



Nuriaty, the Saint and the Sultan: Virtuous Subject and Subjective Virtuoso of the Post-Modern Colony

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- Rouyer, Alwin R. 1994. Explaining Economic Backwardness and Weak Governing Capability in Bihar State in India. *South Asia*, 17 (2): 63-89.
- Scott, James C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State. How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven and London: Yale U. P.
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least treated that way by caste leaders and local people who pressure the backward classes commissions to recognize their claims.⁹ Moreover, individuals or households can cross class boundaries (when their social economic situation changes) and thus move in and out of eligible categories. Caste criteria apply only to groups. Individuals cannot move in and out, and this obstructs the flexibility needed to solve the 'creamy layer problem'.

Scott stresses that *Seeing Like a State* should not be read as a 'blanket condemnation' of modernization and scientific knowledge (1998: 352, 6, 96-97). Practical knowledge, he observes, 'is often inseparable from the practices of domination, monopoly, and exclusion that offend the modern liberal sensibility' (ibid: 7). The point is not that practical knowledge is 'the product of some mythical, egalitarian state of nature,' but that 'formal schemes of order are untenable without some elements of the practical knowledge they tend to dismiss' (ibid.).

But there is more to Scott's argument. If viability were the only point, the plea for '*metis*-friendly institutions' with which Scott ends the study would not make much sense. Clearly there is also a strong suggestion that *metis*-friendliness is better than what high-modernist governments want to impose. This suggestion comes from Scott's own examples of disaster, but it also comes from the positive connotations of the fluidity and flexibility ascribed to *metis* in contrast to the rigidity ascribed to official knowledge. Alvin W. Gouldner wrote that the theory of bureaucracy involves sentiments of pessimism and fatalism, which he called (after Arthur O. Lovejoy) 'metaphysical pathos', and argued that people often subscribe to theories, not because these theories are 'cerebrally inspected and found valid', but because their metaphysical pathos resonates with people's own moods and sentiments

(1955). The opposition between rigid official knowledge and fluid practical knowledge that Scott dwells on, and that is also popular in constructivist writing on social and cultural group divisions, stems from the same metaphysical pathos of bureaucracy. Many prefer small and flexible from the bottom up to general and rigid from the top down. The idea of a dominant state that imposes rigidity and suppresses flexible local knowledge well fits the common dislike of bureaucracy and the equally common pessimism about its workings. Reservation policy in India, however, shows that a plea for *metis*-friendly institutions as a principle of institutional design is a mistake if that plea assumes the flexibility of *metis*.

There are other reasons, however, to make *metis*-friendly institutions. Incorporating *metis* in government institutions is democratic.¹⁰ A plea for doing so does not require positive characterization of the nature of *metis*. A well known argument in discussions on affirmative action in India can illustrate. Criticizing Indian anthropologists such as Bêteille and Srinivas for opposing caste based reservations, Gerard Heuzé (1991) argues that caste is important to people in India, and that therefore the government should recognize it in affirmative action (see Srinivas 1992 for a reaction). *Metis* on caste may be rigid – indeed Heuzé says it is rigid – but that is irrelevant to the democratic principle that the government should recognize and incorporate what is important to people. In the same spirit there is increasing support among intellectuals in India for reinitiating the colonial practice – abandoned after independence – of registering caste identities in the Census of India (cf. Omvedt 1998). Whether or not this choice makes sense as a democratic principle, however, is a normative question. A priori claims about the nature of *metis* can only obscure the issue. □

Nuriaty, the Saint and the Sultan

Virtuous subject and subjective virtuoso of the post-modern colony

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This paper was originally prepared for the panel on Postcolonial Subjectivities in Africa at the Manchester '99 Visions and Voices Conference, University of Manchester, October 27-31 1999.¹ I was intrigued to participate by the way Richard Werbner's invitation conjured the notion of subjectivity as simultaneously about subjection to power, moral agency, and being the subject of one's own experience, the kind of space where a number of ostensibly competing theories might be made to meet. My interest lies at present in moral practice, in the conditions of and for acting with dignity and self respect and making situated judgments. I draw from an Aristotelian perspective in which practical knowledge is understood not as detached from being or becoming, but as constitutive of them (Bernstein 1983: 146), yet seek to understand the way ambivalent subjects are able to make existential choices with respect to power. My subject here is a spirit medium who, subjected to power and history, nevertheless manages to constitute herself as a subject in her own right.

With respect to the *postcolonial*, the locus is an anomalous one; Mayotte remains one of the few previously colonized places that is not exactly post-colonial, or rather, that has defined coloniality in an original, even post-modern way, in which the emphasis is on the second rather than the first morpheme of postcolonial.

