that description; by telling his story, he too gains recognition.

'I and my wife had a daughter.' (The father had got very thin, he was nothing, he thought only of his daughter.) 'My wife died and left me with my daughter, then I married another woman, I took my child to her house. One day my wife took my daughter, supposedly to catch winkles, she took her, and until today I have never seen my child'.

When she appears, more visible than ever, she has to revive the fainting bystanders. Father and daughter are reunited, the stepmother and her children are decapitated, and Shura becomes the king's sole wife.

To make her final point, Anfiati Sufu asserts the primacy of the mother-daughter relationship over this new marriage. Shura asks only one thing of her royal husband. 'WHEN YOUR SERVANTS MAKE FOOD FOR ME, I ASK YOU TO HAVE THEM TAKE SOME OF IT AND GIVE IT TO MY MOTHER.' Knowing she is an orphan, the king asks, 'WHERE IS SHE?' 'OUT THERE, IN THE SEA.' Her mother, through the shark, has controlled every move in her life. Dependent as she must be on her new husband, she is even more so on that powerful mother-surrogate. Her embedded story tells the truth: to learn to be a woman, one must rehearse one's gender.<sup>19</sup> Her account of herself in song and narrative is the lesson for women in Mayotte, which Anfiati Sufu enacts through performing assertively: when a silenced woman speaks, everything changes. Shura, starting from a position of equilibrium or safety, is threatened with danger and must extricate herself. But unlike the silent wife in any *fille difficile* tale, who is similarly threatened, Shura speaks up. So does her narrator. The particularly feminine skill Shura exercises is narrating. As in certain Indian tales, 'the whole tale is the tale of her acquiring her story, making a person of her, making a silent person a speaking woman.'<sup>20</sup>

To perform such a loving account of persecution and rescue, to show self-revelation deferred and delayed yet ultimately successful and convincing, is to offer women the proof and manifestation of ideological truth. Telling such a story 'is a tacit project to renew one's cultural history in one's own terms.'<sup>21</sup> Or maybe, being entirely cast in words, it's not tacit. Maybe it invites women and men in the audience to dwell safely in an alternative reality, from which they can look at the constructed ideology of sex and gender around them. When Anfiati Sufu tells Shura's story to her audience, she is enacting women's power, representing herself and other women, and critiquing the gender system implied in these tales. What about intention? Does the message of the tale mean that this narrator, or any female narrator, must have an ideological slant? Does she deliberately choose this kind of story to send that message? In chapter 1, the choice of place legends seemed to result from the circumstance of being recorded. Perhaps Anfiati Sufu discerned Sophie Blanchy's interest in the subordination of women and performed accordingly. However that might be, the assertiveness of Shura and her other heroines, her vivid use of dialogue, and her loving attention to her audience all mark her artistry.

In a contrasting version, by the way, a young man of Mronabeja has more trouble with this plot, but he does give the heroine more ruinous words once she is recognized. After she forces the king to acknowledge that her baby is his — she shows him his own ring — he breaks down and offers to be stabbed, and she comes back with sarcasm: 'YOU TOOK ME FROM MY MOTHER'S AND FATHER'S SIDE TO GO AND ABANDON ME FAR AWAY ON AN ISLAND, SO TODAY IT'S FOR YOU TO KILL ME, SINCE YOU SAY YOU ARE THE KING, THAT YOU HAVE KNOWLEDGE, BUT I'M THE STUPID ONE, I'M A POOR MAN'S DAUGHTER.' He submits to her superior verbal power, but to restore the normal power relation, she remonstrates submissively and both say, 'SLAY ME!' But not wanting to kill off this young couple, the narrator hauls in an irrelevant punishment to finish his tale. 'THE KING WENT TO FIND HIS FIRST WIFE, TOOK HER AND PUT THE SWORD THROUGH HER, AND I LEFT THEM THERE AND CAME HERE. THAT'S ALL.'<sup>22</sup> That looks like a narrator's mistake, but the piece remains a woman's story.

## Furukombe as Boeing

Another great performance by Anfiati Sufu is her version of the *fille* tale, the best told of all the Mayotte versions collected. To begin with, she is especially skilled with faithfully handling and elaborating folktale conventions, for instance in her quadruple opening formula and the conventional fixed phrases.

HALE HALELE

VWUKA MUTRU NAKA MUTRU

VWUKA TADJIRI

VWUKA MASIKINI

VWUKA WAZIRI

VWUKA MFALUME

ATA BARANI YA HADITHI, NDRANI!

NDRANI, NDRANI!

HAY, DZAHO, DZAHO!

OLD-TIME STORY

THERE WAS A MAN AMONG MEN

THERE WAS A RICH MAN

THERE WAS A POOR MAN

THERE WAS A MINISTER

THERE WAS A KING

TO THE LAND OF STORIES, INTO IT!

INTO IT, INTO IT!

YES, IN YOU, IN YOU!

WELL, THERE WAS A FATHER AND MOTHER — KINGS — THEY HAD SEVEN CHILDREN. THE SEVEN WERE GIRLS.

Six of the seven girls are quickly married off. Hadidja refuses all offers, saying, 'I KNOW MY HUSBAND WILL COME'. She spies her husband-to-be arriving in his boat. 'HE HAD TO BE AN ARAB, SO SHINING, BI DZHO BI DZHO BI!' But of course 'NA LILE DJINI', he was a *djinn*, and quickly the marriage is arranged. When Mari, her youngest sister, offers to accompany her, Hadidja's jealousy erupts: 'YOU WANT TO COME AND SPOIL MY MARRIAGE!' Instantly Anfiati Sufu speaks an aside (a device hardly any other Mayotte storyteller uses, but not a spoiler if you've heard the tale before): 'BUT IT WAS MARI WHO WOULD SAVE HADIDJA.' Of all Mahorais narrators of this piece, only Anfiati Sufu shows the cannibal digging a hole, dumping into it the human food he is offered, and gobbling up his preferred food of worms, snakes and snails, saying 'YUM' in Shimaore: 'KOWA INI YANGU, AH, MM, NYOHA INI YANGU, THESE SNAILS FOR ME, AH, MMM, THESE SNAKES FOR ME'. She also emphasizes how fast he resumes his disguise: 'AH, SISTER-IN-LAW, COME AND TAKE BACK THE PLATE, I'M FINISHED EATING'. This fast change enables Mari to spy his horn, teeth, eyes, and tail coming out. So, in another special touch, before they have even left the parents' house, Mari has recognized his real nature.

This *djinn* is remarkably human-seeming and verbal, well disguised. He explains to Mari the charm she will have to speak, to call his attention at lunchtime. The more he talks, the more his hunger transpires as avarice (he must be a portrait of one of the neighbors). If all husbands in Mayotte are *djinns*, as many *fille* tales seem to say, their cannibalism symbolizes a husband's demand for the *shungu*, the meal or other celebration he must give to his relatives in celebration of marriage. This one even admits it in an aside: 'WITH THE SHUNGU I'M GOING TO GIVE THEM THEY WON'T COMPLAIN ABOUT ME.' On the long trip to his place, they pass through the village he has devoured. He explains all the empty houses in modern terms: he is the landlord and he made the tenants all leave. (In other versions we hear about but do not see his previous depredations.) Hadidja, searching in the refrigerators and freezers of these 1970s houses, finds nothing but the meat he is reserving for himself and the other *djinns*. He boastfully shows her his herds of goats, sheep, beef cattle, ducks, and pigeons, and his plentiful vegetable gardens, including tomatoes. 'ALL THIS IS YOURS! YOU GET TO DECIDE WHAT YOU WANT AND DON'T WANT TO EAT'. 'All this' is more than we are shown by other narrators.

Eating and food, a big item for a cannibal *djinn*, reaches its peak after the naming-of-parts scene. In details only Anfiati Sufu or her sources give us, the wife must find her terrified way to the donor lady and tell her story. The old lady gives an account of herself, explaining the custom to the innocent:

"MY GIRL, HE IS GOING TO GATHER HIS RELATIVES, BECAUSE HE OWES THEM A SHUNGU. HE HAS EATEN OTHERS' SHUNGU AND HAS NOT GIVEN BACK. HE CAME INTO THIS VILLAGE AND ATE ALL THE PEOPLE; I AM THE ONLY ONE WHO ESCAPED. I TOOK COVER IN THIS CAVE, AND HIM — EVERY MORNING HE COMES TO EAT ME, AND HE SHITS ME AT NOONTIME, AND IN THE AFTERNOON HE COMES BACK TO EAT ME AND AT EVENING HE SHITS ME!"

Is that what marriage feels like? No other donor in a *fille* tale takes part in the cannibal's alimentary cycle. This character, being past childbearing age and living outside society with magic powers, is still under male control.

This obliging lady, with Hadidja's help, deposits magic betel spittle in all corners of the house and calls the sparrowhawk to fly the girls home, but then rejects its call, as she does with all the other birds except the gigantic Furukombe.<sup>23</sup> (Anfiati Sufu need not describe a legendary bird her audience will recognize.) He must expect to be asked, 'ISN'T THAT MY WIFE YOU ARE CARRYING?' Only Furukombe gives the right answer, in a song that will be sung at least three times. He agrees to carry seven gourds of ground coconut, both girls, and all their possessions. 'HE GATHERED AND CARRIED, GATHERED AND CARRIED. THEY SAY BOEINGS GO FAST — JUST LIKE THAT!'

Special touches continue: for instance, he says his prayers — even a legendary bird can be a good Muslim — and takes off with his load. On the way, he meets the boats of pursuing, challenging *djinns*. Each time, the narrator names the island; each time he answers the *djinns* correctly and drops the gourds of coconut. Suddenly at their destination, bushes magically expand to block the *djinns'* passage, but they make their way to the house, expecting to find Hadidja and Mari. The answers from the betel spittle keep them outside until the husband arrives, says the charm, and finds the house emptied. Fearing to be eaten by his gang, he digs a hole and hides. Only his huge tooth sticks out. An infant *djinn* finds the tooth and says 'MAMA, TOY!', but she shuts him up. The *djinns* find their brother in the hole and throw him into the fire, but before being cooked and devoured, he has time to say, 'DON'T BREAK MY BONES!'

