

Mayotte, France and the Comoros: Mimesis and Violence in the Mozambique Channel

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1 Mimetic Beginnings

In early May 2018 I was in the town of Sada on the west coast of Mayotte, one of the Comoro Islands, to meet a friend.¹ As I sat on a bench waiting for him I watched some people who were setting up a sound system. An older man wearing customary attire, a *kofia* and a *djoho*, seemed to be in charge and he noticed me watching. “Are you here for the *goma*?” he asked.² Which *goma* is that? I said. “The *goma* against the Wandzuani,” he replied. No, I said, I’m not here for the *goma*. But of course, suddenly I was. It wasn’t long before the *goma* began, introduced by a *maulida shenge*, a specifically Maorais musical form whose history dates back to the beginnings of the pro-France political movement in the late 1950s and which is both Islamic and highly politicised. As I listened, the speakers invoked the history of the struggle for Mayotte *la française*, reminding the assembly not to betray their parents, whose efforts had won so much for them, and urging them not to give up now because, despite the departmental status of the island, the struggle was not over. The problem was,

1 Because it is more familiar I use the French name for Mayotte rather than the indigenous name Maore, and I also use the French version of the name of the island’s inhabitants, Maorais (from the Shimaore Mmaore). I use the Comorian terms for the languages as well as for the names of the independent islands and their inhabitants – Maorais speak Shimaore while Ndzuani (Anjouan in French) is the home of the Wandzuani, who speak Shindzuani. I use both singular (Mndzuani) and plural forms for people from Ndzuani, but for other terms in Shimaore I do not use different forms.

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2 A *goma* is a village meeting ostensibly of a social, rather than political character. *Kofia* and *djoho* are Comorian cap and gown respectively.

as ever, the Wandzuani, immigrants from the neighbouring island of Ndzuanu, and those townspeople who were renting property to Wandzuani, many of whom were *clandestins*, irregular migrants, were instructed to tell them to leave. A group of volunteers would help them in this task, and a list of names of people who were renting houses or land to *clandestins* was handed out. The operation would start two days later, and would last as long as necessary, only ending once all the Wandzuani in town had left, even, if necessary, continuing during Ramadan, which was due to start a few days later. However, unlike previous *décasages*, evictions,³ on the island, this was to be a peaceful process, or so the organisers said: no violence, no menaces, we will just tell them, go, pack your bags and leave. And, they added, no cameras or taking pictures with your phones, or we will destroy them.

Despite being part of the Comorian archipelago, Mayotte is a French department enjoying a significantly higher standard of living than the three other islands of the group, which constitute the independent state of the Union of the Comoros. Mayotte's relative wealth exerts an irresistible lure on the people of the underdeveloped and overpopulated island of Ndzuanu, and they travel, clandestinely and in large numbers, to Mayotte in search of a better life. However, on Mayotte Wandzuani are cast as the source of all ills: attracted by the potential for a better standard of living, better health care, a decent education for their children, they are also, according to popular discourse, responsible not only for the failure of these very services, which, for lack of funding, are unable to cope with demand, but for the general state of insecurity on the island, coming out at night from their illegally constructed huts to rob and steal, pillage and plunder. This discourse is perhaps typical of anti-migrant sentiment generally, but the hostility expressed towards Wandzuani – and it is specifically Wandzuani who are exposed to this hostility, other migrants, whether from the other islands or from the African mainland, are rarely targeted in this way – by the Maorais is of particular interest, not only because the two islands are close in every sense of the word – geographically, socially and culturally – but because most Maorais either have Wandzuani ancestry – many have Wandzuani parents or grandparents, some were even born on Ndzuanu themselves – or have married Wandzuani.

In what follows I explore the contradictions in Maorais anti-Wandzuani discourse and the dilemmas Maorais face both in being French and in being Comorian, dilemmas that are a product of the subaltern relationships within which Maorais are inscribed. Maorais are not only embedded in a colonial

3 *Décasage*, literally “unhousing”, is a Maorais neologism, see: Alaoui & al. 2019, 2020.

relationship with metropolitan France but they are constantly threatened by the political hegemony of the other islands. I suggest that the Maorais, caught between being French (citizens) and Comorian (culturally), unable to reject France for political and economic reasons, are, in a sense, forced to reject themselves. The concept of mimesis provides a useful theoretical framework for an analysis of these relationships. Mimesis has a long pedigree, from Plato and Aristotle to René Girard and Michael Taussig by way of Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, all while remaining slightly (and surprisingly: who does not imitate?) marginal to contemporary anthropology. I have elsewhere (Walker 2010; see also Gebauer & Wulf 1995) explored the concept, suffice it to say that mimesis is a particular social engagement: it is, crucially, neither imitation nor mimicry. Imitation involves no pretence – the imitator is not the object of imitation, nor does she pretend to be – while mimicry is subterfuge, trickery, deception, an imitation that is as faithful as possible to the original, attempting to pass itself off as something (or someone) that it is not: mimicry subverts. Mimesis, however, is not deceptive; the mimester does not attempt to pass himself off, nor fool the observer into believing that he is what he is not, on the contrary, the mimester is who he is: mimesis *does something*, it is productive. Mimesis appropriates the object of the mimetic impulse and makes it its own: mimesis enables one to stay the same as oneself (cf. Taussig 1993, Walker 2010). As we shall see, I suggest that the Maorais mimetically appropriate things that are Wandzuani in order to be themselves, to be more concretely Maorais.

However, the mimetic impulse is inherently violent, precisely because, as Girard revealed (1979), the subject and the object are competing for possession of the same thing. This violence may be latent, but it also may be expressed physically, particularly in contexts where the two parties to the mimetic impulse are competing for very real rewards. *Pace* Taussig (1993), who asserts that mimesis must directed towards a radically different Other, I suggest that in this specific case, when the Maorais direct the mimetic impulse at Wandzuani, they are effectively directing it at themselves: one can indeed imitate oneself. Maorais need to differentiate themselves from Wandzuani, but, through mimesis, they appear to become (like) Wandzuani; and the more Wandzuani and Maorais resemble one another, the more they desire the same thing. The only way differentiation can be successful, therefore, is through violence. So the tension between Maorais and Wandzuani explodes as the Maorais imitate the Wandzuani to the point that they threaten to become the same. The tension here lies in the fact that, possibly despite themselves, Maorais do want to be Wandzuani, not French; but again, because they need France in a practical sense, and because both Maorais and Wandzuani desire the benefits of being French, the

Maorais have to turn their violence on the Wandzuani. This violence reasserts a separation between the two, renewing a sense of difference.

