The Saint, the Sea Monster, and an Invitation to a *Dîner-Dansant*: Ethnographic Reflections on the Edgy Passage—and the Double Edge—of Modernity, Mayotte 1975–2001

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Abstract: This depiction of social change in the Western Indian Ocean emphasizes consciousness, agency, and temporal experience as Malagasy speakers are poised between grasping the future and completing—but also regretting—the past.

Keywords: modernity, temporal experience, the *unheimlich*, Mayotte

Résumé : Cette description de changement social dans une île de l'océan Indien fait ressortir la conscientisation, la prise en charge et l'engagement dans le présent chez les malgachophones qui sont à un point d'équilibre entre la conquête du futur et l'achèvement—mais aussi le regret—du passé.

Mots-clés : modernité, expérience historique, *unheimlich*, Mayotte

This paper addresses the theme of the 2003 conference of the Canadian Anthropology Society (CASCA), "On Edge: Anthropology in Troubling Times" at which it was delivered.[1] The times are indeed troubled, but it is important not to allow our own edginess to overwhelm or displace our reporting on the concerns of others nor to mistake our anxieties for theirs. We should remember that times have often been troubling, the future uncertain, people on edge. We call this condition history.

Insofar as edginess is the opposite of complacency, it is not necessarily a bad thing. We can be on edge in the way that a coin is, not concealing what lies beneath us, and ready to roll. I take edginess to be a sign, albeit ironic, of some kind of historical consciousness, or self-consciousness, where what comes without saying does *not* go without saying. I am not making large claims for this consciousness, not imputing revolutionary agency to it. But from the point of view of practice theorists who criticize the excessive weight that others have placed on abstract rational thought, consciousness may be an index of a certain loss of knowledge, of no longer being able to perform our social roles with the ease of intuition that is born of extended cultivation and habit (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Edginess implies having to think twice. Still, it may be a little more hopeful than the sort of consciousness of which those who know their history know that they are condemned to repeat it. It is a consciousness comprised of brief glimpses, flashes of insight, sporadic attempts to make a difference. Edginess is a mode of intention poised between ethics and anxiety and ready to slide in either direction.

The edginess experienced by anthropologists no doubt has many sources. One that stems from changing conceptions of our profession has been anticipated in the observation by literary critic Erich Auerbach that, "The

scholar who does not consistently limit himself to a narrow field of specialization and to a world of concepts held in common with a small circle of like-minded colleagues, lives in the midst of a tumult of impressions and claims on him; for the scholar to do justice to these is almost impossible" (1969, as cited by Said 1975: 36). That is a good reason to hunker down in ethnographic specificity. Indeed, this essay explores two sites at which the edginess of rapid social change has flashed into consciousness among villagers in the western Indian Ocean island of Mayotte whose lives I have tracked since 1975. In other words, I propose to offer fragments of the history of a community that is in part a history of its own historical consciousness.... It is long-term fieldwork that enables this particular kind of conjunction of history and anthropology. This is an articulation characterized precisely by the refusal of "ethnographic refusal" (Ortner, 1995) evident in the invisible standpoint of the genealogist or the abstractions of the pure deconstructionist.

Modernity: The Video

Imagine yourself set down behind a video camera in a tropical island of the Comoro Archipelago in the Mozambique Channel, panning from the verdant slopes of the interior to the bustle of the new port, then following the weekly delivery truck from the Coca-Cola bottling plant along the paved road to the community that was once a remote village. Perhaps every anthropologist who has returned to a field site over as long a period as I have thinks they have been privy to documenting radical social transformation.[2] The closer one is to a set of phenomena, the larger the changes look. In my case, the changes I have observed have indeed been decisive. My sketch of this transformation here is of course limited, images along a single transection through a complex historical process. At the outset I find myself in the classic Weberian position of ambivalence: wanting to tell the story without undue moralizing and realizing how impossible this is on both epistemological and personal grounds. At least I will try to acknowledge where the moralizing and the theorizing are mutually implicated. Nowhere, perhaps, is this more problematic than in the concept of modernity.

If the transformation to modernity has arguably been the force behind the work of the great founders of social science, "modernity" has undoubtedly been also one of the key terms to precipitate from their arguments, especially perhaps within the discipline of sociology. Recently it has colonized anthropology as well. Instead of describing and comparing societies or social formations, anthropologists now speak routinely of alternate or multiple modernities. In part this is a solution to the reification implied by distinct or bounded cultures; in part it is a recognition of capitalist permeation, societal interdependence, and so forth, in sum, of the global spread of modernity itself. But all this is surely insufficient. The concept of modernity has its roots in a temporal distinction rather than a spatial unification. To be useful, "modernity" must depict neither a global oil slick nor a universal phase (and certainly not the triumphalist narrative of modernization), but an historical experience or set of experiences compounded of eagerness, restlessness and rupture. To speak of modernity is to acknowledge incessant production, but also destruction; of straining forward, but also of looking back.

I am characterizing modernity by a certain temporality or historicity and one that makes claims to its own novelty with respect to what preceeded it. What preceeded it, and from which modernity differentiates itself ambivalently, that is, grandly and self-assuredly, but not without a certain nostalgia, regret, or guilt, is too readily—and, by anthropologists, too anxiously—summarized in the concept of tradition. One way to describe postmodernity would be modernity without that sense of connection and loss, a kind of history without memory; a modernity uncoupled from an ancestral Other through which to identify itself.

