

“Balladur Visa” or “Visa of Death”? Questioning ‘Migration’ to Europe via the Comoros Archipelago

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Abstract. This article throws light on migration from Africa to Europe which happens on African soil. The Comoros Archipelago comprises Anjouan, Grande Comore, Mohéli and Mayotte, which has been part of France since 1975, and since January 1st 2014, an ultra-peripheral region of the European Union. This explains measures like the introduction, in 1995, of the Balladur Visa, which is commonly called “Visa de la mort” [Visa of Death] for inhabitants of the other three Islands. The privileged status of Mayotte has caused massive risky ‘migration’, which on the one hand is considered ‘illegal’ while on the other hand, is also regarded as ‘internal’ movement, given the historical ties among the peoples of the Archipelago. Constructing an argument from the works of two ‘francographe’ writers; Nassur Attoumani from Mayotte, and Soeuf Elbadawi from the Grande Comore; this paper challenges discourses on migration crisis and creates a venue for the visibility of critical texts by authors outside the main circuits of literary legitimation. Also, the analysis explores fertile points of dialogue between the economy of literature, history and sociopolitical geography by emphasizing the ambiguous relationship between Mayotte and Europe, while delving into conjectures on critical geography in order to understand an essential human concern: identity.

Keywords: *Balladur visa, critical geography, the Wretched of the Sea, neocolonial balkanisation, anger writing, Nassur Attoumani, Soeuf Elbadawi, literary identity*

Introduction

By far the most controversial aspect of France’s hold of Mayotte is the ‘Balladur visa’. Introduced unilaterally in January 1995 by Prime Minister Édouard Balladur to curb unwanted immigration, it targets citizens of the Union of Comoros [...] Little known to the outside world, the visa requirement has had far-reaching consequences, provoking thousands of deaths, detentions and expulsions, as well as setting Comorians against each other and deepening the tensions in the conflict-prone archipelago. Day after day, never-ending human tragedies are played out as people risk their lives trying to reach Mayotte in overloaded, rickety kwassa-kwassa boats to see family members, place their children in school, visit a health center, sell

products on the market or find an odd job. The waters between Anjouan and Mayotte have been described as the 'biggest marine graveyard in the world and the Balladur visa as 'legalized genocide' "1 (Sellström 2015, 317-318).

In his interdisciplinary book titled *Africa in the Indian Ocean. Islands in Ebb and Flow*, Sellström refreshingly calls chapter five: "Mayotte and Chagos: Colonialism Continued".

What is peculiar to the 'migration' described here is that it has been taking place during the last two decades, but has been happening far 'beyond headlines' and, as Sellström puts it, features 'untold tragedies'. These tragedies reawaken both the question of the currency of discourses on places and spaces and the question of the imaginary struggle for spaces. In this regard, literature, as the following analysis shows, becomes a space for negotiating visibility for critical voices and for challenging the seemingly acquired ownership of space. Thus, literature turns to a field where the construction and the deconstruction of space can be very fertile.

Lefebvre (2000) draws attention to the 'trialectics of space' which can be lived, conceived or perceived. In a broad sense, the article touches on the multidimensional nature of space by highlighting a neglected aspect of mainstream discourse on migration, namely migration from Africa to Europe, which is taking place on African soil. This tridimensional South-South-North 'migration' emphasizes the constructed and ambiguous relationality between Mayotte and the other Islands of the Archipelago, and between Mayotte and France.

In addressing this tridimensional migration, the article transversally deals with history, sociological empathy, taxonomy (legal versus illegal), political geography and the economy of literature (i.e. the channels of canonizing or silencing texts). Moreover, the article opens up current events, in which massive migration to Mayotte, and to Europe, plays a prominent role.

The article is divided into three sections. In the first section, I briefly sketch out the referendum that 'made' Mayotte part of France with consequences like the 'Balladur visa'. The second section analyses *Autopsie d'un Macchabée*, the tragicomical play by the writer from Mayotte, Nassur Attoumani, and the bitter pamphlet *Un Dhikri pour nos morts. La rage entre les dents* by Soeuf Elbadawi, the writer from the Grande Comore.

I chose these writers because they officially represent both sides of what I

¹ See picture 2 at the paper's end which illustrates this fear for a genocidal dimension of the 'migration' crisis in Mayotte.

regard as the Comorian puzzle. Moreover, they differ significantly in terms of a) their artistic engagement with the topic of migration, which is a prime concern for them; b) the politicization of space; and with regard to c) their ‘posture d’auteur’, which encompasses all strategies pertaining to the management and manipulation of their public identity, their public awareness, and especially how they market themselves (Meizoz 2007).

The analysis is done through the lens of the critical geography approach because this tool is particularly fitting for understanding the complexities inherent to the Comorian puzzle. Critical geography, as (Hubbard et al. 2002, 73) put it: “is united by a concerted and engaged encounter with issues of inequality, one that is increasingly recognizing multiple axes of power, with a commitment to emancipatory politics and social change.”

The third section places both texts in the general framework of the literary market by asking questions about their circulation and reception, and the positioning of both writers with regard to France where most of their faultfinding texts about France are published.

