

FOLKTALES OF MAYOTTE, AN AFRICAN ISLAND

LEE HARING





<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

©2023 Lee Haring



This work is licensed under an Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text for non-commercial purposes of the text providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).

Attribution should include the following information:

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

Copyright and permissions for the reuse of many of the images included in this publication differ from the above. This information is provided in the captions and in the list of illustrations. Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

Further details about CC BY-NC licenses are available at
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Any digital material and resources associated with this volume will be available at
<https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0315#resources>

Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

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

Preface

I Am a Stranger There Myself

This book is about storytellers and their oral performances of folktales in Mayotte, an island lying in the Indian Ocean about 1,000 miles east of the African coast. The book is built on a constraint: I have not witnessed the performances I discuss; in fact I have never been to Mayotte. Within that constraint, I indulge a whim. I use books by three French ethnographers of the 1970s–80s to imagine the oral performances. My whim follows the ‘law’ devised by the Oulipo group in Paris: ‘A text written according to a constraint describes the constraint’.¹ I ask, what can we comprehend about an oral art without witnessing it in person? Numerous critics of Homer and succeeding classical authors have answered: quite a lot. Imagining a performance — which I practice and recommend — does not replace the physical presence of a storyteller, but like reading the script of a play, it urges us to see the performance of oral literature as a kind of theater. Storytellers in Mayotte are skillful at blending different traditions and using the past to deal with the present. The books celebrate their skills. I invite you to try this relatively polite kind of eavesdropping with me.

All three ethnographers were well prepared to transmit Mayotte’s culture to the West and tell us why audiences like these stories; each had a distinct purpose. Claude Allibert, while teaching in a *lycée* (secondary school), looked to folktales to preserve traces of Mayotte’s early history. He found many. Noël Gueunier, teaching anthropology in the University of Madagascar not far away, and interested in the uses of Malagasy language, collected scores of tales in Kibushi, Mayotte’s dialect of that language. He also recorded people’s continual switching between Kibushi and a second language, Shimaore, which is

related to the Swahili spoken in Kenya and Tanzania. They inherited their bilingualism from the converging cultures in Mayotte's history. Sophie Blanchy's devoted attention to female storytellers reveals their mastery of the narrative art. All three collectors show their hundreds of storytellers commanding an impressive range of narrative techniques employing symbols from the past, with which they comment on their present. I am grateful to the three collectors for translation permission, for allowing me to paraphrase their notes and comments, and most of all for saving me from embarrassing mistakes.

Obligatory Background Information

Mayotte, I have learned, is smaller than Africa's smallest country (Seychelles) and more multicultural than most. Historically, although no longer politically, it is one of the four Comoro Islands, an archipelago lying between Madagascar and East Africa, which used to be France's most neglected colony. The other three are Grande Comore (Ngazidja), Mohéli (Mwali), and Anjouan (Ndzuwani). Mayotte's population of 288,926 (in 2021) comprises people whose culture is an amalgam created by African, Arab, European and Malagasy settlers. The folktale repertoire connects Mayotte to Madagascar; they share many tales, which have ancient roots. The early Malagasy originated in what is now Indonesia and settled in the Comoros at least as early as the tenth century, maybe earlier. Then Arabs and Persians came into east Africa, in enough numbers to intermarry with Bantu Africans and convert people to Islam. That mix formed the foundation of Swahili culture. Some say that the history of the Comoros archipelago goes back to the era of King Solomon; anyway, it is never separate from the history of Madagascar. How complicated that mix can look to a newcomer is formidably stated by the anthropologist Paul Ottino.

Malagasy ideas and conceptions, whether comprised in myths and wondertales or in historical legends, must be systematically brought together with the Indian and Muslim religious, philosophical, and political representations that, from the 13th century on, converged across India on the Malay peninsula and the Insulindian archipelago, at the same time as Islam and the Bantu world were encountering each other on the shores of the east coast of Africa, producing what were to become Swahili civilization and culture.²

The models for Mayotte were hybrid from birth.

History forced people together; their convergence brought forth creativity. People brought to Mayotte tales that had been transmitted from Persia, India, Europe and Africa. Also, life in Mayotte from its early days has been dominated by Islam. In the twelfth century, the Shirazi, a group originating in Persia, mixed with and married Africans, and began evangelizing, which they continued to do as they migrated to the Comoros and other offshore islands. Traces of Persian, even of Indonesian culture are evident in some of the tales. In response to the conversion, African identity and customs went underground. That is where folklore resides. But the tales collected in the 1970s–80s tell us that in earlier times, those Islamized Africans did not discard African values; they added new characters and plots to the stories they already knew. Islam does not dominate the texture of the folktales in this book, though it saturates people's lives. Few of the tales feature Islamic priests, for instance, as principal characters. When they do, they slander them. Islam has survived in Mayotte not by drowning out popular beliefs, but by living side by side with them.³ Some tales can be read as Islamic allegory about a believer's relation to God: 'Under the pretext of a plot strongly rooted in the daily life of women of Mayotte (says Blanchy), these tales also carry a message of a spiritual order'.⁴ Blending diverse images is one thing the storytellers are very good at. Their creativity shows when they draw the plots and characters they have learned from other storytellers and point them at their present social situation.

