

SWAHILITÉ IN THE FRENCH COMORIAN DIASPORA

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In her article, Daniela Waldburger argued for the inclusion of varieties from the Greater Swahili Area in Swahili lessons. She discussed what it means to be a Mswahili and argued that while identification as a Mswahili can be linked to various aspects, competence in Swahili remains unquestioned as a necessary condition for identification as a Mswahili. In this paper, I would like to go a step further and question the relationship between competence in the Swahili language and the relevance of the notion of Swahili nature or *Swahilité* to a person. More specifically, I would like to reflect on the relevance of the notion of *Swahilité* in a diasporic space, more precisely the Franco-Comorian community in France, drawing on data from fieldwork in Bordeaux (2010 and 2011) and Marseille (2012).¹

Background

The Comoros archipelago, located in the Indian Ocean, is known to consist of four islands. Three of them, Ngazidja (Grande Comore), Nzwani (Anjouan) and Mwali (Mohéli), form the Union of the Comoros, which gained independence in 1975; the fourth island, Maoré (Mayotte), chose to remain with the colonial power France and became a *Collectivité Territoriale*. In March 2009, a large majority of the population voted for even closer integration with France, and in 2011 Mayotte was granted the status of a French *département* and thus became part of the European Union.

However, all four islands are part of a Swahili cultural space that connects the islands to the East African mainland. As Julia Verne (then Pfaff 2010: 343) notes, “[...] translocality more generally has remained at the core of Swahili culture and identity.” The Indian Ocean, where the Comoros are located, is “home to the world’s oldest transoceanic long-distance trading systems” and “old diasporas [...] like the five-hundred-year-old Hadrami network from Yemen” (Hofmeyr 2010: 722, cf. Alpers 2009, Bang 2003, Pearson 2008, Sheriff 2010). The Comoros are thus a physical space where diasporic identities were formed, as many Comorians moved to and settled in East Africa and Madagascar (cf. Walker 2007, 2008, 2010a, 2011) – long before postcolonial migration from the Comoros accelerated.

The Comoros are the most isolated space within the Swahili sphere, with islands that did not form a political entity before colonisation. The Comorian diaspora in France largely reconstructs the separate structures on the islands themselves (Interview Said Ali Said Ahmed, March 15, 2010).

¹ Paper presented at the Symposium “New Dynamics in Swahili Studies”, Bayreuth, June 10-11, 2014. The content and the argument of the paper have not been modified thereafter. The paper has been proofread though. All translations by the author.

Identity Formation in Postcolonial Translocal Spaces

Due to the difficult economic situation and chronic political instability, there has been large-scale emigration from the Comoros, and the majority have migrated to France, where an estimated 200,000 Franco-Comorians live – in Paris, Marseille and other urban centres such as Bordeaux, where I started my research. By far the largest number of Franco-Comorians, however, live in Marseille, where people of Comorian origin make up about 10% of the population of France's second largest metropolis, making it the largest “Comorian city” with more inhabitants than Moroni, the capital on Ngazidja (Bertoncello 2000, Direche-Slimani & Le Houérou 2002, Vivier 1996).

Especially for the second and third generation of Franco-Comorians in Marseille, the city plays an important role in their identity formation, as many of them consider themselves *Comarseillés*. The role of the city of Marseille in their identity formation thus seems to be greater than the role of France as a country. The term “translocal” therefore is particularly appropriate for analysing phenomena related to identifying as *Comarseillés*.

The term “Comorian diaspora” generally also includes Franco-Comorians born in France or in other countries outside Comoros, such as Madagascar, La Réunion or on the East African mainland. Apart from different places of origin, main divisions in the Franco-Comorian community can be seen between those who hold a higher education and those who came as workers. Probably more importantly, people differ according to the importance they attach to each of these three “codes”: the hierarchical system of Comorian society, in which Great Marriage is still of great importance (*le code mila*), Islam (*le code islamique*) or the secular republic (*le code républicain*). Of course, these three main points of reference also overlap and can be drawn upon by individuals depending on different circumstances (Interview Ahmad Mohamed Abdallah, 16 March 2010).