Appropriated by France in 1841 and subjected to a harsh regime of sugar plantations through the early part of this century followed by relatively benign neglect until the mid 1970's, Mayotte chose in vigorously contested referenda conducted in 1974 and 1976 not to sever its ties with France in order to join the emerging independent republic of the Comores, of which it was certainly geographically and culturally a distinctive part (Lambek 1995, Vérin 1994). Mayotte received instead the status of Collectivité Territoriale, an ambiguous designation that in practice includes government by a French prefect alongside an elected local assembly and deputies to the French legislature. This is not the place to go into the complexities of the legal and political status or the lively local politics. Suffice it to say that the Mahorais (people of Mayotte) understood themselves to know what they were doing. And, despite the inevitable continuation of colonial attitudes on the part of the French, the Mahorais have been quite successful at getting what they thought they wanted.²

Since 1976 Mayotte has undergone a striking transformation with respect to the economy, to social services, in particular education, and to the outlook of the population. Mayotte has been transformed into a post-traditional society in which subsistence rice cultivation has been entirely abandoned in favour of wage work and welfare

1. The research, writing and delivery of the paper have been supported by grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I thank especially my collaborator Jacqueline Solway for her substantive contributions to this essay but absolve her of responsibility for the final interpretation. I am also greatly indebted to Nuriaty Tumbu and her family and regret the use of pseudonyms. A portion of Nuriaty's story, placed within a broader theoretical frame, was presented in a lecture commemorating Roy Rappaport delivered at the University of Michigan, 15 April 1998; later versions were delivered at Trent University and the Manchester conference. I thank the audiences at each occasion, especially Ray Kelly, Heike Behrend, and Richard Fardon for incisive criticism and Paul Stoller, Dick Werbner, and Jonathan Benthall for their enthusiasm.

2. Perhaps Mayotte awaits its Frantz Fanon.

3. They had not held their ceremonies or had the opportunity to announce their names before they were displaced.

4. Much of this was described to me by Nuriaty's ex-mother-in-law, who wished to both justify her own actions and to praise Nuriaty.

5. As another medium, who thought she had heard a rumour to the effect that the saint had left his tomb put it, the saint was undoubtedly sad to have the sound of Islamic recitation replaced by pop music from the radio.

6. 'Good people' are here described as Muslims able to indulge in the outward signs of piety: beautiful clothes and scent, an elegance characteristic of the epoch of Muslim hegemony.

7. Football (soccer) was, in fact, a major means by which the French attempted to reorient and discipline youth and promote a civil rather than a Muslim identity.

8. The most important of these, the spirit whom Nuriaty shared with her father, continued occasionally to advise her in her sleep. The others, she said, left outright. Nuriaty emphasized the Sultan's objection to the non-Islamic practices of the other spirits, especially the drink and the noise, whereas her father pointed out that the Sultan is a king and kings rule singly.

9. Regular prayer was commonly taken up by older and post-menopausal women. On the complex links between Islam and spirit possession in Mayotte see Lambek 1993.

10. This is not to suggest that her day-to-day life has changed much. In 1995 she was still embroiled in the daily affairs of her parents'

benefits; in which a whole generation has been introduced to French schooling, some proceeding all the way through the *bac*; in which people achieved social mobility and white collar jobs; and in which many inhabitants were able to relocate to La Réunion and even metropolitan France. Conversely, Mayotte has become a desirable location for outsiders: for metropolitan French seeking romantic escape in a tropical island that has an ever increasing tourist infrastructure, supply of European amenities, and the security of the known; for desperately poor Comorians, especially Anjouanais, who often arrived on the beach at night and were willing to take employment on any terms; and for Malagasy from the Mahajanga region eagerly seeking work papers and drawing on old kinship connections to acquire French citizenship. Mayotte has become a local hub of movement and a whirl of activity and opportunity. But in the background remain all those people who did not achieve the mobility, the education, the white collar jobs, the consumer items, and the respect that comes with them.

Originally despised for its political dependency and subsequently envied for its economic success (albeit relative and artificial), and certainly less buffeted by the effects of global economic forces than its neighbours, Mayotte has experienced rapid transition, a transition to which Nuriaty, the woman at the centre of this paper, stands as moral witness. Yet this transition was something generally desired. When neighbouring Madagascar marks independence day by means of French custom (military parades, food, *bises*), the Malagasy are celebrating not only independence from France but independence to be like France, to be another commensurable nation state within the international order of nation states. In this aspiration perhaps they are out of date. Mayotte, which is not only like France, but a part of France, stands as the first instance of a place that grasped the possibility of post-coloniality in the new global order for enhanced forms of connection and mobility.

