

## "Endure and shut up, *karivendze!*": Beyond the political discourse, expressing or concealing ordinary violence experienced in Mayotte

« Subir et se taire, *karivendze!* » : Au-delà du discours politique, dire ou taire les violences ordinaires vécues à Mayotte.

4 octobre 2021

Auteur

M. Heslon

PHD student in Social Anthropology and Ethnology, EHESS,

Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac scholarship holder

mathilde.heslon@ehess.fr

Type de publication

Récit de terrain

Lien DOI

<https://doi.org/10.48728/antipodes.211001>

Citer cet article

M. Heslon. "Endure and shut up, *karivendze!*": Beyond the political discourse, expressing or concealing ordinary violence experienced in Mayotte. *Antipodes, Annales de la Fondation Martine Aublet*. 4 octobre 2021. <https://doi.org/10.48728/antipodes.211001>

### RESUME / ABSTRACT

By describing the situations of affliction experienced by different members of the same family living in Mayotte, this article questions the gap that exists between the forms of violence denounced publicly, and those experienced in the unfortunate circumstances of everyday life. It is the latter violence, that of rivalries manifested by the attack of spirits or bewitchments, or physical violence within the family, that is studied. These forms of violence are rarely mentioned, unlike those denounced during the demonstrations against violence in Mayotte, which are essentially attributed to young people from immigrant families. In the face of this daily violence, family strategies and individual choices to mobilize institutional, emotional and financial resources reveal ways of caring that are both complex and sometimes unexpected.

En décrivant les situations d'affliction vécues par différents membres d'une même famille vivant à Mayotte, cet article interroge le décalage qui existe entre les formes de violences dénoncées publiquement, et celles vécues dans les circonstances malheureuses du quotidien. Ce sont ces dernières violences, celles des rivalités qui se manifestent par l'attaque d'esprits ou des ensorcellements, ou encore la violence physique au sein de la famille, qui sont étudiées. Ces violences sont rarement énoncées, contrairement à celles dénoncées lors des manifestations contre la violence à Mayotte, attribuée essentiellement à des jeunes issus de l'immigration. Face à ces violences quotidiennes, les stratégies familiales et les choix individuels de mobilisation de ressources institutionnelles, affectives et financières révèlent des façons de prendre soin à la fois complexes et parfois inattendues.

### MOTS-CLEFS / KEYWORDS

## TEXTE INTEGRAL



Fig.1 : Manifestation à Mayotte

March 2018, Salama<sup>2</sup>, a student in professional license of 21 years old, leads the procession demonstrating against insecurity in Mayotte – a French department since 2011 – beside her maternal aunt, with a French flag. I ask her why she went: "We are not safe. We went there in order to stop foreigners who enter Mayotte illegally and to have more police officers watching over the schools." Indeed, this strike was initiated by bus drivers because of numerous assaults in front of schools. Additionally, in 2015, the number of foreigners living in Mayotte is 41%, and half of them are in an irregular situation [1]. However, the situations of aggression and, more generally, of affliction that Salama told me she experienced in her daily life are due more to family members, friends, and even spirits than to immigrants or young people. She also lives in a village in the north of the island, historically committed to keeping Mayotte French<sup>3</sup>, where there are a low delinquency rates. Situations of violence due to delinquent youth and high immigration rates are a reality experienced by the population, but what can show the "descent into the ordinary" [2] and the analysis of the everyday afflictions of people who, although they denounce violence through supporting public discourse, experience other forms of violence? First, the management of inner family afflictions informs us about the problems that are expressed and those that are concealed. Secondly, it shows us the relational system of Mahorais society, within the family, between sisters and brothers, while also showing their relationship with French institutions. Finally, it allows us to understand the constitution of an individual, his subjectivity and his agency, between social construction and chosen actions. Since it is impossible to give an exhaustive account of the complex nature of these experiences, this article will describe the afflictions experienced by a young girl, named Salama, and her family of three siblings, echoing many others in the island.

