The choreography of street traffic and slight bodies adeptly meandering through its fits and starts to sell the daily variety of newspapers is a site to behold each morning throughout downtown Tana. Cradling newspapers in a giant hand-fan toward the sky, young and old people stand in the middle of traffic or run alongside moving buses to sell one or many of the dailies. Makeshift market stands alongside the city streets and in market aisles are posted with newspapers as advertisements of themselves. Most often, these stands of newspapers cause logjams as people stand together to read and discuss the headlines and the *kisarisary politika*, the political cartoon, the only section of the paper that can be read without purchasing it. Often, it is only through this gathering of voices reciting the news and interpretations of it – tying the wisdom of yesterday and yesteryear with today’s – that many are able to know the subject of news they otherwise cannot read. For those who cannot afford to buy the paper, the political cartoons on the cover of most newspapers are their only access to news. The cartoons are large, simply worded, and equivalent to a thousand words of political commentary. As a point of competition between papers, political cartoons have combined front-page news and editorial
within the same medium as they have since their inception in 1818 when the LMS published the first copy of the newspaper, *Teny Soa*.

This chapter explores the everyday life and audience of the urban Imerina cartoonist, illuminating some of the political, historical, and linguistic forces shaping their mediation of public opinion, and the ways in which their counter-political discourse reflects and transforms interactions between the state and civil society. We go to the sketch rooms to gather some insight into the perspective of urban political cartoonists and their modes of communicative interaction in the daily creation and perceived reception of cartooning. Listening to groups of political cartoonists talk their mornings away while drawing strips, we learn the details of their parodic approach and some of the literary elements on which their tradition relies. In their discussions about cartoons as political action, as objectifications of real everyday people and issues, and about the beliefs and objectives that inform their work, we come to see how such semiotic devices as parody, reported speech, iconicization, stereotyping, and intentional hyperbole of speaking styles are all part of a cartooning method to break the indexical power and foreground social disorder to destabilize the otherwise normative sociopolitical moral order *kabary* attempts to maintain.

**Postcolonial History of Political Cartooning in Urban Imerina**

Political cartoons in Madagascar find their origins in a precolonial newspaper, the first publication of the LMS, the *Teny Soa*. The cartoonists of this publication, however, were not from the politically driven lot cartoonists look up to today. Rather today’s political cartoonist, of which all are rather young men, emulate those predecessors who ushered in independence in 1960 with some semblance of an overt social democratic voice. This voice of postcolonial Madagascar was immediately censored by the new Malagasy ruling regime, just as it had been by the very colonial government that influenced the way these cartoons were drawn. Nonetheless, the artifacts of the work still exist and what was published in the press paved the way for the kind of criticism of social life and government one finds today. We see the origins of this biting criticism in the *Gazety Hehy* cartoon featured as figure 2.2 in chapter 2. The cartoon depicts the blatant cooking of

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the electoral books during an election, a quite overt and direct criticism made as early as the First Republic (1960–1972).^2

For the most part, political cartoonists have had a front-page presence in Malagasy urban media since independence in 1960. For many newspapers then and now, political cartoons fill the entire front page in order to give immediate access to a literate and semi-literate readership (or even illiterate, as many cartoons are drawn without words). Within each cartoon readers could get both the information and analysis or commentary. Because the front page could be seen and discussed without purchasing the paper, this format built a context for collective competency in the everyday politics of national government.

Cartoonists were a dominating presence in major urban post-independence newspapers until Ratsiraka’s presidential victory in 1975 when newspapers were controlled heavily by the state. Evidence of the effectiveness of graphic satire in the early 1970s comes from the fact that many cartoonists at that time were immediately censored and persecuted under Ratsiraka’s leadership. Cartooning’s presence under Ratsiraka eventually shifted when in 1989 Ratsiraka was forced to accept compulsory programs under liberalization that espoused beliefs in a healthy civil society as one with political cartoons. Motivated primarily by IMF Structural Adjustment programs, the state loosened control over the press and instituted privatized media standards. Sély, one of the cartoonists with whom I worked, began his work in 1991, and describes this period:

> About cartoons, it has been gaining ground during the last decade. Written press political cartoons has been flourishing during the last ten years, as soon as the former state leader decided to cease press censorship in 1989. Before 1989 it was very difficult, nobody could do these [kisarisary] because every day, all gazettes had to be brought to the Minister of Interior prior to their issue to get the official stamp. They had to be read one by one: “this article cannot be issued,” they would say, and so it had to be removed. But after 1989, journalism was set “free.” I mean, it gained very little freedom but political cartoons did begin to appear in newspapers again. And I started to draw them in 1991.