* * *

To generalize about subjectivity risks engagement with the oxymoronic and so I turn to case history, a suitably Mancunian method that I have found indispensable. The story is that of Nuriaty Tumbu (a pseudonym). Modest in her range and abilities by comparison to some of the sophisticated spirit mediums I have since encountered in Madagascar, like them she is both a subjective virtuoso and virtuous subject.

The moral practice of spirit mediums in Mayotte and Madagascar, that is to say, their exercise of situated, yet imaginative judgment, is evident in at least three respects. The most obvious is the way that they demonstrate flexible role shifting, empathy and disinterestedness in their interactions with clients, each other, and their general 'public,' both from within and outside states of active possession (Lambek 1993: 371ff). The second is the way mediums come to be possessed by particular spirits rather than others, thereby reproducing and initiating specific social relations and emphasizing certain social connections over others (Lambek 1988, 1993: 320ff). The third, on which I focus here, is the way that some mediums come to assume a kind of consciousness – and conscience – of history (Lambek 1998a, 1998b, nd a). Their virtuosity is evident in the skill with which they can shift between historically distinct subject positions; their virtue in their combination of social advocate and social critic, of exemplary monarch (most spirits are former rulers) and exemplary subject.

I began some time ago to trace generational continuity among mediums and spirits in Mayotte and thereby dis-

covered a logic of practice inherent in succession to mediumship (Lambek 1988, 1993). Asking who comes to be possessed by which spirit turned out to be much more interesting than simply asking why some people rather than others become possessed. One of the central figures in my description of the dynamics of succession was a woman named Nuriaty, the eldest daughter of Tumbu and Mohedja, people with whom I had lived and worked for some time and who, among other things in their productive and well-rounded lives, have been active spirit mediums. Soon after her first marriage Nuriaty too began to acquire spirits, notably the main senior spirit who also possessed her father. This occurred with her father's tacit acquiescence and perhaps even with his encouragement. Tumbu passed on his knowledge of curing and sorcery extraction and Nuriaty took up his therapeutic practice as he withdrew from it. Within Nuriaty the senior spirit continued to look after the welfare of the extended family. Nuriaty also began to be possessed by two of the spirits who possessed her mother.³ Nuriaty's actions fitted my model of succession to mediumship very well, exemplifying a process that includes mutual identification, introjection, negotiation of issues of connection and separation, and ultimately, displacement, growth and reproduction which resonate both on deep psychological and on social levels (Lambek nd b).

Succession implies success and I expected that Nuriaty would continue to expand her role as host to the main spirit who had possessed her father. However Nuriaty's career has not developed as either I or her parents had anticipated. I was disconcerted to find on a trip to Mayotte in 1995 that Nuriaty was no longer an active medium of any of the family spirits. Social change had destroyed the whole pattern, I assumed, and indeed the changes in Mayotte were enormous. But not quite so. What had happened was that Nuriaty's moral horizons had shifted.

Nuriaty is a warm, jovial, and slightly aggressive woman whom I have known since 1975 when, as a mother of 3 sons, she seemed much older than me, although in reality she is approximately my age. She likes to eat well, pays relatively little attention to her appearance, and unlike most people in the village of Lombeni in 1995, still lived in a wattle and daub thatched-roofed house. She has been married 6 times. One of her sons died at a young age and since then, to her great sadness, she has had no full term pregnancies. She has also raised a sister's daughter, a younger brother, and now the former's daughter.

It was her infertility that broke up the marriage that was otherwise the happiest. Her husband at the time had never been previously married and had no children of his own. After several years during which Nuriaty sought to give birth, he listened to his mother's advice to have children elsewhere and took the opportunity to follow the socially approved scenario which until then he had avoided, namely to marry a virgin. This was an expensive proposition; moreover the requirements had inflated enormously since Nuriaty herself had married as a virgin (Lambek 1983, Solway and Lambek nd). Thus, while she lived in great simplicity she knew her husband was putting aside most of his earnings towards gifts for the new bride. The husband decided that polygyny would be too difficult and so when the time was ripe he left Nuriaty. She understood the reasons and even attended the wedding, which included a lavish display of gifts – a sewing machine, 70 cloth wrappers, a watch, and several pieces of gold. Nuriaty herself contributed an item to add to the gifts he brought.⁴

The new wife, more than a decade younger than Nuriaty and her husband, was a school graduate with a clerical job. She had enough money to build a fashionable

extended family and lived extremely modestly.

11. To my wife, who had also known her a decade earlier, she appeared harder, her warmth coloured by a streak of bitterness (J. Solway, pers. comm.).

12. In addition, the security of uneducated women had radically declined. With rising domestic costs, declining subsistence production, and female immigration, local women were increasingly vulnerable to abandonment by their spouses and found it harder to support their children. For the different sorts of difficulties faced by youths educated under the French system see Vidal 1994.