We need to be careful to distinguish what appear to be two different but linked mimetic impulses here. The first is Maorais mimesis of Wandzuani, which is manifested in what is almost a straightforward appropriation of the attributes of the Other, for example, in the *manzaraka*, an elaborate and costly wedding ritual (see below), through which Maorais become themselves. But there is also a mimetic impulse initially directed towards France. However, although there is some competition for scarce resources, the Maorais do not particularly need to strive for the benefits of being French since these are already theirs by virtue of their already being French. In this case the mimetic desire is instead and again, redirected towards the Wandzuani. If truth be told, Maorais do not particularly want to be French; yet at the same time the Wandzuani, whom the Maorais approach mimetically, *do* want to be French, or at least, they want to enjoy the benefits of being French: they desire what the Maorais already have. In response, the Maorais can only mimetically appropriate the Wandzuani's desire to be French since they have no need to truly desire what they already are. In other words, both desire the same things, the Maorais mimetically so. Furthermore, and in a practical sense, the fact that the objects of desire are not being adequately provided by France – despite massive investment, Mayotte nevertheless remains vastly underfunded and under-equipped – prompts Maorais to transfer what is seen as a French rejection of their desires onto the Wandzuani, for not only do Wandzuani desire what is rightfully theirs, but the Wandzuani are also responsible for the objects of their desire not being available to them. The violence felt towards France cannot be expressed towards France because France provides very real economic and political benefits and is therefore redirected from the French to the Wandzuani. Here we can invoke Girard's notion of triangular mimetic desire (Girard 1966), in which the subject and the mediator increasingly come to resemble one another as their desires become aligned. The object of desire eventually becomes irrelevant and through mimesis they come to resemble one another so completely – a process Girard (1987) calls “doubling” – that, once again, the only possible outcome is violence.

Let us turn to the ethnography.

2 The Historical Context and Some Statistics

The Comoro Islands lie in the Mozambique Channel between Madagascar and the East African coast. They are four in number: the largest, Ngazidja, the

westernmost and the seat of government of the independent state, was for much of the pre-colonial period only peripherally involved in the affairs of the other islands; the smallest island, Mwali, on the other hand, was often ruled by the second largest island, Ndzواني, which also frequently imposed itself upon the fourth island, Mayotte: antagonism between the two latter islands has a long history. Prior to the arrival of the French Mayotte was regularly invaded by the sultans of Ndzواني who would carry off Maorais to sell them into slavery;⁴ and it was in part the threat of invasion that prompted Andriantsoli, the Malagasy usurper sultan of Mayotte, to sell the island to France in 1841 for an annual pension of a thousand dollars. France inherited an island, but few people. Incessant wars between the islands in the eighteenth century, raids by Malagasy slavers in the early nineteenth, and further conflict between Mayotte and Ndzواني in the 1820s and 1830s had reduced the population of Mayotte to perhaps 1500 individuals; and although the numbers were gradually on the increase, France was obliged to encourage immigration from the neighbouring islands – Ndzواني in particular, but Ngazidja and Mwali, too – as well as from the African mainland in order to provide a labour force for their new colony.

In 1886 France established protectorates over the three remaining islands of the group and in 1912 all four islands were annexed to the colony of Madagascar before becoming a territory in their own right in 1946. While most other French colonies in Africa, including Madagascar, acceded to independence in 1960, it was not until 1974 that a referendum was held on independence in the Comoros. The vote was overwhelmingly in favour on the three westernmost islands but on Mayotte 63% voted against. France tergiversated, and in July 1975 political pressures forced the president of the territory, Ahmed Abdallah, to unilaterally declare independence; when France recognised the independence of the new state six months later it did not include Mayotte. Mayotte has since remained French, passing through several political configurations before finally becoming a French department in 2011.⁵

From this extremely cursory foray into Comorian history, a number of elements can be identified as being relevant in the contemporary context. First, the proposition that Mayotte was voluntarily ceded to France and so long ago that, as Maorais frequently point out, the island has been French longer than Nice: this is a fundamental tenet of Maorais identarian discourse and

4 Although largely ignored in contemporary discourse, the reverse was also true: Maorais frequently raided Ndzواني for slaves (Walker 2019a).

5 See Walker (2019a) for a history of the archipelago, Sidi (1998) for a history of Ndzواني. Lambek (2018) for an ethnographic history of Mayotte; and Idriss (2018) for the political struggles on Mayotte.

political strategies, not only establishing a claim to being French that has as much, if not greater legitimacy even than places in metropolitan France, but distinguishing Mayotte from the other islands.⁶ Second, the ruler of the island at the time was Malagasy, not Comorian: as I have argued elsewhere (Walker 2019b), emphasising this is part of a strategy aimed at establishing an identity discourse to counter claims that Maorais are Comorian: instead Maorais claim to be as much Malagasy as they are Comorian, again, unlike the other islands. Third, most islanders are descended from migrants who arrived no earlier than the mid-nineteenth century; and finally, beginning in the late 1950s a political movement on the island consistently militated for full incorporation into France as a department, refusing to accept independence as part of a Comorian state and finally achieving its aims in 2011. Although often presented as being product of the collective will of the Maorais, this was not accomplished without resistance and in the 1960s and 1970s tensions between members of the pro-independence faction, known as *serelamaa* (from the French *serrer la main*, to clasp hands), and the pro-French *soroda* (“*soldat*”), who favoured separation from the other islands and continued status as a French possession, led to punitive action against *serelamaa*, including, in a foreshadowing of things to come, the expulsion from the island of those who could be denied local belonging. This, and subsequent political struggles, has led to a Maorais being defined, in the words of one informant, as one who “embraces our political destiny”.⁷

The independent Union of the Comoros generally ranks fairly low in tables of indicators produced by the likes of the World Bank and the IMF. With an annual per capita GNP of about €650, it lies firmly in the low-income group, and although growth rates are generally positive, population increase means that there is little real change. Despite a not undeserved reputation for political intrigues, the country now appears to be stable, but it remains chronically mismanaged. National infrastructure and the provision of basic services leave much to be desired: health and education are grossly underfunded, roads, water supplies and electricity are unreliable if not absent altogether and unemployment is high. In contrast, if poor and underdeveloped by European standards, Mayotte’s per capita GNP is now close to €10,000 and while unemployment is

6 Nice, ceded to France by the Kingdom of Sardinia in 1860, was one of France’s last territorial acquisitions in continental Europe.