Some argue for the globalization of the term "modernity"—everyone has been modern for as long as "we" have—on what appear to be ethical rather than empirical grounds, drawing their lesson from Fabian's discussion of coevalness and its denial in *Time and the Other* (1983). That extrapolation seems to me unfortunate insofar as it suppresses the distinctiveness of local histories, specific transformations that are as radical at the present moment in their consequences for local experience and perhaps even more sudden in their actuality than the disruptions that inspired Marx, Weber, Baudelaire and others to grasp their historical condition in arguments and depictions that can be variously summarized under the rubric of the modern.

I could attribute "modernity" to the people of Mayotte on several grounds, of which I will mention only three. First, taking the coeval argument, I could say they are "modern" simply on the basis of the fact that I am referring to the last quarter of the 20th century. This not only trivializes the concept of modernity but it actually presupposes what it means to argue insofar as it applies a quintessentially modern, "empty" time frame and assumes its universality.

Second, and in a much stronger sense, I could import to the Indian Ocean from the Caribbean the line of argument developed by Sidney Mintz (1989, cf. Vaughan in

press) and suggest that Mayotte has been "modern" ever since the disruptions of the slave trade and especially since French appropriation of the island in 1841 and the establishment of sugar plantations and factories. This is indeed compelling, especially insofar as enslavement and dislocation transformed the lifeworlds of the plantation workers and linked them to the transformations taking place in Europe. However, in Mayotte, and unlike much of the Caribbean, these workers formed only a portion of the 19th-century African population. They lived alongside indigenous Shimaore-speaking inhabitants who had long exploited labour themselves and who adapted quite adroitly to the colonial context, and alongside various immigrants from Madagascar who saw themselves as reasonably autonomous subjects seeking a more peaceful life apart from the conflicts that wracked Madagascar at the time. Moreover, the factory system collapsed early on and the plantations rapidly declined, leaving space for the development of local communities on the margins of a marginal colony. The inhabitants practised subsistence cultivation and fishing supplemented by occasional periods of wage labour and cash cropping. They also participated in an intense and compelling social life of intra- and intervillage festivity focussed on Muslim and life-cycle celebrations.[3] Mayotte has never been quite *A Small Place* of Jamaica Kincaid's visceral evocation (1988).

Third, and here leaving aside all the other ways modernity has been and could be described, written from the shores of an even smaller colonized island is Marshall Berman's depiction of capitalist modernity's intensity and restlessness, of unceasing need for and feeding upon change (1988). Seen from this perspective, the experience of life in Mayotte has shifted decisively towards modernity in the last decades of the 20th century, at least relative to what preceded it. Again, it is questionable whether it is appropriate to depict the earlier period by the term generally given to modernity's "other"—namely, tradition. Those who like using the term modernity are often much edgier about applying tradition. This illustrates how problematic is the entire classificatory exercise that looms behind the application of a single label. I think there are plenty of interesting things to say about tradition or ways to apply the concept, especially understood as long-standing conversations and bodies of practice that may continue into—or even begin with—modernity, such as anthropology itself. However, this is not the place to do so. Let me simply be clear that I am wary of any ostensibly objective or stable application of a contrast between modernity and tradition and restrict their deployment here to a dialectical process of change and a recursive discourse. One could even say that modernity exists only insofar as it is able to conceptualize and differentiate itself from tradition; hence that tradition itself only comes into being, in a certain sense, along with modernity and hence, along with its own demise (cf. Handler, 1988; Ivy, 1995).[4]

In any case, for the first three-quarters of the 20th century Mayotte changed slowly; far too slowly for the local critics who developed in the post World War II surge of African independence. As the Comoros moved, again more slowly than most of their neighbours, toward that goal, the inhabitants of Mayotte (one of four islands in the Comoro Archipelago) felt that they were not receiving a share of new infrastructure, in the shape of roads, buildings, education, white collar employment and so forth. But at the same time that there emerged an acute political consciousness and an active political movement, life in the villages had consolidated in highly integrative ways that countered any immediate displacement toward more individualistic conceptions of persons and practice.

It is the developments from this period that interest me, with respect to people's historical consciousness; to their increased awareness of the global context in which they find themselves; to their class-inflected assurance in taking up opportunities and inviting or discovering new ones—for example, the female village shopkeepers who now fly to Dubai and Bangkok for merchandise; and to their critical apprehension of the changes that transpire. Here the meaning of modernity is close to that of global citizenship and of facing in a direction that is outward and forward rather than inward or backward (using these directional indicators in a non-evaluative sense). Nevertheless, I will suggest, it does not occur without a remainder.

A Quarter Century of Change

When I first arrived in Mayotte in 1975, political sentiments were running high.[5] A vote had been taken in the Comoro Islands concerning independence from France. Tabulated globally, the large majority of the population were in favour of independence, but counted island by island, it was apparent that the majority of people in Mayotte were opposed (Lambek, 1995). The Mouvement Populaire Mahorais urged France to disaggregate the results and maintain its presence on Mayotte. The movement expected unanimity in each village in which it expressed the majority opinion. I, of course, disagreed, and argued the evils of colonial exploitation until I was invited to either keep my opinions to myself or find another community in which to live. In brief, most people were more worried about exploitation from the stratified societies on the more densely populated and wealthier islands next door than they were about France, which they pictured as

a relatively disinterested step-parent. Indeed, they hoped to manipulate the French into providing them with the economic infrastructure that was obviously lacking. When the pro-French forces won the agreement of the government to hold a second referendum, the women—who had been the main mobilizers and enthusiasts of the movement, who had spent a week surrounding a bulldozer in order to prevent its removal to another island—singing odes to the Prophet all the while—and who had even supplied the movement's only martyr—celebrated in an impromptu fashion. I have slides of village women doing an energetic dance (the *wadaha*) that involves passing a heavy wooden pestle from hand to hand so that it creates a steady rhythm as it is pounded into the mortar by one dancer and retrieved by the next. The performance beautifully indexes both collective interdependence and unalienated labour (cf. White, n.d.). The women dance in the dusty red earth plaza to a backdrop of palm trees and wattle- and-daub thatch-roofed houses. A large French flag hoisted on a makeshift pole flutters incongruously, much brighter than the women's faded work clothing. In one picture an elderly man approaches to pay his respects to the women for their political efforts.

