Kinship as gift and theft:
Acts of succession in Mayotte and Ancient Israel

Marshall Sahlins (1965) once described a continuum of reciprocity, characterized by extreme generosity and selflessness at one end and selfishness and even theft at the other, with balanced exchange in the middle. Sahlins located kinship at the positive end and continues to see it as the epitome of generosity (see Sahlins 2008), whereas Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969) emphasized balanced affinal exchange at the midpoint. In either case, kinship is set off from the far end of the spectrum that Sahlins called “negative reciprocity.” This is a matter of definition—kin are those who are not strangers or enemies (Murphy 1972)—and of ideology—kin should never practice negative reciprocity with one another. But, of course, outsiders are created by practices of endogamy or exclusion, and kin frequently do treat each other badly. Enmity is often the product of a refusal of kinship or a breach of commitment; strangers were once intimates. Kinship, then, may be conceived as a kind of theft or hoarding, of something kept to or for oneself, at the betrayal or expulsion of the other. In the Torah, expulsion is to be found in the story of Ishmael, and betrayal in the next generation is explicitly a story of theft, as Jacob steals the blessing of his brother Esau.1 Here I examine the conflict of kinship as it emerged around the deaths of the parents who had assimilated me into their family on my first fieldwork in Mayotte in 1975. Mayotte is an island in the Comoro Archipelago of the Western Indian Ocean; during the years covered by this article, Mayotte has shifted in stages from being a French colony toward full integration as a département of the French state. Inhabitants of Mayotte are Muslim and have cognatic kinship and little gender segregation. The people I worked with are speakers of Kibushy (Malagasy).2

In an article published in this journal in 1988, I developed a model of the way people in Mayotte succeed to spirit possession, sometimes becoming mediums of the same spirits that possessed senior members of their family before them. I presented the case of two sisters, Nuriaty and Mariam, each of whom had greater affinity with a different parent. Whereas Nuriaty had already become possessed by the spirits that possessed their

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father, Mariam was unpossessed but retained a particularly close relationship with one of the spirits who possessed their mother. The family said that the spirit would eventually transfer to Mariam, but only shortly before her mother’s death. Subsequent field trips have enabled me to follow up on the sisters’ situation, my observations confirming both the prediction and my model but also showing that people are never fully predictable and that a neat ideal model looks very different when it is realized painfully in practice.

**Acts of kinship**

I make three general points concerning kinship. First, the study of kinship should include what happens toward the middle and end of life and not just at the beginning. Second, a fundamental aspect of later life concerns succession. I understand succession to entail intergenerational social and psychological transmission and transition, identification and differentiation, and thereby distinguish it more or less from the simple inheritance of material property or accession to office. Third, and perhaps less uncontroversially, I conceive of succession, and kinship more generally, as constituted through the performance of acts. These acts range from the deliberate and formal, like Isaac’s blessing of Jacob, to the relatively informal, like addressing someone by a kin term, and even the unconscious, like becoming possessed by a particular spirit.  

The focus on acts can be seen as a development from a practice-theory approach to kinship, itself a kind of unacknowledged but productive successor to descent, alliance, and cultural models (Bourdieu 1977; Carsten 2004; Ortner 1984; Peletz 1995; Yan 2001). Kinship, in the sense of what the family in Mayotte extended to me (and as many anthropologists have experienced it in the field), is, in the first instance, not a matter of shared substance or code but a set of commitments, played out in practice and publicly articulated. The practice could be called “care” (Faubion 2001); it entails attention, foresight, reliability, mutual respect, memory, and what David M. Schneider (1968) termed “diffuse, enduring solidarity.” Yet, if kinship often entails a continuous stream of everyday unremarked acts of care, these acts are neither necessary (e.g., in the case of sustained absence from the community) nor sufficient for constituting kinship. That my relations with the family in Mayotte are not ones of full kinship is not for insufficient care or presence, lack of a blood or genetic tie, or only because our relations are not authorized by law. What is lacking is the enactment of deliberate, marked rituals that would formally, substantively, and conclusively constitute or consummate our relationship as one of kinship and publicly affirm our mutual commitment to it, such that any subsequent departure from solidarity would be perceived as a specific kind of fault or failure. Practice by itself is unpredictable and ambiguous; it needs to be articulated with respect to something more certain and lasting. That “something,” I argue, is the set of criteria and commitments constituted through deliberate ritual acts, rather than simply abstract law or (ostensibly) natural substance.

Kinship is constituted not only through the daily labor of nurturance or care but in acts: of naming (vom Bruck and Bodenhorn 2006), welcoming (Gottlieb 2004), addressing, feeding (Carsten 1997; Weismantel 1995), respecting, circumcising, marrying (Comaroff 1980) and marrying off (Lambek 1983), disposing of property, blessing, settling, releasing, commemorating the dead (Kwon 2008), and so on. Acts of kinship, in the sense I am using the term, are not ongoing and continuous, not simply a matter of habit or having a feel for the game (Bourdieu 1977). Rather, acts stand out within the stream of practice as marked and often irreversible. They can be construed as interventions in the stream of practice; they are intentional and consequential, yet their consequences are never fully predictable (Arendt 1998). Moreover, such acts are not always positive and incorporative; they may be conceived as acts of giving but also experienced as acts of theft.

Some of the more formal acts of kinship are what have been called “rites of passage.” Whereas anthropology once treated rites of passage as somewhat superficial to kinship, contemporary theory of ritual suggests that they lie at the heart of it. Indeed, ritual appears intrinsic to the production of kinship, rather than merely a superficial covering. Although they cannot solve intellectual puzzles about the relationship of nature to culture, ritual acts somehow transcend them. To borrow Ludwig Wittgenstein’s aphorism, “man is a ceremonial animal” (1979; cf. James 2003). Philosopher J. L. Austin (1962) demonstrated that things are accomplished in acts of utterance performed in the right contexts. A marriage vow, felicitously (i.e., correctly) applied, changes the state of affairs. Not only does it produce a married couple out of two individuals or reproduce an alliance between two descent groups but it also establishes the criteria according to which future acts, including nonritual or relatively unmarked ones, among the parties will be configured, oriented, and evaluated. Following Rappaport (1999:133), adultery, for example, is defined in relation to a vow of sexual loyalty; having sex with someone other than one’s spouse does not render the marriage void but, to the contrary, is itself constituted and evaluated with respect to the prior act, and therefore the fact, of marriage. Feeding or refusing to feed kin is not the same as offering or refusing hospitality to guests. What holds for marriage or nurturance is also true of becoming a parent (Thomas 1999) or succeeding one.