13. The Sultan sported a spotless white shirt, long waist wrap, cloth belt, lacy scarf, fez-like red hat, and staff. The items were very expensive; some were purchased by Nuriaty and her husband, others were gifts from devotees of the Sultan. He also consumes rose water, betel nut, and a drink made of powdered sandalwood, all long out of fashion in Mayotte.

14. See Lambek 1995 and Lambek and Breslar 1986 for brief accounts of aspects of this campaign and the referendum.

15. Clients should remunerate spirit mediums with gifts (*ishima*) rather than payment; the amount is up to the donor (Lambek 1993: 95-8, 361) and is an index of respect. While Nuriaty may anticipate that the Sultan will receive larger gifts from wealthy politicians than her other spirits received from village supplicants, she cannot be sure of this. Moreover, any indications of greed would immediately undermine the authority of the medium. Hence, while not irrelevant, material considerations are unlikely to be central in Nuriaty's shift in practice.

16. I am referring to *The Poetics* (Aristotle 1947) and *The Ethics* (Aristotle 1976). For an elaboration of the theoretical argument concerning the general value of an Aristotelian perspective, see Lambek in press; for substantiation with respect to *poiesis*, see Lambek 1998a. Beattie (1977) provides an earlier, somewhat more literal treatment of spirit mediumship as theatre, as does Leiris (1958).

17. Moreover, things are changing so fast in Mayotte that she may become unable to attract and retain the degree of social respect necessary for her own self-respect.

18. Richard Fardon admonished in his comments on this paper that agency ought to remain a question rather than an answer.

house of durable materials, something which was still beyond Nuriaty's grasp (she is counting on her grown sons to help her build). There had been no comparable opportunities for schooling when Nuriaty was young. Living in relative poverty or at least materially simpler conditions, she watched younger cousins and nieces gain white collar jobs and incomes and display the associated signs of material prosperity and physical ease.

When I arrived in 1995 Nuriaty began to tell me about a series of dreams in which she witnessed how a saint had left his tomb which was located on the adjacent beach. Sharif Bakar was from *Arabie*; according to legend his burial took place well before the founding of the village, possibly several centuries ago. His tomb had been the site of community sacrifices until a few years earlier. Recently the beach had become the destination of Sunday visitors from town, young people in large numbers who arrived in cars and motorcycles and who drank, played ball, caroused, and possibly urinated on the tomb. In Nuriaty's dreams, the saint and his wife (the first I had ever heard of her) withdrew in anger from the pollution.⁵

The saint did not simply quit his tomb. Nuriaty saw Maouana Madi, the Sultan of Mayotte prior to the French takeover in 1841, arrive in a boat to fetch him, in effect to rescue him. Here is a paraphrase of her account:

The day they cleared the bush from around the tomb [in order to create a football field] Nuriaty first had the dream. Sharif Bakar and his wife got up and left angrily. Maouana Madi came and said to Nuriaty, "Let's fetch Sharif Bakar, he can't stay there. Maouana Madi asked her to help; she's his helper. She saw both Maouana Madi and Ndramanavaka [leader of the Sakalava *trumba* spirits, former Sakalava king and ally of Maouana Madi, and the man who signed over Mayotte to the French] invite him to join them. A *vedette* came, filled with beautifully dressed people. They performed the Maulida Shengy [musical poem and dance in honour of the Prophet performed by women], then took the Saint and his wife with them in the launch [to the Sultan's own tomb on the other side of Mayotte]. They speak in Shimaore to Nuriaty. They are good, beautiful people, *ulu tsara*. Their smell is very sweet, *manitry*. They left with gold, a golden armchair, *fauteuil dahabo* and gold clothes on the chair.⁶ After they left she woke up. She has had the dream 3 times.

The Saint has left for good. You can still do a *fatiha* [Muslim prayer] at the tomb, but the tomb is now empty. He and all the elders, *ulu be* were angry at how the tomb was treated, used as the site of ball games,⁷ picnics, etc. The elders couldn't put up with drunken picnics [as she speaks we hear trucks full of noisy people leaving the beach]. Sharif Bakar was angry to see his house used in this way, so he got up and left.

Nuriaty thus undertook to serve as a modest witness to the changes taking place in Mayotte and the violation of respect to elders and predecessors. But the fact that the Sultan included her in this scene had even greater significance. The second thing that had happened to Nuriaty (and was partly realized through the first) was that the Sultan, Maouana Madi, now possessed her. Not only that, but she was apparently the only recognized medium of Maouana Madi on the island, the previous medium, a woman who had lived in town (L'Abattoir) and whom Nuriaty had never met, having died some years previously.