7 See Breslar (1981) for the construction of identities based on pro-and anti-independence stances; see also Baco (1991) for a semi-fictionalised account of the internal conflicts on Mayotte in the 1960s and 1970s. Note that when I speak of independence, this refers to independence as part of the Comorian state. There is no movement supporting independence for Mayotte alone.

even higher (35% in 2018), wages are also high when compared to the neighbouring islands.⁸ Education, following the national curriculum, is French (if not always *in* French⁹) and relatively well funded, and the island's medical facilities are far superior to anything on offer in the independent state. The attractions of Mayotte to other islanders, and particularly to Wandzuani, are clear.

Emigration has long been a feature of local demographics and today there is a significant community of Comorians in metropolitan France; most are from Ngazidja and their remittances are essential to the national economy in the independent state.¹⁰ On Ndzواني a high population density and a lack of agricultural land has also been responsible for emigration, in this case mostly to the other islands, and until the imposition of visa controls upon Comorian citizens in 1995 there was a regular circulation of individuals between Ndzواني and Mayotte. Since then most movements to Mayotte have been irregular, at least from the French perspective, and their effects increasingly important, economically, politically, socially and demographically. Most of these migrants now arrive by speedboats, known as *kwasa kwasa*, which cover the 70km between Ndzواني and Mayotte in two or three hours at a cost of three or four hundred euros per person, discharging their passengers onto Mayotte's beaches, often in broad daylight.¹¹ From the perspective of the Comorian state these movements are internal migrations, even if most are under no illusions as to the French status of Mayotte. The constant struggle by the French border police to stem this flow of migrants saw deportations from the island reach a peak of more than 27,000 in 2019.¹²

8 Mayotte source Paillole (2019). Unemployment in the independent state is officially slightly over 4%, clearly a nonsensical figure (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=KM&view=chart>, accessed 22 Jan 2021). Informal estimates, taking into consideration high rates of under-employment and informal or self-employment, place it closer to 30% (<https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/unemployment-and-labour-underutilization/>).

9 Many pupils, particularly at primary level, and even some teachers, have an inadequate grasp of the language and so teachers use Shimaore in class.

10 Estimates vary, but possibly as much as a quarter of national income in the independent state is attributed to remittances. See da Cruz & al. (2004), Poulain & al. (2013). Remittances to Mayotte from Maorais in the metropole and in Réunion are also significant, if difficult to quantify.

11 The name was derived from a Congolese dance and is said to describe the movement of the boats as they crossed to Mayotte. *Kwasa kwasa* are often unseaworthy and overloaded and frequently sink. It is estimated that more than 15,000 people have lost their lives attempting this crossing in the 25 years since visa requirements were imposed (Walker 2019a).

12 Note that this figure this does not of course represent 27,000 unique individuals since many would have subsequently returned to Mayotte and may have been deported a second (or third...) time (Forum Réfugiés 2020).

Figures are constantly being produced (and manipulated) to illustrate the magnitude of the problems faced by Mayotte. A survey in 2017 estimated that 40% of adults resident in Mayotte do not have French citizenship (and are thus considered to be “foreigners”), and half of these do not have a *carte de séjour* (residence permit) and are thus considered “irregular” or *clandestins*. The same report revealed other figures: more than one resident in two was not born on the island; 30% were born on Ndzواني; only one in three residents of Mayotte were born of a Mayotte-born mother; and so on. These figures, probably reasonably reliable, suggest that questions of belonging are particularly thorny ones.¹³

As noted above, *clandestins* are held responsible for a range of problems, in a fairly classic anti-immigrant discourse: crime, pressure on housing, health and other social services, nefarious influences and general insalubrity. Parents must now be prepared to bribe local officials to obtain places for their children in schools that are officially full (of the children of *clandestins*) and patients seeking medical care need to take their place in the queue (surrounded by *clandestins*) at 4 am if they are to have any hope of seeing a doctor that day, or so one is led to believe. The maternity ward at the island’s main hospital is said to be the most productive in France, registering some 6400 births in 2017, and most of these mothers are said to be *clandestins*.¹⁴ Most immigrants live in corrugated iron huts built on land they do not own and which have few amenities: no sewage or running water, and often without a legal electricity supply. However, these people, *clandestins* or not, are essential to the local economy. The above-cited survey also revealed that 26% of French residents born in Mayotte lived in another department, a figure that rises to 45% of 18–24 year olds: wherever possible, Maorais leave their island for Réunion or the metropole.¹⁵ In their absence, immigrants constitute the local workforce, cultivating the fields,

13 “Mayotte”, INSEE Analyses 12, March 2017.

14 While it would appear to be true that the majority (74% in 2016 according to INSEE) of women giving birth in Mayotte are foreign citizens, in almost half these cases the father was a French citizen. Only 40% of births were to two foreign parents, not necessarily *clandestins*, and statistically, and all other things being equal, the odds are that only 10% of births would be to two *clandestin* parents. Although it is popularly believed that *jus soli* grants citizenship to children born to foreign parents on French soil, this is not strictly true: citizenship is only acquired if, upon attaining the age of 18, the individual concerned has lived in France for at least five years after the age of 11. Note, too, that if the boatloads of pregnant women arriving on Mayotte’s shores are largely imaginary, under current legislation the mother of a child born in France, regardless of her status, is generally safe from the threat of deportation.

15 It is now accepted that net migratory flows in Mayotte are outwards, although this does not of course alter anti-immigrant discourse: quite the opposite, as Wandzواني are now held responsible for forcing Maorais to flee their own island.

fishing, working in the construction industry, as masons, plumbers, electricians, and working in domestic service, cleaning houses and providing childcare: most Maorais admit that, whatever their failings, Wandzuani are hard workers.