Such acts contain a dimension I refer to not simply as meaningful but as ethical. They are ethical in the sense not that they are inevitably good or just but that they entail criteria for judgment as well as acceptance or acknowledgment by actors of their commitment to their acts and...
consequences. They occur in reference to past and future as well as the sheer present and are not easily undone. Acknowledgment and commitment are reinforced by the fact that, frequently, participants include not only the principals and those acted on but also those granted the authority to officiate and those who serve as witnesses. Such public acts are highly marked; they assert themselves as consequential, and they serve to place persons within long-term and possibly permanent relationships or to transform the nature of those relationships. They do so by establishing and acknowledging the criteria for engaging in and evaluating subsequent practice. In sum, relations and practice are produced or transformed by means of acts as much as acts presuppose and emerge out of a structure of relations and a stream of practice.7

My point concerns not the internal tripartite structure of rites of passage (Turner 1969) but, rather, the consequences for the future borne by what is accomplished, as the act casts itself forward onto subsequent practice (Lambek 2007). A vow once uttered, a child acknowledged, or a spirit embodied has implications for subsequent practice with respect to that promise, child, or spirit, that is, with respect to the meaning and evaluation of subsequent actions and events. Whether a man is a good father, husband, or son (or a woman a good mother, etc.) subsequent to the acknowledgment of paternity, act of marriage, or receipt of the paternal blessing, he nevertheless now is a father, husband, or son, and what he does is constituted and evaluated—by him and others—in those terms. What is at stake is not the monitoring or regulation of individuals or behavior but the constitution of social relations, acts, and persons, placing them, as philosophers say, “under a description” (Anscombe 1963; Hacking 1995).

Acts do not occur in a vacuum, and practices do not occur except in terms of criteria established by means of prior acts. Thus, although practice is one way to think about kinship, it must still be considered in relation to structure. Structure in this case is defined not (or not only) as a synchronic grid of kin terms, a web of relationships, or rules to generate relationships, or even as the abstract or ideal model of relationships, but as the framework for an institution of order of acts and the criteria that constitute acts as such, specify the felicity of their enactment (under proper conditions, with respect to recognized parties, etc.), and become contextually relevant by reference to them.

However, if ritual acts are embedded within what Rappaport (1999:169–170) calls a “liturgical order,” this does not remove factors of chance, contingency, deliberation, or judgment. Some acts fail to meet all the established felicity conditions. I take Isaac’s blessing of Jacob as recounted in the book of Genesis (Bereshit) as paradigmatic of an act of kinship in the sense both of order and of contingency. With the help of his mother (and as intended and justified by God), Jacob deceitfully put himself in the place of his twin brother Esau so that he might receive the paternal blessing of the first-born. The act of blessing was completed successfully, despite running counter to both the birth order and Isaac’s intention. Jacob succeeded his father.8

As the Jacob story makes clear, a focus on acts must also acknowledge the emotional vectors of kinship, its intensity and drama.9 As we all know from our own lives, kinship is constituted not simply in routine practice but is full of anticipation, imagination, contestation, fulfillment, regret, and retrospection. It has suspense, resolution, and dénouement as well as tedium. This emotional dimension is not just a matter for soap opera or melodrama but lies at the heart of foundational myths. Will we marry, conceive, bury our parents, become ancestors? Kinship entails promises and breaches of promise, acts and violations of intimacy, and acts of forgiveness and revenge. In some systems and at some moments, success is predicated on competition—who will receive the spouse, baby, bequest, or blessing?—but the outcome can turn equally on fate as on justice. Viewing kinship as drama obviously owes something to Victor Turner (1957) but equally to Meyer Fortes’s (1983) inspiring application of the Oedipus and Job stories to Tallensi kinship. The Tallensi understand kinship as human flourishing, what the ancient Greeks called “eu-daimonia,” fruitful, productive lives in which means and ends are conjoined in the practice and art of living. But, as Tallensi well know, some children die young, some adults are infertile, and some people appear to be cursed. The circumstances are often understood with respect to divine or other nonhuman intervention. Challenges must be met and overcome, and the outcome is always, in some respects, in suspense. Kinship is not a matter for complacency.

Insofar as kinship is constituted through a series of acts, it exists in stages of intention, expectation, and fulfillment but also frustration and violation.10 It is not absolute and unambiguous, as one popular ideology in North America might suggest, operating according to a binary logic of either–or—either the blood or legal connection is present or it is absent, either the facts are true or they are false—as in the case of the man who wants recompense for child support when he discovers that he is not the genitor of the child he has raised.11 The invocation of truth and falsity in this sense is based on a representational theory of language and of kinship as an underlying reality, subject to representation. Speech act theory serves precisely to point out the limitations of such a theory of language (Austin 1965); as Jacob’s success implies, ordinary criteria of truth and falsity do not apply to states of affairs that are brought into being through illocutionary acts (Rappaport 1999:344). The criteria that apply are ethical.
The study of kinship has recently been given new life, in large part through the opportunities afforded by new reproductive technologies. The results have been illuminating, but a focus on these technologies also has certain, largely unremarked, general effects. First, it tends to narrow kinship to procreation and the achievement of parenthood. This focus obviates one of the insights of the older literature, which was that so-called nuclear family relations must be seen as precipitates within larger networks and dynamics of kinship, not as their building blocks. In other words, even as it appears to challenge them, the “new” anthropology of kinship risks staying too close to contemporary so-called nuclear or even more minimal constructs of family and to ideologies of individual achievement and possessive individualism that imply that body substances are personal or transactable property and that children are the right and property of their parents. One of the things missing here is how children identify with and separate from their parents, becoming subjects and actors in their own right. Moreover, with some important exceptions (e.g., Bamford 2007; Bamford and Leach 2009; Carsten 2004), the new kinship has emphasized the first phases of the life cycle, as though social reproduction could be limited to biological reproduction and adoption. A focus on assisted reproduction ignores subjects like laterality and siblingship and implicitly reinforces the Euro-American ideology of kinship as concentrated in biological reproduction and sentimentality. To the degree that it moves from substance and code to acts, the emphasis is on producing attachment rather than separation, alignment, reciprocity, or replacement. But just as the subject of memory must concern itself with forgetting, so must the study of relationships deal, as Melanesian ethnography in particular has shown (e.g., Battaglia 1990; Mosko 1983; Wagner 1977; Weiner 1976), with disentangling or disengaging from them.

In contrast, then, to ever more abstract or complex iterations of the “romance of the egg and the sperm” (Martin 1991) or alternatives with respect to adoption, I turn to succession. Acts of succession can be understood as reproductive no less than those that surround procreation. The story of Jacob and Esau illustrates beautifully that critical acts of kinship do not occur only at the beginning of life and, indeed, that an act of great consequence and certainty, the paternal blessing, can occur relatively late. Succession is confirmed not at the birth of the child but around the death of the parent. Indeed, the ostensibly natural facts of birth order and chronological seniority are eventually superseded. The natural “facts” are never sufficient for kinship but always subordinated to social “acts.” Even normative practices can be overturned by contingent acts.

Jacob’s story demonstrates not only that one cannot be complacent about ostensibly natural or normative facts like birth order but also that deliberate acts do not treat everyone equally. Kinship is constituted as much through discrimination and competition as through incorporation and solidarity. If expansive families like the ones that incorporate fieldworkers speak to the gift of and for kinship, sibling rivalry and impartible inheritance demonstrate the theft of kinship. The paring down of kinship is especially salient in families destined for leadership, as Abraham’s was.