Twenty-five years later the fruits, both sweet and bitter, of this strategy have been achieved. Some liken these fruits of progress specifically to the papaya; they depict a "papaya world," *dunia papay*, in which, as the fruit hang on a papaya tree, the young rest above their elders (Lambek, 2002a). That is to say, in the course of rapid transition, during the specific historical period of the 1990s, younger siblings moved far ahead of older siblings, and children ahead of their parents, in wealth and privilege, and partly in respect and authority, producing a world turned upside-down.

More broadly, Mayotte shifted from sleepy backwater to economic hub of the region. The French really did invest. A network of paved roads was established along with new forms of housing, water supply, electricity and greatly improved education, health care and personal benefits. The cultivation of dry rice, which had been the main preoccupation of villagers in 1975, was abandoned, and eventually most cash cropping as well. The rigorous daily labour of husking rice with mortar and pestle is gone, along with the locally constructed wooden versions of these implements, and along with the taste, nutrition and availability of non-commodified field rice (*vary shombu*). Houses of brick or cement facing, with tin roofs and electric lights that are left on all night push up the hillsides; the newest constructions are accompanied by compulsory latrines.

People of my age cohort have lived their adult working lives since the mid-1980s engaged in menial and manual labour—road work, construction, janitors and guards—combined with some independent activities such as fishing or livestock, or else they have moved, increasingly since the mid-1990s and ostensibly temporarily, to La Réunion or metropolitan France for better unemployment benefits. But many of their children and younger siblings have now been through an entire cycle of decent French schooling.[6] The successful ones earn professional degrees overseas or continue to live in the village while commuting each morning, in their private cars and through traffic jams, to white collar jobs across the island. In brief, a vast and rapid expansion of infrastructure, commoditization, internal class and age differentiation, migration, unemployment and opportunity. Indeed, a papaya world.

This is not, then, just another local version of the same old story of the desultory or violent aftermath of colonialism, at least not in the short term.[7] Mayotte has become what I have described as a "postmodern colony" or a postcolony, in which the emphasis rests on the second morpheme not the first. The economy is entirely transformed and, insofar as it is based on continued French subsidy, entirely artificial. Politics are oriented toward fuller integration with France and therefore toward the same level of benefits that are available to all citizens of the Republic. In June, 2001 Mayotte shifted in status from a *Collectivité Territoriale* (initiated in December 1976) to a *Collectivité Départmentale*, in the process of what is referred to as an *évolution statuaire* (to be re-evaluated in 10 years) en route to full integration in the French state. The French have made huge inroads in governmentality, transforming public and private life and changing the boundaries between them, working now on family law. The currency is the Euro and the most enterprising young people know how to apply to the European Community for local development grants. The village contains a modern *foyer des jeunes* (youth centre) with a decent library. Moreover, despite initial surprise, disconcertion and dislocation at many of the changes, people are generally satisfied by the direction things have gone and feel somewhat empowered by their role in instigating the process. It is certainly different from the immiseration and political turmoil of the neighbouring islands of the independent Federal Islamic Republic of the Comores—since 2002 re-formed as L'Union des Comores—many of whose inhabitants make dangerous and illegal nocturnal maritime crossings to Mayotte in search of livelihood. What people in Mayotte say they regret is not the speed, but the slowness of change, and the unfairness in the distribution of its effects, notably the way it has left some people relatively impoverished and marginalized.

Because of this particular history, "modernity" is not objectified and is neither an imaginary object of desire nor an unrealized source of violence. Indeed, most people in the villages I have studied would not describe their trajectory by means of abstractions like tradition and modernity. Instead, they identify the immediacies of change by the sort of concrete representations and practice I will describe shortly. To the degree that they use a dual classification, it is between the marked category of *vazaha*—French people or Europeans—and themselves, sometimes identified as *silamo*, Muslims or as *ulu mainting*, Black people, or *ulu maskin*, the poor. These categories are not essentialized and do not imply a hierarchy of progression. They are not understood as mutually exclusive and their boundaries are traversible in both directions.

However "French" they become, most people remain devout Muslims and ostensibly committed to the intense sociality of village life. The dry southern winter is a time of festivity. In 1975 this was the post-harvest season; it is now more accurate to call it the period of school vacation, when even those employed in France or Réunion are able to take their *vacances* (vacations) and, in some years, return home. As in the past, performances of all kinds succeed each other: weddings, spirit possession ceremonies, mortuary ceremonies, circumcisions, *maulida*s and other Sufi-inspired Muslim dances. Each of these includes the preparation, distribution, and consumption of large amounts of food and other expenditures of time, money and energy. I have long thought of the village communities of Mayotte as existing and reproducing through the almost continuous production of such feasts (as well as funerals and other Muslim celebrations that are not seasonally linked).[8] It is to facets of this collective sociality that I wish to turn in order to indicate both decisive changes in practice and their collective acknowledgment and representation.