He won't completely die. They eat him up, leaving the bones; they dance around and sing their happiness at having eaten their brother; they get back into their dhows and leave. At every point Anfiati Sufu enlivens the conventions and keeps her audience engaged. Her version of an international tale type responds to her specific situation of performance and life. Her capacity of responding to the request to perform is the measure of both her traditionality and her innovativeness.<sup>24</sup>

### A Laughing Palm and a Speaking Leaf

In the performance that most clearly reveals Anfiati Sufu's mastery, evil sisters accuse a king's wife of giving birth to a dog, then her children are banished, rescued, and after having adventures are finally restored. Characters and relationships are quite realistic, and touches by Anfiati Sufu bring the tale right into the village. Two of her leading characters are the *areca* palm and betel leaf, chewables the listeners know and taste. In the tale world of Mayotte, magic objects are not very fanciful.<sup>25</sup>



Fig. 14 Betel leaf. Photo by Wajira, CC BY-SA 4.0, Wikimedia Commons, [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/27/Betel\\_leaf\\_%28In\\_Sinhalese\\_-\\_Bulath\\_Kola%29.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/27/Betel_leaf_%28In_Sinhalese_-_Bulath_Kola%29.jpg)

Anfiati Sufu asserts her connection to the listeners with a classic opening formula, a fixed phrase to which her audience must give an equally fixed response.

HALE HALELE [tale from old times]

The audience responds with the untranslatable 'GOMBE!'

THERE WAS A MAN AMONG MEN.

WAKA [Yes]!

THERE WAS A MAN AND A WOMAN. YES. AND A CHILD, LIKE MY LITTLE  
MARIDJA HERE.

Maridja and her other two daughters are present; later she will link one of them to one of the lost babies; soon she will mention the mosque and the rest of the town. Anfiati Sufu is completely at ease with making each performance of a folktale, especially in a village community like Mtsapere, a tissue of references to things known to the audience. They probably know the folk etymology that derives the name of the village from the realistic legend about Musa, who was seeking a resting-place in Mayotte after being driven out of Madagascar. One of his two companions noticed his unadorned hand and uttered the phrase *Musa a latsa y péré*, Musa lost his ring. The loss nearly came to blows, but the phrase got shortened into a place name.<sup>26</sup> Details like naming the men make the legend believable, as do the details Anfiati Sufu supplies, things already known to an audience in Mtsapere: that Mbalamanga is the nobles' quarter of their town, around the grand mosque, and that Kavani is the poor folks' quarter, lying out at the other end of town. Between those quarters there is no contact.<sup>27</sup>

IN THAT VILLAGE THERE WAS A KING, WHO LIVED... LIKE, LET'S SAY IN  
MBALAMANGA, AND HER GRANDMOTHER WAS IN KAVANI. DO THE PEOPLE THERE  
EVEN KNOW THERE ARE PEOPLE HERE? AND THE ONES HERE, DO THEY KNOW  
THERE ARE PEOPLE OVER THERE?

Having established physical separation as the sign of rank, she can begin her story.

The heroine is being raised by grandparents, i. e. shamed without parents, and growing up ill, with sores or boils, but she is no ninny. What can she do besides wish for a husband? Speak up. She sets a mat out on the veranda, where by speaking to the king, she challenges their obvious class difference.



ONE DAY THE GIRL WAS LYING THERE ON HER MAT STRETCHED OUT ON THE VERANDA, SHE SAW ONE OF "THEM" GOING BY, SHE HAD A CRAZY IDEA. SHE TURNED AND CALLED OUT, "KING! KING!" HE TURNED AROUND. "WHY DON'T YOU COME CURE MY SICKNESS, AND WHEN I'M CURED, YOU'LL MARRY ME, AND I'LL GIVE YOU SEVEN CHILDREN — SIX BOYS AND THE SEVENTH ONE A GIRL".

Knowing the magic healing power of kings, the young woman calls him as he passes by three more times. At first, he disregards her, keeping her in her place; the second time, either compassionate or charmed, he sends her healing milk that cures most of her sores. After she calls him again (the call is repeated like the songs in other tales), he goes home to fetch clothes for all three of the little family. NOW SHE HAD CLOTHES AND FOOD, NO MORE PROBLEMS! SHE COULD SLEEP SOUNDLY. NOT LIKE ME! Uneasy lies the head of the village storyteller, it seems. Finally, the proud king, after three times disregarding this insistent woman's call, comes around: he makes a formal proposal to her grandmother, whose poverty Anfiati Sufu emphasizes by her living in a *banga* (hut) instead of a real house. WHAT WERE THE GRANDPARENTS GOING TO SAY? THE GIRL HAD NOTHING, THAT'S HOW THINGS GO WITH A KING. The narrator is quick to remind us, in her asides, of her heroine's function in a king's eyes (and in an African fairytale plot).

THAT KING HAD ONE WIFE ALREADY. SHE WAS CHILDLESS. (SEE, THAT'S WHERE THE GIRL CAME IN, FOR A HAPPY ENDING.) CHILDLESS!

Yet that barren wife does give birth to a boy, at the same time that the young wife bears the six boys and a girl she promised. This defeat goads the first wife, aided by an old henchwoman, into throwing away the children and putting stones in their place. To denote the degradation of this recurrent character, folklorists say she is 'calumniated', a term you have to love in order not to forget it. This calumniated wife, accused of giving birth to stones, says not a word in protest, but is blindfolded and never sees her children. Anfiati Sufu murmurs an aside: 'HOW COULD SHE GIVE BIRTH TO A HUMAN CHILD AND NOT KNOW IT?' Her silence foreshadows the verbal skill she will demonstrate later.

Here enters another *koko* (grandmother) figure, parallel to Grandmother Shark, who will rescue and foster the children. The stunning reduplications in Anfiati Sufu's sentence narrating the rescue are better heard than translated. Try pronouncing the words: AWARENGELEDZA, AWAHEDZA, AHISA, ARANDRUA-RANDRUA-RANDRUA MWANA

WA MASAMBI MACAMBA WAHE VALE, AWAVAMBIA-VAMBIA-VAMBIA AWALADZA. SHE CUT THE CORD, SHE TOOK CARE OF THEM, WASHED THEM, THEN CUT HER LOINCLOTH UP INTO PIECES, WRAPPED EACH ONE, LAID THEM DOWN. Meanwhile the king, believing the first wife's calumny about the stones, resumes his earlier behavior: instead of staying with his young wife, he sends her rice.

Next Anfiati Sufu follows the usual plot of Golden Children tales. The children must be sent on a seemingly impossible quest by the henchwoman.

WELL, DAY AFTER DAY, THE OLD WOMAN, THE ONE FROM THE BIRTH, WAS GOING SOMEWHERE AND STOPPED BY THE GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE, SAW THAT FINE LITTLE GIRL, HER EYES WIDENED: JUST LIKE THE KING! "WHOSE HOUSE IS THIS?"

"MY MOTHER'S."

"YOUR MOTHER'S?" SHE SAID YES. "SO DO YOU HAVE ANY BROTHERS?"

"YES, I HAVE."

"HOW MANY?"

"SIX," SHE SAID, "I'M THE SEVENTH."

"AND DO YOUR BROTHERS LOVE YOU?" THE GIRL SAID YES.

"THEY DON'T LOVE YOU. IF THEY LOVED YOU, THEY WOULD GO GET YOU LION'S MILK." [THAT WOMAN KNEW THAT] IF THE THING BECAME KNOWN, SHE WOULD LOSE HER HEAD. DON'T LIONS EAT PEOPLE?

Against grandmother's protests, the girl convinces her brothers to go on the quest, with a big sugared *muhare* (pancake) to appease the *djinn* children they will meet. *Djinns* love sweets. A bit of modernization shows when the boys meet up with *djinn* children: they are not a bit surprised at having to bribe them by sharing their pancake. The price is that the *djinns* find lion's milk for them. 'OK, GIVE IT TO US,' the *djinn* children say. 'THE LION IS OUR MOTHER!' The quest has been successful.

For the boys' second adventure, Anfiati Sufu brings back the henchwoman, to repeat some Madagascar-style dialogue.

"WHERE IS YOUR MOTHER?"

"SHE WENT OUT TO THE COUNTRY."

"AND YOUR FATHER?"

"WENT TO THE COUNTRY."

"AND YOUR BROTHERS?"

"WENT TO THE COUNTRY."

"DO YOUR BROTHERS LOVE YOU?"

"SURE THEY DO, THEY WENT AND GOT ME LION'S MILK."

"WELL! BUT THAT'S NOT IT! THEY DON'T LOVE YOU, BECAUSE IF THEY DID, YOU'D TELL THEM TO GO GET YOU THE LAUGHING ARECA NUT AND THE SPEAKING BETEL!"<sup>28</sup>

Areca palm and betel nut are the two ingredients for *shileo*, the stimulating chew that Indian people know as *paan*. The areca and betel, they're the ones who are going to reveal the whole thing. These are real twentieth-century plants; they have magic speaking powers.

IT WORKED LIKE THE MOVIES. "HOW DO YOU MAKE IT WORK?" THEY [THE *DJINN* BOYS] SAID, "I'LL TELL YOU. GO HOME, PUT IT DOWN LIKE THIS, YOU'LL HEAR ONE OF THEM LAUGHING AND THE OTHER SAYING 'WHAT ARE YOU LAUGHING AT?'"  
 'REALLY?'  
 'YEAH.'

The magic plants are gendered: the areca, more articulate than the betel, is female. Next day at lunchtime they lay out a mat and put the areca and betel on it.

THEN AS SOON AS THEY PUT IT THERE, THEY HEARD "HA, HA, HA, HA, HA, HA."  
 IT WAS THE ARECA. THE BETEL ASKED, "WHY ARE YOU LAUGHING? WHAT ARE YOU LAUGHING AT, ARECA?"  
 IT ANSWERED, "AMAZING! LET ME LAUGH..."