A contested referendum

According to Ahamadi (1999), Mayotte has been a French Island following the *Traité de cession de Mayotte à la France du 25 Juin 1841* which was signed by Andriansouli. Later, in 1975, contrary to the Islands of Grande Comore, Anjouan and Mohéli, Mayotte chose by referendum to stay French. Sellström regards Ahamadi’s position as a ‘myth’. To Sellström (2015, 320) “like all Comorians, the inhabitants of Mayotte became French citizens in 1946. In Mahorian history, the year 1841 and a supposed voluntary union with France have taken almost mythical proportions.” The issue of ‘union with France’ is still at the heart of the discussion on the results of the referendum:

In accordance with the 1973 agreement, in December 1974 the French government organized a referendum in which the Comorian population could opt for national independence or continued attachment to France. With a participation of 93.3% of the registered voters, an overwhelming majority of 94.6% voted in favor of independence. On the Islands of Grande Comore, Mohéli and Anjouan practically all – or 99.9% opted to break with France. On Mayotte, however, only one third (34.5%) supported independence, whereas a majority (64.9%) chose to remain under French administration. Faced with the popular verdict, the Paris government decided to



interpret the referendum Island by Island, signaling that Mayotte should remain attached to France. The violation of the 1973 agreement was strongly condemned by the authorities in Moroni, which under Ahmed Abdallah on 6 July 1975 proceeded to unilaterally declare the independence of the State of Comoros (*État Comorien*) consisting of the four Comorian Islands including Mayotte. Less than a month later – on August 1975 – Abdallah was overthrown in the first of a series of French-engineered *coup d'états*² (Sellström 2015, 323-324).

This brief knowledge of the main historical event at the heart of all discourses on territorialisation or deterritorialisation within the Comoros Archipelago is necessary in understanding the argumentative thread in works that serve as the corpus for this analysis. This knowledge is especially relevant when it comes to discussing the emotional charge that goes with the concepts 'legal' and 'illegal' when they are used in the context of peoples' movements within the Comoros Archipelago.

This explains why the topic of migration in this setting calls for empathy on the one hand, but, on the other hand, when one takes into account geography and un-truncated history, is about justice and restitution. The situation has been exacerbated by many factors, the following are just four examples, which I have chosen to highlight the ambiguity of the whole situation.

First, several attempts by delegates of the Union of the Comoros and other countries to draw the attention of the United Nations to this issue have been in vain. This appropriation of Mayotte has been criticized by the United Nations with respect to the United Nations Decolonization Declaration in 1975, but France has not altered its position. This is only strengthened by its status as one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

Second, one should recall images that were broadcast to the world in August 1997, in which thousands of people from the Island of Anjouan proudly brandished the French flag and pictures of former President Jacques Chirac. They were asking to be recolonized by France, in view of the economic and social advantages that being a French Island would entail.

Thirdly, in 2016, public life in Mayotte was marked by two social movements which had an echo in media in France. On one side, there were the massive attacks

² For more on *coup d'états* in the Comoros, the reader may refer to Mohamed (2001). *Comores : Les Institutions d'un État mort-né*.

against Comorians by a few groups of Mahorians who held ‘illegal’³ Comorians responsible for the growth of theft, crime and joblessness in Mayotte. Whether these assaults were called ‘operation de décasage’ [Clear their houses!], or ‘Mayotte Asphyxié!’ [Mayotte is suffocating!]⁴, they conveyed a main meta-message: many Mahorians are afraid of having to share their privileges with ‘migrants’ from Anjouan, Mohéli and Grande Comore.

This fear was reinforced in a second social movement namely; the campaign against ‘la vie chère’ [protest against the high cost of living]. This protest was mainly addressed to France, asking that Mahorians receive the same rights and advantages to which other French citizens are entitled; this was in order to survive on an Island in which the majority of goods are imported.

As an affiliate, each year, I offer a one-week intensive course in sociolinguistics at the Centre Universitaire de Formation et de Recherche of Mayotte. In September 2017, I taught during a tense period. Paris and Moroni had started negotiations on the cancellation of the ‘Balladur Visa’ without consulting Mayotte⁵. This situation caused several strikes, including one major strike on the day I was flying back. Everyone had to walk to the [la Place de la République] where one takes a boat between [Petite-Terre] and [Grande- Terre].

[La Place de la République] was overcrowded with angry Mahorians complaining about this state of affairs and my colleagues had advised me to be at the airport well ahead of time. They were right, because after I had reached the airport, the tensions⁶ increased on [Grande- Terre]. In addition to the airport, the

³ As it went many of the victims were living ‘legally’ in Mayotte and some even had the French citizenship.

⁴ The reader can refer to the flyer at the end of the paper to have a gist of the tenets of the movement.

⁵ When I taught in September 2018, the situation was still very uneasy because for reasons of security, the Prefecture had been closed for several months. This resulted in the fact that thousands of people, among them students in my class, were not informed about their ‘legal’ status on the Island.