Mayotte is now an overseas *département* of France, like Martinique and Guadeloupe. It has always been loyal to the metropole. In the 1970s, when some of these tales were being collected, it refused to join the independence movement of the other Comoros. A story in "Chapter 2" shows how hot the issue was in the villages. At that time, Mayotte was classified as a 'territorial collectivity'; in 2011 the loyalists finally got their wish to be an overseas *département*. Every week now, French people arrive from the metropole permanently or temporarily, adding their own linguistic and cultural heritage to the local network. Some see Mayotte as a less expensive Réunion (another Indian Ocean *département*, 900 miles away). Also arriving are illegal immigrants from Anjouan and the other Comoros, seeking work. If the immigrants do not perish on the way from overloading and bad weather, they will be blamed for a rise in

crime and evicted from their homes. Now this African-Malagasy island is obliged to pretend to be part of France (5000 miles away), to use France's manufactured products and currency, and to leave behind the village traditions sampled in this book. With its economy and finances linked ever more closely with Europe, Mayotte sees French capital being used for exploitation rather than development. The gap between villagers and settlers increases. The tales translated in this book speak from a village life that was already passing in the 1970s–80s.⁵

The narrators draw from their island's widely divergent traditions. Their creativity lies in a highly developed capacity for combining the new and the old. Their art is to blend what they remember from other storytellers with settings and objects from everyday life. It is a capacity cast in theoretical terms by the critic Julia Kristeva: 'the text is doubly oriented, towards the signifying system in which it is produced (the language, and the language of a specific era and society), and towards the social process in which it participates by virtue of being a discourse'.⁶ In practical terms, the translations by our three collectors show performers skilled in entertaining their audiences while they deal critically with issues like colonial power, marriage and the need for secrecy. Taken together, their stories amount to a network of the metaphors traditional to Mayotte. Storytellers in Mayotte choose tales from the past that are somehow relevant to their present. Sometimes the choice is conscious, sometimes calling it a choice is my interpretive move. Each of the following chapters will discuss the findings of one collector.

Endnotes

- 1 Jacques Roubaud, 'Introduction: The *Oulipo* and Combinatorial Art', in *Oulipo Compendium*, ed. Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie (London: Atlas Press, 1998), p. 42.
- 2 Paul Ottino, *L'étrangère intime: essai d'anthropologie de la civilisation de l'ancien Madagascar* (Paris: Éditions des Archives Contemporaines, 1986), p. 576. Claude Allibert follows up Ottino's directive in *Mayotte: plaque tournante et microcosme de l'océan indien occidental* (Paris: Éditions Anthropos, 1984).
- 3 Along with collecting folktales, Sophie Blanchy has closely observed Islam in the daily life of the 1980s: *La vie quotidienne à Mayotte* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1993), pp. 180–96.
- 4 'Lignée féminine et valeurs islamiques à travers quelques contes de Mayotte (Comores)' (Saint-Denis: Université de la Réunion, 1986), pp. 136–46.
- 5 Sources of information on Mayotte today include: Michael Lambek, *Knowledge and Practice in Mayotte: Local Discourses of Islam, Sorcery, and Spirit Possession*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993. Dan Golembeski, 'Mayotte: France's New Overseas Department in the Indian Ocean', *The French Review*, 85, 3 (February 2012), pp. 440–57. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41346263>. Claude-Valentin Marie, Didier Breton, Maude Crouzet, 'More than half of all adults living in Mayotte were born elsewhere'. *Population and Societies*, 560 (November 2018). Nina Sahraoui, 'Constructions of Undeservingness around the Figure of the Undocumented Pregnant Woman in the French Department of Mayotte'. *Social Policy and Society*, 20, 3 (July 2021), 475–86. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746421000038>. Iris Derceux, 'Mayotte: Four key dates to explain the migratory tensions on the French department. Events in the recent history of the archipelago shed light on the current difficulty in curbing illegal immigration'. *Le Monde*, 27 August 2022. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/les-decodeurs/article/2022/08/27/mayotte-four-key-dates-to-explain-the-migratory-tensions-on-the-french-department_5994998_8.html. Rémi Armand Tchokothe, 'How Can Literary Works Help Us to Understand the Politics of Migration?' LT Video Publication. <https://doi.org/10.21036/LTPUB10756>.
- 6 Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 332.