But what does it actually mean to be a Comorian? And what is the significance of *Swahilité* for the Franco-Comorian population? Due to the complex history of the archipelago, marked by numerous partitions and (re)unions, and the current complex political situation within the Union of Comoros and in its relationship with Mayotte, “being Comorian” is a contested concept: “Comorien – on ne sait jamais ça inclût combien des îles la dedans – trois, quatre ou deux?” [“Comorian – you never know how many islands are in there – three, four or two?”] remarks Ahmad Mohamed Abdallah, who was born and raised on Grande Comore and has lived in Bordeaux for almost 40 years (Interview Ahmad Mohamed Abdallah, 24 March 2010).

Confusion about the meaning of the term “Comorian” is the reason why many French-Comorians refuse to identify themselves with this term, preferring instead to refer to the island from which their family originates. Generally, the village where one was born is the main point of

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identification (see Walker 2011). The associations are usually based on origin from a particular town or village on one of the islands.

However, some people also look for a broader concept with which they can identify. Ahmed Mohamed Abdallah, for example, emphasises that he does not identify himself as a Comorian, but as a *Mshingazija* (someone from Ngazidja, Grande Comore) on the one hand and as a Mswahili on the other – he describes himself as a “*Mswahili Francophone*”. This leads us to the question of what *Swahilité* means to Comorians in the diaspora? In what sense is the term used and what meaning does it have for whom?

Concept of *Swahilité*

As Njubi has noted, debates over the meaning of ‘Kiswahili’ and ‘Mswahili’ date back to the 1970s and have been fought mainly between two camps: “the ‘purists’ who insisted that the Waswahili are a distinct ethnic group, and those who claimed that the term ‘Mswahili’ refers to a speech community rather than a distinct ethnic group. Scholars who trace their origins to the core group of Kiswahili speakers on the Indian Ocean coast tend to identify with the first category of ‘purists’” (2009: 108).

In light of the research conducted in France, I propose to understand *Swahilité* as a “state of mind”, a term that serves an important identification function for individuals. However, it is not necessarily linked to speaking Swahili competently. Neither Ahmed Almorone, who describes himself as a “*Swahili francophone*”, nor Ahamada Smis, in whose work as a slam artist the search for his cultural origins and thus the concept of *Swahilité* play an important role, speak more than a few sentences of Swahili. In the case of Ahamada Smis, he does not even master Shikomor to a degree that would allow him to write the verses of his song lyrics in that language.²

There are, of course, also Franco-Comorians who speak Swahili because of their family history, such as Salimat Abdallah, whose first language is Comorian and her second is Swahili. Her father was born in Zanzibar and all his children learned Swahili at home and French at school. The family had a jahazi (boat) and regularly travelled back and forth between the East African mainland and the Comoros. Today, family members live in Zanzibar, Dar-es-Salaam, Mombasa, Lamu, Bordeaux, Paris and Copenhagen. Salimat’s children were born in France and she only spoke French with them. They understand Comorian passively but cannot speak it, and they do not speak Swahili at all – much to Salimat’s regret, because her children can hardly communicate with their grandfather, who speaks Swahili but little Comorian (Interview Salimat Abdallah, 21 March 2010, Bordeaux).

² His work will be the focus of the second part of this paper.

Thus, while Daniela Waldburger pointed out in her article that we should also extend our interest to Swahili speakers who do not share any other characteristics of being Swahili besides the language, I would like to argue for including people who claim *Swahilité* as an important part of their identity formation due to historical ties, even though they may not speak Swahili.

***Swahilité* and Popular Culture**

As geographer Said Ahmed has argued, *Swahilité* is an essential part of Comorian identity formation, albeit on a more subconscious level (Interview Said Ali Said Ahmed, 15 March 2010).³ This general absence of the term *Swahilité* among the majority of Franco-Comorians may come as a surprise when one considers the sphere of popular culture produced and consumed by Franco-Comorians in Marseille, where *twarab* (cf. Graebner 2001a, 2001b) is certainly the most popular form of music. *Twarab soirées* are organised regularly, almost every Saturday evening, by people who come from the same village in the Comoros and who then use the money generated to finance development projects in their home village.⁴

The origins of Comorian *twarab* in Zanzibari *taarab* are usually highlighted, and *twarab* music can certainly be considered a vector of *Swahilité*:

