CHAPTER 3

THE STRUCTURAL AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF KABARY POLITIKA

On the Structure and Style of Kabary Politika

To the untrained eye, Ambohijatovo in downtown Tana appears to be simply a traffic roundabout where small buses circle around to retrieve awaiting passengers before continuing back out into traffic, where taxis park at its edge to await customers. It is a bustling area where only the garbage dumpsters stand still. A tall stone obelisk topped with a marble icon of the island of Madagascar gives shape and order to the traffic circle. It is not a particularly eye-catching monument and its most consistent visitor is the roving salesman often seeking a few moments of respite at its base. The scene changes every day in the content of its hustle and bustle, but the general form of Ambohijatovo stays the same. It is a place of everyday city life.

On occasion at this otherwise unremarkable area, a stage is erected and dressed in pipe and drapes in the national colors of red, white, and green. A few chairs take the place of taxis, the garbage dumpsters are hauled away. A single microphone stands front and center of the stage, loudspeakers stand like bookends at stage left and right. Still, as the setting changes, people move about the area as they had before, hopping on and off buses, selling their goods, or just sitting around watching real-world vignettes of interaction unfold.
shrieks from the loudspeakers. At once, the roundabout becomes host to an audience of listeners. The moment these words are uttered aloud, what was once a bustling of myriad individuals carrying out their individual business now transforms into an audience, a public in potentia. They are brought together as a composite of an audience of the urban multitude to a rhetor on a stage, co-members of a group constituted in their joint social biography as listeners and in their response to a single stimulus, words spoken by a political mpikabary. At this instant where people change, so does the space around them. Not only have chairs, stages, speakers, and microphones come into play as physical contextualization cues to signify this event as a political kabary, but the otherwise unremarkable monument shifts from traffic divider or a place to rest, to the monument it is, an obelisk memorializing the over 100,000 Malagasy martyrs of the 1947 rebellion against French colonialism. This style of public speaking is so familiar to so many that with the utterance of its first lines, everything about everyone within earshot shifts.

Political kabary is a highly stylized form of oratory, the political form of address since before the first king of Imerina, Andrianampoinmerina, reigned from 1787 to 1810. As Maurice Bloch noted in his detailed explorations of kabary over thirty years ago, one of the implications understood by speakers of Malagasy, and noted by all commentators on the notion, from the very earliest ones (Sibree 1889; Ochs 1975; Bloch 1975) is that kabarys (sic) are highly decorated speeches containing elaborate, even euphemistic metaphorical decoration (Bloch 1985: 633). Political leaders or professional speechmakers known as mpikabary write and deliver these speeches to an audience referred to by the general term for public audience, vahoaka. Once the event concludes, this public emerges as a different kind of public, and the subject positions once inhabited by the speaker as rhetorician and the multitude as audience shift to the contrastive anonymous public of the city, joined only by their co-membership in an urban space as residents, visitors, market-goers, bus riders, street vendors, fathers, mothers, children, and neighbors. When instantiated by a speaker, however, the kabary event alters place and time in the way the performative act of “I do” in a certain context changes the course of two individuals’ lives at its mere utterance.
Socially established interactional features of the performance context, that is, how the speech sounds, how it is structured, who says what and when, how one shifts from buying beans at a market stall to being an audience member to a speech, and how an anonymous multitude reacts and becomes known as audience, travel as intact, presupposed codes and contexts of *kabary*’s model. The place of these features is ratified at their arrival, in face-to-face encounters between speaker and addressees, that audience who knows and understands this genre type, its expected length, and compositional structure. Generally, the audience shows this approval through rapt silence, their attention directed toward the stage. In fact, silence during the *kabary* is the most ubiquitous response, an indicator of the refined conduct of the speaker against that of anyone else within this context; *Kabary* is exemplary speech, informing even the sermonic structure today or the way a beauty pageant contestant might reply to a question about how to save the world. Joe Errington’s description of state speech in Indonesia reflects *kabary*’s place similarly: “such refined conduct [is] admired by a silent audience whose members recognize(d) the distinctive worth of exemplary language but, by the same token, the unfittingness of any attempt on their own part to use it” (Errington 2000: 110).

To gauge how these structural and stylistic features unfold as socially salient and productive beyond the event itself, this chapter considers that ideal structure taught in schools, passed down from generation to generation, embodied as an unmarked and normative pattern of public speaking by speakers and audiences throughout Imerina. It looks to the form of political *kabary* as motivating an ideologically and aesthetically meaningful political speech act and event, highlighting its significance for everyday political public culture in urban Imerina. Following the teachings of *kabary* instructors, political campaign advisors, and scholars, the chapter traces not only the specificities of political *kabary*’s ideal structure, but also the moral order and mythic past undergirding it, its daily unfolding in real time, and the ways it reconstitutes the historical narrative in which it was positioned as an exemplary genre of political discourse in the urban public sphere. Most particularly, as we are grounded in the structure of the performance, its audience, and its political presence, we shall also see how beliefs about language and ancestors inform the moral order of public speaking in Madagascar, the power enforcing it, and shape the kind of social work *kabary politika* does.

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The Prototypical Kabary Politika Plan

It bears repeating what Elinor Ochs (1975: 230) stated in her description of kabary: “there is no one unified concept of the kabary shared by all members of the speech community.” Variations of degree and context abound in kabary, but most people in the high plateau, especially students of kabary and their mentors, agree that there is a fairly coherent structure that is lauded as the pure and “proper” kabary. The maintenance of this ideal of a pure exemplary form goes along with kabary’s association with objects and practices hailed as “pure” gasy. As a way of being and doing something uniquely “Malagasy,” kabary has been institutionalized as an act and instrument of identity, reproduced through classroom instruction, heritage organizations, and kabary associations. The groups educate their membership and audiences, hold competitions, and award those who best approximate this ideal.