3 Wandzuani and *Wajeni*: Who are the *Clandestins*?

Foreigners, *wajeni*, are generally understood to be Wandzuani, even if upon closer inspection some of them turn out to be from elsewhere.¹⁶ What is relevant in the definition is both their intentions and their belonging. Africans¹⁷ do not intend to stay in Mayotte, seeing the island as an easy gateway to Europe; likewise many Malagasy also attempt to move on, either to Réunion or to the metropole. Neither of these groups are particularly problematic even if they may also be responsible for insecurity or pressures on public services: Maorais are well aware that few of them are intending to stay; those who do are few in number and, more importantly, pose no threat politically, socially or existentially. Wandzuani, however, have no particular desire to move on: Mayotte is familiar territory – culturally it is as Comorian as the other islands and the two languages, Shimaore and Shindzuani, are perfectly inter-comprehensible¹⁸ – and it is closer to home, indeed, it *is* home both in formal (Comorian) political discourse and, given the ties that bind the islands together, in socio-cultural terms. The circular migratory patterns that were a feature of the pre-visa regime are harder to maintain today but are nevertheless desirable; relatively easy for those who manage to obtain their *carte de séjour* and can take one of the short flights between the two islands, they are less so for those who must risk their lives in a *kwasa*. More importantly, however, it is precisely because of their social and cultural proximity that Wandzuani can claim to belong, an option largely denied to African or Malagasy immigrants, and they therefore pose a threat.

There is, at least in theory, a difference between *clandestins* and *wajeni*. *Wajeni*, outsiders or foreigners, are opposed to *wenyeji*, people “from here”, who belong. Criteria for belonging include both formal markers, such as possession of French citizenship or, depending on the flexibility of the definition,

16 A small percentage of non-Maorais Comorians are Wangazidja or Wamwali, from the other two islands. They are often assimilated to Wandzuani in popular discourse, although there are occasions in which the difference is important.

17 Here I refer to citizens of mainland African countries without legal residency, most of whom are from the Great Lakes countries. There are also a number of people of African origin legally resident in Mayotte, most of whom are French citizens and often civil servants.

18 Shingazidja and Shimwali are somewhat different, but inter-comprehension is still possible.

a *carte de séjour*, and customary ones, such as being born in the village (and having one's placenta buried there), having a spouse or child born there, and, eventually, being buried there, since only those who belong will have a grave dug for them by their village. *Wajeni* are those who are not *wenyeji*, and this may apply on various levels: *wajeni* may simply be from another village, or they may be from the other side of the island; but the term is increasingly understood as referring to those who do not belong on Mayotte, who were born elsewhere (or, if circumstances dictate, are of parents born elsewhere); they may nevertheless have a *carte de séjour* and be legally resident: some may even be French citizens. *Clandestins*, on the other hand, and at least formally, are those without legal authority to remain in Mayotte, neither French citizens nor holders of a *carte de séjour*. In practice, however, the two are often conflated: *wajeni* not only includes *clandestins*, they are themselves socially "*clandestins*", if not legally so. It should be clear that this category does not include metropolitan French citizens (*wazungu*, people of European origin) who, if technically *wajeni*, are not usually subsumed within this category: they are without category, at least in this particular context.

Maorais make clear discursive distinctions between themselves and the Wandzuani. With a predictability that has long ceased to be surprising, my conversations with Maorais generally begin with condemnations of the *clandestins*. Some are more tolerant than others. One woman explained her ambivalence towards them thus:

A long time ago, there was an old woman, a Mndzuani, she came here but didn't have anywhere to stay, so I let her live with me. Everything was fine. After a while she started to help with the cooking and she started looking after the children, which helped me. And then one day she said she wanted to be paid! I said no, I'm already giving you food and you are living in my house, and now you want my money? That's how they are. You give them something and they want more.

Another informant was less well-disposed:

Lately, since 2015, the Wandzuani who come here, they try to steal from the Maorais, break into the houses, steal cars, to put them in boats [for Ndzuani], they break up cars to steal the engines. They steal from the fields ... When the Wandzuani started to steal, well, that's when hostilities began. [It is] the new Wandzuani, those who come from over there. They even rape the women, the children. They had bad habits over there, and they brought them over here.

Sometimes it seems that Maorais have little else to talk about. Sitting with a friend in a restaurant, we overheard two men at a neighbouring table complaining about their food, eventually telling the owner they wouldn't pay and leaving. "That's not right," she said to us when they'd gone, "but what can you expect from Wandzuani?" Likewise, the man in a café loudly declaring – in French – to anyone who would listen, "I prefer a dog to a Mndzuani. At least a dog is grateful."¹⁹ Statements of this kind would be relatively unproblematic were that the end of it: negative stereotyping of a large and visible immigrant group is hardly unusual. But, and with a similar predictability, my conversations invariably ended with the confession that my interlocutor was born in Ndzuani, or that one of her parents was, or that his wife was Mndzuani, creating an ambiguity that was explicitly acknowledged by the man cited above, who singled out "the new Wandzuani" for criticism. Maorais ancestry is invariably traced to one of the other islands, said another informant:

The native Maorais, he doesn't exist. Here it's much more cosmopolitan. Here there is a lot of mixing, to the point that you can't distinguish between Maorais and Wandzuani, Maorais and Wamwali, Maorais and Wangazidja, Maorais and Malagasy, except perhaps when they speak. Here we really live democratically.

I could quote a dozen individuals who, after a long conversation denigrating Wandzuani, then expressed an identity with the other islanders, saying something along the lines of "we're all the same here": "That's who Maorais are," said another man. "Immigrants come from the other islands and have children here and they become Maorais, or if not, then their children do. Everyone in Mayotte comes from somewhere else."

The nuances in attributions of or claims to belonging have been particularly evident in access to positions of power or status within the French administration, and there have been protests when jobs are given to French citizens if these latter are considered to be *wajeni*. In a notorious incident in 2006, the appointment of Daniel Bacar, a French citizen born in Mayotte of a Maorais mother but a Ndzuani father, to a position of responsibility in the local social security office prompted such opposition that he was swiftly transferred to the metropole. Although (some) Maorais claim that this case was exceptional – the man in question was the half-brother of the president of Ndzuani – the frequency with which such appointments are condemned suggests otherwise.

19 A particularly negative statement given the horror with which Comorians view dogs. Of course, the French have no problems with dogs.

More recently, in May 2018, when a French citizen of Wandzuani parents was offered a position at the town hall in Pamandzi there were similar protests and, likewise, she was forced to resign.