The areca palm can do a lot more than laugh. She now becomes an embedded narrator, no less skilled than Anfiati Sufu herself, and recycles the whole story from the top, framing dialogue into her treatment. She even starts with a formula. 'LONG AGO [*HALE HALE*] THERE WAS AN OLD WOMAN AND AN OLD MAN... A WOMAN AND A MAN, THEY HAD A DAUGHTER.' Anfiati Sufu comments, IT WAS REALLY LIKE THE MOVIES, but it is more like a live storytelling session. By embedding the recapitulation into the areca's reported speech, Anfiati Sufu hides and reveals herself, even implying that her audiences ought to pay for what she's giving them.

The climax will require another recapitulation, repeating the previous events and performing a known story. The boys — you have to love their cunning — charge a woman passerby the fat sum of two thousand *riali* for the show. Noticing the strong family resemblance, she carries the message to the king, who comes to hear the whole story in hiding while his courtier pays the boys' admission charge. Quickly the king rushes in; to avoid being seen, the girl retreats into the house, re-enacting her banishment. The boys charge the king ten thousand *riali*, and then

ONE OF THEM SAID, "OK, THERE'S ONE MORE CHILD. A SEPARATE ONE."

"WHO'S THAT?"

"WE HAVE A SISTER. THIS IS JUST OUR SHARE."

"HOW MUCH?"

"ANOTHER TEN THOUSAND."

The boys turn the total of 20,000 over to the grandparents, but they don't let the king see the girl until he hears the betel speak. That causes him to faint; of course, she has to come out and revive him.

The king stages the climactic recognition scene at the Anjouannais mosque in Mtsapere, a place well known to the audience (see Fig. 4 in Chapter 1). For that occasion the six boys demand royal clothes and a *pousse-pousse* (rickshaw) to transport them. With some ceremonious setting up of ten chairs, the next recapitulation begins only after they've squeezed another forty thousand out of the king. (It must be clear by now that in these tales, a king is realistically a local chief and symbolically a Frenchified civil servant.) Then the cinema-areca tells the whole story again, at last conferring public recognition on the young woman. Narrators do love narrating.

Now that she has embedded the two scenes of recounting, Anfiati Sufu moves fast to the dénouement. The first wife's son confirms the recognition ('ALMIGHTY GOD HAS GIVEN ME MY BROTHERS AND SISTER'); he orders his mother and her henchwoman beheaded. The king gives away his royal turban and puts the six brothers in command. His restored wife is installed in a modern apartment with all her possessions, and is later given a new house. All are rich. The closing formula, *Tsiwalishi vavo na ushonga wao* [I LEFT THEM THERE, THEM AND THEIR SILLINESS] carries out its conventional functions, to help the audience make a transition from fiction to real life and to distance her vivid narration from her spirited self. I LEFT THEM THERE, THEM AND THEIR SILLINESS, I TOOK MY MOVIE THING AND ALL THOSE STORIES, I CAME HOME, I RAISE MY RICE TO EAT, AND I MIND MY BUSINESS.

This elegant narrative was one of the eleven pieces with which Anfiati Sufu responded after Sophie Blanchy and Zaharia Soilihi asked her for stories. The three that they translated, probably the others too, blend her recall of the shared traditions of Madagascar and Mayotte with her skill in translating them into twentieth-century terms. She blends the *djinns* of Islamic Mayotte into the lions whose milk must be

fetched. She transforms the magic laughing plant into a movie projector, her audience's gateway to the world of fantasy. All the while, knowing her audience will follow, she faithfully honors the underlying themes of the *fille* tale: the vulnerability of a marriageable girl, the necessity of her marrying, the essential saving role of her birth family, and her liberation from the calumniated-wife status into a rich marriage. This capacity for innovation is part of the African-Malagasy-Mahorais tradition, shared by who knows how many predecessors. The form of *The Laughing Areca*, drawn from 'one of the eight or ten best known plots in the world',<sup>29</sup> allows her to dominate her tale with its female characters, while she absorbs and transforms the gender system of Mayotte into parallels between her audience's life situation and the symbols of the story. The language of her performance is built on ordinary talk; already known from a listener's experience are the incidents of the tale. Yet her performing sets the two worlds apart. Her piece is unique because her innovations are in classic style. Her remodeling process is an essential component of creole narrative poetics, which takes ideology and makes it aesthetic. As Terry Eagleton says;

the problem-solving process of the text is never merely a matter of its reference outwards to certain pre-existent ideological cruxes. It is, rather, a matter of the 'ideological' presenting itself in the form of the 'aesthetic' and *vice versa*.... Every phrase, every image of the text... is at once an 'answer' and a 'question,' mobilising new possibilities of conflict in the very moment of taking the weight of a provisional 'solution.'<sup>30</sup>

'Isn't it possible that 'such coded messages may ultimately help to empower a community and hence to effect change... '?<sup>31</sup>

### Her Mother, Her House

A storyteller like Anfiati Sufu is a cultural mediator. By managing plot, language and dialect, she reminds women of their power. If a patriarchal ideology teaches women 'to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values...',<sup>32</sup> her stories teach women to think outside the system. Oral narration is hence a kind of 'women's writing'. Just at the time these tales were being collected, the French critic Hélène Cixous was decreeing, 'Woman must write her self... Woman must put herself into the text — as into the world

and into history — by her own movement’.<sup>33</sup> For an audience of Comoran women, female-oriented folktales give powerful voice to deep, abiding present concerns by speaking the inherited language of metaphor. Their storytellers create in verbal art their own ways of resistance and protest. They act for themselves; they represent themselves; the word is their weapon.

In this group of tales, a woman ends her banishment by telling her own story. The outstanding performance is by Aïsha Hussein, known as Ma Sula, from Sada village on Mayotte’s west coast in July 1984 (the same place and time as Fatima Maolida). To begin her tale, she uses formulas that echo centuries of African and Malagasy verbal artists.

A TALE OF OLD TIMES.  
 THERE WAS A RICH MAN  
     THERE WAS A POOR MAN  
 THERE WAS A WAZIRI [MINISTER]  
     THERE WAS AN OLD DZINAFIKI<sup>34</sup>  
     THERE WAS A MAN.

Ma Sula’s orphan girl comes right out of that world. She is being raised by a *kadhi* [foster father], a figure of the ‘real’ world. Knowing what property she will bring to a future husband, he intends her for his son. After he shows her the contents of her mother’s house, the audacious girl spies where he keeps the key; thereafter she goes to the house sometimes with her friends, to raid it for sweets, biscuits, and Cokes (it’s 1984 in Mayotte). She took some clothes too, and gave them to them. All those children got into the habit of going to her place and looting, over and over — . behavior not found in most old-time tales, but believable enough in twentieth-century Mayotte or anywhere else.

The girl falls under the influence of a seemingly kind neighbor lady — poor, predatory, with several daughters, a would-be stepmother figure.<sup>35</sup> As if offering her a pseudo-family to replace her dead parent, she prompts the girl to steal more of her mother’s goods and bring them to her. She empties her mother’s house and gets some boys to pick all the coconuts and mangoes nearby. Noting that she’s nearing marriageable age, the *kadhi* discovers the thefts and intervenes to retrieve everything. She admits having given it all away, the *kadhi* demands their restoration, and already the pseudo-stepmother is plotting to kill the girl. The abstract stylization of folktale doesn’t require this motivation; Ma Sula

supplies it as part of her (or her sources') remodeling. The daughters take the girl fishing the next day. Firstly, they pick *uruba*, a plant used to line a fishing basket in the water; as the audience knows, the infusion of the plant narcotizes and inebriates the fish, and perhaps an innocent human as well.<sup>36</sup> But they don't succeed in drowning her: she is saved much as Shura was, by a little *djinn*. He is both grouper fish and a human-like only child, who rejoices,

"MAMA, I FOUND MYSELF A SISTER!"

"YOU FOUND YOURSELF A SISTER?"

"YES."

"WHERE?"

"IT'S A HUMAN."

"A HUMAN?"

"YES."

"WHAT HAPPENED?"

HE SAID, "I SAW SOME HUMANS PUTTING OUT *URUBA*, I WENT TO GET HIGH,  
JUST THEN I SAW HUMANS PUSH THAT GIRL IN, AND I CAUGHT HER."

Being under water presents no more threat to this girl than it did to Shura. More realism: his motherly mother, queen of the *djinnns*, notices that she is a good Muslim who has to avoid certain foods and directs her son to take correct food to her. As she grows up, the care these fish-foster-parents give her is realistic — they will make all provision for a marriageable girl — but they also sequester her where she may never be found, a regular incident both in tales of a mistreated heroine and in the life of a marriageable girl.

Ma Sula continues her realistic blending. At the age of seventeen, she observes that the girl 'LOOKED FINE, WITH NICE ARMS, NICE LEGS'. At twenty-five she has to be married. The humanlike *djinnns* know the marriage rules: she can't marry one of them. Being helpful fish from the folktale world, they have no trouble buying real-world objects like beds, sheets, plates, and pots (imported from France); they put her on an island, where she sings her plight. Sequestration builds suspense. A friendly fisherman hears her song, with its riddle-like words no one can understand. If she was to be sequestered, she would use verbal art, posing a riddle only she could solve. When the fisherman has tipped off the king and the villagers come to persuade her, she begins recovering her social place. The fisherman is rewarded with riches but not promoted. The

king welcomes her and marries her to his son. In this quasi-conclusive moment of order, she finds her new husband to be another helper. He will allow her to show her own mastery of language, to explain the riddle, and to show her gratitude for the generous treatment from the *djinn* fish.



Fig. 15 Jackfruit. Photo by Augustus Binu, CC BY-SA 3.0, Wikimedia Commons, [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/ba/Jackfruit\\_hanging.JPG](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/ba/Jackfruit_hanging.JPG)

A month goes by before she plays storyteller, framing her life as a local anecdote: 'BACK HOME, LONG AGO, I HEARD A STORY ABOUT A GIRL FROM HERE,' an orphan girl, ten years before, whose fortune was consumed and who was then killed. She takes her husband to the site of her mother's house, where she removes her quite realistic modern brassiere, and puts it around the trunk of a quite realistic *jacquier* (jackfruit tree). Thus does



she identify the tree with herself: jackfruit are big and round and grow in pairs. The wood of the tree will be transformed into the replacement for her mother's house, which will be her own. Now when she repeats her riddle-like song, her husband says;

'WHY DON'T YOU WANT TO TELL ME WHAT YOUR SONG MEANS? I WANT TO KNOW.'