Succession has deep psychological as well as social entailments, with roots in the intimacy of family life. Isaac knows his son Esau’s tastes and habits; he recognizes the smell of his clothing and feels the hair on his body. Rebecca listens in as family members converse and draw on the strengths and weaknesses of each. Members know each other’s secrets and that some knowledge should remain unspoken. The conjunction of intimacy and rivalry is experienced as forms of love, favoritism, ambivalence, and jealousy (Rebecca’s greater love for Jacob and Isaac’s for Esau). In psychoanalytic terms, processes of identification and differentiation, internalization and separation, are at work, related to the playing out of Oedipal rivalry and object choice. In the literature, they are generally framed around the triad of the young child and his or her parents, another instance of focusing on the early phases of life. But when one turns to the social implications of these psychological forces and processes, the scene moves to adulthood (Oedipus committed his fateful acts as a grown man), and the triad is often between multiple adult siblings and an elderly parent. Moreover, in succession, the primary locus of agency shifts from the parent, who may choose his or her successor, to the adult child, who ensures and affirms that he or she is the one chosen, sometimes at the expense of siblings.

Succession implies success, and it may be depicted as a matter of passing some kind of test. The unsuccessful sibling arrives too late. Acts like the blessing of Jacob are irreversible. They cannot be taken back, at least not without an equally complex act of undoing. Whereas, from a structural perspective, kinship can be construed as reversible or cyclical (Geertz 1973; Lévi-Strauss 1969), from the action perspective, kinship is a matter of going forward, not back. Birth, sacrifice, and circumcision and other forms of scarification are vivid exemplifications of acts that cannot be taken back (Lambeke 2007).

Acts differ in the degree of their formality, their location within an affirmed sequence of acts, and the extent of their public recognition. The paternal blessing invoked by Isaac is conventional and formal. The prior exchange between the brothers of birthright for potage and Rebecca’s instruction of her son are less formal and occur outside the established order. That the group of siblings in Mayotte sent me word of their parents’ deaths and that they waited for me to join them to perform the final commemorative ceremony (that takes place some time after the funeral) were
acts of kinship, but they were less formal, less public, and less consequential than our performance together of that ritual in 2005. But as I show below, decisive acts are not restricted to the most formal domain.

**Confronting loss**

Although this article is not about Mohedja’s and Tumbu’s deaths per se or about the performance of the public *mandeving* ritual commemorating the two, it is in large part provoked by what ensued in the family following their deaths. In writing about the family, I too am stealing kinship insofar as I betray confidences. The anthropologist is no less a trickster than the younger sibling, here out to steal not the birthright but the right to speak. Kinship and ethnography have this in common—that the intimacy on which they are based inevitably provokes betrayal and, thus, at least retrospectively, a sense of deception. This betrayal is doubled when the ethnography presented is about the intimacy of kinship itself. It is hardly excused by using pseudonyms, as I do here.

Mohedja died suddenly on April 19, 2004, collapsing on her verandah after returning from walking a grandchild to nursery school. At the time of Mohedja’s death, her husband Tumbu had been bedridden for several years. He died eight months after his wife, on December 24, 2004. Mohedja and Tumbu left behind five daughters and two sons, speaking here only of their biological offspring. My account concerns primarily their oldest children, Nuriaty and Mariam, both grown women with grandchildren of their own (cf. Lambek 1988). The plot, in brief, is that the elder of the two, Nuriaty, renounces seniority and Mariam claims it. Both appear to do so with some ambivalence; Mariam in particular is ambivalent insofar as her succession remains partially acknowledged by the remaining siblings.

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In Mayotte, there are several modalities or registers of what I am calling “succession,” in the sense of actions affirming and clarifying intergenerational transmission and transition. One is the performance of the public ritual known as mandeving, in which adult children collectively acknowledge their deceased parents by directing Islamic prayers toward them. A second involves the realignments among the siblings with respect to seniority within the family; a third concerns matters of inheritance and distribution of property. But also, in families affected by spirit possession, possible movement occurs of spirits from hosts (mediums) in the parental generation to hosts in the next. Succession to mediumship, which may begin long before or long after the death of the parent, entails acquiring the voice and person of the spirit along with the social relationships the particular spirit held with others. Additionally, offspring address the loss of their parents in less formal ways. These were touchingly evident in this case in the narratives of their parents’ respective deaths that each sibling found the opportunity to recite privately to me. Finally, covert means exist by which the family collectively addresses its misfortune.

The Muslim *mandeving* ceremony, although highly successful and satisfying, did not resolve the more personal aspects of the adult children’s identification with and separation from their parents, their sense of loss, or the issues outstanding between the siblings themselves. If the mandeving is the performance, in effect, of a blessing of the deceased parents produced (but not directly pronounced) by their offspring, what form does the parents’ blessing of, or final message to, the offspring take? That act is not as clear or as public in Mayotte as it was in ancient Israel. How do the children know that their mother or father has blessed them? Who is there to acknowledge it? How do siblings renegotiate their relationships with each other and to the world in the absence of their parents? These issues must also find the means for expression.

**Realignment of the siblings**

Each extended family (*mraba*) in Mayotte has its “adults,” “parents,” or “elders,” known as *ulu be*, literally, “big people.” When emphasizing the emotional valence of their loss, the siblings would say, “Alas, we are bereft, we have no more mother, no more father, no ulu be.” Other things being equal, on the death of the actual parents, the first-born brother and sister informally become the ulu be with respect to their siblings. That is, they take on parental responsibility, by care, example, initiative, advice, and leadership. Their doing so confirms and extends the respect that is always shown to older siblings (*zuky*) by younger ones (*zandry*). Referring to one’s ulu be as “mother” and “father” is optional. In this case, although the oldest sibling is Nuriaty, it was Mariam whom the others came to call “ulu be.” Now, there is some irony here. I had published an essay about Nuriaty that described her as an ethical virtuoso (Lambek 2002b). But life goes on, and people do not always rise to successive challenges as well as they have responded to past ones. Although she participated fully in the mandeving, Nuriaty was perceived by her siblings to have failed in her duty to their parents when they were still alive, and she refused to take up the position of ulu be on their death, leaving it, by default, to Mariam.

The designation of ulu be is not sharp or marked by an explicit act. In 2005, when I asked the youngest sibling who he thought the ulu be was, he said it was probably Nuriaty. But, in 2007, Mariam affirmed that she herself was now the mother of the extended family and that
her brother Amady was the father.21 Mariam added that because Nuriaty was not around much, she could not serve as mother. The role is one of responsibility rather than prestige and not taken up without ambivalence. A few moments later, Mariam reflected, “You have just one father and one mother, and when they go, you can’t replace them.”