⁶ Since February 2018 Mayotte has been going through another social turmoil at the heart of which the question of insecurity which is sold as a consequence of ‘illegal migration’ still plays an important role. In order to find a way out of the crisis that has been lasting for a month, the French overseas minister Annick Girardin, accompanied by three envoys was in Mayotte from March 12 to March 13. Some results of this attempted dialogue with different delegates include the discussion of 14 points among which the appointment of a senior official in charge of the fight against ‘illegal migration’, the later will work together with citizens and members of different associations that fight against ‘illegal migration’ to Mayotte.

French army base, the Conseil Général and many strategic offices are located on [Petite-Terre], which means that in the case of a serious threat, the connection to [Grande-Terre] can be cut in the twinkling of an eye and the happy few, to which I belonged that day in September 2017, would already be near the airport. It is this absurdity of the politics of place and power that Nassur Attoumani and Soeuf Elbadawi deal with in *Autopsie d'un Macchabée* and *Un Dhikri pour nos morts La rage entre les dents*. Attoumani uses an unusual satirical and magic realist touch, while Elbadawi poetically engages with anger writing.

Nassur Attoumani and Soeuf Elbadawi as 'critical geographers'

This section presents the tragico-magical play by Nassur Attoumani and the bitter pamphlet by Soeuf Elbadawi as pieces of critical geography. I understand critical geography as a hyperonym for critical discourses about all kinds of social injustice, since both authors reflect on historical, economic, political and security aspects in the lives of the people of the Comoros Archipelago.

(Hubbard et al. 2002, 62) argue that critical human geography has a concern 'to expose the socio-spatial processes that (re)produce inequalities between people and places'. Critical geography invites scholars to interrogate acquired knowledge of political geographies and to see space as a site for discourses on power, which Attoumani and Elbadawi do in both texts, which portray space, not only as a site for contesting power hierarchies, but also as a mode and a node of resistance to inequalities. In this sense, their imaginary endeavor brings to mind Toni Morrison's stance on imaginary spaces, as well as the need to deconstruct African-American identities as they are presented in 'American literature' by writers such as Hawthorne, Melville and Hemingway.

In her call to question the 'American Literature canon', (Morrison 1992, 3) states her intention as follows: "I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use the map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting of the new world - without the mandate for conquest." In the following, I propose a close reading of *Autopsie d'un Macchabée & Un Dhikri pour nos morts La rage entre les dents* as critical maps.

In *Autopsie d'un Macchabée* [Autopsy of a Dead Body], Attoumani shows the stupid and inhuman turn that the concept migration has taken. This satirical play

features four characters namely Macchabée (the dead body), Mahossa (a fundamentalist Mahorian), Docteur Chikungunya (a forensic pathologist) and Iblis (Satan the outcast). Mahossa who embodies Mahorians, discovers the dead body, the third body to be found in a week in the mangrove swamp and is happy that villagers are already digging a grave for the body at the cemetery for adults (Dieu soit loué, les villageois sont déjà en train de creuser sa tombe, au cimetière des adultes, *Autopsie d'un Macchabée* 2009, 12). At that very moment, the forensic pathologist, whose name resembles that of a terrible disease, comes in; Dr Chikungunya is upset because, as the spokesperson of the French Republic, he has to make sure that French laws are enforced on the Island, which in this case means an autopsy of the dead body should be carried out. This creates the great misunderstanding on which the play centers, i.e. the disharmony between Mahorian cultural practices and French cultural practices on an Island that is 'officially' French.

Mahossa is busy organising the burial of the dead body according to the tenets of Islam, whereas the forensic pathologist goes as far as blaming the dead body for having transcended space and for being 'illegally' in French territory. The consequence is that the dead body should first account for its irreverent act towards France. The forensic pathologist goes further by warning Mahossa:

When one is ignorant about all of medicine and all of justice, one should not ask clueless citizens to dig graves ... French Law can take you to court for complicity in murder

quand on ignore tout de la médecine et de la justice, on ne demande pas à des citoyens inconscients de creuser des tombes... La loi française peut vous poursuivre en justice pour complicité de meurtre (Attoumani 2009, 15).

We found the dead body at your place. You should be happy that the State is not lodging a complaint against you for the concealment of a sovereign good (Attoumani 2009, 21).

nous l'avons trouvé chez vous. Soyez déjà heureux que l'État ne porte pas plainte contre vous pour recel de bien régalien.

Not only is Mahossa traumatised by the fact that a Christian stops him from going ahead with the planning of the burial for his 'Muslim brother' with dignity, moreover, he is threatened because of his good intentions to do what he holds as right with regard to the dead body, which fell from a 'kwasa-kwasa' (Attoumani 2009, 18). *Kwasa-Kwasa* (probably from the Congolese music genre implying the idea of



shaking) are adventurous and overloaded fishing boats⁷ that people take in their attempt to reach Mayotte.

It has commonly been referred to as the 'visa of death' because of the number of people who have died when these boats capsize, break down at sea or are chased at night by the Border Police (Paf: Police aux Frontières). As the story unfolds, it is revealed that the dead body came from the Grande-Comore.

