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Creating Self and Other: Discourses of inclusion and exclusion on Mayotte¹

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Abstract

This text analyses the different expressions of identity, the practices of identification, and the conflicts that emerge from this among the people of Mayotte, one of the four islands of the Comoro archipelago. Formerly a French colony, in 1975 Mayotte opted to remain a part of France while the remaining three islands became an independent state. Mayotte is beset by a number of ills: overpopulation, poverty, and underfunded health, education, and social services. Blame is laid at the feet of the significant population of irregular migrants from the neighbouring islands who are attracted by wages, and social services that are better than in the Union of Comoros (albeit still low and underfunded). Underlying these economic problems, however, is a fundamental question of identity, as the Maorais, the people of Mayotte, attempt to define themselves politically (and often by implication socially) as French rather than Comorian, part of an ongoing process of rejection of any possibility of political and economic domination by the other islands of the group. These different expressions of identity give rise to conflicts that are vented in regular episodes of anti-immigrant violence and a pervasive discourse of Maorais difference. However, in other contexts Maorais may claim to be Comorian rather than, or in addition to, French, and the inconsistencies in claims to and practices of identity are a regular feature of island life. Drawing on the concept of the persona, Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, and the associated concept of capital, this paper argues that the Maorais perform different identities in different fields, a strategy that allows them to mitigate, if not avoid entirely, the conflicts that arise in attempting to be at once French and Comorian.

¹ This paper has been through a number of iterations, and (quite different) versions have been presented at seminars at the Institute for Social Anthropology at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, the Institute of Ethnology at the University of Münster, and the Italian African Studies Association (ASAI) biannual conference. I thank all those who commented at these events, and those who commented on earlier drafts, particularly Ghassan Hage, Andrew Haxby, Jacqueline Knörr, Laurent Berger, Sophie Blanchy, Patrick Desplat, and Martin Slama.

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Mayotte, a French overseas department, is one of four islands that comprise the Comoro archipelago in the western Indian Ocean. The island suffers from a variety of ills: widespread poverty and growing inequalities of wealth, a shortage of housing, overcrowded and understaffed schools, insufficient access to medical care, and a high cost of living, all accompanied by chronic criminal violence and sporadic social unrest (see e.g., Blanchy et al. 2019). The people of Mayotte often blame these woes on the irregular migrants from the neighbouring islands that constitute the independent state of the Union of the Comoros; this applies particularly to migrants from Ndzuanani,³ with whom the people of Mayotte have historically had a close but ambivalent relationship, a relationship often marked by repeated expressions and contestations, of identity and belonging. In the chronic struggle over access to resources and the quest for social stability – the struggle for a bearable life (cf. Hage 2019) – , the residents of the island are confronted with a need to define the undesirable other (people from Ndzuanani) in opposition to the desirable self (people from Mayotte), thereby providing for exclusion of the undesirable; the often-violent discourses and practices produced by these attempts at establishing identities are a constant feature of life on the island. However, despite their political separation, the four Comoro Islands constitute a relatively coherent socio-cultural complex; this cohesion, the history of settlement of Mayotte, and the close links between Mayotte and neighbouring Ndzuanani, both in the past and in the present, all render socio-cultural (or “ethnic”) distinctions highly contingent, boundaries between groups fluid and permeable, and the islanders’ task of establishing exactly who is the other particularly problematic.

These discourses and practices are inscribed within a triadic dialectic within which the various actors have long struggled and continue to struggle to establish their particular perspectives on who belongs and who does not belong. These discourses are made visible as the French attempt to regulate the movement of people, revealing the particular ways in which the different social groups in Mayotte – Maorais, French, Comorians, irregular migrants (*clandestins*), the poor, and so on – are practically manifested as different categories that people draw upon to operate in different fields. I have elsewhere explored historical constructions of identities on Mayotte and the specific character of the relationship between Mayotte and Ndzuanani (Walker 2019, 2022); what I wish to do here is to explore the ways in which discourses of identification confront social and political reality, and the ways in which these realities render problematic any clear distinction between “Comorian” and “French” in Mayotte. For a variety of reasons, the concretisation of this distinction is seen locally as politically essential, if only to enable the French state to administer the island according to its established republican norms; the problem, of course, is that the local population are both “Comorian” and “French”.

Some Theoretical Considerations: personae, identities and fields

Rather than confronting the body of literature on identity in the humanities and the social sciences it seems more productive to stake out my own territory regarding the concepts I wish to employ; and while recognising that there are almost as many opinions on what identity is as there are opinion-holding personae (and the terminology is equally diverse), I should make it clear that I do consider

³ The English names for the individual islands (Comoro, Mohilla, Johanna, and Mayotta) are long obsolete; therefore, for the three islands that make up the Union of Comoros, I use the official names given in the Comorian constitution – Ngazidja, Mwali, and Ndzuanani – and the (also official) French name for the fourth island, Mayotte, a French department since 2011. Where a (relatively: see below) neutral term is required, I call the people of Mayotte (using an English orthography) “Maorais”.

identity to be a useful term, and that proposed alternatives are either inadequate or unwieldy.⁴ It seems that the primary distinction that needs to be made is that between a psychological understanding of identity as a personal attribute – an individual’s “unique” identity –, and identity as a socially constructed conceptual category that exists independently of the individual (“American”, “woman”, “Muslim”, and so on). If these two meanings of the word are inextricably intertwined they are nevertheless analytically distinct, and it is the second of the two uses that concerns me more here.

My point of departure therefore is Marcel Mauss’s proposition that, much as all people have a body, so all people have a self (Mauss 1938; Sökefeld 1999; Quinn 2006).⁵ I am not qualified to make philosophical judgements regarding the character of the self; suffice it to say that the self is manifested, sometimes consciously, more usually unconsciously, in personae, performances of specific aspects of the self that are based on identities and are invariably context dependent (Mauss 1938; Carrithers et al. 1985; Harris 1989).⁶ The self manages these personae, resolving incompatibilities where they arise, although for most (mentally healthy) people these personae are, if sometimes incompatible, nevertheless managed in such a way that incompatibilities do not generally give rise to conflicts. It is widely recognised, expected even, that most people have a variety of personae: thus I assume the persona of father with my children but (father being inappropriate in other contexts) that of husband with my wife, colleague with other anthropologists, customer with my newsagent, and so on.⁷ Although I am (hopefully) recognisably the same person, shifts in my comportment – the expressions of a persona – allow people to make judgements about how to interact with me, and simultaneously and in dialogue with them, allow me to act correctly myself. I suspect I would have problems if I behaved towards my colleagues as if they were my children, or towards my wife as if she were my newsagent. However, and perhaps obviously, I only have a limited range of persona available to me. I could draw upon what I know of Japanese culture to pretend to be Japanese, but I would be unlikely to get far, and even if I could fool a few people, were I to meet a (“real”) Japanese person I would soon be unmasked (*sic*; or unpersonaed). Since all performances of the self require some sort of persona, as a socially constituted set of practices, my understanding of the persona differs somewhat from some psychological uses of the term, in which personae are used to conceal a person’s “true” nature, or self.⁸

⁴ See Brubaker and Cooper’s now classic text (Brubaker and Cooper 2000), which raises some important questions but ultimately seems to confirm that the term “identity” is difficult to replace. See Eidson (2019) for a history of the term.