Intensive festivities continue but their social significance has altered. Not only have individual communities become less autonomous and less central to the functioning and reproduction of society as a whole, but their internal constitution has also changed, in ways that festive performance often indexes. In particular, villages are shifting from social wholes constituted through the totality and density of the interrelationships among their inhabitants to administrative units comprised of individuated parts—households, families and individuals.[9]

The festivities of the 1970s were of roughly four social orders. First, were ceremonies conducted for, by, and on behalf of the villages as whole communities. These included an annual new year festival in July, the date varying slightly from village to village and year to year depending on how local officials kept track. There was also a triennial sacrifice at the tomb of a saint, about which more later. Second, were rituals held on behalf of families but conducted by the entire village, notably funerals and those life cycle rituals that were performed as *shungu*s, a term I will explicate shortly. Third, were rituals conducted for and by families to which kin, friends, and neighbours were selectively invited. Finally, were spirit possession ceremonies held on behalf of individuals but at which all adepts participated. This picture is vastly oversimplified in several ways, one being that a given event might have components that would engage people through various of these forms of connection. In any case, each festivity had a complex and quite specific way in which labour was organized and raw materials collected; and in which food was distributed and consumed.

Of these four rough types, some, but not all, of the events of the first, village-based, order had virtually disappeared by 2001, while possession ceremonies have continued apace. Those of the second, that articulated families to the whole community had mostly transformed into the third, more individual and optative kind.

I turn briefly to weddings.[10] In Mayotte the celebration of virgin marriages continues to be a central feature of social life and subject to a great deal of expense and interest, but its value has been rather different from the functions and meanings highlighted by either old or new kinship theory (cf. Lambek, 1983). The main theme of weddings has been social reproduction and the celebration and transformation of young women, as well as of their husbands and their parents. Marriage has been a critical moment in the moral life narrative in Mayotte, understood as the event that gets you started on an adult career and on what were the most important tasks of adulthood, namely circumcizing boys and marrying off girls of the next generation and holding memorials for deceased parents—that is, further acts and ceremonies of social reproduction. While biological parenthood was much desired by people of both sexes it was less critical for adult status than sponsoring life cycle rituals like weddings. Thus a man or woman who was childless would sponsor a nephew's circumcision and a niece's wedding.[11] These sponsorships marked people as full social adults.

During the 1970s and earlier, the major public life cycle rituals—virgin marriages, circumcision of boys, and memorials for deceased kin—were the occasions for the enactment of a unique and elaborate system of reciprocity known as *shungu*. *Shungu* was intricately beautiful in its structure and effects, providing a means and measure for articulating and substantiating personhood, citizenship and the temporal experience of the life cycle

(Lambek, 1990). In brief, the *shungu* demanded precisely equivalent prestations from each member of the community in turn. Not only were the quantities of food regulated and measured, but the obligations of giving and receiving were such that over the course of their lives each person ate at precisely the same number and kinds of feasts as the number of guests who had eaten at theirs (the places of people who were absent or deceased being taken on their behalf by close kin). Around the time of marriage one began eating at the *shungu* feasts of other community members, moving from increasing indebtedness to one's own series of payments, to the last feast at which one was a guest of those who had eaten at ones own feasts. Not only did fulfilment of the *shungu* establish the civic status that Gregory (1982: 65) has captured in the felicitous phrase "mutual superiority," but each person's life could be measured according to the balance of invitations they had yet to offer and to receive. This produced, in the end, the mutual embeddedness of all members of the community as part of one another through the logic of the gift.

By 1985 the *shungu* system had been closed down insofar as no more young people continued to enter it. However *shungu* feasts still occured from time to time as the system could not end until the last participant had completed their obligations. The decision to close the system was taken for several reasons, including the collapse of subsistence production and the increasing discrepancies between the ideally equivalent prestations of the gift economy and rising prices in the commodity sphere. The temporal interval between receipt and return thus engendered an irresolvable contradiction in the balancing of acts of exchange. Moreover, people felt increasingly anxious about their individual ability to fulfil their obligations and decided to remove the burden entirely from young people. The fact that the *shungu* was not simply abandoned in mid-cycle but has wound down slowly and systematically, feast by feast, until everyone meets every obligation of giving and receiving, is a remarkable testament to cultural integrity. The irony is that what has replaced the obligatory *shungu* is a more inflationary and unregulated sequence of competitive feasting that discriminates readily between the relatively wealthy and the poor, invites and excludes participants on an individual basis, and no longer distributes social prestige even-handedly. Rites of passage are no longer the business of the whole community (*tanana*)—whose members in witnessing each other's events helped produce them and became part of them and of each other.[12]

At weddings *shungu* feasts have been replaced by the aptly named *invitations*. Consider two weddings that took place in 2001. In both, as in the past, the couple stayed in the bride's new house for at least a week after the consummation, receiving congratulations and entertaining visitors, mostly young people, including boys who dance at night to the CD player. In one house, actually belonging to the bride's sister, since no new house had yet been built, the bride was only 15, a fact for which her mother, Zaikia, was much criticized in the village. Zaikia had wanted to ensure her daughter was still a virgin. The groom was an unemployed man from the Grande Comore, much older than his bride. The wedding was modest; a small festivity at which traditional cakes were served had taken place.