Ici, c'est comme à Zanzibar. Ici, c'est beaucoup, beaucoup le Twarab. Ici les gens qui ne font pas le Twarab, ils se battent. Comme nous, quand on va faire un concert. Mais les gens qui aiment trop le Twarab, ils ne vont pas venir. Par contre, des grands artistes qui vont venir ici mais qui jouent autre chose que le Twarab – y'a pas beaucoup de gens qui vont le voir. (Interview Ali Cheikh Mohamed, 2012)

Here it's like Zanzibar. Here, it is very, very Twarab. Here people who don't do Twarab, they fight. Like us, when we go to a concert. But people who like Twarab too much, they won't come. On the other hand, great artists who come here but play something else than Twarab – not many people go to see it.

I would like to argue that especially for the younger generation, most of whom grew up or were born in France, the concept of *Swahilité* has been gaining importance in recent years through other forms of popular music that are, at first glance, much less associated with it: namely, slam poetry. Slam poet Ahamada Smis, in particular, has created a body of work that reflects and discusses translocal identities. The same applies to the musicians who see themselves as Afro-folk producers, such as the group Afropa, which is the focus of the documentary film “Creating Comoria”, which I realised together with filmmaker Andrés Carvajal (Englert & Carvajal 2014).

³ The situation is different for the Mahorais, who have French citizenship and generally do not even ask the question about their comorianité. (Interview Combo Abdallah, 24 March 2010)

⁴ Here, too, the situation on Mayotte differs considerably, as *twarab* is by far not as popular there as on the other islands, first and foremost Grande Comore. (Interview Doudou, 20 March 2010). See also my more recent work Englert & Fritsch 2015, Englert 2018.

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Artists such as Ahamada Smis or Afropa can be considered as intermediaries between generations of Franco-Comorians: They use strategies of mixing in terms of language, musical styles and collaborations (with Twarab singers as well as rappers). Their main motivation is to pass on their music and the rhythms they perceive as Comorian to the next generation – from which they differ in terms of their biological age, as they are already in their forties. Moreover, they differ in terms of their life experience in Comoros, but not in terms of their social status within the diaspora community, because in social terms they are also “youths”, since they did not perform the *Grand Mariage*. Their political alliance is therefore also with youth organisations like “Comores Ushababi”, with whose goals they agree. The same goes for people like Ahmad Mohamed Abdallah, who is not an artist himself, but works as a music journalist (specialising in blues) and also occupies an “outsider-insider” position among the Franco-Comorians based in Bordeaux.

Ahamada Smis and His Works

Ahamada Smis was born in Comoros and came to Marseille in 1983 at the age of ten. In Marseille he encountered various forms of popular music, rock, pop, but what influenced him the most was hip hop culture. He emphasises that hip hop is a culture and not just a form of music: “le hip hop ce n’est pas une musique, c’est une culture” (Interview Ahamada Smis, 27 February 2012). After a few years, he realised that he could never rap as hard as an American, so he decided to return to his origins and incorporate his Comorian roots into his musical work (see also Englert & Fritsch 2015, Englert 2021).

In 1999, after an absence of 16 years, he returned to the Comoros for the first time since his arrival in Marseille. He had longed to go for many years, but the plane ticket was too expensive, it cost about 1500 euros. Upon his return, he realised that he knew nothing about the history of the Comoros, as he had only been exposed to French history during his school years. He noticed that there are no books about the Comoros, as the history is mainly passed down orally. This motivated him to write his song “Comores”, in which he summarises the history of the Comoros in 3:30 minutes. For this song, he researched with older Comorians in Marseille, he also searched for sources on the internet and compared the sources to create his song, which took him five years to write (Interview Ahamada Smis, 27 February 2012).

«Comores» von Ahmada Smis,

Album «Etre» 2010, Colombe Records

La légende raconte à qui veut le croire

La reine de Saba perdit sa bague en haute mer

Causa l’éruption volcanique

Sortant les Comores entre Madagascar et l’Afrique

BIRGIT ENGLERT

Là, où l'autre légende nous ramène aux djins
Chassés par le roi Salomon
Volent la couronne de la reine,
La jettent du mont, creusent plus grand cratère du monde.
Terre lunaire, ile aux Sultans,
Terre des contes, ile aux parfums
Maoré, Dzouani,
Gazidja Moili
L'islam est notre ciment.