Socially (in a narrow sense of the term) and culturally, Wandzuani pose no real threat to Maorais. Indeed, quite the opposite, Ndzuanis, and the other islands, are often seen as cultural repositories. Thus for example, the *manzaraka*, an elaborate and costly wedding ritual that has become ubiquitous on Mayotte since the turn of the century, seems to have been imported from Ndzuanis and is generally accepted as such. Maorais often have recourse to Wandzuani wedding organisers who arrive (often by *kwasa*, of course) to help out, bringing bags full of jasmine, hard to source on Mayotte. The groom at these weddings increasingly dresses as grooms do on Ngazidja, and both this and the increasing extravagance of the event has prompted claims that the Maorais do this in imitation of the Wangazidja, renowned for their spectacular and costly ritual marriages. This sort of acknowledgement of cultural inclusion is not usually viewed negatively, or at least if it is, it is in terms of the costs and ostentation of these events, rather than any concerns over their origins.²⁰

It is clear that if distinctions between *wajeni* and *wenyeji*, between Maorais and Wandzuani, are essentialised in popular and political discourse, in practice they are more nuanced, contextual, and the categories themselves are fluid and loosely bounded. In less politically charged contexts, a Mndzuani, resident perhaps a lifetime and married in a village, can be *wenyeji* while a Maorais from the other side of the island is *wajeni*. Unknown individuals are placed into a social framework that defines them, their roles, rights and responsibilities: “Whose child are you?” is invariably the first question asked of a stranger in a village, and if the parents are known then the individual can be assigned an identity.

Those who do not have the networks have to work a little harder to achieve the status that grants them belonging, and much depends on personal attitudes. Some Wandzuani assimilate more easily than others; *clandestins* who live in a community surrounded by other *clandestins*, who fail to participate in village events, help organise weddings or dig graves, have greater difficulty assimilating, whether this is through choice or through exclusion. Looking for a shop that was open in a village one afternoon – everyone had gone to a wedding – someone said to me, “Try the little shop opposite the mosque, he’s from Ngazidja, he won’t be at the wedding.” In contrast, another man, who had arrived in Mayotte aged

20 See Walker (2019b) for a discussion of the *manzaraka* and its origins.

eight, explained how, at school, he didn't hang out with the other Wandzuani, and most of his friends were Maorais. "They used to call me Mndzuani," he said,

but eventually I became like them and they forgot about it. But it really changes when you marry and have children. I married a Maoraise, and once my son was born I wasn't Salim any more, I was Papa Abdou. Once you stop being called by your name and people start calling you Papa Abdou, then you are local, your child is born here and you have a local identity.

Whether Wandzuani are liable to be tolerated, imitated or treated as *wajeni* or *clandestins* also depends on their specific Wandzuani identities, for there are two types of Wandzuani. The *makabaila* are descendants of the Arab ruling classes of the island and live in Ndzuanis towns, Mutsamudu, Domoni and Wani. Light-skinned, high status, often tracing their origins to Hadramawt, they clearly distinguish themselves from the *wamatsaha*, "bushmen", who constitute the bulk of Ndzuanis population and who are said to be the descendants of slaves.²¹ This distinction was once also relevant in Mayotte but although there are still families recognised as *makabaila*, the distinction has become less salient as Maorais identity *contra wajeni* is prioritised over internal differentiations. However, while *wajeni* are *wajeni*, there is a tacit recognition that *makabaila* may belong. Apart from anything else, if they are not already French citizens, they generally have the status, the connections, and the money to obtain visas and arrive by air rather than in the *kwasas* with the *wamatsaha*, and they would be unlikely to build illegal houses or engage in manual labour. One informant recounted how, on hearing that she was preparing a trip to Ndzuanis, a friend of hers said, "Oh, bring me back a *shirmani*,"²² "I'm light skinned, so when I wear it people will think I am Mndzuani." During another conversation with a woman who had loudly declaimed a few minutes earlier that she was Maorais, I asked her where she came from. I was enquiring about her village, but she misunderstood me: "Can't you guess?" she said. She was light skinned and clearly I was expected to say "Ndzuanis", but I feigned ignorance and said no. "My mother is from Ndzuanis," she confirmed, and went on to explain that her maternal grandfather was from Muscat, reinforcing what I was supposed to have guessed, that she was *makabaila*, not really a Mndzuani, certainly neither *clandestin*, *wamatsaha* or *wajeni*, but well-born.

21 There are further distinctions between those who arrived as slaves in the nineteenth century, the *wamakua*, and the "true" *wamatsaha*, who claim to be descended from the island's original inhabitants, those who ruled prior to the arrival of Arab rulers in the late fifteenth century.

22 A distinctive woman's garment from Ndzuanis.

4 Were It Not for the French...

For half a century the dominant political project on Mayotte was aimed at securing the status of a French department. The origins of this movement lie in the 1958 decision to transfer the territorial capital from Dzaoudzi, on Mayotte, to Moroni, the capital of Ngazidja. The decision was inevitable: Mayotte had been the seat of the territorial government by default since it was already a French colony when the other islands were annexed; but there was simply no space for the administration on Dzaoudzi, a ten hectare rock in Mayotte's lagoon. The government already met in Moroni for lack of a room in Dzaoudzi big enough to accommodate them all, and it was inevitable that the entire administration eventually be transferred. This officially occurred in 1962. However, the decision to move not only confirmed Mayotte's liminal political role in the archipelago, but it had significant economic and social repercussions on the island: jobs provided by ancillary services to the government disappeared; the civil servants themselves moved to Moroni, often without their wives; the small businesses – shops and trades – that catered to them saw their revenues disappear, and so on.²³ The resentment was exacerbated by the fact that several wealthy politicians from Ndzuanani were able to purchase large tracts of former plantation land that were no longer required by their owners, generally French companies, allegedly taking advantage of their positions in the government to pre-empt potential local buyers. Resentment against Wangazidja and Wandzuani was already simmering long before *clandestins* became an issue.