You had a paradise, too. Do not turn ours into hell. It was the deliberate choice of your people. Take responsibility for your madness! (Attoumani 2009, 51)

Vous aviez un paradis, vous aussi. Ne transformez pas le nôtre en Enfer. C'était le choix délibéré de ton peuple. Assumez votre folie!

The above passage helps one remember the referendum mentioned in the first part of this article; the latter referendum which led to the introduction of the 'Balladur Visa' in 1995, separating families; and later on in 2006, of Sarkozy's law against immigration. These laws have caused the dead body to become one of the thousands 'damnés de la mer' [The Wretched of the Sea] as the Senegalese writer (Diop 2014, 7) calls them in a series of letters which he exchanged with the cultural resistance leader Aminata Traoré of Mali between January 2012 and October 2013. These letters deal with, among others, the political situations in Mali, Lybia, Tunisia, Senegal, the Ivory Coast and Guinea.

Obviously, 'les damnés de la mer' makes reference to Fanon's *Les Damnés de la Terre*, which is fitting here because migration as a consequence of uncertainty about the future and poor living conditions applies to both the West and Central African contexts, and the Comoros Archipelago. Although, the case of the Comoros Archipelago is unique, in the sense that these [Wretched of the Sea] face a double predicament: the geographic-cultural predicament and the media predicament. Regarding the media predicament (Sellström 2015, 318) notes that:

the disasters bear a close resemblance to those occurring when African refugees and economic migrants try to reach the Mediterranean Island of Lampedusa, Italy, in search of EU shelter and jobs. In the case of Mayotte; they take place in silence, far away from any international media coverage or public debate.

⁷ In a twist of magic realism, the dead body later speaks of 47 people in a kwasa-kwasa which was initially made for six fishermen. He adds that he was the only survivor from that boat (Attoumani 2009, 55).

The dead body is depicted as a victim of the “illegally imposed Balladur Visa” (Attoumani 2009, 63). To Nassur Attoumani, it is the Balladur visa which is illegal, not the people. Together with the silence of the international media on this human tragedy of the last two decades, this ‘visa of death’, forcefully introduced by foreigners, forms a central motif in *Un Dhikri pour nos morts La rage entre les dents*.

Un Dhikri pour nos morts La rage entre les dents [An anger song of mourning for our dead] opens with the warning “ouvrez bien l’oreille Retenez bien votre souffle” [Open your ear well and hold your breath, Elbadawi 2013, 7]. A *Dhikri* is a Muslim prayer, a ritual, an act of remembrance which generally takes place 40 days after the death of a person. By asking whether God was drowsing when all this was happening and saying this prayer with anger, even rage, “between the teeth”, as the title suggests, Elbadawi embarks on a violent and scathing imaginative criticism of the ‘Balladur Visa’ which manifests itself as a measure of neocolonial balkanisation.

Comorian memories are divided into two fronts regarding the (unnamed) cousin to which this poem for the dead is dedicated. The cousin is a symbol for the thousands of people who have died at sea during attempts to cross the so called wall of hate (mur de la haine⁸). This piece can therefore be read as a common burial ceremony for all the faceless and nameless dead in this silent tragedy of the past two decades, despite attempts by Comorian presidents, the African Union and the United Nations to change the state of affairs. Clinging to its status as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, France has remained resolute; refusing to withdraw, despite 22 United Nations Resolutions against their presence in Mayotte.

The ‘Balladur Visa’ has turned Comorians into ‘illegal migrants’ on the ‘Land of their Ancestors’ [la terre de ses aïeux, Elbadawi 2013, 25]. Elbadawi criticises this illogical state of affairs, which, in his pamphlet, is shown to have caused the death of ninety-eight Comorians, among them children and pregnant women who were packed up as slaves on a frail boat. Elbadawi describes the power of space in this tragedy as follows :

On one side were the guardians of a border of usurpation On the other side

⁸ ‘Ce mur dont je vous parle Érigé en nos eaux par la lointaine République de Paris est le résultat d’une politique de désespérance remontant aux premiers émois de la colonie Dans cinq siècles on en paiera encore la facture.

[This wall I am speaking of, which was Erected in our waters by the distant Republic of Paris is the result of a policy of despair dating back to the first distress caused by the colony. In five centuries we will still be paying the bill.] (Elbadawi 2013, 22)

were the forgotten of a nation being dispossessed⁹

D'un côté les gardiens d'une frontière d'usurpation De l'autre les oubliés d'une nation en déshérence (Elbadawi 2013, 8)

The author deplores both the physical and imaginary borders that were imposed upon peoples with a common history. In doing so, he acts as a critical geographer; using the stage of fiction as a space for decrying the abusive politics of 'conceived' space. This pamphlet has all the traits of a transformative faction, i.e. the combination of fiction and facts, with the aim to generate critical awareness of a seldom mentioned, yet important, aspect of migration. He uses faction to draw attention to the "falsifications of history done by the foreigner-the colonizer"¹⁰ (Harchi 2016, 150). This work of faction sheds light on a hidden side to the motto "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity'. The depiction of this ridiculous possession of space-place reaches its peak when Elbadawi poetically and satirically rephrases a verse of *La Marseillaise* (Elbadawi 2013, 57-58).