For linguistic anthropologists, witnessing people talk about talk without soliciting such is always key to probing language ideologies and the ways in which they inform practice. This is essentially what I had set out to do in this project, trying to see what it is people think language is and does that is politically productive, and how it provides contexts for agentive actors, mediating the social relations undergirding (and sometimes undermining) these processes. To really understand this art of public speaking, its traditions, its history, its attachment to Malagasy identity, and how it is passed along as an integral aspect of everyday politics, I decided to enroll in a year-long kabary course in a small quartier on the outskirts of Antananarivo. Alongside fifteen Malagasy teenagers who looked about as thrilled and clear about why they were there as I was the day my grandmother pulled me from the little league field to enroll me in a white gloves and party manners course at the local mall back in Virginia, I settled in for three-hour weekly courses with my fellow apprentice orators.

Not only were we all stunned into silence by the learning curve we knew stood in front of us, but also the towering presence of Razafy, our instructor, quieted the room at that first meeting. He dressed in a white robe that went from head to toe, while the low lights highlighted mostly his pupils and put his face in silhouette. He seemed to glow, quietly, until his voice broke through the silence with a thunderous tenor to deliver his lessons. That first day, however, he said no more than a handful of words. At the first class, we learned...
as good postcolonial pupils do, heads bobbing up and down between
the blackboard where Razafy made tables and charts for at least an
hour at a time and our neatly lined notebook paper, rulers, and pencils
in hand. Though our learning would become a more active appren-
ticeship — or, as Lave and Wenger (1991) might say, a community of
practice in which we all assembled to learn by doing the same thing
for the same practical result of performing kabary — our participation
was legitimately “peripheral” at first, not veering much past simply
taking notes from the blackboard. In fact, Razafy seemed to hardly
notice us in those first few classes. It was as if we just happened to
be there as something was happening, and by rote we learned the
morphological structure of the performance, the elements of perform-
ance organized as though it was a grammar of parts that must be
pieced together in the same way for every performance.

Even with his back to us, Razafy controlled the room with his tall
and quiet presence as he charted our oratorical course. He detailed
the named components of kabary and explained their interactional
valence. As he showed in this seemingly rigid outline, kabary’s para-
digmatic structure is an ordered arrangement of various components,
all with names, organizing distinct goals for the whole performance.
The stylistic variations within each component mark degrees of exper-
tise in the speaker. In his lessons Razafy organized our learning
and performance according to three features that shape the structural
components within kabary. Glossed in English, they refer to the
arrangement of elements of speech (rindran-teny); the argument is
explained as rhetorical strategy to convince (mandresy lahatra); and
speaker comportment is described as embodiment and voice, literally
to “carry the voice” (mitondra ny feo). Though these seem like rather
flat categories to parse out of an otherwise rich experience, they
organize and make way for that experience that reaches beyond mere
semantic architecture. And as they represent an ideology of perform-
ance, Razafy emphasized to us all that each kabary component also
maps symbolically to a larger moral order.

This moral order is at the same time historically contingent as it
is continually emergent, and each function in kabary structure links
iconically and indexically to attributes beyond the individual functions
and the event itself: to past and present time and place, to the character
of speakers and strategies of “facework” mediating social identities and
relations, and to notions of power and authority with which their
own acts of speech are charged (Goffman 1967). Usually, Razafy
talked to us as though we all lived under rocks when it came to knowing about *kabary* and the history, memory, and moral order it signified beyond the event itself. The under-a-rock part was certainly the case with me, but my classmates were already clear at least on elements of the performance. It seemed they received this basic information as a review of what had been a grammar carefully instructed since the first day any of them attempted to string words together. Their acumen for speaking in public at all, even to our little public of fifteen people, even if to ask a question, was oriented toward this exemplary genre as though it was second nature, the equivalent of Aristotle’s essays on rhetoric being in grade school primers of the West since kindergarten.

Though the blackboard charts of *kabary* components seemed to freeze in time and space some rigid structure for organizing and delivering this otherwise very creative performance, what they really spoke to was a token/type distinction between instances of real-time performance versus the ideal. Political *kabary* are tokens based on a code or formalized type, but there is some room for individual style in each act (Bloch 1975; Irvine 1979). In fact, even as the style and content of *kabary* change as much as any other artifact of social life, the structure of *kabary* holds steady, as a matter of performance, but also as something that is anticipated by audiences, taught by *kabary* teachers, reproduced as ideological practice by this shared understanding and practice over time. Because the linguistic valence of *kabary* performance is placed on the “how” of their deployment and less on the “what” of their semantic content, stylistic variants within individual elements of the oratory may occur as long as those elements are present. As Maurice Bloch emphasizes, “what is stressed above all . . . is not so much the content of what can be said, but the manner in which it can be said” (1975: 3, my italics). Let us look at this manner by considering the structure that gives it organization.

*The arrangement of elements of speech*

In any *kabary* the sections or scenes within the speech are ideally divided into five parts, though often some parts will be subdivided and flank other parts. The five appear here with English glosses I rely on throughout and include (1) the Opening or the *voha varavurana*, the frame break made to mark a distinction between the informal talk
and chatter that occur before a speech and the formal discourse of the speech itself; (2) the Apology or *fialan-tsiny*, a request to speak without reproach; (3) the Greeting or *fiarahabana*; (4) the Body of the message known as the *ranjan-kabary*; and (5) the *fehin-teny*, the Closing.

A political *kabary* begins with the *voha varavarana*, “the act of opening a door.” This opening marks the event as a communicative engagement and shifts the evaluative stance of people, like those in Ambohijatovo who moved from the subjective stance of shoppers to an audience standing in silence. It almost always begins thus: *Aza fady tompokolahy, Aza fady tompokovavy. Miarahaba anareo aho*, “Excuse me gentlemen and ladies, I give you my greetings.” It is usually followed by a proverb to welcome listeners in the fold of this moment and this space. The first proverb we learned in class and one I heard used once in the mayoral campaigns in 2003 was quite compelling:

The *songosongo* [shrub-like trees] are used to border our paths, *Amberivatry* [thorny bush] are used to border our fields, but here I am, however, as *fandrotarana* [common devil’s grass that seeds, roots, and spreads quickly] at the border that is not here to trip you and make you fall, but who is here to keep you listening.