Several circumstances in Nuriaty’s life led to her displacement. Much to her dismay, she had given birth to only three children, all sons. One died in childhood, another had moved to Réunion, and the third had been seriously ill and died in 2008 (of a heart condition). Nuriaty had remarried the man who had been her husband 30 years earlier and who was the father of her children. He lived in a different village, and she joined him there, where a son built her a nice house.22 She was thus no longer around on a daily basis and had recently even declared that she would continue to live in the other village if her husband were to die. She had made the decision to move late in her father’s long illness, when his children were taking turns with the onerous task of daily nursing and in which she had taken an active part. She arrived late for her mother’s funeral. Moreover, when her father had been moved to the hospital to die, she had flown off to Réunion (1,700 kilometers away) to look after a daughter-in-law who had just given birth. This too is an expected form of care, and she declared that her father had permitted her to go, but others doubted his acquiescence, found the timing unseemly, and further criticized her for not returning immediately for his funeral. As one unrelated woman bluntly said, “There is no one ahead of one’s parents, father and mother. God comes first, then one’s parents. What kind of person would do this?”23

A younger sister, Hadia, said she did not know why Nuriaty had been so determined to move to the other village but added that Nuriaty risked receiving embarrassing and hurtful remarks at home from those people who held joking relationships (obişy) with her. If someone were to call out to “the person who went off to Réunion when her father was in hospital,” she would not know how to respond. Hadia added that the siblings themselves had not quarreled with Nuriaty and were only sad that their elder sibling (zuky) had left them. She could have raised her granddaughters as well in her own village as in her husband’s. Hadia concluded that Nuriaty had abandoned them. Both Tumbu and Mohedja had begged her not to go. She was the oldest of the siblings, their parent, and also a healer (fundi). They were left on their own.

I am in no position to judge Nuriaty, but I think her withdrawal from her natal family, shifting the emphasis from being a daughter, sister, and ulu be in her own village to being a wife and grandmother in her husband’s, had to do in part with her own sense of abandonment. I would call it a sense of having been cheated of her parents’ blessing, and in this respect I liken her situation to that of Esau. To explicate this interpretation, I turn to the register of spirit possession.

**Succession to spirits**

In earlier work, I described accession to spirit mediumship as, in part, a matter of succession. I argued that one cannot explain who gets possessed without examining the spirits by whom they are possessed and that possession demonstrates and develops not only overt social relations (Lambek 1988) but also deep psychological connections, what one can call “identification,” “internalization” or “introjection,” and “displacement” (Lambek 2002a). In comparing Nuriaty and Mariam over 20 years ago, I pointed out that Nuriaty identified more closely with their father and Mariam with their mother. As an infant, Nuriaty was taken from Mohedja by Tumbu’s mother to raise. As an adult, while her father was still active, Nuriaty became possessed by the same spirits that possessed him, and he taught her how to work as a curer. She was first his apprentice and then succeeded to his practice, which included the specialized art of sorcery extraction (Lambek 1993).

Mariam was raised by her mother, and the two women were very close. Mariam is a smart and active woman who knows how to get things done; as her father commented to me on more than one occasion, he wished she had been born a boy.24 Mariam has been preoccupied raising her 11 children, all of whom are alive, and her, by now, several grandchildren. By 2005, many of her children had graduated school, some had white-collar jobs, and some were studying in France. They helped their mother, especially in enlarging her house. Mariam has maintained a stable marriage, in which she is the dominant partner.

In addition to enjoying a rich life with her children, Mariam had visited and spent time daily with her mother. Their intimacy was mediated by the spirit Mze Bunu, an elder male patros.25 Mze Bunu had possessed Mohedja for most of her adult life and was the spirit most trusted within the family. Mohedja unconsciously identified the spirit with her own beloved older brother, who had been her ulu be in the absence of a father and was also a renowned healer. Mze Bunu was himself the younger brother of the spirit who had possessed Mohedja’s older brother and who had presided over the illness and healing ceremony at which her own possession was first recognized. Mze Bunu subsequently came to represent Mohedja’s closeness with Mariam. During most of the years in which I visited Mayotte, Mariam, unlike both her parents and her older sister, remained unpossessed. And yet she often privately consulted her parents’ spirits, especially Mze Bunu in her mother, and served as their confidante. I was puzzled why Mariam was not possessed herself. Eventually Mohedja explained to me that, unlike most spirits, Mze Bunu was very selective (mifidy ulu); he liked to rise in only one person at a time. He
had long ago selected Mariam but would only start to actively possess her shortly before Mohedja's own death. In the meantime, he had intimate relations with Mariam, visiting her regularly in her dreams, as he did Mohedja. In fact, in the morning, Mariam and Mohedja would often discover they had had the same dreams the night before. They shared the spirit, the only difference being that he did not rise in Mariam. Mariam was not a medium and declared repeatedly, possibly protesting too much, that she did not want a spirit and would not have one. Privately, she admitted the spirit would move to her eventually. If succession is culturally predicated on the will of the spirit, it is clearly influenced here by the identification between mother and daughter.

And so, on my first return to Mayotte after Mohedja's death, I was very interested to see whether Mariam had become possessed. Although she denied it at first, I learned from a younger sister that, indeed, she did have the spirit, and eventually Mariam agreed that I could call up Mze Bunu to greet him (as I had done through Mohedja on all my previous trips). Mariam insisted, however, that it be done in private, without others in the family knowing.

Mohedja's death had been very sudden, and people said she had not appeared ill beforehand (though she suffered from high blood pressure, or tension). Everyone was particularly surprised that she died before her husband, who was a good deal older and who had been in terrible physical condition for some time. Hence, it is striking that the spirit Mze Bunu moved to Mariam shortly before her mother's death, just as Mohedja had predicted to me years before. The spirit rose first at Mariam's home and went straight over to Mohedja's home to announce himself. Contrary to the normal pattern, Mze Bunu revealed his identity right away, saying that because he was not a stranger or newcomer to the family, there was no need to keep his identity secret before he revealed it in the public initiation ceremony.

Mariam was quite precise that this had taken place exactly four months before her mother died, leaving Mohedja time to manage the details of Mariam's cure, that is, to hold the initiation to legitimate the presence of the spirit in the new medium. However, initiation takes place over a series of three ceremonies, and the family did not have time to complete the third before Mohedja died. Hence, the authority of the spirit in Mariam remained somewhat ambiguous.26

When, in 2005, I asked about the spirits, in front of both Nuriaty and Mariam, Mariam denied that Mze Bunu had moved to her and said, what she well knew I would recognize to be impossible, that the spirits had all died along with their possessors (tompin). On the contrary, said Nuriaty, laughing, their mother's spirits—every one of them—from Mariam's childhood. Indeed, it was thought to have left the family. I too had thought this spirit, known as a mrewa and speaking only Swahili (kingudja), a language currently unspoken in Mayotte, was a relic of Zanzibar's supremacy in the region, an epoch that was long past.