allons noyés de la fratrie	come on! drowned children of brotherhood
le jour du deuil est arrivé	the day of mourning has arrived
sur nous souffle un vent de tyrannie	on us blows a wind of tyranny
les requins sanglants sont dressés	bloody sharks stand ready
sanglants requins dressés	trained bloody sharks
entendez-vous près de nos rivages gris	near our grey shores do you hear
mugir ces féroces soldats qui renversent	the roaring of these fierce soldiers who capsize
nos boutres d'infortune	our dhows of misfortune
aux armes enfants de catins	grab your weapons children of harlots
bâtards et tortillons	bastards and twists
pardon partons	never mind Let's go
nous qui ne sommes rien	we the worthless ones

There are striking oppositions between the original French national anthem and the version that Elbadawi has tailored to his glaring but very poetic condemnation of French politics of place, which have made Comorians placeless in

⁹ In an interview with Anssoufouddine Mohamed (2013), Elbadawi connects the deliberate absence of any punctuation mark in the text among other reasons to the abject situation which a standard language cannot describe, the desire to answer disorderly to the disorder introduced in the Comoros Archipelago by the 'masters' and the speech of the 'mad' man Ibuka known in the cultural repertoire of Moroni for his public and pauseless speech.

¹⁰ Speaking of the Algerian writer Rachid Boudjedra (Harchi 2016, 150) states that « L'écriture devient cet outil de repérage et de dénonciation « des falsifications de l'histoire » opérées par la figure de l'étranger – le colon, notamment – mais aussi des mensonges, « des mythes » entretenus par le groupe d'appartenance de l'individu. »

Mayotte. One needs to keep these oppositions in mind to fully appreciate Elbadawi's angry writing and his positioning as a critical geographer; the oppositions are : fatherland versus brotherhood; glory versus mourning; freedom versus tyranny; bloody flag versus bloody sharks; citizens versus children of harlots and countryside versus grey shores with the emphasis on the sea. The sea was one way in which slaves were uprooted from their homes, in contrast, Comorians voluntarily choose this route, as a means of reconnecting with a part of their heritage from which they were forcefully detached.

It is ironical that the sea, which was the imposed route in narratives of slavery, is nowadays the route that despairing Comorians choose from their own free will, if we can even call it that. Elbadawi speaks of 'dhow migration' [migration Mdjahazi¹¹, Elbadawi 2013, 11] due to the fact that the 'Master of Possessors - Goliath' has redrawn the map of the 'Land of Loose - David' according to their fantasy. (Diop 2014, 137) also stands against this attitude of the master-conqueror that has pushed people with geographical and historical links to fight against each other. In his words:

in these turbulent times, those who have so long been masters of the universe feel their position threatened and, as in 1885 in Berlin, they draw lines on maps according to their interests. They do so regardless of the fate of the people who they set against each other.

par ces temps difficiles, ceux qui ont été si longtemps les maîtres de l'univers sentent leur position menacée et, comme en 1885 à Berlin, tracent des lignes sur des cartes en fonction de leurs intérêts, sans se soucier du sort des populations violemment dressées les unes contre les autres.

Boris Diop is speaking of the 'Opération Serval' led by the French government under Hollande in the northern part of Mali with all its political and geographical ramifications. This operation which started on January 11, 2011 aimed at freeing the country and its neighbours from 'terrorists', but Diop's timely statement, as in Attoumani's play and Elbadawi's pamphlet, can be seen as saying

¹¹ Elbadawi's text is full of untranslated excerpts in Shikomori and Arabic. In an interview with Anssoufouddine (2013), he states that this conscious choice of languages reflects the multilingual reality of the Island which will be distorted if they were to be narrated solely in French which de facto is a minority language on the Island.

that playing with maps is, in itself, a subtle kind of terrorism. The 2017 French presidential elections provided evidence for the resentment that this kind of terrorism can fuel.

These elections bear witness to the link between political geography and the need to resort to critical geography in understanding current events. In the first round of elections, Marine Le Pen (Front National, right wing conservatives) was second (27,3%) to François Fillon (Socialist Party) (32,6%) in Mayotte. In the second round, she received 43,2% of votes whereas Macron (En Marche!) secured 53,8% of votes (France Info). This means that Mayotte was the constituency where Marine Le Pen gained her second highest share of votes (after New Caledonia).

An explanation to these election results could be her campaign, during which she repeatedly insisted on plans to reduce migration. This appealed to many Mahorians, who have been made to see people from Anjouan, Mohéli and Grande-Comore as 'migrants', and hence, as a source of growing insecurity on the Island and a threat to the promise of their well-being. Le Pen can be seen as one of these players with maps to whom Attoumani, Elbadawi, Boris Diop and Morrison have referred. The 'symbolic power' which maps can also have on the publication, circulation, reception, critical appraisal, translation, authorisation and canonisation of both texts, solely depends on the 'literary configurations' which determine the existence of these texts. I now turn to this aspect.