France's decision not to impose independence upon Mayotte, and its continued (if not unwavering) support for the Maorais and their desire to remain French is both source and product of pro-French sentiment on the island. In a relationship that I have described elsewhere as that of the *immerkolonie*, a place that remains a colony in all but name,²⁴ the Maorais continue to fulfil their side of the bargain: in return for French support, the continued French presence on Mayotte, protection from the hegemony of the other islands and the growing (if still not quite satisfactory) economic benefits of remaining French, Maorais accept a subservient role. Although members of the local government, the Conseil Départemental, as well as the mayors, are locally elected and the council's employees largely recruited locally, their powers are limited; decisions in matters such as immigration and citizenship in particular are made by the French

23 This history of this period has been dealt with at length elsewhere. See, for example Idriss (2018).

24 Walker (2019b). I construct the neologism from the German, *immer*, "always" (or as in *immer noch*, "still"), a *Kolonie*, "colony".

state, represented in Mayotte by the prefect, and most of the higher positions in the state apparatus in Mayotte are held by career civil servants, the vast majority of whom are *wazungu*. The same is true in the education and health sectors, and most Maorais expect their superiors to be *wazungu*, because, as one elderly man put it, “they are very intelligent”.²⁵

Francophilia reached its zenith following the 2009 referendum when it was announced that Mayotte was finally to become a department. This was the reward for fifty years of political perseverance and seemed to remove the possibility of the island ever being annexed by the Union of the Comoros: in the eyes of most, departmental status was irrevocable. Furthermore, Mayotte would cease to be underdeveloped: as part of France the economy would boom and newfound wealth would be available to all. Many Maorais are familiar with Réunion, the other French department in the Indian Ocean, and knew what to expect: good schools, well-equipped hospitals, large shopping malls, new cars, divided highways, and, of course, generous social security payments. Manna, indeed, and all thanks to France.

But this pro-French sentiment is often illusory and antagonism towards France is not far from the surface. French disdain for the Maorais is, from the Maorais perspective, clearly visible in the way that Maorais are treated and there is a sentiment that *wazungu*, and particularly civil servants, are the beneficiaries of special treatment. As one informant explained:

Here the bosses are French, from the metropole, they have family, they have friends, when they recruit, they choose from among their friends. And their friends, they aren't called Aboudou or Omar, no, it's Jean-Jacques and so on. And when they are chosen we see, because we work with them, either they don't merit it, or they are always lacking something, whereas us, we are told, they demand many things, we are told, not only do we have to be competent, but we need diplomas, and so on.

Discrimination is felt in a number of domains, he continued:

The civil servants who arrived here, before, they had what we call *la prime*, a bonus. That bonus, Maorais didn't get it, not even the Maorais who went [to France] and returned, they were excluded [...] They said, you are Maorais, so the high cost of living... as if, as if you weren't concerned.

²⁵ The prefect has, with one (self-appointed) exception, always been a metropolitan Frenchman. Younoussa Bamana, one of the leaders of the MPM, was “elected” prefect in 1975 and held office for a year before a “real” prefect was appointed.

Because they gave the bonus because of the cost of living here [...] they said no, you are Maorais, you don't get the bonus. Because the bonus, they give it to people who come from, in fact, who aren't Muslims. Who come from over there. But then when the Maorais say there is a difference between the *wazungu* and the Maorais, they say, oh, you are racist, you don't like foreigners [*sic*].

The pro-French political project, the constant expressions of fidelity towards France, pride in their French heritage and their status as French citizens, all this turns out, upon closer inspection, to be contingent upon French protection from the designs of the Comorian state upon their island. The increasing numbers of *wazungu* arriving on the island (presumably also putting pressure on housing, education and social services) are tolerated: it has not, to me at least, ever been suggested that they leave and return to France. But many Maorais have no particular desire to be French in any but the most formal sense of the word – indeed, often the contrary, the French, almost all of them *makafiri*, unbelievers, are often viewed with some disdain, and are rarely part of Maorais social networks. What Maorais expect from the relationship is not to be Comorian, and France is but a means to an end. Many make this quite explicit: “We have no connection with France,”²⁶ said one informant. “It's all about money,” said another: “If it wasn't the French it would be someone else.”

If 2009 was the zenith of pro-French sentiment in Mayotte, and Nicolas Sarkozy, the French president at the time, something of a local hero, 2018 looked very much like the nadir.²⁷ In February of that year demonstrators set up blockades across the island, and life ground to a halt; for six weeks the demonstrators remained intransigent, until finally the army moved in. This episode was the product of a growing sense of frustration with the French administration. The failure of the promised manna to arrive led many Maorais to question France's commitment to the island: seven years after departmentalisation it seemed as if nothing had changed. Mayotte did not look like Réunion. The schools were still inadequate, the hospital was still unable to cope, the minimum wage and social security payments were still lower than in the metropole.

26 “*Nous n'avons rien à voir avec la France*”, which may also be translated as “we have nothing to do with France” or “we have nothing in common with France”.

27 Sarkozy consistently defended the French status of Mayotte, and repeatedly reaffirmed France's commitment to the island. In a speech in Mamoudzou in January 2010, he declared to an enthusiastic crowd that “Je ne laisserai à personne, à aucune puissance étrangère, le droit de décider de qui serait Français et de qui ne le serait pas: Mayotte, c'est la France, Mayotte restera française.” (<https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/177947-declaration-de-m-nicolas-sarkozy-president-de-la-republique-sur-la-de>).

Nevertheless, France was imposing its rules, collecting land taxes, demolishing illegally constructed houses, banning polygamy, introducing legislation that an older generation finds opaque – apocryphal tales of the Maorais child, following a dressing down from his parents, threatening to report them for breaking EU laws, invoking the spectre of police, handcuffs and court appearances, all in French, a language the parents don't understand, reflect a very real sense of alienation in their own land that is felt by many older Maorais.

At the same time, France not only seems unable to stem the tide of migrants, but actually appears to be on their side. Laws prevent Maorais from expelling *clandestins* who illegally settle on their land; they are entitled to health care; and their children are not simply permitted but legally required to go to school. NGOs – generally run by *wazungu* – provide free advice to *clandestins* on how to obtain shelter and health care, how to claim asylum and how to lodge their applications for a *carte de séjour*. Were the Maorais treated equally, French assistance towards Wandzuani might be tolerated, but the perception is that France actively discriminates against the Maorais. “If we build on a plot of land without a permit the state comes and knocks it down, but if the *clandestins* do it, they say, ah, but they have the right to accommodation, we can't touch them,” said one informant, going on to explain that the state would then provide the *clandestins* with lawyer when they go to court, which often rules in their favour. Thus for example in May 2017 the high court in Mamoudzou ruled that it was not illegal to provide accommodation for an irregular migrant if this was done in the best interests of the migrant. For many this was confirmation of the French government's support for *clandestins*, encouraging them to remain on the island.