Across the road, the bride was 22, left school after completing *3ième*, and was looking for work.[13] Her husband was 36, a cross-cousin and a school teacher. The house was new and well equipped and the fesitivities elaborate. The class difference expressed in the two weddings derived less from the parents of the respective brides and grooms than from the young people themselves, their education, employment opportunities and outlook.[14]

In the second wedding house the couple and close friends were excitedly folding invitations. I was delighted to receive one. They had two computer-printed versions, each with interesting layout and including images of distinctly white couples in romantic poses. In one, bride and groom were kissing on the lips, something that was never seen or practised in the past. On the cover was written *Monsieur Saïd Abdourahim et Mademoiselle Kaisati Aboudou vous invitent à leur marriage.*[15] Inside, the parents of groom and bride were listed and *ont l'honneur et le plaisir de faire part du marriage de leurs enfants... et vous prient de bien vouloir honorer de votre présence.* As they stuffed the envelopes, one person remarked—in French rather than Malagasy, *il faut garder la tradition.* The printed program listed a Friday evening *dîner-dansant*, followed on Saturday morning by a *walima*, a *cortège* at noon, a *sirop d'honneur* at 3 p.m., and on Wednesday noon by an *mbiwi avec Viking.*[16]

The *walima* is a meal traditionally offered by the bride's family to the entire village and requiring a large cow. The *cortège* is a procession by motor vehicle through the village and its neighbours. The *cortège* displays the groom's *valise*, a "suitcase" that includes not only some 1-3 000 Euros of gold jewelery and clothing but nowadays a TV, freezer, and frequently a VCR, microwave and washing machine. *Mbiwi* is the Shimaore word for what Malagasy speakers call the clacking of sticks. It is a dance performed and much loved by women in which they sexily sway their buttocks while clacking together pieces of bamboo. The women dress elegantly and come in large numbers to celebrate the transformation of a "daughter"

into a sexual woman as well as the munificence of male spending on new wives.[17] Nowadays *mbiwi* is performed to a live, amplified band; *Vingkingy*—the Vikings—are prefered, if expensive at around 400 Euros, a cost sometimes shared between the bride and groom's kin. The *dîner-dansant* and the *sirop d'honneur*, practices begun only a decade or so ago, are primarily for young people. Their expense is the groom's responsibility although the bride's family helps with the labour. The *invitations* are not intrinsic to a wedding; the number of discrete events depends in part on what people can afford. A friend remembered his *dîner-dansant* from 1995 costing 3 700 FF. Total costs for an elaborate wedding can reach as high as 12 000 euros or 15 000 Canadian dollars on the groom's side alone.[18]

I would have liked to describe the *dîner-dansant* in detail, but suffice it to say that people arrived dressed in elegant European clothing—I was chastised for not wearing a tie—and gave each other *bises* (kisses on the cheek, a French style of greeting) and handshakes. A master of ceremonies took the microphone and asked everyone to acknowledge the entry of the new couple. The bride wore a white wedding dress. They stood and blushed as photos were taken, speeches were made, and people clapped. Everyone sat at tables, like European couples, self-consciously making small talk. They drank soft drinks and ate popcorn and samosas followed by grated *crudités* (raw vegetables) with a mustard vinaigrette, platters of rice with chicken or beef, and finally a multitiered cake made with a nut and egg batter topped with cherries. Couples danced under strobe lights to slow love songs played by a DJ and soon replaced by the loud, amplified generic Western (or world) popular music known as a *boum*.

All this suggests a kind of naive and pretentious appropriation of Western forms, images, and values. But when I mentioned to the young man on whose wedding video I first saw an *invitation* that people seemed to be acting like *vazaha*—Europeans—he replied that that was precisely the point. He explained that indeed they were acting—imitating (*mikeding*), or playing at being European. It was done knowingly, in the spirit of pleasure or play, not out of some unmediated acceptance of Western comportment and consumption. But, he added, they were also preparing one day to *be* European.

The *dîner-dansant* is thus a matter of seeing and being seen as European. The mimesis is in large part—and in sharp contrast to some compulsive and unrationalized Platonic conception—a deliberate reflexive process, seeing oneself as another, catching oneself in the future, maintaining the distance of the spectator even as one is acting the part. As another young man put it, "We imitate Europeans, want to become Europeans, indeed are already practicing as European" (*Mikeding vazaha; famila vazaha; famañanu kamwe)*. "But," he emphasized, "acting like Europeans doesn't hurt Islam; it is play (*soma*)."[19]

In his compelling thesis on the way in which weddings in contemporary Lithuania address the relationship of participants to conceptions of modernity and the West, Gediminas Lankauskas (2003) draws on Victor Turner's (1985) discussion of the subjunctive "as if." Such subjunctivity is no doubt characteristic of wedding performances in many places across time and place and goes back to their function in articulating the beginnings of responsible adulthood and thereby projecting hopes for a future that can be only partially known and articulated. Such performances must also contain an "edge of irony" (Hutcheon, 1994).[20]

In Mayotte, the *invitation* was at once a performance of Frenchness and a rehearsal for it, with all the entailments each of these terms implies. It is half wish, half realization; half serious, half gentle mockery.[21] The confidence of youth is in contrast to the older generation, who hold themselves back and sit awkwardly in European clothes, leave the *dîner* early if they attend at all, and who are certainly not seen on *this* dance floor. If people are imitating French culture at these events, the point is that they know this full well and are doing so deliberately. The performance is creative, not yet congealed into artifice or dead metaphor, into a ritual carried out for reasons its enactors have long since forgotten. If the *invitation* entails implicitly a very different sociality, temporality and personhood from the *shungu*, it nevertheless expresses quite explicitly a certain kind of historical consciousness.