Autopsie d'un Macchabée, Un Dhikri pour nos Morts La rage entre les dents and 'literary configurations'

On 21 March 2014, Pierzo-Laffond published the following thought-provoking contribution in *Le Journal de Mayotte* titled: 'La littérature mahoraise, c'est Bonjour détresse' [Mahorian Literature is all about Distress]. In this short notice the author writes:

The Ministry of Overseas will participate in the 2014 edition of the Paris Book Fair taking place on March 20-24 at the Palais des Expositions in the Porte de Versailles. [...] The Atlantic Ocean will be represented by several writers and publishers, including forty Guadeloupeans, as many Guyanese, a dozen Martiniquais, even one from Saint Pierre and Miquelon; and the Indian Ocean will be represented by the Reunionese Jean-François Samlong, Rose-May Nivar and André Rober and by ... a unique Mahorian production of an author living in France, Théodora Chastagnol with the children's book, "Zaïna the Little Mahorian Girl". Every year, Mayotte is

illustrated, no pun intended, by its very small representation at the Salon du Livre de Paris.

Le ministère des Outre-mer participera à l'édition 2014 du Salon du Livre de Paris qui se déroule du 20 au 24 mars au Palais des Expositions de la Porte de Versailles. [...] L'océan Atlantique sera représenté par plusieurs écrivains et éditeurs dont une quarantaine de Guadeloupéens, autant de Guyanais, une dizaine de Martiniquais, ou même de Saint Pierre et Miquelon, et l'Océan Indien par les Réunionnais Jean-François Samlong, Rose-May Nivar et André Rober et par... une unique production mahoraise d'une auteure vivant en métropole, Théodora Chastagnol avec l'ouvrage pour enfant, "Zaïna la petite Mahoraise". Chaque année, Mayotte s'illustre, sans jeu de mots, par sa très faible représentation au Salon du Livre de Paris.

This quotation is relevant with regard to the general stance of books from the Comoros Archipelago on the global literary market and especially their dependence on the French Market. It raises questions such as: is Paris the only place to discuss the visibility and the reception of works by authors from the Comoros Archipelago? How can the latter authors do away with circuits they criticise, but which remain instrumental for the reception and canonisation of their works? Is a writer from Mayotte who lives in France representative of literature from Mayotte? Which criteria foregrounded the choice of a children's book to represent writing from Mayotte which is known for its puzzling relationship to France? Is there anything such as a book chain in the Comoros Archipelago? Can one speak of the identity of Comorian Literatures?

In *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant 1797; translation by Gregor 1991) describes a book as an '*opus mechanicum*' – that is, a material product whose existence owes to the technical, economic and political know-how and contributions of different actors. This is what is commonly referred to as 'the book chain' which distinguishes between the book's internal architecture and the book's external architecture.

The book's internal architecture involves actors such as manuscript readers, editors, the legal aspects, translation issues, book designers and printing whereas the book's external architecture includes marketing, press, promotion through channels such as libraries, book fairs, schools and the media¹².

¹² See *Guide Pratique de la Chaîne du livre*, Centre Régional du Livre de Lorraine 2008, for a presentation of the book chain : <http://fill-livrelecture.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Guide-de-la-chaine-du-livre.pdf>

The two texts analysed in this article are critical of the politicisation of 'migration' within the Comoros Archipelago but were both published in France with L'harmattan and Vents D'Ailleurs¹³. Soeuf Elbadawi is outspokenly critical of France and its institutions in his texts and his blog (muzdalifahouse.com)¹⁴. Interestingly, during the 2014 Paris Book Fair, he received 'le Prix littéraire des lycéens, apprentis et stagiaires de la formation professionnelle en Île de France' for *Un Dhikri pour nos morts La rage entre les dents*.

The jury which consisted of 1200 pupils shows that there is sensitivity to the topic from the side of young people living on mainland France. Nonetheless, it stresses the role of mainland France, which holds "the power of consecration" (Bourdieu 1992, 303) because, once again, a powerful mainland France institution is giving credit and visibility to the text, even though this visibility was not a foregone conclusion.

The piece has been performed by eight actors in the Comoros, but has also been performed as a one-man-show (by Elbadawi himself) in France. This is for the obvious reason that it is not an easy task getting a French visa for the purpose of performing a scene that so fiercely denounces French policy (Elbadawi in the interview with Doucouré 2013). Earlier on in 2009, the theatre group *O Mcezo** led by Elbadawi was censored by the 'Alliance Française' of Moroni due to Elbadawi's decolonial position, which was regarded as an incitement to violence (<http://comores4.skyrock.com>, 2009). Elbadawi's approach differs completely from Attoumani's means of denouncing injustice in the Comoros Archipelago.

Attoumani is a proponent of departmentalization, but he focuses on unkept promises; demonstrated through regular social turmoils found in his works, in particular absurd and unexpected events. His criticism is essentially of a literary nature, which differs from Elbadawi's more medial and activist approach.