Mariam insisted that she did not want to be possessed or to become a healer and that the spirits did not rise often. In fact, as I discovered later, her attempts to complete the initiations and to recover from the discomfort the spirits were causing her had been somewhat frustrated. An unrelated spirit medium told me that Mariam first sought treatment from Nuriaty. When Mariam grew sicker, she accused Nuriaty of not performing the cure correctly. An argument ensued, and Mohedja took Mariam's side. My informant was convinced that Nuriaty was angry that Mariam had received all the spirits, did not want her to become a medium able to treat people, and did not want to pass on her therapeutic knowledge to her sister. He told me that he and Mariam had discreetly come to an agreement that Mariam would privately become his apprentice. He added that it was not long after the quarrel between the sisters that Mohedja died.

I do not wish to imply that in acquiring the spirits or in getting sicker after being treated by her sister, Mariam acted intentionally, at least insofar as intention is restricted to consciousness. But she was, in a sense, greedy in acquiring so many spirits and without any hint beforehand that this would be the case. Although there is no reason, in principle, why spirits cannot enter multiple offspring, Mariam's acquisition of so many family spirits so suddenly was experienced by Nuriaty as taking place at her expense. And there was really nothing she could do about it.27

Nuriaty herself was adamant that she was no longer interested in anything having to do with spirits (tsy shiguly kabar ny lulu) and turned away all clients who came to her
for treatment. She claimed to have no interest whatsoever in spirits and did not want to be actively possessed (menziyik) any more. “My desire has gone [nafka shoku] ever since my mother died … I’m really tired [of it] [vaha, vaha, vaha].” She added that she had begun to think about the afterlife (kiyama), that is, about becoming a more respectable Muslim. Later she offered a more practical explanation: She had been suffering pain in her leg (possibly sciatica) for some time and could no longer collect medicines in the bush. Nor did she have the means to purchase medicines, whose cost had risen sharply. Throughout our conversations, Nuriaty seemed somewhat sad and perhaps too insistent about her disinterest; in fact, she revealed very little of how she felt.

With the loss of their parents and the withdrawal of Nuriaty, the remaining siblings felt quite vulnerable. Indeed, although Mze Bunu and the other spirits who possessed Mohedja and Tumbu had looked after the family well (as spirits too sometimes serve as ulu be), the last few years had been ones of unhappiness. Worries over the parents had been compounded by a serious illness in one of the younger siblings that appeared to demonstrate some vulnerability or moral failing at the heart of the family.

Amady, in particular, worried family members would suffer after his father died. Tumbu, he said, had always known what was what and had warned them when attack by sorcery was imminent and how to address it. But now there was no one to provide the remedies for their problems. Nuriaty did not seem to care, she was not interested any more; and Mariam, Amady asserted, had not received full training and was therefore not yet ready to help.

And so, Amady took the initiative to hire an outside healer to treat the ailing younger sibling, and he picked up the considerable expense himself, thereby performing as an ulu be. I was very surprised to learn from Amady that a month before the mandeving, the entire family had engaged in another large and expensive ceremony. All the descendants of Tumbu and Mohedja slipped away to their fields in the middle of the night, where the outside healer secretly performed various ritual acts, including recitation of Quranic verses over them to cleanse them of evil spirits (shetwan) and turn away sorcery directed at the family. Amady asserted that everyone felt better afterward, but Mariam suggested privately that the curer was just after their money. Although she went along with the ritual, she appeared to have little respect for her brother’s judgment in the matter. What the spirits thought about having their interests in protecting the family overlooked became apparent later, as I now recount.

**Greeting Mze Bunu**

In 2005, I was eager to encounter Mze Bunu in Mariam and asked on several occasions whether I might pay my respects. Mariam eventually agreed. She decided that her younger sister Hadia should assist us but wasadamant that we hold the consultation in secret, without letting Nuriaty know. The day before I was due to leave the island, when I had given up pursuing the matter, Mariam called me to her house.

We sat on the linoleum floor in Mariam’s back room with the shutters closed. Hadia told me to light the incense. I did so and clumsily invited the spirit, explaining I had returned for the mandeving and wanted to greet him. Hadia rounded out my speech. She said encouragingly, “There are no outsiders [mugyen] here; we all know each other [djaby faikahay].” Mariam entered into a trance and was displaced by Mze Bunu. I greeted him and said I hoped he would continue to look after the family. The spirit replied through Mariam, whom he spoke about in the third person.

To Hadia’s and my surprise, we had precipitated an emotional outburst and a revelation of some significance. The spirit began by complaining, “Since they don’t believe in me here [in Mariam], why should I care about the family?” He said family members used to call him up regularly in Mohedja without being asked to do so and would always inform him of events. But they never called him in Mariam, and Mariam herself did not seem to care. They did not even inform him of their big event, the mandeving, not even by speaking over incense, so why should he try to help them?

“The problem is you don’t believe [tsy kuamin] in me, that I am really here, in Mariam. You believed I was in Mohedja, but not here.”

Hadia tried to defend her siblings and herself and to calm the spirit, saying that in Mohedja the spirits just rose of their own accord to offer advice. Moreover, Hadia asserted, Mariam pushed family members away when they wanted to call up the spirits.

The spirit retorted, “We are never informed of anything.”

Mze Bunu explained that when he realized Mohedja was soon to die, he rushed into Mariam and pushed through the curing ceremony so that he could continue to be accessible to the family. But they ignored him, as indicated by the ceremony held by the outside healer. And now Mariam’s children were sick. The spirit began to cry. Hadia listened somewhat nonplussed; she admitted the family had ignored him but insisted they did believe in his presence in Mariam and that they did need his help. She explained that their oldest sibling (Nuriaty) had abandoned them and gone off to follow her own pursuits; in the absence of their parents, they lacked guidance and did not do the right thing. They would make amends. She said, “You used to rise in our parents spontaneously and look after their children and grandchildren. We didn’t suffer, but now we do. There are no elders left in the family [ulu be am’mraba].”

Mze Bunu retorted, “Not one among you has come to call me in Mariam!” He complained again that no one took Mariam’s possession seriously.
Interspersed with this rather tense dialogue were moments of easy laughter between Hadia and Mze Bunu. Eventually he left and was replaced by another spirit who continued in the same vein. The new arrival said simply, “We don’t come because we aren’t welcome.”

Hadia replied, “We do care. And we are suffering. The children are sick.”

The spirit interrupted, “You don’t even leave incense. But we continue to help you anyway. People no longer love each other [faŋkata].” He continued, “Have you begun to follow Islamic reform [jaula] and are we spirits now haram?”

To my surprise, the next morning Hadia told me I had myself acted like an ulu be by calling Mze Bunu and leading the siblings by example. She added that she would be calling the spirits again, that the family could not abandon them. Hadia is a competent and optimistic young woman but mindful of her obligations to the spirits as kin and ulu be themselves.