'NO, NO, IT'S ONLY A SONG. EVERY TIME YOU HEAR IT, YOU WANT TO KNOW THE MEANING? WHY DON'T YOU ASK ME THE MEANING OF ALL THE OTHER THINGS YOU HAVE HEARD?'

But she keeps the secret of her strange behavior. Repeatedly she refuses to explain the song or translate the riddle. Next day at sundown, they see that her mysterious song is somehow effecting a gradual rebuilding of her mother's house by the *djinn*s. In place of her bra, she buries a *dzivudzi* there — perhaps a skin or a feather. That provision from the folktale donor, her *djinn* mother, will help her gain her object of search, the house. On the third, fourth, and fifth day, they see the mother's house being realistically if magically reconstructed; on the seventh day it is finished. King and husband are equally mystified, but among the villagers, the young people guess, Maybe the owner is coming back and building the house. The king, being a modern landowner, wants to find out who is building in this unauthorized manner. This sort of updating, says Blanchy, is necessary for the tale to remain pertinent and evolve at the lexical level.<sup>37</sup>

Now, in a storytelling flourish by Ma Sula or from her sources, the husband takes a turn at narrating what he knows to his father the king, embedding his wife's story in his own.

"ONE DAY MY WIFE ASKED ME QUESTIONS ABOUT A GIRL WHOSE PARENTS WERE DEAD, WHOSE FORTUNE HAD BEEN SWALLOWED UP, AND WHO GOT KILLED WHEN SHE COMPLAINED. I SAID OK, BUT SHE ASKED ME TO GO WITH HER TO SEE THAT GIRL'S MOTHER'S PLACE. THEN I SAW HER DO WEIRD THINGS I DIDN'T LIKE, AS IF... AS IF SHE WERE NOT HUMAN. SHE LEFT SOME THINGS THERE, AND THE NEXT DAY WE FOUND THE HOUSE HAD BEEN BUILT, AND FINALLY THE ROOF WAS ON AND IT WAS ALL DONE."

"AND CAN'T YOU SPEAK TO YOUR WIFE?"

"YES, OF COURSE I CAN."

"SO WHY HAVEN'T YOU ASKED HER ABOUT HOW THAT HOUSE GOT BUILT?"

"I DID ASK HER, BUT SHE WOULDN'T TELL ME."

He suspects she is a *djinn*; trying again to get the explanation, he arouses his father's anger when he fails. Inserting his bit of storytelling may be Ma Sula's special touch, but modernizing has probably always been part of narrating style in Mayotte. The woman takes charge.

WELL, AT SUNDOWN HIS WIFE SAID, "LET'S GO [THERE]", AND WHEN THEY GOT THERE SHE OPENED THE DOOR AND SAW THE BEDS, AND ALL THE THINGS IN THE HOUSE HAD BEEN PUT THERE. IN THE KITCHEN SHE FOUND HER POTS, HER TINS, THE TRIVET FOR THE FIRE. IT WAS ALL IN ORDER AS IF SHE ALREADY LIVED THERE. SHE SAID, "YOU CAN COME IN TOMORROW."

BUT HER HUSBAND SAID, "YOU'RE NOT COMING BACK INTO THIS HOUSE UNTIL YOU EXPLAIN. I WANT US TO BE FRANK WITH EACH OTHER, YOU AND ME. OR ELSE TELL ME TO LEAVE!"

"ALL RIGHT, I'LL TELL YOU EVERYTHING ABOUT THIS HOUSE, BUT YOU HAVE TO GET THE DRUM BEATEN AND EVERYBODY COMES TOGETHER".

As the story moves to its close, the evil forces are left behind and the untranslatable words of the song are translated, her performance of herself as herself is enough to close both the embedded narrative and its frame.

SHE WENT TO WHERE SHE WAS BORN, HER MOTHER'S HOUSE, TO WORK THE MEDICINES SHE'D GIVEN HER. THAT'S HOW HER PARENTS CAME TO BUILD HER HOUSE AND GAVE HER EVERYTHING NEEDED FOR INSIDE IT. AND THAT GIRL'S FATHER IS UMIE MUZAWAGE, HER MOTHER IS MAMAE SHIZAWAGA; NANA HINDI BALI MAGAZA IS HER SISTER, AMIA SHO FII IHA YOSA IS HERSELF.

I LEFT THEM THERE AND WENT ON MY WAY.

Her climactic answer to the riddle, as the last line of the piece, points to the identity of mother and daughter with the house, which, says Blanchy, is;

the place of all material and psychological security. Although in Mayotte everyone belongs as much to his or her father's family as to the mother's, it is only the mother's side that represents rooting, security. The orphan girl, deprived of her maternal house by a neighbor's malignity, is at last restored to her heritage thanks to the providential help of a fish mother. Now, like any respectable woman, she has her own house, where a husband — a king's son, of course — will come to join her.<sup>38</sup>

The heroine's interest is any woman's interest: recovering her inheritance, regaining the house that is rightfully hers, installing a proper husband in it, preserving the kinship rules. The symbolism of her ritual of fastening

her bra to the tree, then removing it and burying a skin there, is not so mysterious after all: she acts to identify herself with her parents. Most emphasized is the ideological point: a woman knows she is entitled to help from her dead mother, and knows how to assert her identity by telling her story.

What about Ma Sula's own story? Given her delight in embedding, she could have invented this one on the traditional models. For a narrator to embed storytelling, says Barbara Johnson of Mallarmé, is to question how a story comes into existence and what that means.<sup>39</sup> Folklorists have evaded that question by attributing the origin of a present performance to a mystified something of the past called 'oral tradition.' As more knowledge accumulates about African and Malagasy storytelling, and about the diverse languages and cultures converging in Mayotte, the ways in which a present performer preserves and modifies what she remembers from her predecessors will become clearer. To examine and critique the patriarchal system of Mayotte in the 1980s was the artistic form of women's resistance to male domination, as their ownership of property is the material form of that resistance. When this character's narration reveals her previously hidden identity, gender becomes part of poetics. If the audience for Ma Sula's performance perceives the thematic relationship between the framed and the framing narrative, the nature of a woman's mistreatment will have been revealed to both audiences. Her moment of recognition is all-important. Only by singing the song or telling her story will the heroine be recognized. This moment is what Aristotle, writing about effects in tragedy, calls a shift from ignorance to awareness. Formally it is recognition, *anagnorisis*, as much as it is *peripeteia*, a shift of direction. As in Attic tragedy, the 'reversal brought about in the realm of knowledge (an enigma is resolved, a false accusation disproved, a fallacious interpretation corrected) completes and closes the narrative movement'.<sup>40</sup> Formal analysis identifies this as the most moving moment in the piece. The plot requires it. The *hale* loves its resolution as much as tragedy does.

Tales like Her Mother's House embody the contradiction Michelle Rosaldo noted: 'The very symbolic and social approaches that appear to set women apart and to circumscribe their activities may be used by women as a basis for female solidarity and worth'.<sup>41</sup> Tellers and audiences of repeated performances have the advantage of the repetition. As

Butler says, 'it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible.'<sup>42</sup> For the performer to sing the same song five times in the voice of her character is literal repetitive signifying. When both find their voice, both become real. 'To embody the norms that govern speakability in one's speech [says Butler] is to consummate one's status as a subject of speech,'<sup>43</sup> and one's status as a speaker.

Narrating in Mayotte critiques gender as part of the social order the storyteller and her audience live in. Performing what a woman can 'be,' as Butler says (drawing on Foucault);

is constrained in advance by a regime of truth that decides what will and will not be a recognizable form of being. Although the regime of truth decides in advance what form recognition can take, it does not fully constrain this form. Indeed, decide may be too strong a word, since the regime of truth offers a framework for the scene of recognition, delineating who will qualify as a subject of recognition and offering available norms for the act of recognition... His point, however, is not only that there is always a relation to such norms, but that any relation to the regime of truth will at the same time be a relation to myself.<sup>44</sup>

It is left to the reader or hearer to draw a conclusion that the dominant ideology has to suppress.<sup>45</sup> As they maintain the oral-literary matrilineage, the women's narrating becomes a tool for 1980s modernization by honoring ambiguity, presenting their alternative social vision.

Incidentally, an animal mother, in a contrasting Mayotte story collected by Gueunier, has magic powers. A woman is rescued from the forest by a prince, an encounter that looks promising until she refuses to marry him. Her mother, she tells him, is a fierce, powerful cow. In some versions, she is born from an egg and the cow is foster mother. Either way she is alien, unsuitable for human marriage. So fierce, in fact, is this bovine mother (in some versions a stepmother), and so determined to assert the primacy of the birth family, that when the prince takes the girl, she goes in pursuit, removes her daughter's eyes, takes them home, and sets them over her hearth. Each time the girl weeps — which she does a lot, because she is ceaselessly tormented by the prince's other wives — the mother sees the eyes fill with tears. At the end she relents: she restores the eyes, thus enabling her daughter to triumph over her rivals and become the prince's sole wife.<sup>46</sup> A mother's power, then, can cause

her daughter both pain and happiness. What will the female listener take from the story?

### What Is Your Mother's Name?

These tales share with Propp's donor sequence (formal analysis again) a kind of allegory. A woman's reality, her true nature or identity, is tested by being suppressed by male authority; she reacts within her oppressed circumstances, for instance by the permitted art of singing, sometimes acquiring female allies, until she reveals it by the art of narrating. One of the most powerful stories recorded in Mayotte, *The Dog's Daughters*, follows this sequence, combines it with the all-important mother-daughter relationship, and poses the question 'Where do babies come from?' The model comes from Madagascar.