This leads to Meizoz's concept of 'posture d'auteur', which describes the efforts authors undertake to sell their images and works. In the case of Elbadawi,

¹³ Even the fact that both texts were written in French instead of Shimaore or Shikomori attests to the imbalanced relationship between the authors, the language of writing and the editors. They use a language for their daily lives but resort to a language endowed with more symbolic prestige for their writing projects, which already limits their creative freedom since in practice French is to them a minor language but a major language for the literary game.

¹⁴ The reader may refer to Ippolito's (2017) article 'Résistance Culturelle aux Comores. Soeuf Elbadawi et le Blog de Muzdalifa House' for an insightful analysis of Elbadawi's medial discursive practice and the blog which was born out of a contestation of French hegemonic cultural practices.

who worked for *Radio France Internationale* as a media expert, one could even talk of *mediature* because of his consistent use of new media technologies such as the internet, Facebook and blogging to give his voice more prominence.

Attoumani still commits in ink every sentence of his works in a ‘cahier’ [notebook] and he does not devote energy to advertising his works, although he is aware of the embarrassing fact that recognition of Comorian writers owes a good tribute to Paris. While receiving The Knight of the Order of Merit of France for 31 years of service as an English teacher in secondary schools in Mayotte and his *Oeuvre* on November 17, 2014 he made this statement:

my wish is that this recognition might open up new avenues, so that we may, for example, participate in the Paris book fair. I wish that our talents in the francophone culture no longer be confined only to the lagoon of Mayotte. [...]. Writing in Mayotte for an uncertain audience is not an easy task. We never know who will read our work. We never know who will come to our shows. I thank the authorities for having believed in what we do in Mayotte, even if it may not be visible at the national level, despite the fact our books are not studied in Mahorian schools, and notwithstanding the fact that our books are not on the curriculum, as in the West Indies, where some writers are studied at the university or school level.

mon souhait c’est que ça puisse nous ouvrir des portes, pour que l’on puisse participer au salon du livre à Paris par exemple, que nos talents dans la culture francophone ne soient pas confinés dans le lagon de Mayotte. [...] écrire à Mayotte, pour un public incertain, n’est pas évident; on ne sait jamais qui va nous lire, qui va venir à nos spectacles. Je remercie les autorités d’avoir cru en ce que nous faisons à Mayotte, même si ce n’est pas visible au niveau national, même si nos ouvrages ne sont pas étudiés dans les écoles à Mayotte, ne sont pas au programme, comme ça se fait aux Antilles pour certains écrivains qui sont étudiés à l’université ou à l’école.

Here again Paris is presented as the point around which anything revolves. This brings to mind Casanova (1999) *La République Mondiale des Lettres*, which (Damrosch 2003, 27) regarded as “an unsatisfactory account of world literature in general, Casanova’s book is actually a good account of the operation of world literature within the modern French context”. Damrosch went so far as to call Casanova’s book *La République Parisienne des Lettres* because of its exaggerated Parisian perspective. In the same vein, Boris Diop (2015) has remarked that ‘In French-speaking Africa one is considered a writer only if one fulfils the following two conditions: to write in French and to be published and accepted in Paris with the



understanding that it is even more rewarding to live in Paris¹⁵.”

Attoumani recognises the centrality of France when he complains about ‘uncertain’ audiences in Mayotte due to ‘literary configurations’ (Bourdieu 1992) which do not facilitate the circulation of works by writers from the Archipelago within the Archipelago. However, there are two more aspects that should be mentioned here. First, the school system in Mayotte follows the French school system, despite the fact that most children in Mayotte grow up learning the Bantu language Shimaore as a first language, before moving on to writing Arabic, which is the dominant language of religion in Mayotte. Most only really get acquainted with French at a later stage when they attend formal schools. This is important because potential readers of literature in Mayotte live in-between the languages and the cultures they embody. Second, in an interview I conducted with the author in June 2017, he states that

The reality is that we are French on paper but culturally we are not considered French authors. I see it with publishers in France. They tell us that they do not publish Francophone authors, even though you thought you were a French person just like the others. You understand that your place is not listed there. In France, I found *Nerf de Boeuf* in the Haitian literature section and I was made to understand that this is because the novel deals with slavery. This has nothing to do with the real geographical belonging of the author.

La réalité est que nous sommes Français sur le papier mais culturellement nous ne sommes pas considérés comme des auteurs Français. Je le vois au niveau des éditeurs en France qui nous disent qu’ils ne publient pas des auteurs francophones alors que tu pensais être un Français comme les autres. Tu comprends que ta place n’est pas repertoriée là-bas. En France, j’ai trouvé *Nerf de Boeuf* dans le rayon de la littérature haïtienne et on m’a fait comprendre que c’est parce que le roman traite de l’esclavage. Rien à voir avec l’appartenance géographique réelle de l’auteur.

Nerf de Boeuf (2000, also published with L’Harmattan Paris) is a violent account of displacement caused by slavery, but the fact that the book was found in the section for Haitian literature expresses the situation’s ambiguity, which boils down to the question of literary identity. Is a writer from Mayotte who writes in

¹⁵ “Dans l’Afrique francophone on n’est considéré comme écrivain que si on remplit les deux conditions suivantes : écrire en français et être publié et légitimé à Paris, étant entendu qu’il est encore plus valorisant d’y être installé...”