Though I wasn’t sure if it was a warning or a welcome, those around me took it as the latter. With the greeting and this welcoming proverb, simply, the *voha varavarana* is the lead that hooks the audience’s attention and invites them into the event. In response, deference to the speaker is initiated and maintained in the role of the audience who are careful not to miss a morsel of a metaphor that builds from this opening proverb over the course of the speech. But before the speaker can truly gain the sanction and deference of the audience, he must acknowledge the power and, therefore, danger of one’s words.

There are two things no one owns in Madagascar, land and language. Rather, they are considered, ideally, the material belongings of the ancestors while the living act merely as their stewards. This view is held because both land and language endure beyond the mortals who use them, and the power of neither can be fully ascertainable or understood by the human psyche and for this are vulnerable to their mishandling. The consequences of language’s endurance and long-term impact are played out semantically in the next component of the *kabary*, known as the *fialan-tsiny*, or “the apology and request for excuse from reproach.” This is a guilt associated with the actual act of public speaking (*tsinin-dresaka*). The act of *miala-tsiny* serves as a
“disclaimer of performance,” a statement declaring the speaker’s “incapacity to perform as well as the elders and an unwillingness to assume responsibility to his audience for a display of skill and effectiveness,” in this case, in his kabary (Bauman 1993: 194). This request for excuse from reproach is centered primarily on the relationship between the orator’s word and the authority of elders, most of all, that of the ancestors. With the recognition of tsiny the speaker understands and keys his own performance within a frame of responsibility, not just to his local audience but as a steward to the words of these ancestors, particularly his reported speech of their words through proverbs (Bauman 1993: 194). As a conduit of the ancestors’ words, all of which are deemed sacred, the speaker must dissociate himself from the unavoidable blame that comes with delivering such sacred words in his human, and therefore profane, ways. In the Apology the mpikabary hesitantly transitions from the Opening to an apology for the subject position he inhabits as orator. This is a particularly important component of the kabary overall, and often the longest. Reverend Dahl records in the Antananarivo Annual (1885), perhaps the very first published article concerning kabary with a reference to the Apology: “Any one who has read a Malagasy kabary (public speech) of the right stamp cannot but have noticed that the speaker does not venture upon a discussion of the subject on which he is to speak before he has properly nanala tsiny, i.e., made an elaborate excuse for the liberty he is going to take in addressing the assembly” (Dahle 1885: 203). Consider the following example from the fialan-tsiny offered by a 2003 mayoral candidate in a suburb of Antananarivo before addressing members of the voting community:

It is a given floor that makes us stand up and one that is not granted that makes us stoop. As a crowing cock gets rid of his caw [miala kopakopaka], a hen lays an egg [miala faditr’ahitra], I who is talking must ask for relief of guilt [miala tsiny] not only because of the mistakes I may say but also because of your honor.² We do not know what may be the reason we may acquire tsiny. We take off the tsiny, but we should take care not to give it to someone else because life and the words that make life are the ancestors – well today we explain it as God’s. Don’t put it on the ground because this is where our once-living ancestors are now buried; we don’t throw it to the water because life springs from water; and we should not spread it into the wind, because it is the air we breathe.
In explaining the role and importance of the Apology in *kabary* as well as how it is a speech given to or inspired in the speaker by the ancestors, our teacher Razafy offered the following analogy. Holding a glass of water, he asked:

You know flies? You see flies, when we eat? Straight away they shake their wings in the direction of the food, always without asking your permission; straight away, they come. Me, I am not a fly to plunge at once. If I drink this water, it is because you gave it to me a moment ago. But flies, they don’t question, they act immediately.

The speech act *miala tsiny aho*, “I ask to be excused from any impending guilt [from speaking],” is performativc in that the words themselves remove the speaker from his guilt. It is almost impossible to misfire in the Austinian sense with this performance if the felicity conditions of *kabary* have already been met by the instantiation of its opening lines and the inhabitation of the roles of speaker and audience (Austin 1962). No one responds to the Apology, but all will be certain to note later in talk about the speech the social danger of not requesting permission, because the transgression is a taboo act (*fady*). A humble, preemptive confession, a prolepsis to impending guilt, reflects the sentiment of the famed *mpikabary* Andriamanjato, who remarks, “No one escapes imperfection. The trained speaker will apologize whether he feels inwardly culpable or not” (1957: 16). The act of the Apology also plays a role in the deeper and sociohistorical indexing of personal character, mental capacity, and access to ancestral will and privilege. It is reflective of social relations in that only certain types of people may engage an audience through *kabary*; these “types” of people are categorized today according to objectified notions of past markers of class, which during the Merina Dynasties derived from often arbitrary designated political or geographical cognate groups. Within the hierarchy of elders and age-inferiors (*ny zoky* and *ny zandry*, respectively), “age difference” matters insomuch as it helps to determine levels of deference to more complex classed social norms. This relationship between a speaker’s high status and the past is affirmed by the privilege to speak in the present, and deference in speech to the past. These markers are all reflected, for example, in this *fialan-tsiny*, delivered at the 40th anniversary of the National Kabary Association by an elder of great status, the president of the association:
From the beginning, I am sorry if I am standing here in front of you. I am the younger one, the man of lower class and the dumb one though I face your honor, your glory, your rights, and your distinction.