A jealous co-wife spreads the story that a wife, whom we know to be innocent, has given birth to an old broom (a human implement), the jawbone of an ox (detritus from the animal world), and a stone (from the natural world). In other versions of the slander, jealous co-wives remove her real children and put a broom and mallet in their place. Sometimes her sisters remove the babies and replace them with a cat and rat. Or if there are six babies, the wife's sisters replace them with pebbles, rags (human waste), brooms (human implements), ox's jaws (human discard from the animal world), gourds (vegetable objects of human use). In some versions these conspirators even convince the mother herself that their lie is true. Their slander, having been loudly announced to the people, must be disproved at the end of the tale by a recognition scene.<sup>47</sup>

Distantly the tale is traceable to the Malagasy legend of descent from a woman from under sea or out of the river (the Ranoro story in chapter 1). Its triggering point is the dog mother's insistent presence.

The dog, both detested and honored, is an ambivalent symbol. 'Everyone knows' that dogs are despised in Islamic societies; in Mayotte and Islamic parts of Madagascar, dogs are not allowed into villages. 'This animal [says one historian] appears there as especially impure; the tiniest contact with it entails immediate and scrupulous ablutions'. Yet Malagasy people do raise dogs outside their village. They need them to hunt the *tenrec*, the hedgehog used for meat.<sup>48</sup> Some Malagasy, such as the Bara in the south, have affection for a dog as a dependent: 'The greatest dishonor, the Bara still say, is to see the dog who has chosen to

follow you die of hunger.' One can still hear people there describe an unprovided man as having 'No DOG, NO OX' [*TSY AMBOA TSY LAMBO*].<sup>49</sup> In the tale, the fictional dog is both despised and honored, blending Malagasy tolerance with Islamic scorn for man's best and most impure friend. Creole ambivalence loves contradiction. Throughout the tale, two sisters — that beloved folktale pair, the kind and unkind girls — are confronted by the necessity of deception and driven by the fear of shame.<sup>50</sup> Gueunier recorded two versions four years apart, one told sparsely in plain style in 1977, by a woman of Poroani, the other much richer, by a young woman originally from Kany Kely, living in Mwamoju when he recorded her in 1981. Her version is a Mayotte original.

### The Poroani Version

The Poroani narrator (or her source) poses the paradox of parentage right at the outset: 'WELL, THERE WAS SOMEONE, IT WAS A DOG, SHE GAVE BIRTH TO HUMAN CHILDREN, IN THE FOREST — THERE, AT THE FOOT OF A TREE'. The birth of twins is not unusual, but the image of a dog mother takes the audience instantly into an alternative world not too distant from the real one. Descent from a dog in any world is more mundane and unsavory than descent from a woman from under sea. So shameful is the birth of these babies from an animal that it must be kept secret; the question of what family a girl comes from is the primary consideration for her future marriage.<sup>51</sup> At that same moment, the king's wife, barren until now, gives birth to a daughter — how? The Kany Kely narrator answers: an old woman provided a magic remedy, a mango. The king's wife obediently eats it, but forgets the wise woman's requirement that the peelings must not be eaten by an animal. A dog eats the peels. After nine months, the dog bears twin human girls and the wife gives birth to a little girl. Immediately she commands secrecy: 'WELL, LOOK, WHAT TO DO, WE'LL TAKE THOSE TWO BABIES AND WE'LL PUT THEM WITH THIS ONE, AND IN THE MORNING, WHEN PEOPLE COME TO ASK IF THE KING'S WIFE HAS GIVEN BIRTH, WE'LL TELL THEM "YES, SHE HAD TRIPLETS"'. How quick the ruling class is to steal and conceal.

As the twins grow up, in both versions they quickly polarize into a treacherous sister, who despises her dog mother and ultimately kills her, and a dutiful sister-daughter, who reveres her mother and

acts accordingly. The thinly told Poroani version plays up the themes of secrecy and shame. The girls grow up and marry. The dog mother, having taken refuge at her kind daughter's house, dies. 'WHEN SHE DIED,' the narrator says unemotionally, 'HER DAUGHTER TOOK HER AND WRAPPED HER IN A SHROUD, JUST LIKE A PERSON. SHE BURIED HER'. When her husband demands that they follow convention by visiting her mother, she lies: her mother, she says, lives in the neighboring island, Anjouan. So they must go there. They load a boat with gifts; on the way, shame impels her to lie again. WHEN THEY'D GOT, UH, PRETTY FAR OFF, THE WIFE SAID, 'HAVE THEM STOP THE BOAT, I'M GOING TO GO DO MAUDHURI'. It is a woman's regular practice to go to defecate on the beach, knowing her husband won't follow her there. In fact, she is resolved to drown herself. On the beach she meets a *Biby* (monster snake) and asks it to devour her, so ashamed is she. But the *Biby* is a donor, who refuses to eat her, as she has received her mother's blessing. He tells her how to pass for a king's lost daughter. She goes on to Anjouan and succeeds in the deception. Much excitement; her *grand mariage* temporarily creates a society of the spectacle, and excites the envy of her sister. Both versions end in an unsuccessful imitation by that treacherous sister. The Poroani narrator uses the reporting style of Allibert's narrators: the unkind sister meets the *Biby*, repeats her sister's account, says, 'Eat me!', and obligingly the snake does just that.

### The Mwamoju Version

The 1981 narrator makes more of that, and of every scene leading up to it. Firstly, she elicits sympathy by delaying the women's marriage until they have left home. Their canine mother's affection for them incites catcalls from their human sister: 'ZANAKA NY FANDRÔKA! [THE BITCH'S DAUGHTERS!]' They are so humiliated that they leave ('WE ARE TOO SHAMED') and find their way to an unknown village. Then men's abuse of power comes in, personified by a *kadhi*, an arrogant civil servant whose duties consist of sitting in an office and looking out at what is happening in the road. His dialogue with the girls gets him an impossible and honest answer that blends truth and secrecy.

"WHAT'S YOUR MOTHER'S NAME?"

"WE DON'T KNOW."

"WHAT'S YOUR FATHER'S NAME?"

"WE DON'T KNOW."

"AH, BUT WHERE ARE YOU COMING FROM?"

"WE JUST LEFT, WE DON'T KNOW WHERE OUR MOTHER IS, WE ARE LOST, WE JUST WENT STRAIGHT AHEAD OF US." IN FACT THEY KNEW PERFECTLY WELL, BUT THEY DIDN'T WANT TO TELL HIM.

How skillfully these women's verbal prowess controls a man through fiction. The *kadhi* and his deputy take and marry (appropriate) the girls. In the phrase of the poet L. S. Asekoff, 'rescue = kidnap; kidnap = rescue'.<sup>52</sup> If the dog mother were not still offstage, the story could end right there, with the girls safely married, but as the shame of their birth is not yet cleared, the Mwamaju narrator continues.

Their dog mother has followed them. No other dog would dare come into the village. From their house the women recognize their mother's voice. The elder one said, 'THAT AWFUL DOG! SHE'S REALLY AWFUL, THAT DOG! HOW DID SHE GET HERE TO EMBARRASS US SO?' SHE QUICKLY SAID TO HER SERVANTS, 'GO AFTER THAT DOG THAT'S BARKING, CATCH HER, KILL HER AND THROW AWAY HER BODY.' But the younger sister is bereft at the loss of her mother. The narrator's solicitude for making sure the audience doesn't miss anything is reflected in her habit of stringing together clauses, quite discernible in translation: THEY BROUGHT IT, THE WOMAN PICKED IT RIGHT UP, SHE WENT TO BUY A BEAUTIFUL WHITE SHROUD, SHE WRAPPED THE DOG VERY PRETTILY, HER HUSBAND HAD A NICE BIG TRUNK, SHE TOOK HER HUSBAND'S CLOTHES AND PUT THEM SOMEPLACE ELSE, SHE TOOK THE DOG, SHE WRAPPED HER IN THE SHROUD VERY PRETTILY, AND SHE PUT IT IN HER HUSBAND'S TRUNK AND PUT A COVER OVER IT. What will her husband think when the odor reveals the decaying carcass? But instead of smelling bad, the trunk gives off a paradisaal fragrance, which causes her husband to open it. He discovers treasure, which he takes to be a pile of gifts. When questioned, the younger sister can only stammer, 'THAT ALL COMES FROM MY MOTHER.' Some hearers will recognize that smell from the many tales in which a royal corpse, instead of beginning to stink, gives off a magical odor. All will catch the larger meaning, that all valuable things come from your mother. They pack their bags, mount horses, and set out.<sup>53</sup> When she meets the snake and must answer his question, the narrator frames in her life story.



SHE SAID, "OH — I WAS BROUGHT INTO THE WORLD BY A DOG, AND THAT DOG FOLLOWED US EVERYWHERE, I WAS ASHAMED, 'CAUSE PEOPLE SAID I WAS A DOG'S DAUGHTER. WE WERE ASHAMED, SO WE FLED, ME AND MY BIG SISTER, AND WE GOT TO A PLACE WHERE WE FOUND MEN WHO TOOK US AS WIVES. BUT AFTER, THE DOG CAME, AND MY SISTER'S SERVANTS KILLED IT. I TOOK IT AND PUT IT INTO A SUITCASE [VALIZY], AND THE DAY MY HUSBAND OPENED IT, IT HAD BECOME PERFUMES AND GOLD AND SILVER. THEN HE SAID WE WOULD GO SEE MY MOTHER. BUT I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHERE MY MOTHER IS; MY MOTHER REALLY IS THAT DOG. SO HE SAID WE WOULD GO SEE HER NOW, AND I'M ASHAMED. SO, EAT ME", SHE SAID TO THE SNAKE.

But the snake is no threat; rather he is an agent of her transformation. He helps her pass for the lost daughter of a king and queen who lost their daughter long ago. He even disguises her with a *noro*, 'the mysterious light [that] marks the face of a woman blessed by God for filial love, just as it marked the face of the Prophet.'<sup>54</sup> The *noro* will eclipse her secret. But before that king can give her the expected magnificent reception, an old busybody tips him off and claims credit for the *noro*, in return for a meal. 'I FOUND YOUR DAUGHTER, I FOUND YOUR DAUGHTER, AND I PUT A LIGHT [ON HER FACE]. SHE'S HERE, SHE IS COMING, COME SEE HER.' The king recognizes that light; she tells him her true story, which reveals that she is ready for marrying him. Happy ending.