The camel's back finally gave way when the Macron government, elected in mid-2017, proposed a rapprochement with the Union of the Comoros. It was clear that frontier patrols and deportations, costly and ineffectual, were not going to stem the flow of migrants and in September the foreign ministers of both countries signed an agreement, known as the “*feuille de route*” (roadmap), that, among other things, proposed allowing visa-free travel to Mayotte for certain Comorian citizens.²⁸ The uproar in Mayotte was deafening (and the proposal immediately suspended, indefinitely it would seem), and the widespread suspicion was that this was the thin end of the wedge: that, despite everything, departmentalisation was not irreversible. When it was subsequently suggested that the two states cooperate within the framework of a “Communauté de l'archipel des Comores”, for many Maorais France's strategy immediately

28 The text of this document was never made public and rumours of all sorts abound regarding its contents.

became clear: faced with an expensive and politically undesirable uphill struggle to develop Mayotte, the French government would allow the island to fill with *clandestins*, grant them *cartes de séjour*, followed swiftly by citizenship, and then hold a referendum on returning the island to the Comorian state. The majority of the population would by then be pro-union *wajeni* and would vote for reunification. France could wash its hands of the whole matter, having been seen by the international community to have respected the will of the people, and Mayotte would, once again, suffer the yoke of oppression of the other islands.

5 Rejecting Ndzuanis: The Mimetic Impulse

Despite the cultural proximity of the two islands, and the ubiquitous performances of this proximity, Maorais increasingly attempt to distinguish themselves, discursively and practically, from their neighbours, a process that requires a consolidation, even essentialisation, of Maorais identity. A telling, and explicit, example occurred at an event organised by an agricultural college in the south of Mayotte, a competition to find the best recipe for *madaba*, with a view to establishing commercial production of the dish. *Madaba* is a preparation of cassava leaves with fish and coconut milk, and although eaten on all the islands, it is accepted to be a Ngazidja speciality. However, at the competition one of the judges made a short speech during which she said, “We should say *feliki muhogo* [cassava leaves], not *madaba*, *madaba* is not from here, it’s not our culture, here we have *feliki muhogo*, and that’s what we should call it. That way people who come here can see it’s our culture.” Likewise, although there was formerly widespread recognition that the *manzaraka*, the wedding ceremony referred to above, was adopted from Ndzuanis – where of course it is not called *manzaraka* and neither does it assume the same form –, informants seem increasingly reluctant to accept this, and many are beginning to claim that the event is, after all, quite local.²⁹

The distancing of Mayotte from the other islands is also, and very clearly, articulated in formal discourse and the media – and, it must be said, with

29 It is difficult to generalise from my small pool of interlocutors and the shallow timeframe of my research on Mayotte, but whereas during fieldwork in 2017 only one person claimed the event was Maorais (and this was a change of heart after having initially agreed that it was from Ndzuanis), a year later quite a number of people were certain that it was Maorais. Nevertheless, this was a period during which the costs of the event have come under some scrutiny and the event itself increasingly the object of public discussion.

French complicity. Astonishingly, Mayotte is frequently portrayed as being physically removed from the other islands: “the neighbouring archipelago of the Comoros”, “They mostly come from the Comoros, a neighbouring archipelago in the Indian Ocean”,³⁰ as if Mayotte was no longer one of the islands of the group but had been cast adrift into the Indian Ocean by the magic of plate tectonics. The distinctions are further obscured, linguistically, in any case, and in French, by statements such as “Anjouan, one of the three islands of the Comoros” or “The family is of Comorian origin, a community often victims of popular anger in Mayotte”,³¹ which may recognise a technically (if politically contested) valid distinction between Mayotte and the independent state, the Union of the Comoros but also sets up, and certainly does nothing to deny, the semantic opposition Mayotte/Comoros, thus extending its scope from the purely political to assume social, cultural, ethnic and geographic connotations.

In more formal spheres, there is also a rewriting of perspectives on the historical relationship between the islands, intended (presumably) not only to underline the distinction between Mayotte, on the one hand, and the three independent islands on the other, but to encourage the idea that the other three islands form a unit of which Mayotte has never been part, and within which it therefore has no rightful place. The “History” section of the Conseil Départemental’s website includes the following:

In 1886, Humblot, a French orchid lover turned political adventurer, convinces the Sultan of Anjouan to place his country, that is to say the islands of Ngazidja, Ndzuani and Mwali under French protectorate. [...] The winds of independence [...] lead Paris, in 1946, to re-attach Mayotte to the other islands of the Comoros with a status of Overseas Territory (T.O.M), whose capital was Dzaoudzi.³²

The truth of the matter is somewhat different. Léon Humblot convinced the Sultan of Bambao, only one of several sultanates on Ngazidja, to place that island under French protection; certainly the sultans of the other two islands

30 “*L’archipel voisin des Comores*”, “*Elles viennent essentiellement des Comores, archipel voisin de l’Océan indien*”, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2018/03/15/01016-20180315ARTFIG00278-placer-l-hopital-de-mayotte-sous-un-statut-d-extraterritorialite-est-ce-possible.php>

31 “*Anjouan, une des trois îles des Comores*”, “*La famille est d’origine comorienne, une communauté fréquemment victime de la vindicte populaire à Mayotte*”, http://www.liberation.fr/france/2018/04/08/mayotte-l-ile-des-traques_1641982

32 <https://www.cgg976.fr/le-conseil-departemental/institution/historique>, accessed 21 January 2021.

also sought French protection, but they did so quite independently of one another, and of Ngazidja, the three islands never having been politically unified. Similarly, when the Comoros were established as a separate territory in 1946 Mayotte had been part of an administrative unit (generally referred to as a province of Madagascar) that had been composed of all four islands of the group since 1912 and there was certainly no need to “re-attach” anything. This frankly revisionist history of Mayotte insists both upon the island’s uniqueness and upon the unity of the other three islands, while not only reminding us that the capital of the territory was Dzaoudzi but even implying that Dzaoudzi replaced one of the other islands’ capitals as the logical seat of government.³³

The othering of the other islands – and these are but a few examples of the pervasive discourse of othering present on Mayotte – paves the way for the current wave of violence against Wandzuani. Although *décasages*, episodes during which *clandestins* were forcibly evicted from their homes and the latter either badly damaged or destroyed entirely, had been occurring sporadically since at least the early years of the century, over the past few years they have become more frequent and in early 2018 were occurring with some regularity in various locations across the island, particularly in the south and the west. The episode with which I began, in the village of Sada, did indeed take place as planned, and was, despite the stated intent, not without violence; and these *décasages* were continued elsewhere as, rather satisfactorily from the analytical perspective, people said, we will do what they did in Sada: mimetic violence, if perhaps in a somewhat vulgar sense.