**Mariam’s dilemma**

It was during the encounter with the spirits that I began to realize that Mariam’s succession to Mze Bunu was about more than the identification between mother and daughter; it also had implications for her relationships with her siblings. And because of the partial lack of inhibition on the part of the spirits, I only then became aware of the conflict and pain that succession and the absence of its recognition entailed.

The spirits were very disturbed at having been neglected in Mariam and, indeed, within the family more generally. They had not been asked for assistance with the children’s school exams, minor illnesses, or larger projects. They resented not being informed about the important mandates, and they were insulted when a strange healer was used in their place to conduct a ceremony for the family. The siblings’ actions were a challenge to Mariam’s legitimacy as a medium, and the spirits made this clear by saying that none of the siblings appeared to believe in their presence in her. Mze Bunu uses the verb *kuamin*, which can mean “believe” or “trust”; whether his point is that family members are unconvinced of Mariam’s possession or unconvinced that the spirits will speak truly through her is unclear. In any case, the spirits reveal all too clearly Mariam’s dilemma. If she should not push her kin away when they wish to speak with the spirits, neither can she encourage them. She needs to develop the authority of her possession such that family members come to call the spirits of their own accord, even over the obstacles she puts in their path. In fact, the obstacles are necessary to build the authority of the spirits’ voices and to separate them from her own voice. Mariam was also in a difficult situation because, since her mother’s death, she had been in need of a trustworthy authorita-
Succession as elementary act

In this article, I have been concerned with how succession is marked and enacted. In the resolutions of adulthood, one can observe kinship relatively undisturbed by theories or processes of biological (substantive) connection. Relationships unfold and transform in ethically complex ways and have both overt social and deep psychological dimensions, whose consequences and relative weight vary according to the modality of expression.

Succession is a gift from parents to their offspring, and in Mayotte the mandeving is a blessing in return. But such reciprocity is not uncomplicated by sibling rivalry; Mariam’s actions, like those of Jacob, might be described as theft, trickery, or displacement. The salience of the theft analogy depends on whether succession is conceived or experienced as singular and imperturbable, the partition of a finite good, or the plural disposition of indivisible good and whether it is understood as a deliberate act effected by recognized means. How it is experienced depends on the cultural model, social context, and psychological disposition.

The deaths of their parents have proved difficult in different ways for the siblings in this case, as each struggles to find the means both to become a socially and psychologically relatively autonomous adult and to remain caring for and under the care of the others. For Nuriaty, this struggle reinforced an alienation from the family, partial withdrawal from her siblings, and retraction of her obligations toward them. For Mariam, the attempt to extend her responsibilities to encompass her siblings was also problematic, although one can assume her troubles are transitory and that her alienation from the family, partial withdrawal from her siblings, and retraction of her obligations toward them are ambiguous, plural, or overlapping, when there are no clear, or in whether successors can live up to the expectations placed on them, but also in the possibility that success may be experienced as taking something away from another sibling. It may be resolved or justified by attributing succession to some kind of outside intervention like that of God or the spirits. But it can also appear as trickery, wrong doing, theft, or the mandeving. But it can also appear as trickery, wrong doing, theft, or the mandeving, that establish and acknowledge the affirmation of responsibility for oneself and on behalf of others and, equally, of exercising judgment with respect to others. By using the term ethical, I do not mean to ascribe exclusively positive value but to say that any given act is both subject to construal and evaluative judgment by means of existing criteria and productive of new criteria or contexts of evaluation (Lambek 2010a). The ethical tension of succession lies not only in the displacement of the parent, or in whether successors can live up to the expectations placed on them, but also in the possibility that success may be experienced as taking something away from another sibling. It may be resolved or justified by attributing succession to some kind of outside intervention like that of God or the spirits. But it can also appear as trickery, wrong doing, or appear inconclusive or incomplete.

It is clear from Mariam’s story, as it is from Jacob’s, that succession is not merely granted but is also sometimes taken; human intention triumphs over code and substance and self-assertion challenges norms of respect or reciprocity. But this process is dialectical. For the successor, it entails a tension between separation from and internalization of the parent. But, equally importantly, it must entail some kind of invitation from and acknowledgment by the parent. Succession may be conceptualized and enacted simultaneously as a gift from the parent and as theft by the (adult) child.

It is evident that neither a normative model of kinship nor an instrumental model of practice is sufficient to grasp what is entailed here. Rather, succession may be described as ethical insofar as it is not merely a playing out of law, the naturalized transmission of substance, or selfish competition, but entails acts of bestowal, reception, initiative, and the affirmation of responsibility for oneself and on behalf of others and, equally, of exercising judgment with respect to others. By using the term ethical, I do not mean to ascribe exclusively positive value but to say that any given act is both subject to construal and evaluative judgment by means of existing criteria and productive of new criteria or contexts of evaluation (Lambek 2010b). The ethical tension of succession lies not only in the displacement of the parent, or in whether successors can live up to the expectations placed on them, but also in the possibility that success may be experienced as taking something away from another sibling. It may be resolved or justified by attributing succession to some kind of outside intervention like that of God or the spirits. But it can also appear as trickery, wrong doing, or appear inconclusive or incomplete.

Acts of succession

Coda

One strand of my argument has been methodological. That is, I have tried to illustrate how my understanding of the situation I observed developed in stages. I began with my interest in the relationship between Mohedja and Mariam as mediated by the spirit. Only after I confirmed the mother–daughter succession did I realize how its actual success depended on its reception by Mariam’s siblings and how it
implicated her relations with them. Finally, I began to realize how Mariam’s act of succession had intruded on Nuriaty and how Mariam read Nuriaty’s response, in turn, as an attack on her. Such a reading is a further act of aggression; indeed, it is an instance of the classic dynamics of projection in witchcraft accusation.

This final insight—or at least the place where my understanding rests for now—came only several months after I completed and delivered the first version of this article, during a brief return to Mayotte in July 2009. There, I realized the full extent of what Mariam had done and what a tragedy the whole thing was, especially for Nuriaty.

Nuriaty had hardly been seen in the village since 2005. Mariam was just returning from town, where she had overheard the hospital birth of another granddaughter. She had also visited her children in France. Amady stated that Mariam had more spirits even than their parents and that they included the spirits who had possessed their father as well as those who had possessed their mother. Hadia confirmed this, saying that Mariam had received every one of the family spirits, plus others. In one conversation, she said the spirits had become used to being rarely called up; in another, she said they were angry at the lack of attention paid them. She pointed out that one of Mariam’s older daughters (indeed, perhaps Mariam’s favorite) subscribed now to the brand of reformist Islam (jaula) that strongly disapproved of them. She pointed out that one of Mariam’s older daughters (indeed, perhaps Mariam’s favorite) subscribed now to the brand of reformist Islam (jaula) that strongly disapproved of dealings with spirits.