This is astonishing on several grounds. First, Maouana Madi – and hence Nuriaty as his only medium – is a figure of 'national' importance. A ritual of island-wide import is held at his shrine on an annual basis. Maouana Madi sig-

nifies the unity and pre-colonial autonomy of Mayotte. He is recognized throughout the island and is granted greater honour than the Sakalava monarch with whom he interacts, replaying by means of spirit possession in the late 20th Century their alliance in the early 19th Century that preceded and was implicated in French conquest. In effect, the relationship between Maouana Madi and his *trumba* counterpart, Ndramanavaka stands for the social composition of Mayotte as a union of (a majority of) Shimaore speakers with (a minority of) Kibushy (Malagasy)-speaking Sakalava. Nuriaty herself is a Kibushy speaker but Maouana Madi speaks in an old version of Shimaore. In the present Maouana Madi is sought out by important, sophisticated clients, including, Nuriaty said, the leaders of the dominant political movement (Mouvement Populaire Mahorais: MPM) that engineered Mayotte's present political status. Certain clients have urged Nuriaty to move to town, a request that she has so far forthrightly declined despite the fact that they have offered to buy her a house. Ironically, some of these clients she classifies as European, *vazaha*.

Perhaps most astonishing, once Maouana Madi had risen in Nuriaty and his identity had been confirmed following Nuriaty's participation at the annual ritual at the central shrine, the Sultan announced that he found the presence of Nuriaty's other spirits polluting and he wished for them to leave her. Someone of his stature – and there is no one higher in Mayotte – should not have to put up with their company. These spirits, the cumulative result of Nuriaty's possession activities to that date, who had formed the substantive connection with her parents, had looked after her family, and had served as the carefully cultivated basis of her career, agreed not to rise in her any longer.⁸ Nuriaty still performed as a curer but only by means of Maouana Madi. That meant she entirely gave up participating in the possession ceremonies of other villagers. Once a devoted carouser at spirit ceremonies, she now merely observed from the sidelines. Moreover, at the urging of the Sultan, Nuriaty took up regular Muslim prayer.⁹

It was an act of some courage for Nuriaty to shift from the spirits of her parents who provided her a stable, highly connected identity and a modest means for earning a living as a curer to a spirit whose significance is island-wide and whose appearance transformed her into a player in the public arena, opening up a whole new set of clients and demands, of relations and sources of respect, but also of pitfalls. No one in her family or her community had had this spirit; no one expected her to get it. Her mother, an accomplished spirit medium, was as astonished and as bemused as I was. Moreover, it was the spirit himself who took the definitive step of asking all the other spirits whom she had acquired over the past 20 years to move aside.

In effect, Nuriaty has shifted from constructing herself to making history. Nuriaty plunged from a highly connected position on the family and village scene to a central yet precarious position on the island stage.¹⁰ Why did this happen? In conversation and daily action Nuriaty had come to express a degree of resentment that I had not noticed when she was younger.¹¹ One can speak of Nuriaty's personal setbacks, her relative deprivation. However her acts cannot be described as mainly selfish or instrumental. In part she may be declaring the decline of a kin and village-based mode of solidarity and mutual support, yet she also gave up practices that had afforded her a good deal of pleasure and security. She had devoted much energy to developing mature relationships with her previous spirits and had been comfortably established with them. In abandoning them in her mid-forties she made a leap into the unknown, took a tremendous risk.

Despite its edge of grandiosity, Nuriaty's act was not a

The Sultan, Maouana Madi, in possession of Nuriaty Tumbu. Mayotte, August 1995. Photo: J. S. Solway



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direct expression of envy or an attack upon those more fortunate. Instead, she viewed her situation as a product of 'the times' and it was to historical forces she turned for meaning and for redress. It is clear from her dreams and from the identity of her new spirit that her concerns were not merely personal ones. They had to do with the disturbing effects of rapid social change on the entire community, the withdrawal of previous icons of authority and their displacement by new sources of knowledge, wealth, power, prestige, and pleasure, a process which left not only Nuriaty but large numbers of villagers, especially women of her age, out in the cold. Especially acute, for people of this last cohort not to receive French schooling, was the way that people a decade or more younger had displaced and rendered them marginal. Her personal situation, made more poignant by her ex-husband's new marriage, was by no means unusual; Nuriaty's experience indexed that of a whole generation. It had become, as Nuriaty's next younger sister put it, a 'papaya world' (*dunia papay*) in which, as on a papaya tree, the smaller, younger fruit rest above the larger ones.

