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From Folktales to Fiction: investigating the story-telling tradition of the Comoros

While the literature of the Indian Ocean islands has been relatively neglected by Western academia, including in the fields of francophone and postcolonial studies,¹ literature from the Comoros archipelago is itself underrepresented in Indian Ocean studies. The archipelago is located in the Mozambique Channel and comprises the islands of Grande-Comore, Mohéli and Anjouan which form the Union des Comores, as well as the now French *département* of Mayotte. The *départementalisation* of the latter in 2011 keeps sparking debates as the Union des Comores contests the partition of the archipelago, while an increasing number of Mahoran people refuses any further association with the Union des Comores. Moreover, a substantial proportion (26%)² of the total population of the Union des Comores lives in the diaspora in France. Evoking ‘Comorian’ written literature is therefore complex since the adjective ‘Comorian’ does not reflect a single, straightforward geographical and political reality.

The archipelago has shared a longstanding oral literary tradition in the Comorian language of Shikomori and in local languages alike. Before the publication of Mohamed Toihiri’s pioneering novel *La République des imberbes* in 1985,³ the feeble – but existing – written literary production of the archipelago included written chronicles in Arabic and Shikomori and written poetry in Shikomori.⁴ Comorian Francophone literature now comprises an ever-growing number of writers, playwrights and poets, whose works have received little academic attention so far. As is typical for Francophone writers of the Indian Ocean, Comorian writers were almost exclusively published locally and struggled to find a publisher with

¹ Julia Waters (ed.) ‘Introduction’ in *‘L’ici et l’ailleurs’: Postcolonial Literatures of the Francophone Indian Ocean*. e-france, 2 (2008), 3-8 (p. 3). <<https://www.reading.ac.uk/web/files/e-france/Introduction.pdf>>

²https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/05/04/aux-comores-on-ne-transige-pas-avec-la-fierté-nationale_5294298_3212.html, according to the World Bank. [Accessed 2 August 2019].

³ Mohamed Toihiri, *La République des imberbes* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1985).

⁴ See Linda Rasoamanana, ‘Pourquoi des poètes en temps de détresse?’ in Malela, Rasomanana and Tchokothe (eds.), *Les Littératures francophones de l’archipel des Comores* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2017).

important visibility in France.⁵ The situation changed with the highly publicized publication of Ali Zamir's novel *Anguille sous roche* by the French publisher Le Tripode.⁶ The novel won the international literary prize Prix Senghor, as well as the Prix Mandela and the Mention Spéciale du Prix Wepler. Today, Zamir is an acclaimed author in France and is regularly invited on French TV and radio shows, literary festivals and conferences.

In an interview to France Culture in 2017, Zamir claimed that the Comorian story-telling tradition played an important role in his writing.⁷ This claim became the foundation of my Laidlaw research project, which aimed at investigating how Zamir's literary production both reflects and challenges the story-telling tradition of the Comoros.

Methodology and research ethics

The project aimed at analysing translated collections of folktales from the island of Anjouan – where Zamir was born and lived for twenty-seven years – and *Anguille sous roche* in a comparative framework. As Zamir himself confirmed,⁸ tales differ significantly from an island to another. Unfortunately, the lack of material on Comorian literature made it impossible to study folktales from Anjouan independently from the rest of the archipelago. Indeed, the two best documented islands regarding folktales are Mayotte and Grande-Comore and only one collection of tales from Anjouan is available.⁹ It contains eleven tales, which is not enough to be representative of the island's oral literary production. I therefore decided to study a total of sixty-eight tales drawn from the whole archipelago.¹⁰

I was fully aware that accessing a text of oral literature in its written version goes against its very nature as an unfixed text and neglects the performative aspect of storytelling. While it is necessary to collect, transcribe and publish folktales to preserve the archipelago's intangible heritage, writing them down goes against the traditional introduction of Comorian tales: '*Hale ndrabo / Na mwambiwa kashindana*' ('A tell is a lie / And he *who is told* a tale should not *discuss* it').¹¹ The French translation acted as another mediation between me and the original texts.

⁵ Julia Waters, 'From Continents Noirs to Collection Blanche: From Other to Same? The Case of Ananda Devi', *L'Ici et l'ailleurs*, 55-74 (p. 56).