French, a Mahorian, a Comorian, a French writer or simply a ‘francographe’; one who uses the French language/graphy?

It is in view of this complicated state of affairs that writers under the lead of Nassur Attoumani and Alain Kamal Martial worked on a Mayotte Book Fair whose first edition, after years of preparation, finally took place on September 21-24 at different venues at ‘Grande-Terre’¹⁶. Prior to this book fair, the first *Salon du Livre Comores Océan Indien* also took place at Moroni, Grande Comore in March 2017; aiming “to take stock of what has been produced so far, to make it available to those who come from the outside and who do not know these works because Comorians are published in small outlets which do not have a widespread distribution” (Saindoune Ben Ali; writer from the Comoros and participant in the event 2017)¹⁷.

It is not clear how much competition or cooperation will exist between both initiatives but during the 1st Book Fair at Mayotte to which I was a witness, literary agents from the Comoros Archipelago, Madagascar, Reunion, Tanzania, Kenya and Mozambique participated. Features included keynote lectures; readings by authors; reading and writing workshops for children and pupils plays and songs in French and Shimaore; round tables etc. The book fair was also used to initiate a network for the circulation and translation of works by authors from participant countries.

The participants in different events did not shy from addressing the French status of Mayotte in this regional network; including, for example, the controversy of needing a ‘Balladur Visa’ (or a nameless visa) to travel from Dar es Salaam to Mayotte. Nonetheless, the fact that things will happen regionally and even take place in all countries of the network gives a reason to hope that ‘the scramble for Paris’ (Diop 2017, 197) will diminish and that recognition from Paris will be a secondary addition to regional notice.

Conclusion

This article started with a brief background to the contested referendum of 1974 following which France claimed territorial rights over Mayotte, thereby isolating it from the rest of the Comoros Archipelago. This was followed by a thematically complementary and a stylistically comparative examination of the

¹⁷ “C’est faire le bilan de ce qui a été produit jusqu’ici, le faire découvrir à ceux qui viennent de l’extérieur qui l’ignorent parce que les Comoriens sont publiés dans des petites maisons qui n’ont pas une grande diffusion.”

magical-satirical play *Autopsie d'un Macchabée* by Nassur Attoumani and the enraged mourning of the dead *Un Dhikri pour nos morts La rage entre les dents* by Soeuf Elbadawi.

I have provided an analysis of both texts which addresses urgent contemporary political issues through the lens of critical geography. This is a crucial tool for reconfiguring space as an arena for testing and contesting power relations; even extending to the question of literary configurations which I touched upon in the third section. Critical geography is current and opportune because it suggests transformative actions towards (re)creating literary canons and literary configurations, striving for equality and justice. This is the main leitmotif of both writers who use 'lived' space as an imaginary court where neocolonial injustice and cynical actions can be judged. Speaking of cynicism; the following disrespectful and tasteless 'joke' was made about kwassa-kwassa by a smiling Emmanuel Macron (filmed unknowingly during a visit of a sea rescue center in Brittany on June 2, 2017):

The kwassa-kwassa is not really used for fishing! It is used to carry Comorians, which is a different story altogether!

"Le kwassa-kwassa pêche peu! Il amène **du** Comorien! C'est différent!" (Macron, 2 June 2017). In French, a language which pays excessive attention to stylistics, the use of '**du** comorien' equates the Comorians to livestock. This 'joke' only serves to reiterate how urgent it is to denounce the neocolonial balkanisation of the Comoros Archipelago.

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Appendix:

Picture 1. Flyer: Mayotte Asphyxié. <http://lejournaldemayotte.com/societe/mobilisation-associative-avant-de-nouvelles-expulsions-de-comoriens-prevues-a-boueni/>

Pour Infos

MAYOTTE ASPHYXIÉ !

Collectif des citoyens de la commune de Bouéni

Une manifestation et actions d'expulsions pacifiques contre l'immigration clandestine (Quitter nos maisons et nos terres)

Suivi de Grand Voulé

Conséquences :

- Vols, agressions et meurtres au quotidien.
- Ecoles surchargées,
- Climat de psychose installé,
- Education des enfants en danger,
- Image de notre île souillée,
- Echecs scolaires,
- Une économie meurtrie,
- Délinquances juvéniles et chômage de masse.
- Système de santé débordé,
- Services publics à l'agonie.

Toutes personnes en situation irrégulière, c'est un hors la loi, or elles sont protégées par l'état.
(Droit au logement, prestation sociale, droit, ...)

STOP !

Le Dimanche 15 Mai 2016

Point de départ : au plateau de BOUÉNI à 6h00 pour le tour de la commune

Appel à l'aide à l'ensemble des mahorais et autres personnes qui aiment MAYOTTE.

Picture 2. Mahorians fearing a remake of Rwanda 1994 at Mayotte.
<https://muzdalifahouse.files.wordpress.com/2017/10/2-mamudzu1.jpg>