⁵ Mauss also suggested that the self and the body, at least in Western societies, together constitute the person, a social and legal category. Although Mauss acknowledges the universality of the self (Mauss 1938: 265), he believed that the concept of the person was unique to Western societies. Whether or not this is so, I bracket the question since I am less interested in the idea of the person than in the concept of the persona, and therefore need not quibble with Mauss. Nevertheless, I would observe that even if the self is not universal, all the people under consideration here are followers of – or, in the case of French “atheists”, the social products of worldviews based on – the Abrahamic religions and therefore presumably have understandings of the self and the individual that are similar and, indeed, much like mine, *qua* “Western”. Note also that the self is not the soul; these are not the same thing, if only because the self is embodied. See also Goffman (1959: 57), (mis)citing James.

⁶ The *persona* is clearly closely related to the *role*, perhaps an obvious candidate when seeking both a concept with which to work and a terminology with which to express it. I prefer persona, partly because I see a difference between persona and role, and partly because I wish to avoid the potential for conflation of, and confusion between, the concepts of “role” and “identity” – a constant peril; see, for example, Weizman (2006).

⁷ I eschew here the narrow use of identity *qua* ethnic identity: identities may be constituted in any number of fields: kinship (“father”), economic (“newsagent”), or religious, in addition to the social and political that are my main concern here (cf. Eidson et al. 2017).

⁸ That said, Jungian psychology holds that the failure to present a persona leads to a psychological crisis (Jung 1917: 456ff.) so personae would seem to be necessary and (almost) inevitably engaged. The implication here is that I am engaging a persona even when I am alone, and therefore “being my self”. Whether or not this is so is an intriguing question but more properly one for psychology rather than social anthropology. It has no bearing on what follows. Cf. also William James’s much-cited assertion that “a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognise him” (James 1890: 294).

Personae are based on identities: they are, in a sense, the practical manifestations of identities. Since, as I have already noted, there are a variety of perspectives on identity, I will make it clear that I understand an identity to be a category that is socially determined, based on a collectively accepted understanding of the embodied practices, inclinations, attributes, and beliefs that distinguish this particular identity from others. The identity provides the parameters for a persona, allowing people to interact in a relatively consistent and coherent fashion with others, who recognise the persona being performed, and therefore the identity that underpins it, and are able to respond appropriately. Identity provides the raw material, as it were, for personae. Note that I do not suggest that people have a variety of identities, rather that they have a variety of identities at their disposal upon which to draw to construct their personae. Since people have numerous personae, they likewise have access to and an understanding of a number of identities (father, newsagent, Japanese), calling into play the most appropriate one according to the context. Note, too, that personae and identities have the same names: they are analytically distinguished in that identities are categories (of identification, cf. Eidson et al. 2017) whereas personae are practical implementations of the relevant identity category, providing parameters for behaviour (and, indeed, thought). This is not to suggest that these choices are explicitly, or even consciously made. Certainly, on occasion they are, but more often they are “managed” unconsciously by the self, partly because there is rarely conflict over the choices of a persona: my self knows that I act as (invoke the category of identity of) a customer to my newsagent, and I do it with very little fuss. People who collectively invoke a specific identity constitute a group (of fathers, newsagents, Japanese).

As one might suspect, if identities are to be performed there has to be some sort of agreement on what they are, what they mean to those concerned. It is conventional in contemporary scholarship to insist on the contingent and fluid character of identities and it is true that identities are socially constructed, built on an often-fragile consensus of what it means (for example) to be French, how this French-ness is understood and interpreted, and who is entitled to claim it (through an appropriate performance of Frenchness, a subscription to a set of beliefs, and so on); but at the same time, there is also a sense in which identities are essentialised (cf. Spivak 1989), for how can we possibly determine whether or not someone is French if the definition of “French” keeps changing? Of course, there is a somewhat facetious response to this: we can’t, precisely because all is contingent, processual, nothing is fixed; but this ignores the practicalities of daily existence: people need to be able to classify others in order to decide how to interact. I need to be able to determine whether the person standing in front of me is French or German, if only in order to decide which language to speak, or whether to confess that I love croissants or bratwurst, and not just as idle conversation but by way of establishing a relationship; and I can only make this decision if the definitions of “French” and “German” have not significantly shifted since I last drew upon them. Identities are socially constructed in a way very much analogous to Bourdieu’s (much-cited) formulation of *habitus*; they, too, may be conceptualised as “principles which generate and organise practices and representations (...) without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them” (1992: 53). There are some caveats to this analogy, particularly since many identities are very explicitly and consciously constructed; but the interplay between structure and practice that underpins the notion of *habitus* similarly provides both constraints and flexibility in the organisation of identity categories. Identities provide the parameters for actors to reproduce the very category that constitutes them and guides their actions; yet at the same time, the

interactions between actors, as they perform different personae in different fields, allows for a dynamic rethinking of the categories.

These rethinkings are very much a product (in Mayotte at least) of the political context: action in the political field influences action in the social field, and the (strategic) need for stable identities with which to both act and think leads to what Ghassan Hage has called identity fetishism, the construction of a particular reified identity that serves a particular political purpose. Identity fetishism is the belief that a specific identity has a fixed meaning: “meanings are not seen as historical products but as an intrinsic aspect of the identity itself” (Hage 2005: 199). As we shall see, for many of the actors with whom we are concerned here, it is political identities that are fetishised, not (or far less) socio-cultural identities.

If the personae that draw upon identities are context-dependent, then so too are the parallel expressions of belonging to one of these groups that these personae perform. However, in order to express (and claim, and perform) belonging to a group, the group, much like the identity that underpins it, must be relatively stable in its definition. This is not to reify groups – I am not a groupist (Brubaker 2002) – but rather (and again, as Brubaker points out, *ibid*: 166) to observe that people themselves, understandably, reify groups just as they fetishise identities – indeed, they must do so in order to join them, leave them, discuss them, or even change them. The groups themselves therefore remain relatively stable in both their composition and their membership, at least in collective perceptions, and must also have reasonably well-defined boundaries (Barth 1969; Baumann 2004; Wimmer 2013); but their relevance in any given context is highly contingent, as is, necessarily, the extent to which people express their belonging to them. My point here is to suggest that when group membership becomes desirable, or ceases to be desirable, people do not cross group boundaries in a conventional sense – indeed, this can be difficult to do – but rather invoke group membership contextually (or, as we shall see, have it invoked on their behalf). At first glance, this would appear to be an obvious statement – I invoke membership of the group of fathers at home but customer at the newsagency – but upon closer inspection this sort of movement, can be difficult and can lead to apparently conflicting expressions of identities as people (in Mayotte in any case) appear to be several things, if usually not at once, then at least in rapid succession. In order to consider how people express belonging to different groups in Mayotte, and in recognition of the importance of relationships in defining these groups contextually, I turn to Bourdieu’s notion of the field.

Fields, in Bourdieu’s sense, are domains of practice – scientific, artistic, religious, academic, and so on – within which people act.⁹ The key feature of the field as conceptualised by Bourdieu is that it is concerned with a restricted domain within which people acquire and draw upon domain-specific forms of capital that generally only have value within that particular field. By analogy with physical fields (magnetic, gravitational), the rules that govern practice in the field are established not by direct interactions between people, but by the relations that establish the field and that exist independently of people. These relations then provide the set of rules that establish the necessary conditions for people to (inter)act, to engage in further relations: “to think in terms of field is to *think relationally*” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1994: 96, emphasis in original).¹⁰ People act in fields according to their

⁹ The list of fields could be continued ad libitum; there is no set, fixed number of fields. Eidson et al. (2017) call a field a “frame”, cf. Donahoe et al. (2009).