⁶ Ali Zamir, *Anguille sous roche* (Le Tripode : Paris, 2016).

⁷ Ali Zamir in <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/le-temps-des-ecrivains/gael-faye-et-ali-zamir> [Accessed 15 May 2017]

⁸ Unpublished interview with the author, Montpellier, 23/06/2019.

⁹ Mohamed Ahmed-Chamanga, *Rois, Femmes et Djinns : Contes de l'île d'Anjouan ~ Comores* (Paris : Conseil International de la langue française, 1988).

¹⁰ However, very few texts have been collected in Mohéli and my body of primary texts reflects this imbalance.

¹¹ Wadjih S.M. Abdérémane, 'Introduction' in *Djambo Djema et autres contes comoriens* (Moroni : Komédit, 2014), pp. 15-18. p. 17.

Some of them were recorded, transliterated and translated into French by anthropologists for research purposes, and admittedly out of their traditional context of enunciation.¹² Others were written in French by members of the Comorian diaspora in France, and some authors retell the tales using opening sentences and literary structures belonging to the French rather than the Comorian story-telling tradition.¹³ I am not qualified to write a comprehensive study of Comorian folktales and solely aimed at identifying their most recurrent plots, patterns and characters.

After extensive library search and textual analysis of folktale collections in Paris, my trip to the Comoros helped me gather more material. My research was informed by library search at the CNDRS (the National Research Centre of the Comoros), informal meetings with the scholar Wadjih Abdérémane who extensively studied Comorian folktales, and travel throughout the country to better understand the archipelago's matrilineal and matrilineal society. While I initially claimed that nothing had been written about literature from the Comoros, I found out that nothing had been written about it *in Western academia*. The CNDRS has been publishing a monthly academic journal for decades and other local initiatives produce critical literature.¹⁴ I became increasingly aware of my ambivalent position as a young, French researcher going to an elite academic institution and studying the 'folklore' of a former French colony.

This awareness helped me during the second part of my project in which I attended the literary festival "Lettres sur cour" in France and conducted two semi-directed interviews with Ali Zamir and with the writer and director of *Project'îles*, Nassuf Djailani. I adopted a decolonising mindset and research methodology, conducting my interviews in a collaborative, participative and transparent manner, rather than solely trying to collect data for my own academic purposes.

¹² Mohamed Ahmed Chamanga, 'Introduction' in *Rois, femmes et djinns*, pp. 3-9. p. 6.

¹³ Élisabeth Gardaz, 'Préface' in Abdallah Saïd, *Contes des Iles de la Lune*, (Paris : L'Harmattan, 1995), pp. 7-11. p. 8.

¹⁴ *Ya Mkobe* is a print journal, but some volumes are accessible online at: http://www.swahiliweb.net/ya_mkobe.html and <http://www.cndrs-comores.org/index.php/ya-mkobe>. Other initiatives include Soeuf Elbadawi's blog *Muzdalifa house*, accessible online at: <https://muzdalifahouse.com/> and the independent print journal *Project'îles* that focuses on the arts of the Indian Ocean.

A few comments on ‘orality’ in *Anguille sous roche*

When the first book reviews of Zamir’s *Anguille sous roche* came out in France in 2016, they praised how ‘refreshing’ the novel was, some critics even calling it a ‘roman de l’oralité’ (an ‘oral novel’).¹⁵ This claim seems paradoxical since this novel is written and published - and is therefore fixed in form - contrary to oral texts which are by definition unfixed. It is true that Zamir’s novel contains several marks of orality. The form of the novel – a single, unpunctuated sentence spanning over three-hundred pages – suggests a long monologue, which recalls the thoughts of the seventeen-year old Anguille who is drowning between Anjouan and Mayotte. The impression of a character speaking in a flow is reinforced by Anguille’s numerous digressions that mix up childhood memories, philosophical considerations and gossip about Mutsamudu’s medina. The quick shifts of tone and language register, as well as the subversion of elementary grammatical rules also suggest the fast-paced rhythm of speech. These figures of speech might evoke a sense of ‘refreshing’ orality to a French reader that she would consequently associate with the predominantly oral culture of the Comoros. However, such a comment would reflect a simplistic and Western view of oral literature rather than the truth.