When I meet Salama, she is sitting under the veranda of her mother's house, surrounded by her maternal aunts, and her sister who is about the same age, but who doesn't speak and makes strange repetitive movements with her hands. I had already heard about Amina, Salama's sister, in the neighborhood. A neighbor told me that she had been attacked by malicious spirits called *mazetwani*, which is a spirit not incarnated in the body of the possessed [4]. They had driven her insane before she could finish the construction of her house. In

this neighborhood, the type of housing has remained largely uxorilocal [5-7], and this neighbor told me that the *mazetwani* were sent from harmful packages (*masairy*) buried under Amina's new constructing house by a sorcerer (*fundi mwalim dunia*) in order to usurp this plot. Another version describes a woman, jealous of Amina, that summoned the *mazetwani* to put the *masairy* into Amina's body. Amina after being attacked mobilizes the family's temporal resources – her mother, aunts and sister that constantly look after her – as well as the material resources for the care of these harmful spirits and packages. For many months, Islamic masters (*fundi islamu*) and masters in spirits (*fundi wa madjini*) follow one another, in order to perform protective prayers (*shidjabu*) for the former, and for the latter ablutions with plants (*malalao*), *masairy* extractions, or exorcism rituals [8] with fumigations of water vapor. The money saved for the construction of her house was used for these rituals. As these had no effect, Amina's father took her to Grande Comore where he has family, to consult a master in possession who supposedly has treated an identical case. Amina's husband paid for this trip. I even offered several times to take her to see a psychiatrist, but the maternal aunts were opposed to it, arguing that they knew someone who had come back even crazier. Amina's maternal grandmother fears that her grandkids will be "taken by the D.A.S.S." (now called ASE, "social help to infancy") if Amina were to be locked up. The medico-social institutions do not seem for them to be able to help in this situation instead the ties of the close family are strongly solicited. The afflicted person is then protected from possible attacks of extra-familial jealousy or conflict, but also from the relational breakdowns that could be caused by the institutions. Moreover, the neighborhood, made up of people with distant kinship relations or alliances, avoid this house because it is seen as dangerous to approach such powerful spirits.



**Fig. 2** : Ritual of exorcism by fumigation: a Malagasy sailor spirit holds asheet under which is a pot, a healer and the sick person on the chair.

If madness is an affliction hidden from institutions and to the neighborhood, but cared in the family, it is not the case for all afflictions in the home. Indeed, Amina's twin, and Salama's brother, is even more isolated despite his problems. He lives in their maternal aunt's house which is under construction, next to their mother's house. About 20 years ago, most of the boys would build their hut (*banga*) on the outskirts of the village. This area has become dangerous "because of immigration" according to the villagers, and now the young boys have to build it on the land of the women of their families in the village, or else they live in the uninhabited rooms or upper floors. Salama and Amina's brother stopped his schooling while he was in metropolitan France and started stealing. His mother brought him back to Mayotte, where he took a strong drug, a cannabis derivative called *chimik*. Salama told me that he was fighting with her, that she was afraid of him, and that she would like him to go to a social institution to, she said, "discuss about his addiction". But he never wanted to go. I was also surprised to see that he was not at the center of the family's relational investments, nor did he invest in those relationships. Indeed, he was absent from the various family rituals. I only met him on the beach or in the bush with his friends. The young boys who live on the fringes of the village become more dependent on their family

regarding their lodging but, in daily life, they continue to occupy the fringes of their neighborhood and of family life. The fact that this affliction is concealed in the family underlines the fact that, as in the case of Swapan developed by Veena Das [9], it is not the same emotional and material resources that are invested than in the case of Amina. In this situation it seems easier to leave the son than the daughter to uphold the family honor.

So, if solving daughters' problems is a priority for the honor of the family, it should be the case for Salama's problems. But in her case she can't speak about them to her family, especially to her mother. Indeed her problem, that made her "depressed" according to her, was linked to sexuality. In her words: "It's unlike metropolitan France, we can't tell our mothers everything." Aware of different social norms between metropolitan France and this new French department, this remark is important to understand the relationship between mother and daughter in Mayotte. Indeed, it is difficult to talk about sexuality to one's mother because she will be honored and celebrated through her daughter's virginity during the ritual of deflowering. The responsibility for keeping teenagers' girls' virginity is not the responsibility of the mother but instead of the daughter that should control her sexuality [10]. Thus, it is difficult for Salama to speak about sexuality before the wedding to her mother and, furthermore, her mother doesn't seem to recognize that Salama was suffering. Indeed, during a possession ritual organized for Amina, the fundi came to Salama saying that she also had spirits. But her mother told Salama that only her sister was "ill". After this ritual, Salama explains to me that if spirits indeed attacked her, her family can't take care of this for the moment. Unable to invest her allied kinship relationships in rituals nor in communication, Salama regularly went to social services where social workers offer her a place to express herself. Despite this, she remains at the heart of her family's investment in other types of rituals. For more than a year her sister has been ill and has been mobilizing her family's resources. For this reason, Salama deferred her boyfriend's marriage proposal because her family cannot pay for the wedding and, in this uxorilocal society, consequently build her house. But her boyfriend urges Salama. So her maternal aunts decided to pay the workers to start building a house on the land reserved for her. Before the religious wedding (*mafungidzo*), Salama is tended to by maternal aunts and her mother. During the ceremony, the women of her family and the groom's women offer her some money, while dancing with her. Thus celebrated and recognized in the society of married women, she starts to feel better and does not return to the social institution anymore in order to speak about her problems. It is also alongside the women of her family that she goes to the protest against insecurity in Mayotte. By choosing to get involved and to carry the discourse of the women of her family and of the neighborhood she lives in, she also confirms her position as a Mahorais woman, having a house in a village where she was born. Moreover, beyond the social issue and political discourse against young people and insecurity, is she not also expressing the violence and affliction of her brother, by denouncing the violence and affliction of others?