Though these norms were never addressed explicitly in the *kabary* course, it was apparent that we should cover all of our bases when beginning our speeches. At first I assumed we worked so earnestly on the *fianan-tsiny* because we were all just so bad, and therefore needed to preemptively prepare our invisible audiences for what horror to the Malagasy language was to come. But, in truth, it had everything to do with orienting ourselves and our audience to an ideological stance in solidary deference to the potential *fady* (taboo) and guilt of words, in general (Lambek 1992: 248). This is done in accordance to this general principle of *fady*, which tangibly dramatizes the mutual and continuous commitment of the words of the ancestors and the living voices, in this case, the orator and his request to bring to the crowd the words of the ancestors spoken through him (Lambek 1992). How we addressed the *fady* of speaking in the speech itself was more determined by our youth, the families and geography from which we came. Some of us were white – well, one of us was – and others of us were darker-skinned and from the coast; some were lighter and from the highlands. These differences referenced a class and ethnic history that Razafy never discussed; however, by the very absence of the discussion, and the fact that we all knew this issue of status is almost always directly addressed in any kind of *kabary* speech, we worked hard to apologize, for ourselves, for each other, for all of the students past, present, and pending. We implicitly addressed the issue by approaching the speech with the same amount of deference as the unknown man of the lowest station in the room, just as the *kabary* association president, Georges Andriamanantena, had. Even Mamy, one of my classmates, asked if we should apologize by making ourselves small – stooping, for example – on the stage the way one of a lower station does when entering a room of elders or those considered to be of a higher station. To this Razafy explained we must never do so with our own bodies but with our words, even though the deployment of embodied resources such as standing on stage and offering our words would be the very acts that signaled we were not the clueless neophytes the Apology claimed us to be. So, to declare our inadequacies as a mode of respect toward hierarchies from God to the ancestors to
elders actually invited ratification of the opposite while also pointing to the fact there were people out there who were what we claimed. This is, of course, a rather warped but supremely efficient way to establish agency and authority while making oneself appear outside of the responsibility of that agency, an effect I discuss throughout the book. What is more, though the greeting is preceded by the self-deprecating apology, thereby reorienting the subjectivity and status of speaker more as a passive agent himself, his addressees are marked as doubly passive agents, patients rather than participants (Errington 1988: 161). In this play on paradoxical agency the speaker further assumes an additional level of authority by aligning his understanding of speaking taboos with that of his audience, while signifying the differences as speaker and listener through the fialan-tsiny act.

Following the Apology is the fiarahabana or Greeting, which addresses an entire cosmology, from God to humanity, based on their hierarchical status in relation to the speaker. This order of greetings and virtues addresses first the divine creator, ny Zanahary or ny Andriamanitra, depending on the sub-region and the propensity to attribute the status of a generic god/superior being to Zanahary or the Christian deity, to Andriamanitra (the latter is a Malagasy appellation that Christian missionaries co-opted to name the Christian God during their first visits to Madagascar in the early 1820s). The royal ancestors are greeted, followed by the president of the country and other elite officials such as senators, council members, or the administrators related to the issues to be discussed in the kabary. Elders and then parents are greeted. In precolonial Madagascar this was followed by greetings to the two types of crowds that were thought to be in attendance, the valabemandra (the intended audience) and then the valabemandry (the masses). Though today one never makes this distinction between the different types of crowds without making it a topic within the speech itself, it is a past mode of address in which nobles (andriana) and freemen (hova) would be stipulated by name or differentiated in opposition to those in the audience who were considered slaves (andevo) or descendants of slaves; and today, any designation is covert and caught up in a logic of semiotic practice reinstating class boundaries by recreating the historical memory of past narratives of ancestral order and its corresponding class divisions.

Though the fiarahabana greetings are hardwired into the ideal code of kabary they are nonetheless deictically anchored and derive their indexical significance from the existential relation between their
semantic tokens and their social meaning or interactional contexts (Errington 1988: 158). In the case of kabary politika, quite often the immediate audience is the cast of the fiarahabana; that is, that audience is greeted by the speaker. However, this does not necessarily guarantee they are the primary addressees. Rather, the speaker also aims his speech at the “bystander” audiences who are not present at the kabary event – such as international governments or transnational private enterprise – but that have deep investment in the political issues at hand (Goffman 1974). During a campaign event in a small suburb just outside the capital city, the leader of a major political party decided to weave into the greeting the presence of several US “delegates,” which he later described in his speech as attending with cameras in order to “prove” the development from abroad that was coming to this region should his party be elected. He explained the cameras were televising the event in the United States. These so-called delegates were myself and a few study-abroad students. We were in town for a funeral and had just stumbled into the event. We certainly were not at all powerful, we didn’t even have a ride home other than a rural bus; nor was our camera doing much more than recording the event from about 50 yards back, which does not make for great television! But our presence alone was enough to signal an absent but nonetheless invested audience of bystanders, made powerful in their invisibility.

The linguistic production of these status roles is extended in the component following the Greeting, the body or Ranjan’ny kabary (literally the calf of a leg). The body is followed by the Fehin-teny, the closing which provides a frame break shifting the roles people take on in kabary to those held prior. The body is the part of performance where political topics may be addressed but generally it serves as an opportunity to connect such issues with the character, wisdom, and authority of the ancestors and through the embodiment of this, by extension, in the politician. It is that segment of the kabary where speakers deploy certain literary features in order to show how they think as a leader and to instantiate alliances and distinctions between ideas, beliefs, memories, themselves, and their audience. This trek is not made alone by the orator: aside from having the words of the ancestors to aid this representation, the mpikabary has a team of writers, a toolbox of literary elements that are hard at work less to make a point than to show the path of the orator’s thought, the most persuasive aspect of the kabary. Though the entire kabary requires rhetorical
strategy, the body carries the most opportunities to deploy *kabary*’s signature *hainteny* (poetry) and *ohabolana* (proverbs).