Indeed, oral literature is extremely varied and codified in the Comoros. In his seminal study *Guerriers, princes et poètes aux Comores dans la littérature orale*, Moussa Saïd Ahmed identified eleven different genres of oral literature in Shikomori.¹⁶ Each of them solely exists within a specific, traditional context of enunciation closely linked to the social organization of the archipelago. Oral literature is indissociable from the social events that generate and sustain its growth. For instance, Saïd Ahmed describes how the decision of Ali Soihili’s government to restrict the maximum expenses of the *âda* (the traditional, seven-day long Comorian wedding) impacted literary production, for the *âda* is the site *par excellence* of oral literature.¹⁷ Finally, oral literature is strongly hierarchised: no one can speak up unless the community allows him to speak. Zamir himself admitted that ‘writing has been [his] only chance to speak up, to free [himself] from Comorian society in which [he] felt muzzled.’¹⁸

While there are some marks of ‘orality’ in *Anguille sous roche*, Zamir is not inscribing himself within the extremely codified and diverse tradition of orality of his country. Rather, his writing disrupts it by subverting the founding social and hierarchical principles of traditional

¹⁵ https://www.payot.ch/Detail/anguille_sous_roche-ali_zamir-9782370550941 [Accessed 18 August 2019].

¹⁶ Moussa Saïd Ahmed, *Guerriers, princes et poètes aux Comores dans la littérature orale* (Paris : L’Harmattan, 2000), p.15.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.17.

¹⁸ Unpublished interview with the author, 23/06/2019.

Comorian literature. For this reason, I decided to focus specifically on folktales rather than study the blurry and polysemic concept of ‘orality’.

Folktales and embedded stories in *Anguille sous roche*

I interviewed Ali Zamir on the 23rd of June 2019 in Montpellier.¹⁹ We discussed storytelling in *Anguille sous roche*, with reference to specific tales and embedded stories (that is, tales within a tale). ‘Main, Oreille et Mouche’ was the first story we discussed (pp. 41-46).²⁰ It is, according to Zamir, the only tale in the novel that comes from his childhood. He believes the tale to be from Anjouan since he has never heard it somewhere else. He was told this tale by an old man and presumes that the tale disappeared with him. Writing it down was a way for him to perpetuate in the written form and in French the Comorian tradition of oral transmission. The other tale-like plots I had identified (‘The coconut thief’ pp. 55-59, ‘The white man and the land of questions’ pp. 56-57, ‘Voilà’s wife’ pp. 139-146) come from Zamir’s own imagination. They are inspired by life in the Comoros and based on themes that matter to him, such as family conflict, women’s rights, poverty, and the importance of sharing – which are, interestingly, some of the main topics of traditional folktales.²¹

After examining these specific examples with Zamir, we discussed the extensive media coverage of his three novels, pointing out how French critics tended to call him a ‘good storyteller’ rather than ‘a good novelist’. Zamir’s answer was extremely interesting:

‘I do not see myself as a storyteller. Critics call me a ‘good storyteller’, which means that I am good at telling stories, but it does not mean that I am a storyteller. It is true that all my novels contain tales and embedded stories (...) [but] the stories themselves do not really matter – what matters is how I tell them. These embedded stories are my tools, as a novelist, to invite the reader within the text (...) Thanks to them, my reader cannot stop reading.’

Embedded stories are indeed prominent in Zamir’s novel, whose structure – in the absence of chapters or punctuation - depends solely on these ‘tales within a tale’, which might also include an analepsis (a move backward) or a prolepsis (a move forward). For instance, the two stories ‘The coconut thief’ and ‘The white man and the land of questions’ work within an embedded framework that spans over pp. 53-9 and which could be schematized as follows:

¹⁹ All subsequent quotes attributed to Zamir come from this interview and are my translation.

²⁰ For the purpose of clarity, I gave titles to these ‘tale-like’ stories, but they have no title in the novel.

²¹ See Saïd Ahmed, *Guerriers, princes et poètes*, p. 162.