The Saint and the Sea Monster

At the time these weddings took place, many of the villagers a generation or so older than the primary celebrants were preoccuppied with a troubling issue. A young man from an inland village had drowned on the local beach, swept off his feet while fishing at receding high tide. The previous year a boy from a neighbouring village had drowned while swimming. The coincidence of these events made people recollect that some years earlier a young girl from the village had fallen out of a canoe and drowned. What all these deaths had in common, apart from the unusual fact of drowning itself, was that in each case the bodies were recovered, washed up on shore. They had not been eaten by sharks. The anxiety caused by the most recent death was heightened by the fact that people had just learned about the introduction of autopsies by the French judicial system and were highly disturbed by and opposed to the idea.

People began to talk. They linked the deaths to the saint whose stone tomb lies in the bush adjacent to the beach. The tomb dates to a period long before the founding of the village and had been the site of community sacrifices held every three years until in recent years the sacrifices had stopped. Moreover, the beach on which the tomb sat had seen the construction of a soccer field, basketball court, and tourist facilities and the tomb itself had been polluted by visitors seeking a place to relieve themselves. In the past people had come from afar to the sacred and powerful spot (*ziara*) in order to utter personal prayers, bathing first and bringing incense, perfume and rosewater; now they just held *piqueniques* and danced *boums* there.

This saint was the same person who some years earlier had preoccuppied a woman I called Nuriaty and indeed continued to do so. In another essay (Lambek, 2002a), I have described how she dreamed that the saint had been rescued from the tomb. Nuriaty was adamant that he was gone; along with the other ancestors who had once looked after Mayotte, he had seen that people no longer cared for him and so had retreated to Madagascar on a golden palanquin; she had seen him.[22] But other people now suggested that the saint had turned himself into a sea monster and that it was this creature who was responsible for the drowning deaths. Angered at the loss of his sacrifice, his state of neglect, and the abuse of his tomb, the saint was lashing out. He had risen in a woman in a neighbouring village to announce the fact. Women began organizing a collection in order to buy a sacrifical beast to satisfy him, or rather, to pray to God to make him lie back down (*mampahandry*) and render the beach safe again. Shortly after I left this took place, officiated by the leading Muslim scholar and the elders of the community.[23]

The next year Nuriaty told me that although the sacrifice had been correctly performed, the community had slaughtered only a goat rather than a cow. The saint wouldn't return, she was sure; the remains of the food were simply eaten by rats and lizards. There had not been another drowning in the interim, but she knew the saint remained angry. Nuriaty, a poor, self-employed healer and former subsistence cultivator, continued to leave small offerings of perfume at the tomb, while the young man who served as the M.C. at the *dîner-dansant*, a *lycée* graduate, owner of a car repair business—and son of the senior Muslim scholar—felt that the tomb should be protected as a *monument historique* (historical monument).

I see the emergence of the saint's story as another kind of response to the rapidity of change, this time not a self-confident grasping of the future but a regretful or anxious glance backward at what has been left behind. If people begin to ignore sacred historical figures, they too can begin to abandon, and even turn on, their successors. The people most concerned were indeed those who had experienced most acutely the distortions of the papaya world in which their own juniors forged ahead of them. But their concern is primarily ethical. Weber was correct when he challenged Nietzsche's argument that religion is forged in resentment (Weber, 1946: 270). Unspoken, but looming behind the local drownings, was the regular loss of lives sustained by Comorians from the neighbouring islands who crossed over to Mayotte in small craft in the dead of night in search of livelihood and whose presence in the village, as well as the suffering back home that pushed them to take such risks, was a source of moral anxiety. The saint himself may have originated in the next island.

The great psychoanalyst Hans Loewald once wrote that, "ghosts...long to be released from their ghost life and led to rest as ancestors. As ancestors they live forth in the present generation, while as ghosts they are compelled to haunt the present generation with their shadow life" (1980: 249). Loewald was drawing a metaphorical contrast between psychic repression and identification and internalization, but the idea has broader social relevance. If Loewald says one must transmute angry ghosts into benevolent ancestors, what the villagers experienced was a formerly benevolent ancestor transmuted into an angry ghost. This ghost stands for what has been abandoned, unassimilated, unrecognized, uncompensated; the remainder in the narrative of progress; modernity's double edge. It is not without irony that the boy who drowned had been attempting to swim by clinging to a piece of foam packing that had been discarded from someone's new refrigerator.

The Historical *Unheimlich*

Social change isn't something that simply "happens" or that happens "to" you. Rather, people have complex, multifaceted relationships in processes of change, relationships at once active and passive, characterized by action and reaction. People are caught up in change—are themselves changed—but, at the same time, they can pry moments and spaces of distance through which to construct prototheoretical appreciation and appropriation of what is transpiring.

Moments of self-recognition, of seeing "oneself as another," (Ricoeur, 1992) contain a twinge of the *unheimlich*, which may be experienced as a frisson of pleasure or a shudder of unease.[24] I have shown that such disruption of the habitus, whether intentionally or unintentionally produced, is temporally inflected, past- and future-oriented. Moreover, historical insight is necessarily cultur-

ally mediated, drawing on older cultural idioms and productive of new ones.

I venture that up to now I have had most of you with me—thinking, perhaps, a nicely circumstantial account, if not very novel or sufficiently material. So let me move for a moment onto edgier theoretical terrain and risk a bit of *unheimlich* disruption before drawing back to my conclusion.