More than this, the community sentiment once expressed in reverence to the saint was now dissipated as the village itself was increasingly permeated and fragmented by external forces and eroded by internal divisions of wealth, consumption, and class.¹² By 1995 a large number of village residents worked elsewhere during the week. And on weekends their beach was invaded by privileged and disrespectful picnickers. Moreover, while the sacrifice at the saint's tomb had been to pray for rain, it was, as another villager pointed out, no longer necessary since the rice growing community I had observed in 1975 had 20 years later not a single family who still cultivated rice.

If the saint has withdrawn from his tomb, Nuriaty was there as a witness. And if the saint was abetted by Maouana Madi, who was justifiably outraged at the treatment of his comrade, so too was it Maouana Madi who brought Nuriaty as a witness. Despite the retreat of the Saint, the Sultan has shown his determination to persevere, as manifested by his appearance in Nuriaty. Behind her acts, ostensibly passive and obviously drawing on a

'mimetic faculty' and strong powers of identification, desire, and fantasy, clearly are will, commitment, and moral imagination. The Sultan is concerned with maintaining the dignity of the Saint, and Nuriaty is concerned about respect not only for the Sultan, but dignity for herself and her peers. Nuriaty likewise acknowledges that the locus of significant political action has shifted definitively from the village to the island-wide scene.

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What Nuriaty offers is not just a representation or unmediated expression of problems, but both a consciousness of the historical process and a conscientious intervention in that process. To serve as a witness is not to be passive. The Saint's tomb did not simply sink into oblivion; its passing was marked and articulated in a meaningful scenario as the Saint and his wife withdrew in dignity, accompanied by the celebratory strains of the Maulida. As Maouana Madi, Nuriaty goes further. The Sultan comes to escort the saint from his polluted environs, and thereby acquiesces to change, but knowingly and on his own terms. And while the Saint abandons the community, acknowledging, in effect, its abandonment of him, the Sultan does the reverse, moving into the community and into Nuriaty herself. The particularity of the village is thus transcended by 'national' (island) identification, but this time on terms that Nuriaty sets.

It is important to note that Nuriaty's position is not one of simple conservatism. She is not averse to change *per se* so much as to the way in which the past has been forgotten and, in effect, violated. Dressed in his glistening white Muslim garb,¹³ the Sultan himself quietly pointed out to me how he had long served [in his previous medium] the interests of the Mouvement Mahorais, guiding the leaders in their [ostensibly secular] campaign to intensify French presence on the island.¹⁴ MPM party leaders continued to consult with the Sultan before [hotly contested] elections and major decisions and to inform him of the arrival of political leaders from the Metropole. 'The land has changed', pronounced the Sultan, 'So we all change. We all agree now to follow France. But before any major

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political event they have to inform the rightful masters of the land, *tompin tany*. It is right that the politicians come here when they need something, as they did before the last election, yet they remain ungrateful for their victories.' He was angry, but admitted, 'What can [we] elders, *ulu be* do? Elders are treated like garbage, *ulu be pringa* [literally the weeds at the edge of the village where garbage is dumped and children defecate].' Some visitors do bring a small gift¹⁵ and the Sultan insists that he continue to be informed of political needs: "They [the living political leaders, the people of Mayotte] are my responsibility, *re tarimiku*." He added that he did not discriminate between political parties and would assist all comers so long as they did not advocate union with the other Comoro Islands.

The spirit's viewpoint is composed of several intertwined strands. It is a nationalist stance, one that plays up the internal unity of Mayotte and its opposition to the neighbouring islands. Yet while the sentiment is modern in this respect and by no means opposed to the current policy of increased integration into the French state, it remains at arm's length from that policy, evincing a deep suspicion on moral grounds of the permeation of Mayotte by French values. It also draws on the picture of competition and warfare among the pre-colonial Sultans and fear of the rulers of the larger and more powerful islands. Nuriaty emphasizes Islam as the basis for both the unity and continuity of Mayotte, albeit by means of an idiom, spirit possession, that has often been opposed by Islam. Hers is a picture of a traditionalist Islam, unlike the more recently arrived reformist and transnationalist strains that provide the basis for another kind of political response to French influence.

These ideological strands are condensed in the authoritative figure of the Sultan and his place in history. The Sultan insists on his own continuing relevance, on the importance, characteristic of Malagasy societies more generally, of gaining ancestral authorization for present-day actions and choices (Bloch 1971, 1986, Edkvist 1997, Middleton, ed. 1999), of recognizing what I would call the sanctification of the present by the past.