- _ Anguille’s monologue mentions her aunt Tranquille (p. 53)
- ____ Tranquille and her husband move to Hombo, they struggle to have a child (pp. 53-5)
- _____ One day, a thief tried to steal coconuts in their field. Tranquille’s husband caught him, but the thief only answered questions by another question (pp. 55-6)
- _____ A white man once came to Mutsamudu to check if Anjouan was really ‘the land of questions’ and then left (pp. 56-7)
- _____ The coconut thief pretended that he owned the field, but Tranquille and her husband caught him (pp. 57-8)
- _____ Tranquille struggles to have child (p. 58)
- _ Anguille’s monologue keeps going (pp. 58-9)

Other examples of embedded stories can be found pp. 134-147 or pp. 251-256. This figure of speech is characteristic of Zamir’s writing and perfectly illustrates the proverb from Anjouan ‘*hale mdza hale*’, ‘a tale begets a tale.’²² This is a reference to the storytelling tradition of the Comoros, according to which the audience cannot interrupt the storyteller except to correct her. In that case, the interrupter might retell the story correctly, or tell another version that she heard somewhere else. These ‘corrections’ could last the whole night.²³ On another level, oral folktales are unfixed and depend solely on their context of enunciation, which includes the audience, the storyteller and the relationship between them. There are some local and national favourites, but each storyteller mixes different plotlines and characters to produce a singular tale while connecting it to other popular, well-known stories – which is precisely what Zamir does by including his own tales in the novel.

Storytelling and ‘history-telling’

Some stories in *Anguille sous roche* deliver historical information about the Comoros. Zamir intended from the start to publish his novel in France, for a global rather than a Comorian readership. In that perspective, mentioning elements of Comorian history might be a literary strategy aimed at clarifying the spatial and temporal contexts of the novel to a foreign audience. On another level, it also corresponds to a genre of Comorian oral literature called *hadisi*.²⁴ While the folktale, *hale*, is purely fictional, the *hadisi* is based on historic figures or beliefs –

²² The proverb was mentioned in Wadjih S.M. Abdérémane, ‘Dynamique énonciative dans les contes comoriens’, *Ya Mkobe*, 12-13 (Dec 2005), pp. 115-132. p. 120.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 120.

²⁴ The word comes from the Arabic *hadith*, which means all the reported sayings that have been attributed to the Prophet through a faithful chain of transmitters. In Shikomori the term refers to Islamic and profane texts alike.

making of *hale* ‘storytelling’ and of *hadisi* ‘history-telling’. Both genres educate their audience about the founding principles, myths and figures of Comorian society. The *hale* is set up in an admittedly imaginary and fictional past, and the *hadisi* within the ‘historic’ past (which can be fantasised).²⁵ Interestingly, storytelling and history-telling intersect in the following extract from *Anguille sous roche*, which evokes the foundation of Mutsamudu (p.63):

(...) Mutsamudu avait vu sa naissance grâce à ce pâtre dont j’ai déjà parlé dès le début, Mussa Mudu qui signifie littéralement Mussa Noir, oui, c’était un pâtre qui était au service du palais royal, au dire de Connaît-Tout, des historiens soutiennent qu’il cherchait une chèvre manquante dans le troupeau, pendant que d’autres parlent d’une recherche de pâture, tout ça c’est du n’importe quoi, mais continuons quand même, de ce fait, il avait battu la campagne, jusqu’à ce qu’il découvre cette partie de l’île qui portera plus tard son nom, alors il paraît qu’en cheminant à travers bois, çà et là, ce pâtre avait fini par déboucher dans un espace où l’on pouvait voir la mer, cet espace n’est d’autre que ce quartier qu’on a appelé Mjihari, donc le nom Mutsamudu n’est qu’une dérivation du nom de ce pâtre, Mussa Mudu (...)