When her unkind sister learns what has happened, she must launch an unsuccessful imitation:

"NOW THAT YOU, YOU GOT ALL THESE BEAUTIFUL THINGS, YOU DON'T WANT ME TO HAVE MY SHARE, YOU DON'T WANT TO LET ME GO THERE."

SHE SAID TO HER, "WELL, GO AHEAD THEN, BUT IF YOU GO, I HAVE A FEELING YOU WILL DIE."

SHE ANSWERED, "I'LL GO EVEN IF I MUST DIE FROM IT." SO NOW IT'S HER TURN TO RECOUNT THE LIFE STORY, A TRUE ACCOUNT OF HERSELF AND HER KIND SISTER.

"ME — MY MOTHER — WE DIDN'T HAVE ANY MOTHER, WE WERE BROUGHT INTO THE WORLD BY A DOG, AND THAT DOG, WE STAYED WITH OUR MOTHER SO LONG THAT THAT DOG FOLLOWED US EVERYWHERE WE WENT, AND WE WERE ASHAMED. WE RAN AWAY, AND WE GOT TO A PLACE NEAR MTSAPERE, WHERE WE FOUND MEN WHO MARRIED US. THE DOG FOLLOWED US AND I SENT SERVANTS TO KILL THAT DOG, AND SHE'S DEAD."

SHE EXPLAINED EVERYTHING SHE'D DONE, AND THE SNAKE ANSWERED, "WELL, I WAS SENT TO LOOK FOR PEOPLE WHO WEREN'T BLESSED BY THEIR MOTHER, TO KILL THEM. WELL, YOU WEREN'T BLESSED BY YOUR MOTHER. YOU

KILLED YOUR MOTHER, YOUR MOTHER THE DOG." SHE WANTED TO RUN AWAY, BUT THE SNAKE CAUGHT HER, BIT HER, SWALLOWED HER INTO HIS STOMACH. SHE DIED.

The husband returns and reports his loss. AND I LEFT THEM THERE AND CAME HERE.<sup>55</sup>

That young woman of Mwamoju knows how to vivify her story; whoever her mentor was, she learned well. Plentiful dialogue and ironic touches, like that colonial Frenchman in caricature, convey respect for her two women characters. The climactic device in all these tales is to resolve the tension between shame and secrecy by having the oppressed woman tell the truth. This device (in Tzvetan Todorov's words) 'is an articulation of the most essential property of all narrative. For the embedding narrative is the *narrative of a narrative*.' For characters (and their narrators) to live, 'they must narrate.'<sup>56</sup> The framed-in life story makes the whole piece into what Roland Barthes calls 'that type of message which takes as its object not its content but its own form'.<sup>57</sup> Yet beyond that resolution lies ambivalence. Riches, acceptance, and a royal husband are awarded to a woman who has disguised herself. Concealing her secret and telling her story brings her power.

## Questions of Interpretation

One way to read this piece assumes that folklore is about the past. Then it is a historical legend of long-ago Madagascar, preserved in Mayotte's folk memory. Its theme, says the historian Jean-Pierre Domenichini, is native resistance by Malagasy to foreign usurpation. He hears the earlier, Poroani version speaking out of a Madagascar untouched by Arab influence, and the later version speaking for the time after Islamic conversion. Hence it 'presents both a profession of faith and a political analysis of the situation', and it declares that though people are conventionally Muslim, fundamentally they are Malagasy.<sup>58</sup> Noël Gueunier, while agreeing that the tale speaks to deep concerns about invasion, reads its theme as not resistance but convergence. The *oaziry* (ministers), for example, are owners of the land under Muslim law. Being of local origin, they have tended to resist the new law and uphold the older Mahorais tradition of matrilineal power. The story shows the two systems converging in a view of history: 'Marriage between the Arab and the *oazir*'s daughter produces the ideal heir to the kingdom,

carrying legitimacy from both sides'.<sup>59</sup> Readers of the *fille difficile* will wonder how marrying an Arab can make a happy ending. But both scholars place the story firmly in Madagascar's past.

An alternative reading would ask why such a tale would be told in Mayotte in the 1980s. Around the same time, Sophie Blanchy collected a Shimaore version from Salima Djindani, of Bandrele. What keeps it current is that it speaks to 'the great fear of everyone in Mayotte..., being publicly shamed'.<sup>60</sup> The dog's daughters are motivated by shame, which (disguised in secrecy) prevails until marriage ends the tale. The function of the narrative, in Lévi-Straussian terms, is to resolve such a contradiction. The authority figures commendably rescue the two young women from being out in the world on their own, but because they also appropriate the women, they are branded as dictatorial; juxtaposition of opposites constitutes a blend. With the Malagasy passion for secrecy the tale combines the houseowner role for women, a belittling of men, and a declaration that only a woman's mother will save her. Its contradictions speak to enduring gender and family tensions in Mahorais society. In the terms of creolization theory, the function of the narrative is to allow those contradictions — which suggests that the dog mother story must be a new and hybrid creation in and of Mayotte.<sup>61</sup>

### What These Women Are Particularly Good At

The plot of *The Dog's Daughters* shows the Malagasy habit of secrecy as inseparable from its opposite, a woman's drive towards recognition. Judith Butler speaks to the contradiction for a female narrator: 'That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility. As a result, the "I" that I am finds itself at once constituted by norms and dependent on them...'<sup>62</sup> The narrator role makes it possible to show how dependent she is on social norms and empowers her to question them. In an era of global cultural flows, secrecy and masking are the cherished qualities for a quasi-colony to practice. No tale expresses more poignantly the concern of Mahorais women for legitimizing themselves, or their reliance on narrative to that end. No vehicle for expressing such concerns is more sophisticated or effectual than these narratives.<sup>63</sup>

Listening to this tale, at the time when Mayotte was asserting its independence, what effect could scenes of the construction of a self have on women? To a western observer, it might seem that a woman of a long-neglected colony must have been 'in fact trapped within a discourse [she] has no power to evade or to alter'; that a storyteller's performing, which looks so much like agency, 'is merely yet another effect of the law disguised as something different'.<sup>64</sup> But it's equally possible that some narrators are using narrative discourse to criticize the law. Their texts suggest that. Observing Mauritius, another formerly colonized island in the region, anthropologist Patrick Eisenlohr sees acts of performance both creating and claiming identities.<sup>65</sup> Beyond the Indian Ocean, in the Caribbean or Peru for example, new folklore always results from cultural convergence. Nor is that re-creation confined to creole societies: the social subordination of immigrant populations in the United States and Britain encourages them to create new folklore. All societies engage in cultural renegotiation in their own ways.

Blanchy's women narrators are especially attentive to their listeners. Anfiati Sufu, beginning *The Laughing Areca*, locates the king character in the familiar ground of the social scene they share with her characters. When the girl's grandparents die, she says something her usual audience doesn't need to be told: a girl without parents is alone.<sup>66</sup> Referring in this way to something listeners or readers will recognize is familiar in literature under the name of allusion. Oral narrators continually refer to things familiar to their audience, as poets do everywhere. African tales and proverbs often allude to each other in a way only the in-group will fully enjoy. Not all Mahorais storytellers rely on allusion as much as these women do, but all of them appeal to community standards, and the use of allusion is a force for cohesion. Performance of folktales is one of Foucault's 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak'.<sup>67</sup> When they perform, Anfiati Sufu, Fatima Maolida and the rest (re)create tradition, combining the motifs from Africa and Madagascar with the cultural and local emphases of Mayotte. Of course, that's just part of the job, but these women are especially skilled at handling the dialectic between tradition and the performing situation.

Tradition in Mayotte is obviously multiple, being an agglomeration of discourses that began in the 13th century. Audiences probably expect something that feels traditional, like the *filie* story. A narrator's

creativity may consist in reproducing a heard performance closely. The tales we read today are reproduced verbatim by their collectors, but orally they have been creatively remodeled by tellers like these women. Probably some of Claude Allibert's schoolboy narrators did that with trickster tales. Some of Gueunier's narrators seem to be doing that without remembering their sources very well. Tradition does not equal blind repetition. It is more traditional, in a society of mixed heritages, to recontextualize or adapt an old story like the *filles* to its new setting. That's why the handsome husband is a *djinn*. Creole societies excel in a third kind of creativity, coining a new tale like *The Dog's Daughters* in the pattern Blanchy identified. All these kinds of feminine creativity draw energy from a social context that the storyteller and the hearer use to interpret the tale. Part of that context, says Blanchy, is that a woman is in a position of solidarity with her house, her mother, and her daughter, and of rivalry with women of all other houses. If she must avoid isolation, she must also steer clear of the spontaneity and frankness so much valued by some westerners.<sup>68</sup> That caution may help to account for the spare style of some texts. Anonymity is impossible in Mayotte, as fieldworkers have discovered. Communication takes place through the use of significant linguistic symbols, which are a great aid to simultaneously hiding and revealing oneself. The tales that have been collected and translated by our three collectors are a congeries of those symbols, artistically arranged.