* * *

Most anthropological readings of Nuriaty's practice would divide along theoretical interests in psychological motivation – desire or resentment – and political resistance – power. Both of these arguments rest ultimately on some idea of perceived self-interest and in that sense are similar to each other rather than real alternatives, though they appear to be grounded in opposed theoretical positions. I do not dispute them, but alone neither of them captures what I find of greatest significance. Drawing from an Aristotelian perspective,¹⁶ I would emphasize the following. First, with respect to the content of her dream narrative and her performances as the Sultan she engages in a virtuoso *poiesis* (crafting) of history, complete with plot, character, scene and so on. Second, with respect to her judicious, situated interventions with and as the Sultan, including having and recounting her dreams, her practice is a virtuous one. Hers are acts of dignity and indignation, of courage, of imagination, of concern and respect for herself and for others, of recognizing the indebtedness of the present to the past, of integrity. She speaks for collective values, for what, in her understanding, makes life meaningful and fruitful. Her means are traditional; her end is human flourishing. Her acts are an expression of who she is, not a calculation or manipulation of external knowledge. And while clearly her practice is embodied, embodiment as a paradigm does not cover the case.

If we were restricted to the terms of Plato's opposition between poetry and philosophy, between mimetic engagement and distanced contemplation (Lambek in press),

Nuriaty's practice would fall on the mimetic pole. Yet clearly this too is insufficient; Nuriaty exhibits a consciousness of her historical situation and skillfully applies local knowledge to it – acting within the traditional terms of spirit possession, yet saying something of relevance to the present by its means. Moreover, she is making a practical intervention – in both her personal circumstances and in the history of her society. She is exercising judgment over the situation; she is addressing the contingent by means of values which transcend it; she is articulating a vision of historical action; she is acting with reason for the good. All this falls within the scope of what Aristotle terms *phronesis* (Aristotle 1976).

What Nuriaty shows us is neither detached contemplative reason nor fully impassioned identification alone but practical wisdom, that is, the understanding of how to make sense of the particular, the judgment involved in the timing, in the particular incarnation, in the articulation of the dreams, and so on. The judgment is confirmed to the degree her actions are acknowledged by others as fitting and to the degree that it brings her a degree of equanimity or happiness and her fellow subjects an increased consciousness of history and the place of their own agency within it. We can speak of what she has done not as rational or irrational, accurate or inaccurate, clear or mystified, critically radical or blindly conservative, but (in Aristotelian terms) as elegant or clumsy, wise or foolish, courageous or cowardly, dignified or undignified, virtuous or incontinent.

I do not mean to idealize Nuriaty or to suggest that she or anyone else does not act out of mixed emotions or does not harbour internal conflicts. I worry that she is over her head.¹⁷ But to argue that people are political or desirous subjects does not preclude them from being moral subjects, living virtuously or seeking the means by which they may do so. As Gluckman (1963) observed, most societies hold an image of persons as reasonable and upright. Moreover, as Mauss (1966) recognized, that people act from self-interest does not prevent them from acting simultaneously with disinterest. Similarly for Aristotle, virtuous action straddles the mean between self-interest and self-abnegation. Nuriaty herself put it this way: 'The senior spirits, *lulu maventy* are angry that all the sacred spots (places of pilgrimage), *ziara* are being destroyed. [As a result,] people with spirits (mediums) suffer. The spirits come and cry in our sleep.'

What may remain troubling for such an analysis is the fact that Nuriaty did not claim her choices; they claimed her. The spirits came and cried in her sleep. Her knowledge stemmed from dreams and her acts were carried out via the dissociation of spirit possession. But the act of entering a dissociated state is not itself a dissociated act. The question is, what were her relations to her possession and her dreams, to the Sultan and the Saint? Was she simply their blind servant; or conversely, was she their instrumental manipulator? It should be obvious that I reject both these alternatives, seeing rather the expression of her cultivated subjective disposition by means of an available cultural idiom and scenarios. Possession entails the disavowal of agency; but that should not prevent us from understanding it as neither more nor less spontaneous or calculated than any other act. It is a complex intertwining of action and passion. The knowledge Nuriaty brings to possession is composed both of a *techne*, of the skill of knowing how to speak in possession or as a Sultan, and of *phronesis*, of knowing how to make significant and timely interventions. Although she could stand back and talk wryly in a common-sense and fairly objective way about her circumstances and the changes she had witnessed, the Sultan gave her an additional and more powerful vehicle with which to realize her concerns, to both embody and objectify them, to render them available to herself and others, and to dignify and authorize them. Mediumship expanded both her agency and

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her moral horizons.

Agency is a tricky concept. Leave it out and you have a determinist or abstract model, put it in and you risk instrumentalism, the bourgeois subject, the idealized idealistic individual, etc.¹⁸ But we can see how agents are always partly constructed through their acts – through acts of acknowledgment, witnessing, engagement, commitment, refusal and consent. In assuming responsibility and rendering themselves subject to liturgical, political, and discursive regimes and orders, people simultaneously lay claim to and accept the terms through which their subsequent acts will be judged (Rappaport 1999). People are agents insofar as they choose to subject themselves, to perform and conform accordingly, to accept responsibility, and to acknowledge their commitments.