During my work with the presidential administration and mayoral campaign staff, I found there to be many *kabary politika* authors, sometimes acting also as speakers, but for the most part *kabary* in present-day politics is almost always authored by many and performed by one. This team and its orator come to the table with a relatively shared understanding of what it means to give a speech in Madagascar. They know just how to present in a wind of words the traditional order of greetings and honorifics, expressions of respect and apology, and arrangements of proverbs (*ohabolana*) and poetry (*hainteny*). Regardless of the semantic specificities, as Maurice Bloch suggests, “when it has been indicated that a linguistic act is a *kabary*, the listeners have been warned to expect very many metaphorical statements” (1975: 168; 1985: 633). In fact, this is anticipated by audiences who sometimes come from 100 kilometers away just to hear a famed *mpikabary* speak. In the body of the speech the speaker builds a mental image or *sarinteny* (literally word pictures) by way of metaphor and other tropes deployed through riddles, poetry, and proverbs, hopefully a common image in the minds of his audience. These elements are not ubiquitous in everyday speech and give *kabary* its poetic and phatic force as *rhetoric* (Friedrich 1991). They are delivered in a choreographed manner; “equipped with two or three hundred metrical phrases and four or five hundred metrical poems, Merina men of words compose-and-perform their [*kabary*] debate as if it were a huge contest of *hainteny*,” or poetry (Haring 1992: 180).

So decorated is the *mpikabary*’s cautious and calibrated deployment of literary features that he is able to avoid speaking directly about any single point through referential content of the *kabary* itself. Razafy and other *mpikabary* I met during my research insisted that it is only the job of the orator to conclude the *event* itself but not his job to ever conclude *his thought* or that of his fellow audience. Throughout the *kabary*, he argued, “the speaker does not deliver a finalized message but shares his path of thought, so that the audience may take it in, discuss it, and understand the reasoning behind such authority and *learn a lesson rather than get a message.*” In this process where one man’s signs are productive of another’s, the practical “point” of *kabary* then is not to avoid the typical point, which is how speakers and auditors from other oratorical traditions have often described *kabary*. This was corroborated during my work with the president’s communications
staff and with the mayoral campaigns. On many a Sunday afternoon, I walked with Mahaleo, a well-known political singer-songwriter who doubled as a campaign advisor, through the city listening to various kabary for the upcoming mayoral election. I kept asking Mahaleo, “What’s he getting at? What political issue is he arguing? What’s he going to do for people if elected?” He just laughed and immediately disabused me of assuming Malagasy political oratory might be as to the point and full of over-used, predictable sound bites as what I was accustomed to coming out of Washington, DC. In fact, it was not only artful but an oratory that ventured into storytelling, sometimes with a narrative of rich characters, compelling social situations, and the texture and complexity of proverbs, all of which often never referred to anything in current political events. As Mahaleo explained, “Metaphor is a must. That is how Malagasy people prefer to hear what one has to tell them. They prefer it this way, in a curvy manner [miolaka], which is a way that calls for some thinking and reflection, and not too direct [mihitsy], too direct.”

As Mahaleo and Ochs have described, the intent then is to present both a substantive and rhetorically satisfying performance such that the audience is convinced of a larger idea “on their own accord” without being told to do so through the referential content (Ochs 1975, 1996). We stapled up posters of election candidates that simply and directly told us all to “Choose Me!” As Mahaleo explained, “in kabary one has to say words which make people think and not impose one’s own ideas of truth.” It is this that mpikabary of all kabary types perceive to be the underlying motivation and functionality of their work. Just as the Yemeni tribesmen of Steven Caton’s ethnography place virtue in the controlled and subtle delivery of oral poetry and a “premium on the ability to allude to truth rather than state it baldly,” the Malagasy audience of a kabary associates the symbolic power of the speaker with his knack for indirect persuasion over direct demand (Caton 1993: 36). That notion of where political meaning resides and from where the power of the speaker ushers forth, Mahaleo told me, is enabled by the structure of the kabary itself; however, he explained, it is not the structure alone but its deployment that enables the voice and therefore the power of the ancestors to really enter into and inform the political situation. The right use and timing of riddles, the proverbs, the choreography of the kabary’s structural elements are all indexical of that speaker’s ability not only to give a good speech but also to show his train of thought to an audience and to show how
his potential power aligns with the wisdom of those who have come before him, a relationship bound up in notions of hasina, an issue I introduce later in the chapter.

With Razafy and Mahaleo’s instruction in mind, the speech then is not about campaigning for or reporting laws, policies, or other political issues that an orator might actually bring up in the speech itself; rather, it is more about an agreement that the process is dialogic, that the semiotic work is done by both the speaker and his auditors, “an assumption of accountability to an audience for the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond referential content” (Bauman 1975: 293). In this sense of the joint responsibility between speaker and audience and the endurance of the conversation beyond the event itself, the kabary performance may be read as what anthropologist and mpikabary Elie Rajaonarison defined as a social contract.

**Beyond the Event: Kabary as Social Contract**

Before his untimely death in November 2010, Elie Rajaonarison was a nationally renowned mpikabary, poet, political leader, and anthropologist at the University of Antananarivo. I first met Elie in the United States when he visited Yale and presented a talk about kabary and its place in politics. In Madagascar he was like my father, mentor, and friend. For this, he was primary informant, too. He often sent last-minute text messages to me during my fieldwork inviting me to come along for mayoral campaign trips. During one of our chats, he summed up the biography of kabary as a contract, enduring long after the event itself, more running its course through the discussions about it and through future kabary:

After the kabary, people will discuss it to deepen the picture in question, and that talk (resaka) is interesting in a kabary. If a kabary does not arouse discussion, it is not successful. A kabary, you know, should touch the conscience and enliven the mind. This is how kabary becomes a contract between the speaker and the people.

To call this semiotic process a “contract” speaks on the one hand to the intersubjective understanding speakers and listeners have with one another – that is, the event necessitates work by both parties, with one another. On the other hand, it points to the importance of the
Talk before and after the kabary event. This domain of communicative interaction has been discussed by Elinor Ochs (1975) in her work on Malagasy kabary as resaka and further discussed in later chapters of this book. Resaka is defined as informal or regular conversation – contexts such as talking on the street, at dinner, or after the National Assembly adjourns. What is more, kabary earns its reputation as a “contract” with its myriad publics not in the act itself but in what that act says about the speaker beyond the event; through kabary, a speaker reveals his ability to build and come to resolution with others behind closed doors in the interest of the people. To be a good leader is to show one’s ability to negotiate this contract vis-à-vis one’s words with an audience, which can then trust one’s ability to negotiate and make decisions throughout one’s political tenure.