¹⁰ Bourdieu also uses the analogy of the game (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1994: 98), wherein a set of rules govern play but do not directly cause play to occur and are certainly not the product of play: the rules of the game cannot be changed by individual players, but only in a drawn-out process of collective reflexion on the nature of the game itself by players with varying degrees of influence and power and a similarly collective acceptance of proposed changes by the players.

habitus. Habitus is the embodied set of practical dispositions of the self, the product of cumulative processes of socialisation, that disposes people to act in particular ways that are, if not entirely instinctive, not consciously reflexive: without denying the possibility of reflexive action, habitus provides for the enactment of the habitual acts of daily life.¹¹ In the context of the present discussion, habitus provides the necessary dispositions for people to engage different personae.

The People of Mayotte

The Comoro Islands straddle the Mozambique Channel between Madagascar and the East African mainland. Unsurprisingly, socially, culturally, and historically the people of the archipelago have more in common with each other than they do with their neighbours on either side of the channel, and although there are differences of various kinds both between and within the four islands, it is nevertheless useful to view the archipelago as a coherent entity since it constitutes a social, cultural, and linguistic complex with deep historical ties. These most notably included chronic conflicts between the island of Ndzuanu, on the one hand, and the smaller islands of Mwali and Mayotte on the other, over which the rulers of Ndzuanu regularly attempted to impose their authority, with varying degrees of success.¹²

Mayotte became a French colony in 1841, a fact significant in the construction of “French” identity on the island since the remaining islands were only effectively annexed half a century later. During the colonial period the group of islands was administered as a single political unit, for much of this time either as a province of the neighbouring island of Madagascar or as an autonomous French *territoire d’outre-mer*. In 1975 Ngazidja, Mwali, and Ndzuanu attained independence and today constitute the Union of the Comoros; Mayotte remained a French possession and is today a *département d’outre-mer*. I (Walker 2019) and others (e.g., Idriss 2018) have dealt with the history of Mayotte and the consequences of this political separation elsewhere; suffice it to say that the political and economic changes undergone by Mayotte following the 1975 rejection of independence, the 1995 imposition of visa requirements on visitors from the other islands, and the 2011 departmentalisation of the island have had a number of repercussions. Disparities in economic development between the independent state and Mayotte have led to significant inward flows from the neighbouring island of Ndzuanu; this influx of people, many of whom are undocumented and enter the island illegally (from a French perspective), has in turn led to social conflict (e.g., Blanchy et al. 2019; Cottureau 2021; Hachimi Alaoui et al. 2020; Marie et al. 2018; Peccia and Meda 2017; Riccio 2022). People also arrive from metropolitan France, invariably legally: civil servants are posted to the island to staff the state apparatus, while a smaller number of private individuals are recruited as employees of local businesses or arrive to establish their own. There is therefore a small but socially significant population of European origin on the island; however, most are temporary residents.¹³ Finally, there are significant outward flows – net migration figures are negative – as Maorais with French citizenship move to Réunion or to metropolitan France. Maorais, metropolitan French, and other islanders, largely people from Ndzuanu: these are the people who concern us here.

¹¹ Habitus is a fundamental constitutive part of the self (see Burkitt 2002) and as such is somewhat resistant to change. Like the field, habitus is a key element of Bourdieu’s theory of practice and there is no need to discuss it at length here: see, for example, Bourdieu (1977, 1992, 1998).

¹² Ngazidja, while maintaining social and economic links with the other islands, was generally not involved in these political conflicts.

¹³ Civil servants usually have fixed-term contracts and rarely stay more than four or five years; private individuals have no such constraints but it is generally believed (and largely true) that most also eventually return to Europe.

The population of the archipelago has long been mobile. The people of Ndzuani in particular, where the effects of a high population density were exacerbated by colonial expropriation of land, have long sought their fortunes elsewhere in the archipelago, particularly on Mwali and Mayotte, both islands having been historically underpopulated. The circular nature of movements led to the establishment of enduring links, particularly between people living on Ndzuani and those living on Mayotte. Although mobility remained largely unconstrained in the two decades following independence, even if many overstayed their three-month entry permits and often worked illegally, in 1995 the imposition of visa requirements finally rendered most movements clandestine. Contemporary public political discourse in Mayotte is therefore that migratory flows into the island, largely from neighbouring Ndzuani and largely irregular, are social and economically deleterious. It is certainly true that a significant proportion of the population of the island have neither French citizenship nor residence permits, and are therefore “illegal” in the eyes of the French state. Nevertheless, and largely because they are undocumented, they provide much of the unskilled and semi-skilled workforce, working in domestic service, as builders, labourers, plumbers, masons, and so on, but also in food production – much of the island’s agriculture and fishing – and food sales. While supermarkets are frequented by the metropolitan French (the “*wazungu*”) and the assimilated, many local residents cannot afford to shop there; instead, they rely on informal streetside vendors run by irregular migrants.¹⁴ The government’s response to the “crisis” of irregular immigration is to identify and remove as many of these individuals as possible, and deportations to the Union of Comoros are regularly in excess of 25,000 annually.¹⁵

The various identities invoked in daily practice are categories whose boundaries are, variably, diffuse and imprecise, contingent and contextual, fixed and disputed, formalised, essentialised, and fetishised. These identities provide the material for the performance of personae and may be distinguished by invoking the Bourdieusian field. For present purposes I identify two fields of practice. There are of course others, but the two I identify here, the social and the political, appear to be the most salient for an analysis of the political context and the social and economic struggles that are characteristic of contemporary Mayotte. The places with which people may be identified (and which are instrumental in establishing identities within these two fields) are Mayotte, Ndzuani, the Comoros and France. In order to maintain a consistent terminology I will use Comorian names for identities in the social field, French names to refer to identities in the political field, and English names to refer to people where the field of practice is not, or not particularly relevant – what I call the social self.¹⁶ Amongst these latter I use the archaic “Johannese” to refer to the people of Ndzuani since there is no English demonym in contemporary usage. The schema is represented in the table on page 10.

¹⁴ Menial labour is left to the migrants, since French citizens can enjoy higher incomes living on social security benefits.

¹⁵ There were 25,830 deportations in 2022, <https://lejournaldemayotte.yt/2023/02/02/lutte-contre-limmigration-clandestine-plus-de-25-000-reconduites-a-la-frontiere-en-2022/>. Although notionally this suggests that nearly 10% of the population are removed each year (and a parallel implication that the island would be empty within a decade – and indeed, 300,000 people, more than the entire population of Mayotte, have been deported since the beginning of the century), these figures do not represent 25,000 individuals since many return to Mayotte only to be deported again.

¹⁶ Although a “neutral” field (or a “field-less” identity) might seem anathema to the reader, it is necessary, even if simply for practical purposes: how to translate emic terms, such as in “*C’est un Anjouanais, lui*” if not by using the term “Johannese”: “He’s a Johannese”? Actors – with the possible exception of sociologists – are not usually attentive to the field of practice in which they are operating when they speak, even if they can be analysed as doing so. Not itself an identity, therefore, the “field-less” identity referent is the social equivalent of the self: it has no practical role, although symbolically it is often a metonym for a social or political identity.