Perhaps there is no special historical insight or consciousness, no glimpse of the truth behind appearances. Perhaps this is not possible, either for "them" or for "us," because truth is not out there waiting to be discovered but something humanly constructed. In such a pragmatist view—Richard Rorty's—"human history [is] the history of successive metaphors" (1989: 20) or, as he might have said, one damn metaphor after another. However, our understanding of what is metaphorical versus literal is entirely relative to what precedes or succeeds it, to playing one language game or inventing a new one. Rorty follows Davidson to say, interestingly, that live metaphors are sentences that do not have fixed places in language games and hence are neither true nor false. At the *invitation* people were predicating Frenchness lively metaphorically, making a statement "which one cannot confirm or disconfirm, argue for or against. One can only savor it or spit it out" (ibid.: 18).

We might view the *dîner-dansant* as banal, another instance of shallow globalization, but that would simply indicate our jaded view. The *invitation* is "modern" not because of what is represented—the music, food, comportment and so on—nor because of what is understood, or because of who is excluded, but because of the audacious re-description and triumphant Nietzschean self-fashioning it exhibits, albeit the self-fashioning not of a single individual so much as of a generational cohort.

From the perspective of the participants the *invitation* is metaphorical. Conversely, the sea monster is no metaphor, whether of guilt or of greedy capitalism, but understood quite literally. The saint and the sea monster intervene and interpellate their subjects. People died, after all, and their bodies risked the degradation of autopsy rather than Muslim burial. Here, too, is a matter of discovery not invention, of causality and continuity over contingency. The critics are engaged in a last ditch play—albeit a highly creative one—in an old language game in which the metaphors have long since congealed to literalness; people did debate the veracity of the statement about the saint and the cause of the drownings.

But, between the truth of the wedding and the truth of the sea monster—of that we cannot debate. They are merely successive metaphors in the non-teleological movement of history, the one fading out of literalism as the other is destined to enter it. For Rorty, the idea that there is some prelinguistic consciousness or pan-human intuition is "simply the disposition to use the language of our ancestors, to worship the corpses of their metaphors" (ibid.: 21).[25]

In concluding, let me draw back from this particular edge to a more comfortable zone that gives greater credit to human insight and commitment. Put another way, let me step back from the radical modernity of Wittgenstein and Nietzsche to the temperate traditionalism of Aristotle.

My recent book *The Weight of the Past: Living with History in Mahajanga* (Lambek, 2002b) describes in much greater depth an elaborate and full blown set of culturally constituted vehicles for historical consciousness and historical conscience found in a neighbouring region of Madagascar with much cultural affinity to Mayotte. In the book I draw on two categories from Aristotle. Poiesis refers to creative production in a sense that embraces both meaningful work and art. Phronesis refers to the exercise of ethical judgment or practical wisdom. Both are relevant to what I have just described for Mayotte. People do not passively become Europeans or inadvertent poor copies; they reasonably self-consciously fashion themselves in their image. And people do not simply forget their ancestors; they witness and intervene in their passing. These acts and performances are suitably framed, timed, inserted and circumscribed.

The present is intense in Mayotte. People have acquired a strong sense of personal and collective agency; everyone is engaged in planning and building the future and they have achieved a good deal. Yet some people must find their dignity elsewhere. For them the past cannot and does not simply vanish without trace; nor is it yet discarded on the trash heap to which the gaze of Walter Benjamin's angel of history is mournfully turned (1969). Rather, its surpassing leaves an insistent remainder that demands to be acknowledged, marked, addressed.

The point of the saint's story is not that one should return to the past. No one either explicitly wants this or considers it possible. The point is rather that moving forward should be handled judiciously, ethically. For the people who spoke about the saint or participated in the sacrifice, the past is not objectified. In other words, people ought to continue to be in some active relation to the past, a past that cannot therefore be relinquished unthinkingly but must be remembered, as an old friend is. Historical figures like the saint may continue to give their blessing, but only on condition that they are not humiliated, abandoned in the rush forward. Between the wedding and the saint we see people looking both forwards and back, poised

between the "no longer" and the "not yet." Moral practice entails establishing a balance (Lambek, 1996).

There is also critique here, admission of failure. The moral call of the past slips in uneasily, edgily, in monsterly mutation. The saint suggests that possessive individualism and the pleasures of consumption are not yet the full order of the day, that collective responsibility retains some weight, that people possess their past less than they are possessed by it. Yet he does so after the fact, as a monster. Much as older ways are threatened, so they have come to threaten. The threat can only be reduced by the very historical consciousness that grasps it. Much as the *shungu* is wound down in orderly, deliberate fashion, so the saint is witnessed receding on his golden palanquin.

The author now feels under strong obligation to recede himself. In concluding he offers the usual qualifications of the academic. It has not been my intention, he says, either to provide a definitive distinction between tradition and modernity or a definitive depiction of the transition from one to the other. It would, indeed, be ludicrous to think of modernity as a phenomenon of all or nothing. Rather, he has tried to show that modernity and tradition may engage in mutual interpellation and to evoke that edgy self-consciousness, sometimes playful and celebratory, sometimes anxious and ethically concerned, that subsists on the margins of history.

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Notes

1 This paper was originally presented as the Hawthorne Lecture at the annual meeting of the Canadian Anthropology Society (CASCA) on May 9, 2003 at Dalhousie University, Halifax.