Rhetorical strategy to convince

The rhetorical strategy to convince is that feature of this authoritative speech form (Haring 1992: 154) concerning the combination of the arrangement of elements of speech, embodiment, and voice. It concerns the ways in which the speaker blends and delivers literary features such as metaphor, riddle, poetry, and proverb to build a mental picture (sarinteny) in the minds of his audience such that his message is transmitted in a dialogical process with as much work by the audience as his own. More than anything, these strategies regiment political agency. To gain agency from any political authority, the mpikabary must direct the collective conscience of his audience such that his work is productive of the kind of social imaginary that will inform the reception of his speech and the discussions after his speech. This not only indexes his way of thinking but also builds an alliance or affinity with the audience and accordingly shapes or shifts public opinion.

Razafy’s idea of the role of the strategy to convince presupposed in kabary as a rhetorical form may be glossed like this: a successful kabary is not achieved by simply following the structure, as structure does not determine how the token utterance in its moment of space and time is meaningfully motivated. Rather, it is the deft expertise of speakers who deploy certain literary elements in such a way that each component has a transformative effect on place and time, impelling (hanentana) or persuading listeners (handresy lahatra). Handresy lahatra is
a term used only in persuasion made through verbal arguments. The strategy to convince is, most importantly, bound to building a public, a sense of community (hanamboarana fihavanana). Through the speech, one must attach to the potential energy that every audience has to come together in solidarity, not over a particular issue but as a particular kind of people. Razafy’s idea seemed closest to Durkheim’s (1995) notion of the effervescence of communitas.

Fihavanana is defined as that sense of community one “feels” and is beholden to because of being “Malagasy.” It denotes those acts of an individual that are aligned to that notion of community. In this respect, fihavanana takes on Durkheim’s (1984: 329) notion of social solidarity in the collective consciousness and collective ideal of humanity. In fact, within this ideology of practice, political agency comes not from the individual enterprise toward change by a political orator but from that speaker’s ability to make or maintain community, to transform an audience, a group of assembled individuals, into a collective with a collective sense of their own identity or the political issues at hand. This view of agency is key to the production of political publics and vernacular aspects of democracy in Imerina. It corroborates a number of theoretical positions regarding the culmination of cosmologies of groupness – whether termed imagined communities, social imaginaries, or publics – a process we take up throughout the text.

Of course, this sense of a political community is certainly always much more varied than a single term might suggest, and is often initiated through various rhetorical devices that become a point of origin for identities such as gasy, Christian, modern, moral, progressive – whatever the going trope of the day. Elements of speech that extend the speech event’s transformative context beyond its singular performance hearken back to an objectified past or to another spatiotemporal context with an immutable authority as a point of origin of knowledge and its production. Such chronotopic portability or movement across space and time enables political speakers to arrange this intertextual and intertemporal technique in order to maintain their authority and status, and mark their proximity to the will of the presumed authors of those words, the ancestors (or the Christian God). Greetings and words for respect index social hierarchy beyond the kabary chronotope; the use of proverbs as words of the ancestors, and the ritual reprieve from guilt, all work to iconically reproduce the normative social order. In effect, political kabary resolves the crisis of history and power by
using the mythic past to undergird and stabilize the moral order of the emergent present (Silverstein 1998: 417). This linguistic alliance between speakers and ancestors confers power upon speakers as they animate the words of the ancestors, proverbs. To share words of the ancestors – or as we will see in later chapters, to speak the words of the minister, the Christian, the register of international development, as the modern – symbolically recreates and maintains that connection to this historical narrative of Imerina’s mythic past. Fihavanana, the ways in which to create it through the speech, its attachment to certain registers across contexts, and its place as inchoate forms of political publics, is central to the story of this book and will be taken up as we move into the ethnographic details in later chapters.

**Embodiment and voice**

The second feature of *kabary politika* concerns the volume and tenor of the voice, the range of expressive intonation and articulation of words (implied in this is proper use of the standard dialect), posture, body movement, and proximity and engagement with the audience. It also concerns one’s embodied comportment of character. The president of the National Kabary Association summed up a strong aesthetic sense of *mpikabary* during his *kabary* for the association’s fortieth anniversary celebration:

What makes a *mpikabary* a *mpikabary* in the community? What is a *mpikabary*? First, according to the study of the *Tantaran’ny Andriana* [*The History of Nobles, a reference book for the history of the Malagasy monarchy*], the *mpikabary* must be a respectable person in the community. He is wise, honest, and serious. He has the esteem of the community and of his family, which considers him as its representative. The ancestors’ definition of the *mpikabary* is someone good looking and elegant. Someone tall and handsome. As for an elegant person, he has soft skin. It’s a person that is pleasurable to the eye. He is someone you surrender to.

To gloss in English what Razafy told our class, “If we just look at political speaking to the public as though we know nothing about it but that it is just talk, we can define it simply as nothing but an arrangement of words made with a loud voice in front of a lot of people. But if we see it as Malagasy *kabary*, we see it differently.”

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Kabary is indexed not merely by its opening line as one may expect from the opening example to this chapter, but also by certain paralinguistic indicators, which include the location and demeanor of the mpikabary’s embodied stance, expressive intonation, his character, and the way the audience ratifies the kabary moment through their own behavior. These are all contextualization cues that frame the event as kabary. Without them, the orator at the opening of this chapter could have uttered the words of the greeting but would have failed felicity conditions to continue without this level of embodiment. As Razafy explained to our kabary class, an mpikabary must be invested with the qualities to control the way thoughts are made. He argues that this is the ability “to speak Malagasy well, to handle the manner of one’s movement and comportment, and to control the landscape of time and space of his event with wisdom and patience.” Razafy instilled these qualities of speaking, embodiment, and storytelling in his students, telling us at least once each lesson that half of the manner for transmitting the message is given through speaking; the other half, however, is afforded by manner of moving or acting, encompassed in the comportment of our bodies and voices.