The Social Field

“Wakomori” (“Comorians” in the Comorian languages, sing. *mkomori*) are social Comorians, usually people who were born and socialised on one of the four islands of the archipelago, and who generally either still live there or return regularly, or intend to do so. Within this category may be distinguished the “Wamaore” (Wakomori “from Mayotte”), and the “Wandzuani” (Wakomori “from Ndzuani”).¹⁷ All three of these have the cultural capital that permits them to acquire and maintain the requisite social capital to position themselves (to their best advantage) in the relevant social field: they are Muslim, they speak one of the local languages,¹⁸ they have ties to the land, and to specific places, through birth (a placenta buried in a home village) and death (insofar as it is expected that their body will also be buried, eventually, in the home village). They engage in specific ritual practices, particularly the ritual marriage that is performed in a similar way and with a similar social significance on all four islands of the archipelago (albeit with local specificities) and, generally, demonstrate a variety of attributes of belonging – that is, not only do they claim to belong, but their claims are generally accepted by others like them across the archipelago (Walker 2022). If membership of the category Wamaore is often highly contested, as we shall see, Wandzuani, who, like the Wamaore, are nevertheless Wakomori, are generally viewed positively by the Wamaore, since they share what is effectively a single and relatively coherent social complex and often represent repositories of culture and serve as sources of cultural renewal in the face of encroaching French practices and values.

The fourth category in the social field, “Wazungu”, refers to those who are known locally as *wazungu*, or “white people”. They are generally French, and there is a growing and visible if largely transient community of Wazungu in Mayotte. The definition of Wazungu is in some respects a negative one: they are those who do not have the social capital to be incorporated as Wakomori or one of its sub-categories. Few have any but the most superficial understanding of local culture or speak a local language, they will never perform the ritual marriage, they are rarely Muslim, and their placentas are apparently discarded by the hospital at birth. Nevertheless, they do hold the social capital, or the appurtenances to acquire it, required to be Wazungu. This is capital that many Maorais aspire to acquiring: they speak French (fluently), they live in “modern” houses, possess cars and other consumer goods, travel frequently to the metropole, dress in a French style, and have the requisite contacts, jobs, and friends to be successful Wazungu, despite the lack of locally emplaced belonging. Notably, one characteristic that is highly relevant in determining membership of this category, is that Wazungu are (supposed to be) White.

The Political Field

The political field is also marked by a quadripartite distinction. The political Comorian, whom I shall call a “Comorien”, is constructed within a particular discourse in Mayotte and refers to someone whose origins lie on one of the islands of the independent state. This is a particularly nebulous category, highly politicised and highly contingent, given that almost all inhabitants of Mayotte have

¹⁷ I do not specifically refer to the other islanders – the Wangazidja and the Wamwali – since they are peripheral to (although of course not absent from) the identity practices that I am concerned with here.

¹⁸ Most Comorian languages are Bantu languages of the Sabaki group, and each is named for the island on which it is spoken, thus the language of Mayotte is Shimaore. Kibushi and Kiantalaoatra, dialects of Malagasy, an Austronesian language, are also spoken on the island.

origins on one of the other islands: founded on a political distinction between “Mayotte” and “the Comoros”, it is used in constructions of alterity and denial of belonging on the island. It particularly ignores not only the fact that many Comoriens are French citizens (and therefore have an undeniable right to live in France, of which Mayotte is an integral part), but also the fact that most Maorais are also citizens of the independent state of the Union of the Comoros.¹⁹ From a Comorien perspective, political capital is acquired and held through participation in the political process across the archipelago, but specifically in (as it is often framed, at least by Comoriens) “the independent part of the country”. Comoriens hold Comorian passports or identity cards and promote, with more or less enthusiasm, a pro-unification political position regarding Mayotte. This political capital is frequently based on (and acquired through) a dependency discourse: Comoriens may be poor and their country may have problems, but at least they are free.

Within this category of Comoriens, but often distinguished in daily discourse, are those whom I call “Clandestins”:²⁰ these are people who are politically “from” Ndzuani, meaning that, in Mayotte at least, they are recognised as being socially Wakomori but are defined, negatively, as not being “Mahorais” (see below). Their claims to belonging are rejected in Mayotte and they are liable to be excluded, socially, politically, and even physically. Clandestins are generally marginal, living in precarity, particularly in the shanty towns around the capital Mamoudzou. Importantly, although the word strictly only refers to irregular migrants, the political category also includes many whose right to be in Mayotte is legally established, whether through possession of a residence permit or even French citizenship, but who live in precarious circumstances rather than enjoying a Wazungu lifestyle. This reflects a widespread sentiment in Mayotte that to be French (*qua* “Français”) is to live as a Wazungu; to live in precarity is to be Clandestin. Clearly, this category – much like the social category Wazungu – is defined more by a lack than by the possession of political capital: in this sense it, too, is a negative category.

Likewise, there are the “Mahorais”, those who are accepted as belonging in Mayotte. This category developed within the context of the separatist struggle in the 1960s and 1970s and was constituted by political inclination: people who were “with us” during the struggle against independence, the *sorodas*, as they were known (from the French *soldats*, soldiers). As Jon Breslar (1981; cf. Walker 2022) observed, the group established by this category encompassed any Wakomori who supported the Mayotte secessionist movement, regardless of island of origin – indeed, it is often acknowledged that distinctions based on island of origin were rarely made prior to the rise of separatism. The profile of the group and the corresponding identity have of course evolved somewhat since then, but if those from the other islands are no longer incorporated within the group Mahorais purely through political inclination, they would find incorporation difficult were they to promote unification.²¹ This particular category is highly relevant today, emphasising as it does political affiliations, and,

¹⁹ The 1979 Comorian *Code de la Nationalité* extends Comorian citizenship to anyone born of at least one Comorian parent (Articles 10 and 11). According to Article 7 of this text and the Comorian constitution, the independent state of the Comoros includes Mayotte; therefore, in the eyes of the Comorian state, all Maorais are Comorians and thus Comorian citizens. This particular meaning of “Comorian” is rarely invoked in Mayotte: few Maorais acknowledge their Comorian citizenship and most visitors to the independent islands prefer to pay €30 (per visit) for a visa rather than €15 for the Comorian identity card to which they are legally entitled and which would give them untrammelled rights in the country. The distinction is also invariably expressed by *wazungu*, who will confess, with no sense of irony, that they have never been to the Comoros.

²⁰ *Clandestin* technically refers to irregular migrants, but in this political field those whose belonging is contested, regardless of their legal status, are identified as Clandestins; I capitalise the word to distinguish it from the legal sense of being irregular or undocumented. Since most, but not all, are from Ndzuani, they are sometimes referred to as Anjouanais, but I prefer the term Clandestin since it is their political identity that is important here. I use *clandestin*, lower case and italicised, when I refer to undocumented migrants as a legal category.

²¹ There are very few individuals in Mayotte who support unification and their discourse has little social or political traction.

naturally, defending the French status of the island: their status as belongers (and political belonging is based upon French citizenship rather than on any ritual or spatial belonging) and the benefits that this status brings, particularly freedom from political domination by the other islands. This group can include non-citizens with residency status, particularly if they reject the claims of the Comorian state and live a *wazungu* lifestyle.