Nuriaty’s alienation from her home village and siblings appeared complete. Nuriaty was so disaffected that she had made arrangements to sell her house on the family plot in the village to its current tenant, a foreigner.34 To sell one’s home is shocking in itself, but she had not even offered her siblings first rights of purchase and had hung up on her youngest brother when he phoned to ask about the sale, saying it was none of his business. Hadia and Amady said she would never return home and would even be buried in her husband’s village.

Nuriaty’s disaffection had its roots in the curing (initiation) ceremonies for Mariam’s spirits but more strongly than I had hitherto grasped. One participant told me that Nuriaty had actually begun to cry as the spirits announced their names and she realized that her sister had received them all, including their father’s main spirit no less than the spirits of all the siblings.35

Mariam told me that the reason her spirits were unhappy was that they had received bad or inadequate medicine (audy tsy manzary) at their instauration in her. Her mother had been sick at the time and could not complete the treatment. In a later conversation, I asked her whether Nuriaty was angry that she (Mariam) had received the medicines. Nuriaty had managed another cure; the immediate family had made arrangements to sell her house on the family plot in the village. Nuriaty had actually begun to cry as the spirits announced their names and she realized that her sister had received them all, including their father’s main spirit no less than the spirits of all the siblings.35

Mariam told me that the reason her spirits were unhappy was that they had received bad or inadequate medicine (audy tsy manzary) at their instauration in her. Her mother had been sick at the time and could not complete the treatment. In a later conversation, I asked her whether Nuriaty was angry that she (Mariam) had received all the spirits. She said that that was exactly the case. And, she added, it was Nuriaty, taking over from their ailing mother, who had performed the inadequate treatment. Mariam had only grown sicker, really sick, and eventually the spirits said it was because Nuriaty had not performed the medicine correctly.

What Mariam did not say directly to me but what two collaterals independently volunteered was that Mariam had accused her sister not of an act of omission, of making a mistake and hence being a poor healer, but of a deliberative act. Nuriaty had intended her inadequate medicines to harm Mariam or derail the initiation. Deliberate abuse of medicine is, in effect, the definition of sorcery (voriky) in Mayotte (Lambek 1993), and Mariam had thereby accused her older sister of committing sorcery against her. With the passage of time, this interpretation of events had become substantive enough to be uttered explicitly. When these relatives urged a mediation (suluhia) between the aggrieved siblings, Mariam refused, saying there was nothing to resolve.36 Mariam said to me, “What mediation? We didn’t do anything; Nuriaty just left. Our parents begged her not to move away but she didn’t listen to them.” She repeated the old story of Nuriaty’s bad behavior at their parents’ respective deaths. A cousin who is highly educated in the French system and says he does not believe in sorcery reported that his attempts to remonstrate with Mariam only led her to retort that Nuriaty attacks everyone with sorcery. He affirmed that Nuriaty was subject to widespread suspicion and no longer felt comfortable even visiting her home village. Indeed, someone else whispered his disapproval of the way Nuriaty had managed another cure; the immediate family of this client had also begun to mistrust her and to seek a different healer behind her back.

Mariam is a good senior sibling, an ulu be. She rushed to care for Hadia and bring her home when the latter suffered a minor accident in another village. But she has rationalized her own aggression toward her older sister and is being disingenuous about the reasons Nuriaty has not returned home. Her accusation is realistic insofar as it recognizes Nuriaty’s jealousy and dismay at Mariam’s succession to the spirits (and presumably at her reproductive and relative economic success), but it unfairly transforms Mariam’s own somewhat aggressive act of succession into an attack on Nuriaty’s part. In effect, the sorcery accusation, manifest in Mariam’s resistance to the cure, is a further level of trickery, even if it too is unconscious.

One of the messages in the Genesis story is that the better or more deserving sibling wins. As Billie Holiday sings,

Them that’s got shall have
Them that’s not shall lose
So the Bible said and it still is news
Mama may have, Papa may have
But God bless the child that’s got his own
That’s got his own. [Holiday and Herzog 1941]

As the more clever, fertile, enterprising, and maternally beloved sister, Mariam has got her own. But as Mariam
herself is the first to admit, since the deaths of their parents, the family has been in disarray.

I do not think that either Mariam or Nuriaty has acted on the basis of deliberate calculation or malefaisance. Rather, their situation manifests the ethical morass or epistemic murk (Taussig 1987) that transpires when moral luck is unequally distributed (Williams 1981) and when acts of succession go wrong, turning the gift of kinship into an experience of betrayal and theft.

Notes

Acknowledgments. I presented a draft of this article as the keynote address to the 2009 meeting of the Israeli Anthropological Association (IAA), whose annual theme was kinship. I am deeply indebted to the kindness of my hosts, especially Orit Abuhav; Harvey Goldberg, Yehuda Goodman, and Carol Kidron, and especially for putting up with the inclusion in my oral presentation of a political commentary about the West Bank occupation (which in this article is reduced to allegory and allusion in the title). My thanks to Sandra Bamford for remarkable comments on a first draft; Jackie Solway for her interpretation of the main protagonists; Paul Antze, Uri Davis, Galit Hasan-Rokem, Ivan Kalmar, Anne Meneley, Yvonne Sherwood, Charles Stafford, and Donna Young for guidance; three anonymous (but among them suspiciously familiar) and very helpful referees; the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Canada Research Chairs program, and Canadian Foundation for Innovation for financial support; and event organizers and audiences at Al-Quds University (Abu Dis), the IAA, and the Universities of Toronto and Cambridge, at which drafts were successively presented. I thank, most of all, the people who are subjects of this paper (under pseudonyms) and for whom it forms a kind of necessary betrayal (to borrow a term from Anna Tsing). One of the themes of this article is that betrayal is necessary to kinship, as it is to ethnography, and so I hope I am not too hypocritical in reiterating our mutual kinship.

1. The Jacob and Esau story recurs as a leitmotif throughout this article. It is an allegory developed to suit the occasion for which the article was written and also provides a fruitful comparison to the ethnographic material. My intention is certainly not to provide a full interpretation of a text on which so much has already been written. I must also forgo discussing how anthropology might best interpret or draw from the Bible, a task taken up in Goldberg 1996, Douglas 1999, Feeley-Harnik 1991, Elberg-Schwart 1990, and Leach 1983, among other works.

2. Needless to say, the social changes on the island have been enormous, but there is no space here to address them (cf. Lambek 2002b, 2003, 2004).

3. Becoming possessed can be considered a kind of “passion” as well as “action,” but this is not an issue I can take up here (Lambek 2010a).

4. I acknowledge pathbreaking analyses that draw on local forms (cultural models) of kinship as constituted through acts of feeding, eating, and the like (Carsten 1997; Weismantel 1995; cf. Bamford 2007; Viveiros de Castro 2009), but I move toward a broader and more abstract theory of action (Lambek 2010b). Kinship practices are also the subject of child socialization studies (e.g., Gottlieb 2004), but the latter have generally been discussed apart from the study of “kinship” per se.