(...) Mutsamudu was born thanks to this shepherd I’ve been mentioning since the beginning, Mussa Mudu which literally means Black Mussa, yes, he was a shepherd working for the royal palace, according to what Connaît-Tout says, historians claim that he was looking for a goat that went missing from the herd, while others say he was looking for a pasture, all of this is nonsense, but let’s keep going, because of that, he combed the countryside, until he discovered the part of the island that would later be named after him, it’s been said that when he was walking through the woods, here and there, this shepherd eventually ended up on a place where one could see the sea, this place is the neighbourhood that we called Mjihari, so the name Mutsamudu is just a derivation of this shepherd’s name, Mussa Mudu (...)²⁶

The ‘historic’ part of the tale is fully integrated within the fictional framework of Anguille’s monologue through indirect speech. The absence of marks of time instantly inscribes the story within a mythical past, while references to orality such as ‘according to what Connaît-Tout says’ or ‘while others say’ further connect the extract to the *hadisi* tradition. Nevertheless, this brief historical mention is immediately preceded and followed by purely fictional stories, thereby blurring the lines between story and history-telling. Similarly,

²⁵ See Moussa Saïd Ahmed, *Guerriers, princes et poètes*, pp. 72-73.

²⁶ My translation. The full novel has recently been translated into English: Ali Zamir, *A girl called Eel*, trans. Aneesa Abbas Higgins (London: Jacaranda, 2019).

historical parentheses are frequent in *hale*, such as in ‘Yatima na inyonbe’²⁷ (‘The orphan and the cow’) which also evokes the foundation of Mutsamudu. An orphan is badly treated by her stepmother and asks the help of her dead mother to reverse the situation;²⁸ ultimately, her stepmother is punished by the community while she marries the prince. The tale ends with the closing sentence ‘*De imana imali ya Mtsamdu ile kaitsoyoma, mana alodzewa de Mtsamdu*’, ‘This is why Mutsamudu’s prosperity will be eternal: because she was married in Mutsamudu’ (p. 180), thereby suggesting a reciprocal relationship between the *hale* and *hadisi* genres. This relationship has been very little covered by Comorian and foreign research alike and would be worth exploring.

Audience, readership and the production of meaning

When asked about the Mutsamudu extract, Zamir answered:

‘Why do I always write “au dire de Connaît-Tout”? Because I want my reader to systematically question what is written. (...) I do not think that there is a single, absolute truth in literature, and especially in novels. There are different truths, depending on the reader, and from where and when she reads the text.’

This conception of the reciprocal relationship between reader and text echoes Iser’s reader-response theory, according to which ‘it is with the reader that the text comes to life.’²⁹ In that sense, Zamir’s text is participative, for the reader must engage with the text to produce meaning. For instance, the last word of the novel, the onomatopoeia ‘ouf!’ (p.318) could either suggest that Anguille was saved or drowned. According to Zamir, open endings are essential because ‘literature is the site of dialogue, a site in which the reader always has a thing to say.’ Interestingly, this comment could bring us back to the participative aspect of storytelling, which cannot occur unless the audience answers: ‘Gombé!’ to the storyteller’s introductory sentences, riddles or songs. In that sense, it is the audience and the reader’s participation that activate the meaning virtually contained within these oral and written Comorian texts.

²⁷ ‘Yatima na inyonbe’ in Mohamed Ahmed-Chamanga, *Rois, femmes et djinns*, pp. 172-181.

²⁸ See Sophie Blanchy, ‘Lignée féminine et valeurs islamiques à travers quelques contes de Mayotte’ (unpublished DEA thesis, Université de la Réunion, 1985).

²⁹ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1978). p. 19.

Conclusion

Zamir's novel both reflects and challenges the story-telling tradition of the Comoros. By incorporating an original tale from Anjouan in his novel, Zamir recognizes the legacy of Comorian folktales in forging his writing. He also illustrates the proverb '*hale mdza hale*' by creating his own tales inspired by Comorian popular beliefs and stories and imbricated within an 'embedded stories' framework. While keeping the fundamental elements of Comorian storytelling, including the plurality of genres and its participatory dimension, Zamir reinvests traditional plotlines to use them as literary tools aimed at a Western audience. He thereby subverts the extremely codified literary tradition of the Comoros by dissociating tales from their traditional social function in order to 'say what is universal.'

Further research impact

I submitted an article to the *Bulletin of Francophone Postcolonial Studies* entitled 'Literature and Visibility in the Comoros: Ali Zamir and Nassuf Djailani', which comprises extracts from the interviews I conducted during my Laidlaw research.

My research will also feature in the presentation competition at the 2019 Laidlaw European conference.

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