

THE MULTILINGUAL SUBALTERN: CREOLIZATION AS AGENCY

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The very symbolic and social approaches that appear to set women apart and to circumscribe their activities may be used by women as a basis for female solidarity and worth. When men live apart from women, they in fact cannot control them, and unwittingly they may provide them with the symbols and social resources on which to build a society of their own (Rosaldo 1974, 39).

In the folk narrative repertoire of the Southwest Indian Ocean, a prominent story centered on a woman is the “water-princess” legend of Madagascar, in which a woman from the water – the river or sea – marries a mortal man. The husband is commanded not to mention his wife’s supernatural origin (motif C31.2 in Thompson 1955-58). In everyday terms, the motif means that she tests his ability to refrain from revealing too much information. Such restraint, such careful silence, is a prized ability among at least one Malagasy group who know this story well (Keenan and Ochs 1979). Being a male, however, the mortal husband proves incapable of controlling himself verbally. He breaks her taboo. She immediately returns to the other world (C952) and becomes sacred. Though she has no tomb (and thus no family, in the terms of Malagasy patriarchal society), she is revered. In this legend, as in other folk narratives of Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles, la Réunion, and the Comoros, where ethnicities and languages meet and mix, the woman is central.

Thus the creolization that pervades these societies should be seen not as something that impersonally happens to languages, but as a form of agency. This term creolization, derived from linguistics and then applied to the convergence of cultures, demands to be put back into its setting of performance. When we do that, we discover that the performer is often a woman, acting as an agent of mediation. It is now clear that the sex or gender system is a primary dimension of the history of these islands (Haring 1991: 90-91). Recent publications by the historian Marina Carter (1994, 1998) demonstrate that in the history of Mauritius, it has most often been the woman who was obliged to learn to speak or act across linguistic and ethnic boundaries. In la Réunion, Indo-Portuguese (Goan) and Malagasy women became the wives of Europeans when the island was called Ile Bourbon (Carter 1998). Creole women married Chinese shopkeepers in nineteenth-century Mauritius (Ng Foong 1998). Grandmothers are active

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bearers of tradition in the twentieth-century Comoros. These women's mediating roles argue for seeing multilingualism as a set of communicative options, which includes multiple linguistic codes and multiple possibilities for interpreting and performing. By adding newer cultural patterns to older ones, Southwest Indian Ocean women have acted as agents of creolization, as gatekeepers for the new multiplicity of cultural identities on which survival has depended. For this reason, they furnish empirical substantiation for a historical understanding of creolization.

Moreover, from their position in historical anthropology, Southwest Indian Ocean women offer to speak across disciplinary boundaries. The central place of expressive culture, including folktale and legend, in Southwest Indian Ocean history challenges the discipline of folklore to offer aid to feminist theory. Verbal and musical art are the finest evidence for understanding the fashioning and altering of social identities and the social practices that make possible the ways in which cultures describe gender. This after all is what a gender scholar wants to know: how social identities are constructed.

The story I began with is an example. The "water princess" is a legendary prototype of woman through the history of Madagascar. Creolization in Madagascar began when African and Indonesian cultures converged, in the sixth to ninth centuries. The first settlers were male; their wives came from overseas, if not from undersea. The children the water princess leaves behind, who will engender the clan, are creoles in one classical sense of that term. They have sprung from two radically different cultures. Their mother's distinguishing characteristic is her foreignness. Should we believe that her story is only interpretable as patriarchal ideology? In its many variant African forms, the water-princess legend illustrates the dangers of marrying a wife from the wrong ethnic group. It affirms patriarchy by condemning intermarriage. Must women in the audience not see this legend differently, as proclaiming the importance of a clan mother? With further field research, we may come to understand the "folk" interpretation of these tales and the correlation or lack of correlation between the tales and real-life female roles (Dundes 1966).

Creolization in female-centered folk narrative is well illustrated in the favorite tale of all Africa and of the Southwest Indian Ocean. Here a defiant young woman refuses eligible suitors in favor of a murderous ogre-husband who eats women. From him she must escape; often he is punished. The usefulness of this well known plot to patriarchal ideology is attested by its recurrence throughout West Africa (Biebuyck 1987). In Sierra Leone, for instance, Donald Cosentino collected so many Mende versions of it that it gave him part of his book's title, *Defiant Maids and Stubborn Farmers* (Cosentino 1982: 164-166).