5. To understand kinship as acts is only one approach. I certainly do not wish to limit kinship to the framework I propose or to preclude seeing acts in relation to kin terms, roles, functions, rules, relations, emotions, or property. The distinction between domestic labor (practice) and acts is sharply drawn by Hannah Arendt (1998).

6. As embodied acts, rituals conjoin code with substance or, in Roy Rappaport’s (1989) terms, the canonical with the indexical.

7. For a more extensive elaboration of the argument, see Lambek 2010b.

8. I assume familiarity with the story; the core episode of relevance here is found in Genesis 27. As noted, my intention is not to add another level of exegesis to a narrative that has been subject to religious and scholarly interpretation for centuries but to see how it sheds light on kinship and the performative effects of ritual. Jacob’s story, like his grandfather Abraham’s, is primarily about establishing and maintaining a relationship with God, as manifest in specific acts. Jacob makes a vow at Beth-El to be loyal to God if God keeps him nourished and safe and returns him to his earthly father’s house (Gen. 28:20–22).

9. Both Schneider and Pierre Bourdieu neglect emotion (Carsten 2004:24; Peletz 2001). By contrast, Erich Auerbach describes the situation in Genesis as one in which “the perpetually smouldering jealousy and the connection between the domestic and the spiritual, between the paternal blessing and the divine blessing, lead to daily life being permeated with the stuff of conflict, often with poison” (1953:22; cf. Cotter 2003).


11. Obviously, many North Americans have more nuanced views of kinship.

12. See also Fortes’s argument that if becoming a person begins at birth, personhood may not be fully realized until death (Carsten 2004:89). This is true of Madagascar (Astuti 1995; Bloch 1971; Feeley-Harnik 1991; Lambek 2002c; Middleton 1999).

13. Jacob and Esau are portrayed in sibling rivalry from their time in the womb. Esau manages to slip out ahead of Jacob, who tries to catch him up or pull him back by grabbing his heel—an original set of prepartum acts (Gen. 25:24–28). Jacob later reverses Esau’s original victory. Their father, Isaac, has his own scars of succession to carry—near demise at his father Abraham’s hands. Victor Raharijona and Susan Kus report a Malagasy story remarkably similar to the phase of the Jacob story in which Esau sells his birthright to his brother for a dish of food (Gen. 25:29–34): In the recorded oral traditions for the Merina (Callet 1981), the land, the earth, “ny tany” serves numerous times as icon and index of suitability to govern. In the beginning the sons of the first chief of those who inhabited the land before the Merina set out looking for food. They came across a hedgehog. The younger son offered the choice to his elder brother: the land or the hedgehog. The elder brother was content to satisfy his immediate, individual needs (Callet 1981, 12). The right to rule went to the junior. [in press]


16. The most valuable asset, land, often remains shared and undivided, as it did here, though the implementation of French legislation increases privatization.

17. Spirits are not ancestral or limited to specific lines of descent but often recur within families.

18. My transcription of Kibushy is rather idiosyncratic; unlike standard Malagasy does, I distinguish u from o. The final e is pronounced as the French é.

19. My wife, Jacqueline Solway, always maintained that I had overidealized Nuriaty.
20. Nuriaty had raised him during his infancy as though she were his mother; he discovered that Mohedja and Tumbu were not his grandparents gradually during childhood. By 2005, he had long been addressing Nuriaty as “zuky” rather than “mama.”

21. The assumption of paternal and maternal roles by cross-sex siblings conveys no connotation of conjugality; in fact, an avoidance relationship exists between siblings of opposite sex. In this case, Amady’s status as ulu be was far less salient than that of his sisters because of his relative youth as well as his personality. These relations of social parenthood are likewise not confused with genealogical reckoning. As Sandra Bamford (personal communication 2009) has helpfully put it, “Relationships replace relationships rather than stable, essentialized persons replacing stable, essentialized persons.” Note that the shift in Mariam’s status vis-à-vis her siblings does not affect relations or terminology in the next generation. The terminology for mother’s sister and father’s brother is, in any case, senior–junior mother–father.

22. This situation is a product of the contradiction or point of stress entailed by a residence system of patri-uxorilocality. On marriage, a man typically moved to the house of his wife, built for her by her father, usually near the father’s own residence. Each man or stable couple hopes, in turn, to be the focus around which their own children marry, a process that is only straightforward if marriages occur between inhabitants of the same village. Mariam and Hadi both married local men.

23. Nuriaty undoubtedly considered the cost and conditions of the ticket. Additionally, like many people from Mayotte, she needed to spend sufficient time in Réunion to pick up unemployment benefits that were higher there than the benefits the French state offered residents of Mayotte. Mariam had also visited a son and daughter-in-law in Réunion.

24. The topic of gender is largely outside the scope of this article. In the Torah, the Jacob and Esau story finds its feminine parallel in the competition between Leah and Rachel. My focus on sisters rather than brothers (or cross-sex siblings) in Mayotte is accidental, although it is the case that more women than men are possessed and the psychological meaning of possession may differ between women and men.


26. The first and second patros ceremonies were held together as was the initial phase of medicine for Mariam’s truma spirits, who also rose on that occasion. Each of the spirits publicly announced its name. This set of events was much more condensed than is normally the case but still did not complete the cycle necessary to becoming a curer in one’s own right.

27. To be clear, in local understanding, it is spirits who select their mediums, not the other way round. To the degree that there was an underlying sense that Mariam had not been straightforward and was being disingenuous in expressing both her surprise at and her distaste for suddenly being the medium to so many spirits, her case illustrates what I have elsewhere (Lambek 2003) called the “irony intrinsic to possession.”

28. The verb has its source in Arabic and is thus related to biblical Hebrew, but I am not making a point about diffusion or indicating a substantive connection between Mayotte and ancient Israel.

29. Although the spirit is socially the same person in this medium that he was in Mohedja, his psychological meaning for Hadi is not the same.

30. The presence of the younger siblings complicates the story and suggests that another biblical analogy might be to Joseph and his brothers.

31. I am not suggesting that subjective autonomy is an explicit cultural goal or idea but, rather, that a degree of autonomy is an aspect of mature adulthood anywhere.

32. For example, with respect to joint ownership (shirika) of land. In Mayotte, siblingship has been more durable than, and at times has trumped, the conjugal bond, though this may be changing, especially with respect to emergent class differentiation.

33. See Rappaport (1999:ch. 3) on the way in which ritual can impose order and clarity on what was previously ambiguous.

34. She needed cash urgently because her adult son had died leaving large debts.

35. Nuriaty had several of their father’s spirits herself. Although, in principle, Nuriaty could have entered trance on the spot and allowed these spirits to deny their presence in Mariam, doing so would have appeared unduly competitive. Moreover, the authority of these spirits was undermined by the fact that Nuriaty had never actually completed the expensive curing ceremonies herself.

36. The spirits could not serve as mediators both because they were the objects of contestation and because they had, in effect, contributed to the conflict by making Mariam sicker and by accusing Nuriaty themselves.

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accepted September 22, 2010
final version submitted October 18, 2010

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