Most mpikabary maintain a strong voice that is often punctuated by bursts of tonal saliency (almost always followed by the squeal of microphone feedback). His voice flows with varying intonation responding to movements and shifts of thought. Mpikabary are described as having a strong physical presence, exemplified in the towering presence of Razafy. The carriage of the orator is erect. In my kabary coursework with Razafy, we were instructed to straighten our posture almost to the point of being on the tips of the toes, ready to spill over. This posture is generally understood as lively and enhances facial and tonal expressions, which change as the subject of the kabary grows in complexity. The speaker speaks slowly and clearly, and he is careful to avoid a quiet monotone that might lull his audience to sleep.

In real life, if the speaker embodies the role as mpikabary adequately, evinced by his bodily comportment, a rapt audience is silent and mesmerized, whenever and however long the mpikabary desires, often longer than two hours. If not, in the kabary politika in particular, the audience often will mill about, talk aloud, or stop being wholly an audience. In class, we were chastised for staring into one space for too long while we recited memorized kabary, standing too far from or too close to upstage, and not signaling a clever turn of phrase with a change in intonation and posture. Each of these transgressions appeared to indicate
we were giving a different kind of speech: staring like a possessed person, the slouched posture of a private conversation, the monotone of a sermon, the downstage soliloquy of a minor theatrical player. Because a kabary event is no kabary without an addressee (nor is there an audience without a speaker), these transgressions all involved not fulfilling the comportment and voice, the obligatory intersubjective indexing of our relationship with the audience. This indexing is a material acknowledgment that we know we have an audience, that it knows it is being addressed, and that that audience is meaningful in making the event endure beyond our recited words.

The ideal political mpikabary will embody the voice of the State, by using the dialect of the State, Malagasy ofisialy, or official Malagasy. The standard is based on the dialect of Imerina and is the perceived acrolect across Madagascar. It is of course always described as “purer” and “accentless.” This point of view and the place of Merina dialect as standard reflect the history discussed in chapter 2. The standard dialect was made so when the language was codified and transcribed by the Merina king, Radama I, and the London Missionary Society in the early 1800s and institutionalized in schools and other places of governance during King Radama’s colonization of the island. In kabary politika today, as with other forms of everyday speech, ofisialy does not index this precolonial history of domination as much as it points to an understood norm as the unmarked form. Whether it is used in everyday speech or in kabary, as unmarked, the standard ofisialy then stands in contrastive relief to other marked dialects: the coastal variety and lower basilects in Imerina. The distinctions tied to dialect choice are also indices for describing the mpikabary himself. In short, hierarchical differences of class and ethnicity are typically marked by dialect difference. For example, in one of the kabary competitions held in Antananarivo, the president of the National Mpikabary Association, whose members are almost all Merina and speakers of this standard dialect, made this clear: “If graced, a good mpikabary emulates the tantaran’ny andriana [The Story of the Nobles],” a text of the history of the kings of Merina and their associated nobility. If not, a good mpikabary performer is judged according to how he handles grammar. He juxtaposes his good grammar to that of the slang of the “streets,” a general label for the basilect speech of the lower classes:

Grammatically, the mpikabary masters the Malagasy language, the ancestor’s language, the vocabulary, the hainteny poetry, the expressions and
Aside from these denotational markers of a classed or ethnic comportment, Razafy also instructed us on the refined character and conduct of the speaker himself, regardless of whether we were performing the speech or simply walking through the market buying onions and rice. For Razafy, this otherwise abstract ideology of identity embodied in a speaker’s comportment and voice is operationalized not only linguistically but also by the materialization of the character (fanahy) of the mpikabary, even outside his role as speaker. As he taught us how to both “do kabary” and “be a mpikabary,” Razafy assumed in each of us an agentive quality of character based on notions of what it “means” to be “Malagasy”; if we are to be mpikabary, we had to consider our own individual character above and beyond any ability to execute the form and style of kabary.6 The quality, state, or nature of the kabary speaker (ny toetran’ny mpikabary) within the society should be described as “one who can respect himself; one who is responsible, truthful, and respects one’s family and the society in which he lives; and, one who respects the ideas of fiHAVANANA or community loyalty and solidarity.” The ideal of fihavanana is, in fact, attained through kabary practice while molding that affinity through manifestations of ideal characters in the speaker. With this ideological and aesthetic reflection on speaking as an index of the self and group identity, the social and productive role of kabary as a complex generic form of public political practice may be read better not solely as a transformative event of doing but as an event of being and becoming, manifesting an invisible moral power iconic and indexical of the ancestors who brought you to the stage. This is hasina power.

**On Hasina Power: Notions of Status and Authority Informing Possibilities of Comportment and Rhetorical Strategy**

Understandings of what it means to convince through rhetorical strategy hinge less on the semantico-referential content of the kabary and more on the ideologies of comportment, ways of being that link
action and talk to how speech is perceived by a public as an act of power or *hasina*. As a leader’s authoritative address, *kabary politika* is a practice that imparts a particular virtue and power to its speaker based on an ideology and aesthetic of personal power by directing the collective conscience. This is referred to in Malagasy as *hasina*. In his studies of kinship, folklore, and animism in Imerina, Alain Delivré (1974) defines *hasina* as the capacity to affect the world through imperceptible means. David Graeber (1995) extends this definition in his work on reburial rituals and cultural memory to explain *hasina* as an invisible power of ancestors manifested in living people, “or how the ancestors continue to act and to play a direct role in their descendant’s daily lives.”

Historical and social science research has shown how Merina perceptions and phenomenologies of *hasina* shape and are reflected in everyday linguistic and non-linguistic interactional contexts (Astuti 1995; Berg 1996; Bloch 1975; Campbell 1991; Feeley-Harnik 1984; Graeber 1995, 2007; Lambek 1992; Larson 1995, 1996, 1997). In terms of linguistic action, the *kabary* speaker’s authority and the efficacy of his speech are thought to presuppose his *hasina*. Of course, the very praise of the political supporters for their leader evokes that *hasina* as well. As a social act, use of the *kabary* form does not presuppose power simply because of its formalized code, but rather because of its contiguity with a longer historical narrative in which *hasina* is bound to ancestral will and privilege (Berg 1996). Meaningfully motivated by this deictic extension, the speech form itself imbues its speaker with the rights and privileges of that ancestral will. Speakers animate or channel that ancestral blessing of *hasina* power through *kabary*, which flows “from the ancestors through social superiors to common people” (Bloch 1985: 189).