Members of the fourth category, the “Français”, are also characterised by their possession of political capital, but in a far greater quantity than the Mahorais. Français are French citizens who may be Wamaore but are generally Wazungu. They have access to health care, housing, employment, and welfare benefits; they enjoy the freedom to travel to France (and many other places besides, should they so choose); and they have access to the legal and civic rights accorded to French citizens, access that should ideally be exclusively theirs (but is not: a source of some conflict). All these rights bestow upon the Français the political capital required to exercise power in this field. Note that membership of the group of Français excludes those who are not seen as having the moral right, the correct attributes, or the political capital to qualify for French status even if they are citizens: Comoriens with French citizenship are often excluded, as are others who are not Wazungu, such as French citizens of African or of Caribbean origin (depending on how dark their skin is).²²

Schematically we may represent the different identities that people draw upon in Mayotte as follows:

Field of self	Social Field	Political Field
Comorians	Wakomori	Comorien
Johannese	Wandzuani	Clandestin
French	Wazungu	Français
Maorais	Wamaore	Mahorais

There are other fields of practice that I do not invoke here – religion, gender, and economic or historical fields are also relevant, as people distinguish between believer and *kafiri*, between men and women, between manual labourers and white-collar workers, between “autochthones” and immigrants – but the social and political fields, and the corresponding identities, are the ones most salient to what follows. As we shall see, if none of these identities are fixed, rigidly bounded or mutually exclusive, either in their definitions or in their contents, neither are they particularly fluid: it is as difficult to rework their definitions as it is to move between them. My proposition is that in Mayotte, processes of identification assign people to different groups in a variety of ways, in a variety of contexts, and at different moments, with each group having characteristics defined by the identities established in the field within which it is constituted. Given the difficulty inherent in crossing boundaries in what is a fraught and contested political context where belonging to a particular group is instrumental in determining people’s well-being, people instead act in different fields; the emphasis on relations likewise shifts the focus of the analysis to categories rather than boundaries. Thus as belonging as Comorian becomes more important than belonging as French in a specific context (for example, in a wedding ceremony), Maorais reorient their performances, their invocations of identity, and their expressions of personae from the political field to the social field: they perform

²² In March 2021, when demonstrators against a schoolteacher in the town of Sada invoked his African origins, the administration was forced to relocate him to another school despite his being a French citizen.

a Wamaore identity rather than a Mahorais one.²³ These performances are both practical – a Mahorais denounces a Clandestin in the hopes of having sexual relations with the Clandestin’s wife once the Clandestin has been deported – and symbolic – performing an extravagant marriage ceremony that affirms a Wakomori identity.

Action within fields is largely generated by scripts for action and, guided by habitus, people generally have an instinctive sense of where they are in a given field, what Erving Goffman calls a “sense of one’s place” (cited in Bourdieu 1985: 728); people endeavour to operate in a given field according to the capital they possess and thus the power they can exert in achieving their aims. Different forms of capital have different values in different fields, and thus someone who has political capital – as a French citizen, perhaps – is going to want her relations to be manifested in that field and not in the social field where she may be a Mndzuani. However, a Mkomori without French citizenship will draw on her social capital to press claims to belonging in the archipelago (including Mayotte) despite her lack of political capital. Conflicts over the field of action arise when different individuals hold different quantities of capital in different fields, prompting a struggle in the field of power, a field that permeates other fields, in an attempt to establish within which of the available fields interactions will be played out. These of course are not just idle positions; there are very real issues at stake and people strive to achieve certain ends, such as, most obviously perhaps, establishing the right to live in Mayotte. The advantage of invoking the field is that it allows actors to behave in a variety of different, apparently mutually conflicting ways, invoking their different personae according to the field of action and the identity constituted in that field. Of course, as I have already observed, people rarely think about what they do: these choices are largely made subconsciously according to their habitus: these are not explicitly rational choices, and they are only revealed through practice.

Assimilating the Other, Exoticising the Other

Several processes are at work in Mayotte. The first is aimed at establishing “good” French citizens, Français, who conform to the expected social and political norms of the French republic and generally live a Wazungu lifestyle: while limited expressions of regional diversity are tolerated (generally folkloric and certainly unthreatening), Français are expected to resemble one another, whether they live in Paris, Bordeaux, or Mayotte. This operates through an assimilation of the Maorais other to the French self – more specifically, assimilating Maorais who fall within the political category of “Français” to the social category “Wazungu”. The second, opposing impulse is aimed at distancing those who do not qualify as Wazungu (and the most obvious tension here emerges from the articulation of Wazungu and White), regardless of whether they are Wamaore or Wandzuani; here, those who fail to meet the expectations established by the category Wazungu are assigned to the category of Clandestin. Clearly these two sets of endeavours are fraught with contradictions, since

²³ Although it is of some significance in local identity politics (in all fields), I do not explore the relative character of identity claims, whereby claims to being Wamaore (or Mahorais, depending upon the field in which claims are being made) are made in opposition to other claims to being Wamaore. An individual from the village Dzumonye, descended from slaves who arrived in the nineteenth century, cannot claim to be “as Wamaore as” someone from Tsingoni, one of seven villages whose inhabitants maintain genealogies that are many generations deep, who engage in a cycle of customary marriage exchanges (from which other villages are excluded), and who claim to be the “real” Wamaore. She can, however claim to be “more Wamaore” than someone who arrived as a young adult, remains a *clandestin* and lives in the shanty town on the slopes of Kaweni. These differences are played out in all sorts of different ways and in different fields that space does not permit me to explore here.

they attempt to operate across fields rather than within them. Finally, between these tendencies, there is the process whereby Maorais reject the (impossible) assimilation to the category of Wazungu and affirm an identity as Wamaore. This is in opposition to being Wazungu and implicitly subsumed within identification as Wakomori (if not Wandzuani).

These processes of identification were made particularly visible (and were particularly essentialised) during early 2020 in the early weeks of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the pandemic was not responsible for any particular shifts in the classification of people on Mayotte, identity-related (and largely public) discourses produced in the context of the pandemic became salient as the administration in particular, and civil society more generally, grappled with the task of implementing and respecting government policy. Covid arrived in Mayotte in early 2020 much as it did elsewhere, initially marked by a disinterested observation of events in Wuhan, then in France, followed by increasing concern as the virus spread globally, arriving in Mayotte on 14 March. By then the potential scale of the pandemic had become clear, and on 17 March French president Emmanuel Macron closed the country's borders and declared a lockdown. These restrictions applied equally to Mayotte: as elsewhere, the state imposed controls on the movements of all individuals with no regard for who belonged and who did not. Indeed, rather to the contrary: once the country's borders had been closed there was no formal way of sanctioning *clandestins* since they could neither be placed in detention nor deported.²⁴ However, the interactions between the state, parastatal organisations, NGOs, and even private companies on the one hand and the island's inhabitants on the other were particularly revealing of perceptions and prejudices regarding people's identities. Most salient was the implicit (and clearly absurd) presumption that all residents of Mayotte were Wazungu. This was revealed, for example, in the requirement that anyone wishing to leave their homes download, print out, and fill in a form that stated the reason for their movement and which had to be produced upon demand to an agent of the state. While in metropolitan France this might seem to be a reasonable demand, in Mayotte 70% of households had no internet connection, and while there are no figures for the number of households equipped with functioning printers, the fact that 40% of the population are not literate in French suggests that a significant proportion of the island's residents would have difficulty in complying with these rules.