Still in West Africa, the defiant girl, in her many Peul versions from Mali and Burkina Faso, has elicited from Christiane Seydou a magisterial study of two themes, virilocal marriage and the indispensable role of a woman's birth family

(Seydou 1994). What does a woman want? As Christiane Seydou reads this girl's obstinacy, she wants "a man without any scar" – a husband who is outside society, untouched by "life", because he has never been circumcised. An animal disguised as a perfect young man presents himself. The fly she employs to inspect her suitors discourages her from this animal; so do her family, but she marries him. After the marriage, the husband resumes his shape. Peul narrators give the tale various endings. In some, she commits suicide. Proppian analysts justifiably call this a Final Lack. Magic song, a recurrent element in this tale, comes in again. Once the husband re-transforms in public, at the marriage festivities, the dishonored wife, isolated and suicidal, causes herself to be buried in earth by her song (Seydou 1994: 90-91). In others, the ending restores equilibrium because she is saved by someone's intervention. In Malian versions, this is always a brother (Seydou 1994: 89). A variable element that determines interpretation of the story is whether she stays in her home village or goes to her husband's village. In two Peul versions she does, accompanied by a little brother who notifies her family. Consequently, she is sought by one brother after another. All are slain by the python-husband until a leprous brother effects her rescue and the decapitation of the python. Equilibrium means marrying an ordinary man (Seydou 1994: 94).

Versions of this plot are uncountable. At the 1998 conference of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research, a single scholar reported having collected some 78 versions from one West African language group. As for Mauritius, so well known was the defiant girl a century ago that Charles Baissac distinguished two variant forms. In one, the wolf-husband is a sorcerer, against whom her brother warns her; in the other, the helper is not a relative but a beautiful woman disguised as a mouse (Baissac 1967: 162-179). I can claim but one version of it, which I collected in 1990 from Nelzir Ventre of Poudre d'Or in Mauritius, a gifted veteran singer of *séga* songs. Previous publications show it to be no less popular in Mauritius than in Africa and Europe (Baissac 1967: 146-161; AT311, 312, 955). It is known in all the Southwest Indian Ocean islands. No folktale can pose the question of power more emphatically, or condemn intermarriage more forcefully. How will this woman married to a beast extricate herself from an impossible marriage? It is a question that many a real-life woman asks. Many versions present a readymade, fantasized answer in patriarchal terms: with all his superficial flaws, it is her unpromising brother who defeats the wolf-man and rescues the woman.

Who is the rescuer? That is an issue. In Seydou's Peul versions, as in several Southwest Indian Ocean versions, the final responsibility for restoring order rests on the males in the family. "It is thanks to the vigilance and perspicacity of a little brother (as opposed to the sister's total lack of awareness), then thanks to the courage of the leprous brother, that the sister escapes the fate of being devoured by her animal partner, with all the ambiguity of meaning hidden in the image of devouring." If the brother, she goes on, can pull his sister out of a bad marriage,

he will have benefited himself and other brothers, for she then will return to the status of a marriageable daughter and be reintegrated into the regular circulation of women (Seydou 1994: 95). But some Malagasy versions make the rescuer a sister (Haring 1982: 363-371).

How, then, to interpret the tale? If I read it as a male, thinking of its innumerable West African versions, the real danger, from a brother's point of view, is that his sister's marriage to this alien creature will be consummated. Then his sister will have been removed from the system of the circulation of women (Seydou 1994: 117). But if he rescues her, kinship and masculinity will triumph. If I imagine a woman's interpretation, surely the story looks different. She has undergone an initiation; she has lost her innocence; she has gained a knowledge of the otherness of males, of an alien tribe in an alien environment. That knowledge is both loss and liberation, whether the heroine commits herself to another marriage or decides only to stay with her family of birth.

As a test case for what folklore can offer feminist theory, I focus henceforward on the region's most patriarchal society, the Islamic Republic of the Comoros. Comoran society is strongly stratified. Of all the islands in the Southwest Indian Ocean, the Comoros ought to be the most likely to manifest, in a local remodeling, a phallogocentric symbolic order. Here if anywhere we should find what Judith Fetterley calls the "*immascultation* of women by men". We should find folktales that voice an ideology in which "women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny" (Fetterley 1996: 304). "In public you see only men", not women, I was told in Paris in 1982. Times must have changed by 1995. In Moroni, the capital, that year, many women could be seen in town, some wearing the bluejean costume of globalization. History tells us, moreover, that in the nineteenth century, the succession of power in Ngazidja (Grande Comore) was matrilineal (Gueunier 1990: 9). The hegemony of Islam might lead us to imagine that beliefs and practices are monolithic, but in fact the folk Islam of the Comoros offers a promising field for study, as do the religious practices of women. About Mayotte, one authoritative writer says, "women play a more influential, even conspicuous role in public life . . . than they do in the stricter Koranic paternalism of the other islands" (Allen 1987: 33).