Looking more closely at the episodes themselves, it is clear that in most cases the victims of violence are known to the aggressors, or at least to the initiators of violence: *clandestins* who have been living in a village, often for years, and who have maintained relationships locally, even if those of employer-employee, with *wenyeji*. It is true that individual episodes of violence may have somewhat pedestrian explanations and it is not uncommon for a Maorais who has employed a *clandestin* on a construction site to denounce him to the frontier police at the end of the month rather than pay his wages. Likewise, more than once I was told that a local had denounced a *clandestin* in order to enjoy, or attempt to enjoy, the sexual favours of the wife left behind. But these personal acts do not explain the widespread participation in these episodes of violence. Rather, violence is an essential part of the process of othering: *clandestins* are not the victims of violence because they are *clandestins*; rather they

33 The cynical might also wonder if this display of ignorance is not a deliberate demonstration of the irrelevance of the histories of the other islands.

are *clandestins* because they are victims of violence. The violent act creates the *clandestin*, and the mimetic impulse creates the violent act.

Why create the *clandestin*? Why the violence, and why the mimesis? As I suggested above, there is a tension between *wajeni* and *wenyeji* that is a product of the political context within which Maorais are marginalised. Maorais are embedded in an immercolonial relationship with France and with *wazungu* that disempowers them on their own island despite the political discourse that claims Mayotte to be part of France (just like Nice, if not more so) and the Maorais French (presumably just like the Niçois, if not more so). These claims are ostensibly inscribed within French ideals of a secular state based on Western liberal political and social philosophy; but few Maorais subscribe to these ideals, and many believe them to be illusory as France, and the French, seek to preserve their hegemony on the island. Maorais resistance is muted of course, and generally limited to vague complaints about discrimination, since it is both economically foolhardy and politically unacceptable to question the benevolence of the metropole: not only does France provide, but France protects.

Faced with the reality – that they are not quite as French as the Niçois after all – Maorais are left with little choice but to continue as they were, that is, being Comorian. In doing so, Maorais find themselves confronted with “real” Comorians; for, despite all its failings, the independent Comorian state is, politically and symbolically independent, even if France (and, indeed, other states) continue to wield influence there. Wandzuani, regardless of their status in Mayotte, resist the role of the subaltern, at least in their relationships with Maorais.³⁴ The tension that this distinction creates is often almost palpable as Maorais are subject to two contradictory impulses: both to deny and to accept their identity with Wandzuani. Here we return to the mimetic impulse. In many respects Wandzuani are the Other that Maorais see when they look in the mirror. The two peoples, to the extent that they can even be distinguished as such, are so close both socially and culturally that a distinction between them, and the establishment of the two categories, Maorais and Wandzuani, is a necessary pre-requisite for the construction of contemporary political discourses that attribute social discord and economic insecurity to the Other. In other words, the Other must be (re)constructed in order for difference to be adequately expressed: the Maorais cannot be different from themselves; and it is from the mimetic impulse, in the dialectic between self and other, that violence springs forth. The Other is born out of violence and the violent act creates the *clandestin*.

34 With the French state things are somewhat different, of course.

How, then, does mimesis, the ostensible imitation of the Other, *create* the Other? Precisely because mimesis is *not* imitation: mimesis is productive. Whether it's hosting a *manzaraka* or calling *madaba* "*feliki muhogo*", the mimetic impulse creates the Other in the process of creating the self. Mimesis, the appropriation and re-creation of the attributes of the Other in order to incorporate them with one's own system of practices and beliefs, cannot be anything other than violent, since to merely imitate, without transformation and appropriation, is to subject oneself to the Other, to become – perhaps obviously – a pale and necessarily inferior imitation of the Other. The mimetic impulse, on the other hand, appropriates something that was once the Other's and transforms it so it belongs to the self. This transformation communicates to the Other that the object being mimetically seized is no longer theirs. The self therefore has exercised power over the Other and removed what the Other once claimed as their own. This can only be a violent process since it denies the Other possession of the mimetic object, an object that it considers its own. In Mayotte this mimetic impulse is seen in Maorais appropriation of the cultural practices of Wandzuani in an attempt to be Maorais *qua* Comorian – the *manzaraka* or *madaba* are only two of many examples. There is therefore always already a tension between the two groups but which, paradoxically, is felt more by the Maorais. Furthermore, the mimetic appropriation has not been entirely successful: Wandzuani recognise these mimetic appropriations as imitations, thus further disempowering the Maorais. The violence has not been felt.

Beyond this generalised mimetic impulse is the specific impulse of mimetic desire. The benefits accorded by the continued French status of Mayotte, with the notable exception of protecting the Maorais from Comorian domination, are less apparent to the Maorais than they are to *clandestins*, who have arrived on the island specifically to take advantage of whatever France can offer them that the Comorian state cannot. Wandzuani desire that which Maorais view with some ambivalence since doing so implies an acceptance of their subaltern status: Muslims in a state in which secular principles are underpinned by Christian values, "black" in a state in which racism is pervasive and "white" the aspired-to norm, Maorais live with a constant reappraisal of the advantages of being French, all while the promised benefits appear not to materialise. The desire of the Wandzuani to be in Mayotte confronts the Maorais ambivalence and so, in a somewhat classic Girardian fashion, the Maorais finally desire the Wandzuani's desire: they desire to desire the offerings of Mayotte that are only available to them at a price that they are increasingly reluctant to pay. The competition between Wandzuani and Maorais over their shared desires, and the Maorais desire for the Wandzuani desire also leads to the Maorais wanting to be Wandzuani; but the contradictions thereby implied,

as the two groups increasingly come to resemble one another, leads the Maorais instead to insist upon their differences. It is only through violence that these differences can be created: it is only through violence that the *clandestins*, and thus the Wandzuani, are brought into being.

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