### In Closing

Once folktales from Mayotte are translated, how much can a reader at a distance expect to appreciate them? Readability depends on emphases in that reader's culture, which differ as much the difference between Kibushi and English or French. 'In light of contingency and embeddedness, it seems untenable to claim transcultural, transhistorical literary value', writes one critic (about Shakespeare, by the way).<sup>69</sup> Really? Does embeddedness mean anything more than that performance takes place in an identifiable social setting? Think of the performance of *Macbeth* before James I in 1606. Publication is a variety of performance: think of the publication of *Bleak House* in nineteen numbers of Dickens's periodical *Household Words* in 1852–53, or the posthumous publication of

three volumes of *À la recherche du temps perdu* in 1923–27. The reception of those three works is part of their performance. Their embeddedness also means their reception. Similarly, the translations and commentaries of our three collectors enable a reader to imagine folktale performance and understand how it fits, in one network of human communication. The contingency of the tales — their reference to the past, or to present concerns — is a question to be investigated, like Shakespeare's topical reference to bad weather embedded in the second act of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

In this book I practice on Mahorais narrators the literary-critical approach called Theory of Mind, which its advocates call 'our ability to explain people's behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires'.<sup>70</sup> Imagine being asked to tell stories (*hale* or *angano*) by a person you more or less know. You agree. You have to think and decide what you will tell the collector; maybe you will think back to occasions when you heard stories being told, and recall one that stands out, but the present occasion is distinct from that one. Most of what gives form to your individual style is a result of selection among pre-existing cultural ideas.<sup>71</sup> Your sources, like your mental spaces, are realized in 'a variety of sources — traditional, functional, technological, innovative...'.<sup>72</sup> They are the cultural equivalent of the conceptual metaphors studied by cognitive linguists. In print, you will be seen both calling up the past and recreating and renegotiating your culture. Your collector will bring experience of his or her past and translate your words for a prospective audience. Few of the tales in this book dive into history. If their derivation, say from Madagascar, meant that they were primarily 'about' Mayotte's past, only a few specialized readers would care about them, and no one would claim they had transcultural, transhistorical literary value. In fact, however, the tales in this book became available to the memory of their tellers and the notebooks of the collectors because they meant something about the concerns of the 1970s–80s. Concepts like mixing, adaptation, re-creation, remodeling, parody, and creolization help to answer the universal question how storytellers use the past help the present. They produce knowledge.

This book has been based on the principle that blending formal and historical analysis investigates 'the historical conditions of possibility of specific forms...'.<sup>73</sup> Some other principles follow.

- All cultures have and use equal powers of expression and channels for communication.
- Creativity is universal. So is storytelling.
- 'Creativity may consist in the use of an old sentence [or tale] in a new setting just as much as in the use of a new sentence [or tale] in an old setting'.<sup>74</sup>
- 'Stories are not difficult to make up. If you have understood life, it's easy to make stories' (Sydney Joseph, Mauritian storyteller).
- Heard melodies are sweet, but those yet unheard may turn out to be sweeter.
- Cultures are never isolated from one another; they continually 'borrow', translate, and appropriate cultural elements.
- People in situations of unequal power renegotiate their cultures and thereby create new folklore. 'The production and consumption of art... is socially organized'.<sup>75</sup>
- 'Paradoxically enough, elements and structures of folktales can present a surprising formal similarity across the most diverse ethnicities and cultures. But analysis shows that the signification arising from them, or permeating them, is altogether different, for each culture they are part of employs them with its own motivation and perspective'.<sup>76</sup>
- 'Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature'.<sup>77</sup>
- 'The metaphoric innovations of poets... consist not in the totally new creation of metaphoric thought but in the marshalling of already existing forms of metaphoric thought to form new extensions and combinations of old metaphorical mappings'.<sup>78</sup>
- 'The blended space contains information which has been partially selected from each of the input spaces in a way that a new structure emerges, resulting from a new arrangement of pieces of information present in the inputs'.<sup>79</sup>
- 'A successful work of art is not one which resolves objective contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which

expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure.<sup>80</sup>

- 'If a lion could talk, we wouldn't be able to understand it'.<sup>81</sup>

## Endnotes

- 1 Philip M. Allen, *Security and Nationalism in the Indian Ocean: Lessons from the Latin Quarter Islands* (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 128.
- 2 Sophie Blanchy, *Maisons des femmes, cités des hommes. Filiation, âge et pouvoir à Ngazidja (Comores)* (Nanterre: Société d'Ethnologie, 2010), pp. 22–24.
- 3 The storytellers Blanchy names are Fatima Maolida, Hafuswati Abdallah, Anfiati Sufu, Salima Djindani, Salama Yankubu, Mariamu Atumani, Camille Abdillahi, Aïsha Useni, and Anfiati Sufu. She recorded many others. Dady ny Saidy, Reny Daosy, and Vavy imbo Djabu were recorded by Noël Gueunier. The names, villages, and stories are tabulated in the index. Blanchy's collaborators in the research were Zaharia Soilihi and Ramlati Ahmed.
- 4 Quoted in Richard Howard, *Alone with America: Essays on the Art of Poetry in the United States since 1950* (New York: Atheneum, 1980), p. 285.
- 5 *L'oiseau*, pp. 374–77. Motifs: G10, Cannibalism; G303.3.1.2, The devil as a well-dressed gentleman; G512.8, Ogre killed by striking.
- 6 Maurice Fontoynt and Raomandahy, 'La grande Comore', *Mémoires de l'Académie Malgache* (1937), pp. 77–79. The tale, from deep colonial times, has been collected only in Grande Comore. Raomandahy was Dr. Fontoynt's Malagasy collaborator, perhaps the teller of this one, unless, as Sophie Blanchy advises me, their article was drawn from notes made by the district chief, M. Pechmarty, who lived for several years in Grande Comore. Motif K525.1, Substituted object left in bed while victim escapes; P16, End of king's reign.
- 7 *L'oiseau*, pp. 174–83; Blanchy et al., *La maison*, pp. 159–73. Motifs: W111.3, The lazy wife; D1781, Magic results from singing; Q321, Laziness punished. The baby represents real life.



- 8 *L'oiseau*, pp. 132–56. The second version was recorded in January 1983, seven and a half years after the first (July 1975).
- 9 *L'oiseau*, pp. 132–35. Motifs: N455.4, King overhears girl's boast as to what she should do as queen; S411, Wife banished; N711.6, Prince sees heroine at ball and is enamored; T160, Consummation of marriage; H86, Inscribed name on article as token of ownership; H94, Identification by ring; S411.3, Barren wife sent away; Q288, Punishment for mockery.
- 10 *L'oiseau*, p. xii.
- 11 She reports her discovery in her 1986 thesis, *Lignée féminine*. The quotations are from 'Histoire de l'orpheline élevée par une marâtre', Allibert, *Contes mahorais*, pp. 29–30. Also following the pattern is Fatima Said Achirafi's tale (*Contes mahorais*, pp. 71–73), in which the heroine is named for the narrator, Fatima. She is so innocent that she has no fear of a stepmother; she urges her father to take another wife, and so on.
- 12 *Contes mahorais*, pp. 29–30.
- 13 'The little stick is made out of the central vein of the leaflet of the coconut palm... used to part the hair'. Sophie Blanchy and Zakaria Soilihi, *Furukombe et autres contes de Mayotte* (Paris: Éditions Caribéennes, 1991), p. 42, n. 9.
- 14 *Furukombe*, pp. 13–43. Motifs: L111.4.2, Orphan heroine; S31, Cruel stepmother; E323.2, Dead mother returns to aid persecuted children; E323.3, Dead mother called up from grave to give her son a charm; ± D1552.2, Life of helpful animal demanded as cure for feigned sickness; H355, Suitor test: finding an extraordinary object; H12, Recognition through song; Q482, punishment, noble person must do menial service; B335.2, Life of helpful animal demanded as cure for feigned sickness; D1162, Magic light; H355, Suitor test: finding an extraordinary object; D150, Transformation: man to bird; D720, Disenchantment; Q450, Cruel punishments. This may be the only Indian Ocean tale in which a king's suitor task leads back to his own marrying.
- 15 *Lignée féminine*, p. 44.
- 16 'Folklore's Nature', p. 356.
- 17 Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 113.
- 18 'Giving an Account', p. 12.

- 19 *La maison*, pp. 45–62. The word *Mwenye* in the song, which I translate as Mistress, can also mean someone authoritative like a landlord (Sophie Blanchy, personal communication). Relevant is Butler's quotation of Michel Foucault: 'It is the confession, the verbal act of confession, which comes last and which makes appear, in a certain sense, by its own mechanics, the truth, the reality of what has happened. The verbal act of confession is the proof, is the manifestation, of truth', in 'Giving an Account,' p. 113.
- 20 A. K. Ramanujan, 'Toward a Counter-System: Women's Tales', in *Gender, Genre, and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions*, ed. Arjun Appadurai, Frank J. Korom, and Margaret A. Mills (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), p. 42.
- 21 Butler, 'Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig, and Foucault', in *Feminism as a Critique: On the Politics of Gender*, ed. Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 131. Also, as Sophie Blanchy has suggested to me, and as Christiane Seydou has said about the *filles*, Shura's tale is a way of seeing marriage as an initiation that changes a girl into a woman; male heroes have a corresponding initiation.
- 22 *L'oiseau*, pp. 158–72.
- 23 The series of rejected bird calls happens in a Merina tale (Madagascar), in which the birds choose a king by its good speaking voice (Renel 2:233–34). The role of messenger or transporter is more often played in tales by the roller, *Leptosomus discolor* (Gueunier, *La belle*, p. 161, n. 3).
- 24 Another version of it, almost as well told, was recorded a few years before by Noël Gueunier. The narrators (both female) are careful to make the *djinn* disgusting and to emphasize (perhaps realistically) the force of the wife's jealousy of her well-behaved sister (*La belle*, pp. 138–61).
- 25 Afiati Sufu's Laughing Areca (*La maison*, pp. 64–97) is a version of The Three Golden Children (ATU707), which shows up in the Arabian Nights, in the classic Italian collection by Straparola in 1550, and in Grimm as tale number 96, The Three Little Birds. In Madagascar versions, a woman is accused of having given birth to animals or objects (motif K2115). Elsewhere in the Indian Ocean the animal birth slander has been told in the island of Réunion. Motifs: P292.1, Grandmother as foster mother; S351.1, Abandoned child cared for by grandmother. D2161, Magic healing power; D1711.7, King as magician. M262, Person promises to have but one consort if he is cured; N210, Wish for exalted husband realized. F950, Marvelous cures; L162, Lowly heroine marries king; T121.8, King weds common girl; N201, Wish for exalted husband realized; D2161.3.11, Barrenness

magically cured; K2222, Treacherous co-wife; K2251.1, Treacherous slave-girl. S185.1, Co-wife cruel to pregnant woman. K2110.1, Calumniated wife. K525, Escape by use of substituted object; S322, Children abandoned by hostile relative; S301, Children exposed; W26, Patience; W31, Obedience; P272, Foster (grand)mother: S351.1, Abandoned child cared for by (foster) grandmother; N856.1, Forester as foster father; H911.1, Task (quest) assigned at suggestion of jealous co-wife; H1361, Quest for lion's milk; D1619.3, Fruits that laugh or cry; D1617, Magic laughing object; H1333.2, Quest for extraordinary plant; H71, Marks of royalty; H20, Recognition by resemblance; E52, Resuscitation by magic charm; K1911.3, Reinstatement of true bride; S451, Outcast wife at last united with husband and children. Objective criticism can hardly go farther than a dry list like this.