What does the Comoran symbolic order show about women's roles? Is Comoran language always masculine, as some feminist critics have charged for Europe? Or as Hélène Cixous asked of French writing in 1975, "Which texts appear to be woman-texts and are recognized as such . . .?" (Cixous 1996: 324). Folktales have been collected in two of the four islands, Mayotte and Ngazidja (Grande Comore) (Gueunier 1990, 1994; Blanchy and Soilihi 1991; Rombi and Ahmed Chamanga 1980). These tales often take power relations between pairs of men as their subject. To what extent and in what ways are women represented, or do women represent themselves, in the symbolic order? How is sexuality or

gender constructed in Comoran folktales? In this repressive social structure, women are portrayed in folktale as cultural mediators, operating through their manipulation of language.

The most obvious avenue of mediation is performance, not story content. Childbearers – mothers and grandmothers – are the most active bearers of Comoran tradition. Here is one contemporary man’s experience:

As soon as a child is able to understand the language, his grandmother teaches him folktales, taboos, and riddles. Generally tales and riddles are said on nights of the full moon. She recites tales and poses riddles, and the children come around her to listen. They are very attentive to the tales. With riddles, she puts the question and the children try to answer As for taboos, the grandmother explains what may and may not be eaten. Thus she explains to him what can happen to him if he doesn’t respect them, and the origin of these taboos. These sessions reinforce the relation of affection and interdependence between grandmother and grandchildren,

which this writer calls a “very intense relation” (Djoumoi Ali M’medi 1989: 19). Noël Gueunier, who has collected extensively in Mayotte, emphasizes the grandmother’s importance (Gueunier 1990), and a contemporary Comoran author titles his collection of tales *Contes de ma grand’mère* (Hatubou 1994).

Comoran women do not wait to become grandmothers before they act as tradition bearers and gatekeepers. One accomplished performer is the storyteller Aïsha Hussein, known as Ma Sula, living in the village of Sada on Mayotte. She was recorded and translated in the 1980s by Sophie Blanchy (1986), who finds the descriptions of gender in Ma Sula’s tales to be quite realistic. It is perfectly realistic, she says, to portray a mother-in-law in folktale as hostile, for in real life, such a person must be wooed with gifts, patience, and submission by her new daughter-in-law (Blanchy 1986: 30). The central document in Blanchy’s case for realism is Ma Sula’s story “The Mother’s House”, in which a young woman deprived of her mother’s physical presence (here symbolized by a house) wins her place in society through her skill as a performer of song and story. I summarize.

The heroine has been orphaned. Her guardian, a *cadi* (Islamic judge), promises that the contents of her mother’s house will be given her at puberty - that is, that at puberty she will assume her mother’s role, indeed her body. Promptly asserting herself, she raids the house from time to time, with other children, for sweets, biscuits, and clothes. Then, responding to the kindness of a new foster mother, the girl transfers her mother’s goods to the new house (Q40, Kindness rewarded). The *cadi* discovers the theft and remonstrates with the woman, who however reveals herself as an evil stepmother. With her children she drowns the girl (Q467, Punishment by drowning).

In the water the heroine is adopted by a family of *jinn* fish, who respect her Islamic faith and food taboos. When she is of marriageable age, they provide her with beds, sheets, plates, and pots, and put her on an island. There a fisherman, who

has heard her sing, goes to tell the king, who welcomes her, rewards the fisherman, and marries her to his son (H11.1.3, Recognition by life history sung; T121, Unequal marriage). Soon she tells her husband this story: there was an orphan girl, whose fortune was exhausted and who was then killed. As so often in folklore, the fiction hardly conceals the truth. She takes her husband to the site of her mother's house, removes her brassiere, puts it around a tree trunk (metaphorically claiming it as a body), and sings the song she sang on the island. Next day at sundown, when she takes him back to the site, her mysterious song has caused the *jinn*s to begin rebuilding her mother's house (D1781, Magic results from singing). Now taking back her bra, she buries an animal skin there; she sings the song again but refuses to explain. As the house is gradually reconstructed on succeeding days, the husband begins to suspect that she is a *jinn* and the king is angry that someone has built a house without permission.