2 I spent 14 months in Mayotte during 1975-76 and re-visited for various lengths of time in 1980, 1985, 1992, 1995, 2000 and 2001. The research has been generously supported throughout by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, with additional help from the NSF in 1975-76 and the National Geographic Foundation in 1985.

3 See, for example, Lambek (1987, 1990, 2000).

4 Africanists will observe that I have been alluding quite indirectly to heated debates over the ascription of "modernity" with respect to such matters as witchcraft. For a useful recent discussion that cites much of the literature, see Shaw (2002). Shaw, interestingly, explores the roots of many "traditional" Temne practices in Sierra Leone in the "modernity" of the slave trade. There are several good ethnographies based on long-term research that similarly try to analyze changes with respect to a dialectic of tradition and modernity; an exemplary study from Europe is Collier (1997: 10-14) who offers an especially lucid discussion of her use of the terms.

5 I went, in part, on the advice of French scholar Pierre Vérin who prophesied, correctly, that the place was on the verge of a major transformation that I would be poised to witness.

6 The first primary school in Lombeni was set up in 1982. Prior to that a few intrepid children walked to schools in neighbouring villages. In 2000 there were some five *lycées* (high schools) on the island which then had a population around 135 000—triple that of 1975. In 2000, 545 students took the *bac* (high school leaving exam) with a pass rate of 56%, though only five students got the mention of "*très bien*" (very good).

7 Of course, this is a gross oversimplification of the multiple trajectories of colonial and postcolonial states. On Africa, see inter alia, Bayart (1993), Cooper (1994, 2000), Mbembe (2001), and Young (1994).

8 This impression of communities constituted through ceremonial activity at arm's length from the market I owe in part to Jackie Solway.

9 These differences may correspond in some respects to the types of peasant communities famously discerned by Wolf (1957).

10 In what follows I deal only with certain aspects of the festive, public, and commensual side of weddings, not with their core transformative functions or with the events in their totality. Hence this is not the place to address the profound question of the historicity of ritual form (e.g., Bloch, 1986).

11 Sometimes these were children whom they had fostered for a shorter or longer period. Parents would sponsor the life cycle rituals of all children who had not been taken over by relatives, but their public responsibilities were met by the first circumcision (often of several closely related boys at once) and first virgin wedding they sponsored. This meant that the weddings of sisters were often not identical in scope and elaboration. On the significance of virginity, see Lam-

bek (1983) where I argue that in Mayotte on balance virgin marriage actually contributed to women's dignity and sexual autonomy rather than detracting from them.

12 On the other hand, people still need each other for their life cycle ceremonies and participate when invited so that they can expect assistance in return.

13 *Troisième* in the French school system is four years prior to completion of the *bac* (high school diploma, a higher level than the North American equivalent).

14 The latter groom had three children from a former wife (who herself had been previously married) and told me he would have another three children in this marriage. His new wife demurred and said she planned to have only two; she would use the pill. The groom affirmed he wouldn't practice polygamy, that men were starting to reject it. His own father had three wives simultaneously and the groom said he didn't know the exact number of his own siblings, which are certainly close to 20. At the same time, the young people's positions are partly realized as the result of decisions taken in past generations, notably successive cross-cousin marriages in the more prosperous case.

15 The names are pseudonyms.

16 A translation of the second half of this paragraph: On the cover was written "Mr. Saïd Abdourahim and Miss Kaisati Aboudou invite you to their wedding." Inside, the parents of groom and bride were listed and "have the honour and pleasure to invite you to the marriage of their children...and request the honour of your presence." As they stuffed the envelopes, one person remarked—in French rather than Malagasy, "one should maintain tradition." The printed program listed a Friday evening dinner with dancing, followed on Saturday morning by a *walima*, a procession at noon, a drinks reception at 3 p.m., and on Wednesday noon by an *mbiwi with Viking*.

17 This event only takes place if the bride was a virgin. During the 1970s the women's dance celebrating sexuality was held spontaneously immediately following the consummation, whereas the arrival of the groom's gifts, a week later, was accompanied by a men's dance. By the 1990s marriages were often enacted and consummated a year or two before the groom brought the *valise* and the wedding was celebrated with public feasting and dancing at the latter event (Solway and Lambek, in prep.).

18 During the relevant period the value of the French franc oscillated between approximately 4 and 5 to the Canadian dollar. On July 1, 2001, 1FF equaled .15245 Euros that equaled CAN$ .1966.

19 It is also, as another successful groom admitted, a form of conceit or showing off (*mpwary*).

20 They may also present claims of entitlement, a point for which I thank Victor Li.

21 Some wedding guests were of course more "European"—i.e., performing as Europeans less self-consciously and in more domains of their lives—than others.

22 She referred to his means of transport sometimes as a golden *fauteuil* (arm chair), sometimes as a *vedette* (motorized boat).

23 There is always more than one version to story. Another version had it that a powerful man was displeased that the community had forbidden the land-owner to sell him a plot by the tomb from which to sell liquor. Even angrier when his side lost the latest political referendum, he buried medicine to raise the monster (*kaka*). Seven people would have to die before anyone would do anything about it. Yet another account emphasized that people had stopped participating in the community sacrifice when one group, the very (large, extended) family whose children had first started going to school and were the holders of many of the *invitations*, had started claiming the saint as their personal ancestor.

24 *Unheimlich* is a term that appears in Freud and that is usually translated as "uncanny" but might also work as "uneasy," "disturbing," or "edgy"—that which makes us feel no longer "at home."

25 This, of course, suggests an interesting reading of Nietzsche's famous aphorism concerning the state of God's health.

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