**Fig. 3** : Religious marriage (*mafungidzo*): the bride dances in front of a woman who gives her money.

To conclude, in Mayotte it is possible to express or to conceal violence, and more generally afflictions, depending on the different complementary practices: if one cannot talk in the family, one can talk in an institution, and *vice versa*. This is also the case in the public or in the private sphere where what is denounced in demonstrations is not necessarily denounced in everyday life. Looking at the temporal, emotional and

material resources, we notice that beyond the discourses in daily practices there are those whose lives we try to "improve" and those who we can "let die" [9]. The experience and negotiation of Salama's afflictions in relation to her family, her neighborhood and the context of Mayotte reveals the importance of subjectivity and of agency in forms of life [2, 10]. For example, with her family ignoring her despair and not accepting possession, Salama does not passively surrender to her family's choice that could potentially "let her die". Instead, she remains responsible by finding alternative resources through institutions, such as social services and marriage, trying not to abuse of the resources needed for her sister. More than a therapeutic itinerary, the human experience of affliction underlines two processes through the struggles of each individual: a "voice" [2] and a dimension of agent, who allows choices and commitment [10]. Thus, discourse informs actions, but actions also "say" a lot.

## Notes

---

1. Literally in *shimaore*: "we don't like".
2. The names have been anonymised and the drawings also remain anonymization. The situation presented is itself drawn from several situations so as not to speak of anyone in particular.
3. One of the villages called "soroda", that Mamaye Idriss listed [3].

## Funding and acknowledgements

---

This work received a grant from The Foundation Martine Aublet (Paris, France). I thank them for making this research possible, as well as the LaBex TEPSIS, which allowed me to have a doctoral contract, and the musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, which finances the writing of this dissertation.

I also acknowledge Chloé Heslon, for the beautiful work of illustration she made for this article. And thank you to the confidence that the Mahorais have approached me to realize this research.

## References

---

- [1] Marie CV, Breton D, Crouzet M, Fabre É, Merceron S. Migrations, natalité et solidarités familiales. La société de Mayotte en pleine mutation. *INSEE ANALYSES MAYOTTE*; 10 Mars 2017.
  - [2] Das V. *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. Oakland: University of California Press; 2007.
  - [3] Idriss M. *Le combat pour Mayotte française (1958-1976)*. Paris: Karthala; 2018.
  - [4] Lambek M. *Knowledge and practice in Mayotte: Local discourses of Islam, sorcery and spirit possession*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press; 1993.
  - [5] Blanchy S. *La vie quotidienne à Mayotte, archipel des Comores*. Paris: L'Harmattan; 1990.
  - [6] Blanchy S. Matrilocalité et système d'âge à Mayotte : notes pour une étude comparative de l'organisation sociale dans l'archipel des Comores. *Taarifa*, Mamoudzou, Revue des Archives départementales de Mayotte; 2012, pp. 9-21.
  - [7] Breslar J. Direction départementale de l'équipement de Mayotte. L'habitat mahorais : *Une perspective ethnologique*. Mamoudzou: AGG; 1979.
  - [8] Bouffart S. *La possession comme lieu et mode d'expression de la complexité sociale : Le cas de Mayotte*. Paris X-Nanterre: Thèse de doctorat non publiée; 2010.
  - [9] Lovell A, Pandolfo S, Das V, Laugier S. *Face aux désastres*. Paris: Les éditions d'Ithaque; 2013.
  - [10] Lambek M. *The Ethical Condition: Essays on Action, Person, and Value*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 2015.
-