Against his anger and the husband's refusal to live in the house the heroine must now recount her whole story to the villagers, first as fiction, then as her life story. The magical reality is that her dead parents have built and furnished the house (Q47, Kindness to orphans repaid by dead parents). The metaphorical reality is that her mature woman's body is the gift of her parents. By telling her life history and thus demonstrating her mastery of language, she is recognized (H11.1). By living, at last, in her mother's house with her husband, she claims her body.

Sophie Blanchy interprets this tale as what feminists call women's writing, as popular in the Comoros as the tale of the defiant girl who must escape from an ogre husband, because it concerns a woman's life. The relation between mother and daughter, Blanchy says, is the most important relationship of all. It contrasts with the unstable marriage relations that result from negotiations between men. Such tales assimilate the young woman into a continuous existence with her mother; thus the mother's death can be accepted. If the tale is as realistic as Sophie Blanchy interprets it, the woman's ability to achieve recognition through song and storytelling should also be seen as part of its portrayal of a woman's role.

In many Comoran tales, marriage is the only subject, though represented fantastically in the many versions of the defiant-girl story. On the surface at least, women are invited, indeed required, to identify with the wifely role. Tales seem to function in the way Patrocínio Schweickart (1989: 271) describes literature: "The male text draws its power over the female reader from authentic desires, which it rouses and then harnesses to the process of immasculation" (identifying with the male-dominated order). In a nation where one must be multidialectal as well as bilingual, perhaps it is no surprise that the otherness of males and the dangers of marriage are symbolized by the foreignness of language. In some versions of the defiant-girl tale collected by Noël Gueunier, the alien husband (an ogre, *jinn*, or animal) speaks a bizarre language. Yet (says Gueunier, who knows Mahorais storytelling very well) this alien speech is only a slight deformation of the language of a neighboring village. Sometimes the husband manipulates language in another

way: he lies about going to cultivate his crops (Gueunier 1990: 16). In other versions it falls to a woman to be able to understand a language otherwise incomprehensible, and she acquits herself well.

The construction of gender and the differential interpretations of women and men speak directly to concerns of feminist philosophers. Their concerns are played out in vernacularity. American performance researchers Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman argue that “poetics and politics are one” (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 239). French feminists would agree, yet they seldom look beyond the horizon of European or American literature for the evidence furnished by vernacular cultures. Hélène Cixous, Monique Wittig, and Luce Irigaray have variously proclaimed that it is difficult for women to express and represent themselves in language. It will benefit the feminist project to emend a remark of the brilliant Hélène Cixous, who says, “Woman must write her self; must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away . . .” (Cixous 1998: 1454). In reality, women have been writing themselves ever since they helped to invent fiction and the art of narration at least 50,000 years ago. One way in which ethnographers and ethnologists can aid the feminist project is to proclaim the skills women have developed, in patriarchal societies, in using multiple linguistic codes, registers, and channels. It is folk narratives in particular which delineate women’s roles and problems, realistically or fantastically.

Folklore tells us, then, that as performers and tradition bearers, women maintain their importance. What does it mean, in the light of these facts, to ask how big a voice women have in the Southwest Indian Ocean? The distinguished cultural critic Gayatri Spivak asks, “With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?” (Spivak 1995: 27). To answer this, criticism must turn (in words of Michel Foucault which Spivak quotes) “to a layer of material which had hitherto had no pertinence for history and which had not been recognized as having any moral, aesthetic or historical value” (Foucault 1980: 50-51). That layer of material includes storytelling, singing, cookery, costume, belief, custom, and numerous other activities, which in Europe are the purview of ethnology and in the United States are studied under the name of folklore. What a pity Foucault disregarded these things.

Answering Gayatri Spivak, Benita Parry points to these very kinds of expressive culture in India, “those sites where women inscribed themselves as healers, ascetics, singers of sacred songs, artisans and artists . . .” It is a mistake, Benita Parry goes on, to write off such sites; they are “the evidence of native agency recorded in India’s 200 year struggle against British conquest and the Raj” (Parry 1995: 37). It would be equally a mistake to write them off in nations less well known to the world than India. The challenge today is not to the subaltern to find a voice, but for those in dominant positions to develop ears. Margaret Mills transforms Gayatri Spivak’s question accordingly: “How, and under what circumstances, can or does the hegemonic hear?” (Mills 174). In the cultural studies arena, those who practice feminist theorizing will do well to heed the voices from women’s folklore.