In their combination of action and passion and in their explicit denial of their tacit agency in choosing or permitting themselves to be possessed by particular spirits, and then in following out the consequences of such possession, spirit mediums like Nuriaty speak to universal aspects of moral practice. The success of Nuriaty's practice may be clarified by, and perhaps help illuminate, Zizek's argument (drawing on Elster's *Sour Grapes*) that respect and dignity cannot be successfully 'planned in advance or assumed by means of a conscious decision.' (1991: 76) 'If I consciously try to appear dignified or to arouse respect, the result is ridiculous; the impression I make, instead, is that of a miserable impersonator. The basic paradox of these states is that although they are what matters most, they elude us as soon as we make them the immediate aim of our activity. The only way to bring them about is not to center our activity on them but to pursue other goals and hope that they will come about "by themselves". Although they do pertain to our activity, they are ultimately perceived as something that belongs to us on account of what we are and not on account of what we do.' (1991:77)

Nuriaty is not a prophet, she is not extraordinary. She is, rather, a good citizen and a mensch, an exemplary political subject, engaged with the past and future of her society. She lacks the self-confidence to be an übermensch, but then übermenschen are not always the best citizens. Nuriaty is doing what she can. It is the ends and means at

her disposal, the unity of means and ends in her practice, and in people like her, that ought to be among the central topics of a postcolonial anthropology.

Conclusion

I have characterized Nuriaty's practice in terms of historical consciousness. But it is clear that in taking on the burden of history, in witnessing the heroes of the past crying in her sleep and withdrawing in anger from their tombs, and in carrying on despite her material circumstances and despite the lack of recognition from contemporary political leaders, Nuriaty does more than display a heightened consciousness of history; she embodies an historical conscience.

The portrait I have painted and the mood I have evoked are very different from the frantic sense of loss visible elsewhere in facets of the African memory crisis (Werbner 1998), the witchcraft epidemic in South Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff nd) or Kinshasa (de Boeck, personal communication), or, for that matter, in the epidemic of accusations of Satanism and recovered memories of sexual abuse in North America and northern Europe (Comaroff 1997, Lambek 1997, Antze and Lambek, eds 1996, La Fontaine 1997) in which ancestral and parental figures are violently rejected in response, perhaps, to what is understood as their absence, their impotence, or their withdrawal of protection. Spirit mediums like Nuriaty capture a particular moment in the process of change, seen from a particular angle; the internalization of an ancestor (or as here, an historical precursor) in the very act of withdrawal and thereby a kind of transference of the ancestor from the public, external scene to the internal one. In so doing, the medium allows herself to be subjected by the ancestor, but equally to be empowered and enlightened, to become a subject. It is the obverse of projection, and the obverse of witchcraft. There are flashes of bravado; a rustle of anger at the inverted and inequitable papaya world in which dignity for some is hard to come by; an undertone of knowing sadness.

In that same slow, deliberate way, Nuriaty's elegy to the receding past comes to possess my own ethnography of Mayotte. □

Social differentiation, moral authority and public Islam in Egypt

The path of Mustafa Mahmud

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An original path to Islamic authority

In recent years Islamic authority has been subject, in Egypt, to a process of transformation, fragmentation and recomposition. At issue is the occupation, use or reappropriation of different media – from the *minbar* [pulpit] of the mosque to TV, from booklets to cassettes – through shaykhs and other religious personalities. 'Lay' intellectuals join and extend this panoply of activities, too. Here, I examine an articulation of moral authority that claims to draw inspiration and legitimacy from Islamic faith, and has gained a growing appeal – through different media and social activities – on a composite, though middle class centred, public.

It is the case of Mustafa Mahmud, whose popularity in Egypt as an Islamic moral authority during the last three

decades has been probably second only to the revered shaykh Muhammad Mutawalli Sha'rawi (for the early ascent of this popular religious personality see Lazarus-Yafeh 1983). The case summons back, extends and complexifies the approach to Islamic authority developed in Patrick Gaffney's study of preachers (Gaffney 1994; see also Gaffney 1991). Mustafa Mahmud shares with preachers of Gaffney's type of advocates of 'religiously inspired modernity' an emphasis on 'creativity and adaptation' as a method. He has certainly accumulated authority and visibility through his mosque and charitable association, like Shaykh Uthman, who embodies this type in Gaffney's study (Gaffney 1994, pp. 208-232). However, the path of access of Mustafa Mahmud to public notoriety has been singular, and the