Furthermore, the list of activities for which it was permitted to leave one's house was limited: travel to the workplace; brief periods of exercise, or to walk a dog (limited to one hour);²⁵ reasons of health; for compelling family reasons; or to make essential purchases, such as food, at a list of government-approved establishments. Reasons of health presumably extended to going to the toilet for residents of the numerous lodgings with no internal facilities; but while it was eventually conceded that travel to the workplace could include taking one's goat to one's field,²⁶ the requirement that food be purchased in supermarkets led to informal street-side vendors (from whom most Wakomori purchase basic foodstuffs) being banned. This expectation that food be obtained from supermarkets was reinforced later in the pandemic when, in response to a realisation that food shortages were causing real hardship, supermarket vouchers were distributed to the needy, invariably Wamaore, who would find little to eat in a French supermarket. In other words, Wamaore were nominally assimilated to

²⁴ Placing irregular migrants in detention was a precursor to a fairly swift deportation, but with a five-day limit on detention and no suggestion that the borders would open in the near future, attempts to detain *clandestins* were rapidly abandoned.

²⁵ Largely irrelevant to Wamaore since dogs are seen as unclean and few Wakomori will even touch a dog.

²⁶ In theory of course, this concession only applied to those with residency or citizenship; in practice, as noted above, *clandestins* could not be sanctioned.

the category of Wazungu.²⁷ Clearly classification along these lines was unsuccessful and the effect was quite the opposite – namely, an othering of those among the local population – the Wamaore – who did not live a lifestyle appropriate to being Wazungu, thus emphasising a distinction between Wazungu and Wamaore in the social field, and assimilating Wamaore to Wakomori as a precursor to mapping Wazungu and Wakomori onto Français and Comorien, respectively, in the political field. This strategy (insofar as it can be described as such) seems to have emerged with two parallel objectives in view: reaffirming the belonging of Mahorais in the category Français, regardless of their lifestyles; and simultaneously differentiating Comoriens from Français. Both tendencies ignored the fact that most Mahorais are Wamaore.

Attempts at incorporating Wamaore within the Wazungu sphere required an exoticisation of all Wakomori prior to a subsequent affirmation of their identities as Mahorais – or their exclusion as Clandestins. Two examples will suffice to illustrate the processes at work. In the early stages of the pandemic, attempts to increase public awareness of the rules and guidelines aimed at curbing the spread of Covid included campaigns in the media, both audio-visual and the written press, as well as the distribution of leaflets and posters. Presumably following a realisation that the majority of older Maorais were not literate in French, publications were produced in Shimaore, the most widely spoken local language; following a further realisation that many Maore were only literate in the Arabic script, posters were produced in that script. Unfortunately, one of the earlier efforts produced a rather garbled Shimaore text written backwards.²⁸ Those who did not understand it were of course Wazungu; those who were supposed to understand it were Wamaore. The distance between the Wazungu and the Wamaore represented in this episode was not simply based on a lack of communication but on an exoticisation of the other through the production of a text that, although quite meaningless to its intended audience, was deemed acceptable precisely because it appeared to be exotic. At the same time, therefore it reaffirmed the identification of the French as Wazungu: they were those who could not read the text.

The recognition that there was a non-French speaking, non-Latin-script reading audience eventually prompted more accurate renditions of the various texts, but this audience was explicitly presented as the Other. Thus on 28 April 2020, the local newspaper *Journal de Mayotte* reported that “Capitaine Chamassi has translated the instructions into a language comprehensible by the cocos and the bacocos”.²⁹ *Koko* (*sic*; pl. *makoko*) and *bakoko* (*sic*; pl. *mabakoko*) mean, respectively, grandmother and grandfather, and the implication is clear: these people are socially distant from the Wazungu; not only do they need to be communicated with in a language that is comprehensible to them, they are not referred to using French terminology (“the elderly”, for example), and are thus nominally exoticised. This sort of linguistic othering is common on Mayotte. Maorais women are frequently referred to as Bouénis – a francised rendering of *bweni* (pl. *mabweni*), which in Shimaore

²⁷ Food vouchers were not granted to *clandestins*, who quite obviously could not be Wazungu. See “Aide alimentaire : comment distribuer sans se faire déborder, l’exemple de Chirongui,” *Journal de Mayotte*, 15 Apr 2020, <https://lejournaldemayotte.fr/2020/04/15/aide-alimentaire-comment-distribuer-sans-se-faire-deborder-lexemple-de-chirongui/>, last accessed 2 February 2023.

²⁸ This text would appear to have been the work of someone who, while clearly not a native speaker of Shimaore, nevertheless had a basic knowledge of the language (the vocabulary used was recognisably Shimaore), but none whatsoever of the Arabic script. While the effort was certainly well intentioned, it seems curious that on an island where the majority of the population would have been capable of pointing out the fundamental error in the text, no advice was sought. The poster is available online on the regional health agency’s website, <https://www.mayotte.ars.sante.fr/system/files/2020-03/je-me-protege-coronavirus-flyer-vectorise.pdf>, last accessed 2 February 2023.

²⁹ “Le capitaine Chamassi a traduit les consignes en langage compréhensible par les cocos et les bacocos”, *Journal de Mayotte*, 28 Apr 2020, <https://old.lejournaldemayotte.fr/2020/04/28/craquellement-du-confinement-les-consignes-contradictaires-des-autorites/>, last accessed 2 February 2023.

is a term of respect for a woman (it may be glossed as “Madame”) – as if to emphasise that they are indeed Other: socially, culturally, spatially, and temporally. Most Wazungu are aware that Mayotte is a matriarchal society and that the Wamaore woman is powerful; the term Bouéni therefore transforms the Wamaore woman into a depersonalised, generic, and thus erased Other: unapproachable, perhaps even incomprehensible, but no longer threatening to the French patriarchy. Such appellations reinforce that the interactions are occurring in the social field, in which Wamaore cannot aspire to be Wazungu: the othering of the Wamaore makes any assimilation to the category Wazungu impossible.³⁰

This discourse of social othering is also spatial. In a media interview, the director of a private social care company described how difficult it was communicating with the local population during the pandemic:

“It’s going to be very complicated because culturally, the Mahorais find it very difficult to understand lockdown. Not so much them, but the undocumented population, the illegal immigrants (between 100,000 and 150,000 people, mostly from the Comoros [author’s note]). They live in shanty towns with no phone or radio to warn them. Most are therefore unaware of the lockdown to be respected. They continue to live as if nothing had happened. There are police checks but they live in the woods and for them nothing has changed.”³¹

Quite why the *Clandestin* (*qua* Wakomori: for it is the *clandestins* rather than the Maorais here who are being invoked here, the latter presumably being Français and thus able to understand these things) should find it difficult to understand lockdown is not made explicit, but the implication is that the Français – and the Mahorais are implicitly subsumed within the category of Français – do, perhaps because it is part of their culture and not part of Wamaore culture, although this seems doubtful since the concept of a lockdown was presumably quite novel to everyone. Furthermore, the suggestion that the *Clandestins* (rather than the Mahorais) were unaware even that there was something to understand is also rather faulty in its logic, since if these *Clandestins* had had no idea that something was amiss, they would have ventured forth (as they regularly do), unawares, from their hideouts in the woods to find the streets deserted and businesses closed. The discourse is clearly that these people *live*, in every sense of the term, in the presumably metaphorical woods (the idea that up to 150,000 people could literally be living in isolation in the woods of Mayotte is clearly absurd), never emerging from their Robinsonade.