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ABSTRACT

The islands of the Southwest Indian Ocean are a paradigmatic case for understanding transculturation. There, when ethnicities and languages meet and mix, the central agent of mediation and creolization is often a woman. In history as in fiction, it is the woman who is obliged to learn to speak or act across linguistic and ethnic boundaries. The Indo-Portuguese (Goan) and Malagasy women who became the wives of Europeans in eighteenth-century Île Bourbon, the Creole wives of Chinese shopkeepers in nineteenth-century Mauritius, the grandmothers who are active bearers of tradition in the twentieth-century Comoros – all argue for seeing sex/gender system as a primary category of textual and social analysis. Southwest Indian Ocean women act as agents of creolization by adding newer cultural patterns to older ones. They act as gatekeepers for the new multiplicity of cultural identities which they experience in their lives. Thus creolization should be seen as a form of agency. Folktale and legend in Madagascar, Mauritius, and the other islands open a window into a much-needed area of ethnographic analysis. Feminist critique needs to find substantiation in the empirical evidence of verbal art.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Inseln im südwestlichen Indischen Ozean stellen einen paradigmatischen Fall für das Verständnis von Transkulturation dar. Dort, wo sich Ethnien und Sprachen treffen und mischen, ist oft eine Frau Hauptträgerin der Vermittlung und Kreolisierung. In der historischen Wirklichkeit wie im fiktionalen Bereich ist es die Frau, die gezwungen ist, über sprachliche und ethnische Grenzen hinweg sprechen oder handeln zu lernen. Die indisch-portugiesischen (aus Goa stammenden) und madegassischen Frauen, die im 18. Jahrhundert auf der Île Bourbon Europäer heirateten, die kreolischen Ehefrauen chinesischer Ladeninhaber auf Mauritius im 19. Jahrhundert, die Großmütter, die im 20. Jahrhundert aktive Traditionsträger auf den Komoren sind – sprechen dafür, das Sexual/Gendersystem als primäre Kategorie für eine Text und Sozialanalyse zu betrachten. Die Frauen aus der Region des südwestlichen Indischen Ozeans wirken als Vermittlerinnen eine Kreolisierung, indem sie den alten neue kulturelle Muster hinzufügen. Sie fungieren als Öffnerinnen einer neuen Vielfalt kultureller Identitäten, die sie selbst in ihren Leben erfahren haben. Kreolisierung sollte daher als eine Form der Vermittlung gesehen werden. Märchen und Sage auf Madagaskar, Mauritius und den anderen Inseln erschließen den Blick auf ein dringend benötigtes Arbeitsfeld der ethnographischen Analyse. Die feministische Kritik benötigt eine Erhärtung ihrer Argumente im empirischen Befund mündlichen Kunstschaffens.

RESUMO

As ilhas do Sudoeste do Índico são um caso paradigmático para tentar entender o fenómeno de aculturação. Ali, quando as etnias e culturas se misturam, o agente central de mediação e crioulização é frequentemente a mulher. Na História como na ficção, é a mulher que é obrigada a aprender a falar ou a agir transpondo fronteiras linguísticas e étnicas. As mulheres goesas e malgaxes que se casaram com europeus na Île Bourbon oitocentista, as mulheres crioulas de lojistas chineses nas Maurícias do século XIX, as avós que são guardiãs activas da tradição nas Comores do século XX – todas mostram a necessidade de se considerar o sistema da identidade sexual como uma categoria fundamental da análise textual e social. As mulheres do Sudoeste do Índico actuam como agentes de crioulização, acrescentando novos modelos culturais aos antigos. Actuam como guardiãs da nova multiplicidade de identidades culturais que experimentam nas suas vidas. Assim, a crioulização deveria ser considerada como uma forma de agenciamento *agency*. O conto e a lenda em Madagáscar, nas Maurícias e nas restantes ilhas abrem uma janela para uma área bem necessária dos estudos etnográficos. A crítica feminista necessita de se basear nas evidências empíricas fornecidas pelas artes verbais.