Refrain

Maoré, Dzouani, CC
Gazidja Moili, CC
Les iles aux sultans CC
Comores mon pays.
Maoré, Dzouani, CC
Gazidja Moili, CC
Les iles aux Parfums CC
Comores mon pays.

Archéologues, ethnologues
Nous ramènent loin en arrière
Danks l'aire préhistorique.
Quatre volcans naissent, tour à tour meurent
Le Karthala seul actif de nos jours
Mètis bantous-arabes
Gagnent nos iles au séptième siècle
Deviennent les premiers habitants
Débarqués de l'Afrique orientale
Swahili notre culture.
Vie tribale, nos chefs des bedjas
Deviennent des sultans aux temps des sultanats
Princesses perses accostent nos rivages

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Tracent lignages dans leur mariage.

Refrain

Epoque féodale, guerres territoriales
L'archipel se fragilise
De Zanzibar à Mogadscio,
Les renforts se coalisent
Razzias malgaches traumatisent
La France profite, nous divise
Peu à peu nous colonise
Lache prise en 75.

Refrain

Il me faudrait plus d'un livre
Pur raconter les Comores
Son histoire, sa flore
Un album aux noms de mes origines
Mille et une nuits pour raconter mes contes
Simbad le marin est passé par là comme
Vasco da Gama sur la route des Indes
Les Malaisiens et leur ylang Malaysians
C'est à suivre dans mon prochain tome.

Generally, in his music, the choruses are written either in Shikomor (Comorian from Grande Comore) and/or Swahili, while the verses are written in French.⁵ As he says, he has been in France for so long that he is no longer able to write whole verses in Comorian, only choruses. His music, released by Colombe Records, a label run by his wife, has earned him the recognition of a world music audience. He stresses that he is targeting a wider audience, not exclusively Comorians. With his latest album, “Origines”, released in autumn 2013, he continues his search for links between Comoros and countries in East Africa and the Indian Ocean – in terms of musical connections, but also more generally in terms of the region’s shared history, which affects people’s identities even when they live outside the region, as in the case of Ahamada Smis and other Francocomorans in

⁵ Maalesh, probably the best-known Comorian artist, with whom Ahamada also collaborates on his new album “Origines”, also sings in Swahili and Arabic. He is considered one of the musicians of a new generation who underline their international dimension by using Swahili (Interview Ahmed Mohamed Abdallah, 18 March 2010).

Marseille. The songs on “Origines” (2013) were recorded in Grande Comore, Mayotte, Zanzibar⁶, La Réunion and Marseille, for the earlier album “Etre” (2010) he had also recorded two tracks in Kinshasa (DRC).

The Role of Mobility as a Means of Gaining New Perspectives on One’s Own Identity

As Ahmada tells it, his travels through the wider East African region played a key role in making him aware of the concept of *Swahilité*, which he now emphasises in his work. On his trips to the Democratic Republic of Congo and Tanzania, he became aware that the people in these countries “speak our language”, as he says. This was a crucial experience for him, because the connection between Shikomor and Kiswahili is a hidden one in Marseille, where he grew up. Among Franco-Comorians, Shikomor is generally considered a language of low prestige, especially in the French context. However, in the East African context, he recognised, firstly, the close relationship of Shikomor to Swahili and, secondly, the importance of Swahili. Ahmada recounts an example where he worked with a Zanzibari cameraman who did not speak English but with whom he communicated in Shikomor/Swahili. A similar situation occurred in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where he found that people in Lubumbashi also spoke Swahili, and both sides were surprised to find that their languages were closely related: “Je suis bantou comme vous, je suis bantou insulaire” (“I am a Bantu like you, I am an island Bantu.” Interview Ahmada Smis, 27 February 2012).