³⁰ For some examples of depictions of generic Bouéni, “Les bouénis ont été délogés de la préfecture par les gendarmes”, <https://www.linfokwezi.fr/les-premier-photos-du-delogement-des-bouenis-devant-le-bureau-des-etrangers/>; “Incendies à Vetiver: Grand mouvement de solidarité entre habitants du quartier”, <https://old.lejournaldemayotte.fr/2016/06/07/incendies-a-vetiver-grand-mouvement-de-solidarite-entre-habitants-du-quartier/>; “Des bouénis anti cocktail molotov”, https://www.mayottehebdo.com/actualite/en_bref/des-bouenis-anti-cocktail-molotov/; Bouéni may also be objectified as an attraction of Mayotte, listed alongside gastronomy, lemurs, and perfume flowers, <https://prezi.com/unuovlyzjvud/la-mayotte/> or simply in tourists’ photographs (photos of “Bouéni au marché”, <https://www.tripadvisor.fr/LocationPhoto-DirectLink-g480210-i20986524-Mamoudzou.html>; “Les Bouéni des bords de route”, <http://365joursamayotte.canalblog.com/albums/mamoudzou/photos/113617847-les-bouenis-des-bords-de-route.html>; “2 bouéni”, http://ileaulagon.canalblog.com/albums/portraits/photos/55892259-2_bouenis.html). There was a popular comic strip that appeared in the local press in the early 2010s called “Les Bouéni”, <https://www.bedetheque.com/serie-48361-BD-Bouenis.html> – which caricatures Wamaore women as Bouéni and which was probably responsible for the vulgarisation of the term in its current form as well as the racist views about Bouéni and Maorais more widely. For a perspective on being Bouéni, see Saadia Samra “Racisme et sexisme en milieu hospitalier (...) et colonial,” *LMSI*, 6 July 2018, <https://lmsi.net/Robert-et-les-bouenis>. Finally, note that Bouéni are very rarely named: they are literally anonymous.

³¹ Chrystel de Bricourt, co-director, Dagoni Services, 30 Mar 2020, “Coronavirus à Mayotte: ‘Si rien ne bouge très vite, cela va être un carnage’ pour les personnes âgées,” <https://www.ash.tm.fr/dependance-handicap/coronavirus-a-mayotte-si-rien-ne-bouge-tres-vite-cela-va-etre-un-carnage-pour-les-personnes-agees-550014.php>, last accessed 31 January 2023.

Here the exotic other is the irregular migrant, the *Clandestin*, who not only finds it difficult to understand lockdown, but, further, is uninformed and isolated. This rather overlooks the fact that most *Clandestins* live in the urban areas, have smartphones (if perhaps not radios), and are generally as well-informed as their neighbours, be they Français or Mahorais.³² This returns the discourse to one in which the othering of the irregular population proceeds in tandem with the discursive assimilation of the Mahorais to the Français who, presumably do have phones and radios and are aware of what is going on (and understand the situation). Once again, characterising the *Clandestin* thus implies that those with papers don't live in "extremely precarious conditions, in shantytowns", but live in "proper" houses with electricity and an internal water supply, are well-educated, speak French, have jobs and cars – that is, they generally have the requisite political capital to avoid being classified as *Clandestins*. The French discourse drives a wedge between the Français and the *Clandestins*, leaving little space for the Mahorais lying in between. As for the exotic Other, the Wamaore already no longer exists: it is an anonymous and exoticised relic of the past, or perhaps of a Wakomori present, destined for extinction as the French nation-building project pursues its relentless path.

And so, finally, this socio-spatial othering is also temporal. This is already hinted at in evocations of "cocos" and "bacocos" – people from a different age, their anchoring in the past rendering them different – and is reinforced by evocations of life in the more remote villages of the island, far from the Wazungu gaze:

"As a result, according to [a social worker] dengue fever is already taking its toll in these neighbourhoods, buried deep in the jungle. It is difficult moreover to contradict him, when you see the garbage strewn here and there at the different water distribution points in the village. An overturned shopping cart, plastic packaging (...) all potential breeding grounds for the tiger mosquito. At a bend in the road, a sick man is resting in his corrugated iron hut. "*Hodi, hodi?*" The answer, in Shimaore, comes from afar."³³

The answer that comes from afar could only be in Shimaore: had it been in French it would certainly have been much closer, for, although not made explicit, "afar" here is as much temporal as it is spatial: as Johannes Fabian has pointed out, a denial of contemporaneity is crucial to the orientalisating gaze (Fabian 1983); but it is equally crucial that the spatial and temporal aspects of the distanciation be intertwined, allowing the spatially distant – the residents of the shanty towns "deep in the jungle" as much as those of the remote, rural areas – to also be temporally distanced.

The discursive opposition *Clandestin*/rural/past and Français/urban(e)/present fails to adequately position the Mahorais. Mahorais identity is fraught with contradictions since identities in the political field do not map onto identities in the social field. Arriving to enforce eviction orders upon those living in illegally constructed housing, representatives of the French state are regularly surprised to find French citizens and legal residents living amongst the *clandestins* in these shanty towns. Evicted nevertheless, these legally resident non-citizens (Mahorais) end up, ironically, becoming *clandestins* – since an address is required in order to renew one's residence permit (Hachimi Alaoui et al. 2019, 2020) – and thus *Clandestins*.

³² Indeed, perhaps better informed than most *wazungu*, who live lives that are often quite detached from daily life in Mayotte: to each their woods.

³³ "À Miréréni, les masques ne protègent pas contre la dengue ou la faim." *Mayotte Hebdo*, 16 May 2020, <https://www.mayottehebdo.com/actualite/sante/a-mirereni-les-masques-ne-protègent-pas-contre-la-dengue-ou-la-faim/>, last accessed 31 January 2023. *Hodi* is a Shimaore interjection, the verbal equivalent of knocking at a door.

The Acquisition of Capital and the Deployment of Personae

The preceding examples hint at the difficulties inherent in classifying the population. The normative opposition between French and Comorian dissolves in the interstices of daily practices as Maorais are revealed to be both at once. French public discourse characterises the Mahorais as Français; local practice reveals Wamaore to be Wakomori. However, instrumentality is also in the hands of the Maorais here. Processes of identification and self-identification operate in different fields with what almost seems to be indifference – but which of course is anything but. The hostility directed towards Clandestins by Mahorais in a political field dissipates entirely when interactions move into the social field. Statements such as “they’re not immigrants, they’re invaders!” and “they’re all bad, they’re thieves, they should all go home” are rapidly displaced by (far more common) expressions of identity, expressions that sometimes even exaggerate their commonalities. Thus, for example, after a conversation with a group of men sitting in the public square in the west coast town of Tsingoni, I thanked them for their time and apologised for my poor Shimaore. “Shingazidja, Shimaore, it’s all the same,” one of them replied. “We understand both, no problem, we’re all brothers”: this was a particularly eloquent declaration, since Shingazidja and Shimaore are in fact quite different, and not all Maorais understand Shingazidja (cf. Breslar 1981). Other statements, such as “I don’t understand all these problems, we are all of the same blood” or “We are all of the same race”, accompanied by admissions, almost universally expressed, even by the most ardent Mahorais nationalist, that “Everyone in Mayotte comes from somewhere else”, appear in stark contradiction to the hostility expressed in the political field. If the conflicts might appear to be rather banal in character – “we have the same language and the same culture, but still, you’re on my property” – ultimately it is this shared identity that causes the greatest conflict: “You know why the Maorais don’t like the Johannese? Because they [the Maorais] are all Johannese!”³⁴