Folklore and anthropological scholars describe *kabary* as “the showiest and most authoritative form of verbal art in Madagascar” (Haring 1992: 152). For this, those who claim knowledge of this genre are then dubbed icons of exemplary speech, an elite speaker speaking an elite form. In the way the “most elegant of the well-known Javanese speech styles” and knowledge of its style is a “diacritic of the speaker’s higher status” (Errington 2000: 109), so too *kabary* is the refined and polite form of state speech, accessible only to those of high status; its exemplary usage “could be perceived, then, as a quasi-natural attribute of elitehood,” what Habermas has called a “status attribute” through which the noble person presented himself as embodiment of some sort of “higher” power (Habermas 1989: 7). *Hasina par excellence.*
At the end of our year together, Razafy invited what seemed like all of Madagascar to watch us perform versions of the famous kabary we had learned and memorized. I am not so certain how successful we were; our audience gave us more a polite silence rather than the silence that comes as deference to public speakers, but our performance ushered in a certain spirit in the room, a spirit of consciousness for the work of the word. This was that moment of hasina blessing. After we plodded through hours of greetings, apologies, proverbs, poetry, riddles, and other metaphor, we joined our audience for food and drink. The conversations were almost all about the speeches of the original mpikabary, what their words meant then, how they apply today, and how what we had done today in bringing this past to the fore was good for future generations of Malagasy. Through that night’s talk about our talk, we were already making ourselves ancestors.

Power and Sharing the Political Stage with an Exemplary Form

One effect of associating power in the present with an exemplary form that endures from a mythic past is that any genre that is not political kabary – from radio talk shows to political cartooning – is evaluated against this alpha datum of hasina power. Certainly, these other speech forms circulating in the political sphere are regarded as being in definite and often defiant interaction with political kabary. Combine this privilege of the exemplar with that fact that mpikabary are politically invested, and therefore often have access to “knowledge” and other conversations beyond the stage. For this, they can control the resources and capacities of other groups that engage with the state through mediated forms of communication. This often sets up the power dynamic in which kabary presents political knowledge and genres such as cartooning respond to it.

Until the Ravalomanana administration this difference was grounded by the fact that kabary is almost always used to serve state power rather than turn against it. Though ideologically political kabary is at the center and apex of public political speech, its forms, and therefore its speakers, are not necessarily in a one-way relationship with other genres and speakers. Rather, concrete examples of more informal political forms, especially political cartoons, church sermons, hiragasy,
and political theatre, often incorporate, defer, or allude to certain structural and stylistic elements of *kabary* to upset the authority conferred on the speaker by his performance of this exemplary form. In fact, many cartoons, *hiragasy*, and theatre performances often contain parodied *kabary* events. In these iconic recontextualizations of oratory and the bodies who utter it, cartoonists provide dissonant jolts to the otherwise totalizing authority *kabary* presupposes and entails. In the heteroglossia that is the public sphere, the dialogical relationship between *resaka* forms and *kabary* is often manipulated to distort, dislocate, and undermine a *kabary* performance as much as to reproduce the idealization of its formal and exemplary authority.

To counter this authority and the “publics” to which it gives rise, political cartooning exposes and alleges to resolve problems in social relations by foregrounding representations of such “problems” while complicating the here-and-now reduction of these issues in the political *kabary* events. Quite often, this here-and-now is disturbed, and reoriented in contrast to the mythic past, and the public of *kabary* is reconfigured to represent its heteroglossic nature. In this respect, as we shall discuss next, while *kabary* acts attempt to smooth over these differences and cohere publics supportive of their interests, cartoonists disrupt that unity to show dispute and difference, as well as power imbalances inherent in any reductionist notions of community unity put forth by state orators for political effect.

**Notes**

1 Most Malagasy are surprised to learn SAE (Standard Average European, to use Whorf’s phrase) speakers’ oratorical variations do not include a form similar to the highly stylized *kabary*.

2 The poetic triad of *miala* used in this comparison, which means to let out or relieve, is completely missed in the English translation, but the *mpikabary* would get credit for his clever way at mixing such an analogy.

3 Today, the work of the utterance of *fialan-tsiny* as a speech act, a performative, is being thrown into question as speakers are doing it less and less, shifting participation structures that deemphasize the sacred place of the ancestors’ words. This desacralizing force most often occurs when a speaker delivers his address on television or radio, or when the bystanders to his speech (rather than his audience) are from transnational state and quasi-state institutions who would not ratify the *fialan-tsiny* one way or another. The shift in *fialan-tsiny* frequency is also associated with Presi-
dent Ravalomanana, who unlike his predecessor hardly ever asks for removal of the guilt associated with inevitably dangerous words. This neglect of the Apology comes with the president’s privilege as the “parent” (rei-amandreny) of the country. On the other hand, his tendency to avoid the Apology is said to be associated with Ravalomanana’s strong Christian beliefs, which direct him to ask for pardon only from God, not an audience or the ancestors, which the fialan-tsiny implies.

This description was provided to me by Elie when he was visiting the United States; therefore, the term “contract” was offered in English.

This is particularly evident in the speaking styles of the First Republic President Philibert Tsiranana and the Second and Third Republic President Didier Ratsiraka.

Lesley Sharpe (2002: 95) speaks of this in terms of Christian converts who still maintain a sense that to be Malagasy is to continue to respect the words of the ancestors in this overt way.

Such descendants are semantically referenced in the urban political kabary context as those who embody the imagined community of the nation (firenena) rather than particular descent groups.

References