The widespread use of Swahili throughout East Africa, i.e., its international dimension, and the experience of being able to communicate with Swahili speakers even though he only speaks Shikomor (and not to an extent that allows him to write verses in that language, as mentioned above), have made him appreciate Shikomor much more. For people like Ahmada Smis, *Swahilité* serves as a means of identity construction for Comorians – a positive connotation of belonging to a Swahili world. It serves as a means to affirm their connection to the world, a means to value their own languages – Shingazidja, Shinzwani, Shimwali or Shimaoré – more.

In this case thus, mobility/travel created an awareness of translocal connections and facilitated identity constructions that are an alternative to the context of the diaspora community with its emphasis on origins traceable to specific villages/islands. While these concepts do not lose their value, broader concepts such as *Swahilité* which was emphasised by people like Ahmada Smis or Ahmed Almorone who I consider as “brokers”, offer new (old) forms of identification that go beyond the state – which in the case of the Comoros tends to be accompanied by confusion about what it actually means to be ‘Comorian’ as outlined at the beginning of this paper. Thus, the appeal

⁶ He also travelled to the Tanzanian mainland, but did not record there.

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of older and broader concept such as *Swahilité*, which takes on a very positive connotation in this context of mobility and translocal connections, has to be understood in this context.

In contrast, many Comorians do not want to be associated with Africa, as the continent is generally held in low esteem due to the still existing association of Africa with the history of slavery (Interview Ahmada Smis, 27 February 2012; cf. interview Combo Abdallah, 23 March 2010; interview Salimat Abdallah, 21 March 2010). The projection of Africa as “weak” is also reflected in the origin of the various djinn (spirits): the very powerful ones are seen as Arab djinn, the slightly less powerful ones as Malagasy, while the weak djinn are seen as African (Interview Ahmada Smis, 27 February 2012).

As Ahamada Smis points out, the feeling of inferiority is still very present on the islands. In Marseille, too, the estimated 10 per cent of the population of (French) Comorian origin represent a rather “invisible” group. As Ahamada Smis points out, due to the low economic status of most of them and the lack of knowledge about Comorian history and culture in Marseille, the Franco-Comoros largely lack self-confidence: “on nous regarde, mais on ne sais pas qui on est”. This situation is slowly changing as those who grew up in France have developed a different self-confidence – a process in which artistic creation plays an important role: “notre musique, nos paroles sont écoutées, par les enfants, par les adultes [...]” (“our music, our words are listened to, by children, by adults [...]” Interview Ahmada Smis, 27 February 2012). Artists like Ahamada Smis create a body of work that aims to familiarise a new generation of French-born Franco-Comorians in particular with the history of the country from which their parents emigrated and which is generally reduced to tiny, economically insignificant islands in a state of constant political crisis. By emphasising their history and its translocal dimension, which continues to this day, he creates a narrative in which he connects the archipelago of the Comoros with a greater East African region, linked not least by the notion of *Swahilité* - which for some can mean speaking Swahili, while for others it can mean a more unspecific but therefore no less “real” notion of belonging to a Swahili world.

Swahili has become a positive concept that people want to identify with and that provides clarity in a state of postcolonial confusion, as in the case of the Franco-Comorians. Interestingly, Pan-African ideology does not seem to play a role, unlike the Swahili speakers in the US (cf. Waldburger, as well as Mazrui & Njogu, this volume). Rather, the interviews with Ahamada and others suggest that mobility, i.e., personal travel experiences and connections, seem to have played a key role in the formation of an awareness of being Swahili.

Conclusion

The difficult political situation which has characterized the post-colonial period on the Comorian archipelago has contributed to a rejection of the label “Comorian”. The people I talked to in France either emphasized their belonging to a specific island within the archipelago and/or referred to themselves as “Swahili”. In contrast to “African”, a Swahili identity has a positive image that is strongly linked to the growing international recognition of the language. *Swahilité* is adopted as a positive concept that fulfils the desire to belong to a larger group that dates back to a pre-colonial time. This function can also be fulfilled for people who are not proficient in Swahili.

Is this appropriation of the concept of *Swahilité* by non-Swahili speakers in the diaspora a cause for concern? In my view, it rather points to the “success story” of *Swahilité*, Swahiliness, in recent decades and should therefore be seen positively. In attempting to conceptualise the Swahili world, I therefore suggest including the imagined spaces in which Swahiliness occurs – and these can be found in cultural/artistic practices.

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