I have elsewhere analysed the ways in which Maorais confront the contradictions raised in being (or attempting to be) both Français and Wakomori and how the encounter manifests itself violently (Walker 2022); implicit in this analysis is the Maorais recognition of the impossibility of their successfully being Wazungu and their desire to be – indeed, the recognition that they are – Wakomori. Maorais only desire to be Wazungu in opposition to the Clandestin: as Mahorais, they draw on the political (and economic) capital unavailable to the Clandestin to position themselves in the political field close to the Français. Those with jobs, cars, houses and access to consumer goods to healthcare, education and other social benefits, to travel and the possibility of moving to and from between Mayotte and the metropole – all the trappings of the middle-class Wazungu lifestyle – exercise very real power over Clandestins in the political field and thereby differentiate themselves from the latter. Clandestins, who survive on low incomes, often at the mercy of an employer who may well refuse to pay their wages at the end of the month, without legal title to their homes, never mind legal authority to be present on the island, denied access to all but the most basic resources, hold little political or economic capital and thus wield negligible power. They remain at the mercy of the Mahorais who, at a whim, may denounce them or drive them from their homes without any real fear of being sanctioned.

³⁴ All quotes from individuals met during fieldwork in Mayotte between 2017 and 2019.

However, if the Mahorais hold sufficient capital in the political field to be able to exert power over the Clandestins in particular and over Comoriens more generally, it is not exclusive. Comoriens hold what might be termed moral political capital, countering that while Mahorais can be Français, they can never be Wazungu: excluded from belonging in the social sphere for lack of social (and symbolic, and cultural) capital, being Français is perhaps a necessary condition for being Wazungu, but not sufficient. The Comorien riposte to the fact of Mahorais political capital is to counter with Comorien political capital: Comoriens may be poor but they are free; Mahorais will always be dependent upon *wazungu* largesse, ever the colonial subjects. While this discourse may be of little value in the political field – Comorien political capital is, at least in Mayotte, largely ineffective in the political field – the recognition by Maorais that they themselves hold less political capital than the *wazungu* Français disempowers them politically and relegates them to a lower political tier.³⁵

Maorais are therefore confronted with the fact that their Clandestin other is also their Wakomori self, and that socially they are far closer to the Wandzuani than they are to the Wazungu – indeed, as is widely recognised, they *are* Wandzuani: kin links, ritual incorporation, shared cultural practices all bind Wakomori, regardless of their political identities. Thus, recognising their lower status in the political field, the Maorais leverage their social positioning: they deploy capital, and thus power, in the social field – capital and power not accessible to the Wazungu, such as linguistic competence, religious and social networks, the acquisition of status through Comorian life-cycle rituals, and so on. This shift into the social field is fraught, however, since they find themselves confronted with the fact that Wakomori, and Wandzuani in particular, often hold far more social and cultural capital than Wamaore do. Wamaore frequently defer to Wandzuani in matters of customary practice, such as the performance of wedding rituals, and even if Wamaore have greater claims to belonging based on socio-spatial attachment to a place of origin, these claims are based on Wakomori systems of knowledge and practice and not Wazungu ones. Wamaore therefore draw upon Wandzuani cultural practice, as they must, but they appropriate it too, since, logically, it needs to be properly and exclusively theirs if they are to own it and use it to augment their capital in opposition to Wandzuani. Thus, they perform the *harusi* ritual at their weddings, but they call it the *manzaraka*. They eat a dish of manioc leaves known as *madaba* on Ngazidja, but they call it *feliki muhogo* (“manioc leaves”). Likewise, religious authority largely emanates from the other islands, and particularly Ngazidja, where high-status families of *sharifu*³⁶ origin, many of whom have studied in Cairo, Mecca, or Hadramawt, exercise far greater social (and religious) authority than almost any religious leader on Mayotte – where religious authority is of course denigrated by the Wazungu and explicitly excluded not only from the political process but frequently from the social sphere, too. With a fortuitous irony, the very fact of the exclusion of religious practice renders it exclusively Wamaore, at least from the Wazungu perspective.

The contradictions therefore lie in the fact that not only are Maorais not Wazungu, they do not want to be Wazungu: they are Wakomori. Culturally, they want to assert their identity with the other islanders because their primary points of reference lie in the archipelago and not in France (of which they are but a peripheral part). This is where their social and cultural capital is greatest, even if not as substantial as that of the other islanders. They therefore want to be different: they want to be Wamaore; but simultaneously they want to be Français, and specifically Mahorais, the political

³⁵ Comorien criticism of Mahorais’ acceptance of their status as subservient colonial subjects is not conducive to good relations.

³⁶ Descendants of the Prophet Muhammad.

equivalent of being Wamaore, hence the desire for distinction: they are not Clandestins. However, the Clandestin identity is strongly associated with being Wakomori, and particularly Wandzuani – which are seen as desirable identities, points of reference, and socio-cultural “authenticity” for the Wamaore. Maorais need to be both Wamaore (and thus assimilated to the Wakomori) and Mahorais (and thus differentiated from the Clandestin *qua* Comorien and associated with the Français) at the same time: the classic double bind.

The post-Westphalian conceptualisation of national identities as mutually exclusive and the subsequent essentialisation of those national identities was a political choice rather than a social one. In Mayotte national identities are very much a product of the colonial encounter, sedimented into the types of discourses expressed by the French state and by Wazungu more generally and running counter to the historical fluidity inherent in local identities and contemporary expressions thereof. Drawing on field theory and the notion of the persona avoids primordialist conceptualisations of identities as mutually defining and therefore mutually exclusive categories: it is possible to be Wakomori and Français at the same time, to assert affinities with (and identification with) Wandzuani while rejecting the Clandestin. Potential contradictions are avoided through the engagement of personae: an individual may assume a Mahorais persona in a political field but a Wamaore persona in a social field, thus allowing for performances based on two different identities that are not conflictual precisely because they operate in different fields. On the contrary, these personae help Maorais to create order from the complexity of belonging in a fraught and contradictory set of fields. In particular, a recourse to personae obviates the need to confront (and attempt to cross) boundaries: by shifting fields, the boundaries disappear.

The performance of identities and the accompanying symbolic processes of identification occur when people are similar as well as when they are different. This is perhaps a banal observation: when identities are being invoked to emphasise commonalities with partners, such as expressions of shared belonging on national holidays, it is expected. But there are also contexts where similarities are undesirable, for whatever reason, and the performance of identities is instead concerned with producing difference and, perhaps obviously, the production of boundaries. Here there is a paradox of sorts, for boundaries are often frontiers, not enclosures (cf. Weil 2005: 14): places where interactions occur and where actors both draw upon and rework identities through the engagement of their different personae. It is useful to recall Thomas Hylland Eriksen’s suggestion that “Ethnicity is essentially an aspect of a relationship, not a property of a group (...) [it] presupposes an institutionalised relationship between delineated categories whose members *consider each other* to be culturally distinctive” (2010: 16, 23, my emphasis). The proposition that ethnicity (for which we may read “identity”) is based on relationships suggests that group identities may not necessarily be the *product* of differences but rather the *cause* of differences. This is particularly true of groups such as Maorais and Johannese, who are not particularly different culturally: cultural difference is therefore the product of a relationship that creates those very differences.

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