- 26 *Contes mahorais*, pp. 117–18.
- 27 *La maison*, p. 97, n. 3. As anthropologists have long known, all folklore alludes to bits of the economy, technology, religion, and social organization of the people. In Africa, says Isidore Okpewho, to name known people and places and disregard any boundary between fiction and fact is 'accepted practice in oral narrative performance'; it represents a 'peculiar intersection of aesthetic and pragmatic imperatives,' some of which are political (Isidore Okpewho, *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character, and Continuity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 225). A less explicit form of the allusive device is what Claude Lévi-Strauss finds in South American mythology: unconscious interconnections among hundreds of myths.
- 28 The girl's impertinent answers recall the smart-ass replies of a clever lad to a king, incorporated in Madagascar versions of type ATU921, The King and the Farmer's Son (Dandouau, pp. 302–13). The term for these one-line dialogic exchanges, *stichomythia*, was first used for Greek tragedy. The device is often used by folktale narrators.
- 29 Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1946), p. 121.
- 30 Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London, 1978), pp. 88–89.
- 31 Joan N. Radner and Susan S. Lanser, 'Strategies of Coding in Women's Cultures', in *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 4.
- 32 Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 304.

- 33 Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in *New French Feminisms, an Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), p. 245.
- 34 The old woman trusted to verify a bride's virginity and defloration (*Lignée féminine*, p. 164, n. 3). Recorded around the same time, Dady ny Saidy of Poroani used a very similar formula. Other tellers often omitted opening formulas, probably for lack of their usual audience. Being easily recognized, an opening formula calls for listening mode and announces the fictional genre of *angano*. Imaginatively it transports the hearer into the world of *ny taloha*, former times.
- 35 Note that she does not marry the heroine's father. In a tale similar to Grandmother Shark, such a stepmother pushes the girl into the water, then presents her daughter to the kin, who first marries her, then drives her away after discovering the imposture. The girl, undersea, is found and cared for by a *djinn* who takes care of her, the later discovered and married to the king. Of course the stepmother and her daughter are punished. More realistically, some Mahorais acknowledge a negative attitude between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law (who may not be from the same village community that they are), and sometimes the young women have to woo them with gifts, patience, and submission (*Lignée féminine*, p. 30).
- 36 *La maison*, p. 43.
- 37 *Lignée féminine*, p. 45.
- 38 *La maison*, p. 6.
- 39 Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore, 1981), p. 54.
- 40 Terence Cave, *Recognitions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 200.
- 41 Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, *Woman, Culture, and Society* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1974), p. 39.
- 42 Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 145.
- 43 Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 133.
- 44 Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 22.

- 45 I draw on Paul De Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 104.
- 46 *Le coq*, pp. 174–83.
- 47 Summarized from the versions in *Malagasy Tale Index*, pp. 416–21.
- 48 Jean-Pierre Domenichini, ‘Un aspect de la résistance de l’ancienne culture malgache à l’influence arabe’, *Omaly Sy Anio*, 25–26 (1987), p. 86. I make extensive use of this great historian’s thinking in my comments.
- 49 Bakoly Domenichini-Ramiaramanana, *Du ohabolana au hainteny. Langue, littérature et politique à Madagascar* (Paris: Karthala, 1983), pp. 490–91, n. 139.
- 50 The tale was told by both a woman narrator in Poroani and a young woman of Mwamoju, originally from Kany Kely (*Loiseau*, pp. 20–49). The piece is distantly related to European tales such as *The Three Birds* (Grimm no. 96). Motifs, Poroani version: B754.7, Unusual parturition of animal (reversal of T554, Woman gives birth to animal); Q2, Kind and unkind; K2212, Treacherous sister; ±T111.3, Marriage of man with woman who has come from an egg (Indian); Q65, Filial duty rewarded; Q261, Treachery punished. The Kany Kely version: B754.6.1, Unusual impregnation of animal; D1925.1, Barrenness cured by eating; T511.1.3, Conception from eating mango; T589.7, Simultaneous conception and births; B754.7, Unusual parturition of animal; B535.0.4, Dog as nurse for child; K2110.1, Calumniated wife; cf. R169.7, Royal minister rescues abandoned queen (Indian); T100, Marriage; H79.3, Recognition by voice (Indian); B332, Too watchful dog killed; V222.4, Saint’s house filled with fragrance; D2167, Corpse magically saved from corruption; Q111, Riches as reward; Q65, Filial duty rewarded; E323, Dead mother’s friendly return; E373, Ghosts bestow gifts on living; E363.5, Dead provide material aid to living; B491.1, Helpful serpent (transformation of swallowing monster); H71.1, Star on forehead as sign of royalty; D1860, Magic beautification; Q411, Death as punishment; Q211.2, Matricide punished; Q281.1.2, Girl cruel to her mother is slain by God. Mwamoju version: B754.6.1, Unusual impregnation of animal; D1925.1, Barrenness cured by eating; T511.1.3, Conception from eating mango; T589.7, Simultaneous conception and births; B754.7, Unusual parturition of animal; T670, Adoption of children; cf. T676, Childless couple adopt animal as substitute for child; B535.0.4, Dog as nurse for child; T100, Marriage; H79.3, Recognition by voice; B332, Too watchful dog killed; D422.2, Transformation: dog to object; V222.4, Saint’s house filled with fragrance; D2167, Corpse magically saved from corruption; Q111, Riches as reward; Q65, Filial duty rewarded; E323, Dead

mother's friendly return; E373, Ghosts bestow gifts on living; E363.5, Dead provide material aid to living; B491.1, Helpful serpent; H71.1, Star on forehead as sign of royalty; Q411, Death as punishment, Q211.2, Matricide punished, Q281.1.2, Girl cruel to her mother is slain.

- 51 Being born at the foot of a tree recalls Malagasy myths of the origin of woman, and Comoran tales in which a supernatural girl emerges from a tree-trunk (Renel 3:39–41, *L'oiseau*, p. 25, n. 2).
- 52 L. S. Asekoff, *Freedom Hill, a Poem* (Evanston (IL) TriQuarterly Books, Northwestern University Press, 2011), p. 42.
- 53 Horses (*farasy*) don't exist in Mayotte except in these stories.
- 54 *Le coq*, p. 49, n. 18.
- 55 *L'oiseau*, pp. 26–91.
- 56 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 72, 76.
- 57 Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1986), p. 411.
- 58 Jean-Pierre Domenichini, 'Un aspect de la résistance de l'ancienne culture malgache à l'influence arabe', *Omaly Sy Anio*, 25–26 (1987), pp. 91–92.
- 59 *L'oiseau*, pp. xxi-xxii.
- 60 Sophie Blanchy-Daurel, *La vie quotidienne à Mayotte* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1993), p. 128.
- 61 Evidently the story has enduring appeal for the descendants of Malagasy, or for other Comorans. Other versions are in Veronika Görög-Karady, *L'enfant dans les contes africains* (Paris: C I L F, 1988), pp. 153–60 and Abdallah Daoud, *Zamani. Hale za shikomori, hadisi za kikomori* (Moroni: CNDRS, 1983), pp. 57–90.
- 62 Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 4.
- 63 Framing in a narrative doesn't always require a female voice, as we saw in The Laughing Areca. In a reversal of the *fille difficile* plot, told by a female narrator, the male character proclaims in song that a boar-wife is ethnically unsuitable. Mahorais versions of the international tales The Clever Precepts (ATU910) and The Treasure Finders Who Murder One Another (ATU763) include a scene of recognition through narration (*Contes comoriens*, pp. 442–50, 480–85). In the complex *fille* story of Kalevola, told by an old

woman, the mother character, betrayed into the power of a cannibal ogre who then devoured their child, produces a second daughter as the heroine. Hidden by female protectors, found, devoured, resuscitated, sent far away, displaced by her servant, sent to the fields, and recognized, she is finally adopted and married off by a benevolent king. During these adventures the song is sung again and again. After the fifth repetition, she still has to explain it in speech, like a Los Angeles folksinger singing in Serbian. Her recognition through performance unlocks the mystery. Narrators' reliance on a scene of recognition through narration or song indicates its traditional status, at least for Mayotte.

- 64 I use words of Sara Salih, *Judith Butler* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2002), p. 67.
- 65 Patrick Eisenlohr, *Little India: Diaspora, Time, and Ethnolinguistic Belonging in Hindu Mauritius* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 112.
- 66 *La maison*, p. 97, n. 6.
- 67 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 49.
- 68 *La vie quotidienne*, p. 67.
- 69 A. E. B. Coldiron, 'Canons and Cultures: Is Shakespeare Universal?' in *How to Do Things with Shakespeare: New Approaches, New Essays*, ed. Laurie Maguire (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 248.
- 70 Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), p. 6.
- 71 Munro S. Edmonson, *Lore: An Introduction to the Science of Folklore and Literature* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 200.
- 72 James Deetz, *Invitation to Archaeology* (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1967), p. 83.
- 73 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 298.
- 74 Dell Hymes, 'The Contribution of Folklore to Sociolinguistic Research', in *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore*, ed. Américo Paredes and Richard Bauman (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972), p. 49.
- 75 Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *Prismatic Thought: Theodor W. Adorno* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 160.

- 76 Christiane Seydou, 'Un conte breton: "Petit-Louis, fils d'un charbonnier et filleul du Roi de France"'. Essai d'analyse et d'étude comparative'. *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 12, 45 (1972), p. 130.
- 77 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 3.
- 78 Lakoff & Johnson, p. 267.
- 79 Ralf Schneider and Marcus Hartner, *Blending and the Study of Narrative: Approaches and Applications* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), p. 6.
- 80 Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), p. 32.
- 81 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen = Philosophical Investigations* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2009), p. 235.