Even after the 1989 liberalization of the press, cartoonists still avoided direct jabs at specific politicians or particular political issues, lest they suffer some sort of persecution – often signaled by Sély’s broad hand
making like a knife cutting across the throat. On and off censorship has led many political cartoonists, not just in Madagascar but around the formerly colonized world, to find indirect modes of representing politics and political agendas. They rely on the possibilities inherent in and the agency afforded by embodying and voicing the words of one in a cartoon caricature.

Today, newspapers come and go. The most common and consistent are *L’Express*, *Le Quotidien*, *Midi*, *Tribune*, *Les Nouvelles*, *La Gazette*, Gazetiko – the one written in Malagasy – and a few weekly papers like *Malaza*, Ngah?!, and *Revue de l’Océan Indien*, a magazine with many political cartoons. All are privately owned, but most owners work in public service in one way or another. This was particularly the case for *Le Quotidien*’s owner, President Marc Ravalomanana, who also owned one of two national television channels, named only in English, the Madagascar Broadcasting Company (MBC), throughout his presidency. The distribution of newspapers is limited to urban Imerina and the southern highlands. These areas, between Antananarivo and Antsirabe, house many printing presses and many of the internationally based civil society education programs dedicated to increasing civic education and its technologies (namely, mass media). One can find these newspapers in other major cities and towns in Madagascar but their delivery is severely delayed; and, aside from the national political news, the topics are for the most part quite local to the capital city and highland area.

Rites, Membership, and Networks in the Cartooning Community

Most cartoonists are members of the journalist unions and mass media professional associations, though this occupation is not recognized as a journalistic profession in and of itself. The cartoonists must declare their occupation as journalists. Cartoonists as well as journalists often break away from one media conglomerate to join or create another, usually for political reasons; for example, an association of cartoonists and journalists who once worked for the *Le Tribune* formed *La Gazette*, a major newspaper in the capital that was under fire for scrutiny and criticism of the competency of the Ravalomanana government. The unions and professional associations often provide
political power for journalists in their representation of a large group of otherwise very politically powerless individuals. Most of these cartoonists and journalists are extremely young university students led by a handful of older veterans of the business.

Aside from this formal organization for the community of professional cartoonists, there are informal means for building and maintaining a sense of a collective profession and trade. These means are built almost entirely on the historical memory of cartooning’s elders, narratives which the young generation of political cartoonists reproduce in their own convictions about and approach to the business. In this they resemble many mpikabary students who compare their performance to that of past speakers. Razafy, my kabary instructor, for example, would compare his own performance to his ideal, the well-known mpikabary Pastor Andriamanjato. And, all of us were aware of the greatest mpikabary of the past, notably the great king of Imerina, Andrianampoinimerina. So, too, cartoonists look to their elders and predecessors for inspiration and guidance. Since 1960, a loose association of mentors has set the standards for style and content. Today, many of the cartoonists with whom I worked spoke of some mentor, and some assumed that role for up-and-coming cartoonists, “those who are newly graduated from the university are hard at work, but not good yet.” Every cartoonist I know speaks of his work today as a part of and a contribution to an ongoing community. Part of maintaining the kinship of this occupational community is to jovially contest the genealogy of artists over time, arguing about who came first and who followed whom. A typical remark in this friendly rivalry may be “well, actually he gets his ideas from me. But Aimé Razafy was the first. His cartoons are the original ones: the rest are all copies.”

However, for the most part, it continues to be a community based on bringing up new cartoonists to carry on their important work in an informally organized association whose shared biography as political non-elites leads them to find some way to get their edge in wordwise. Elisé, a well-known cartoonist of the major French-language newspaper L’Express, explains this shared biography but also the ways in which mentoring and apprenticing are integral to this professional community:

All of these other drawers today are still influenced by either Elisé’s or Aimé Razafy’s style. There are many of them I trained: I made up books and I asked them to conceive the covers . . . or to put
color on my drawings. The making of such books requires a team effort. I write/draw with a pencil and different people do the finishing . . . That’s what I do besides making political cartoons in the newspaper. I run this sort of enterprise as a way to teach them. Once they get experience with me, an elder in this work, they can find jobs in the other papers – like those who now work for Ngah?!. There were lots of ankizy [youngsters] who worked with me, like most of Ngah?!’s caricaturists or Les Nouvelles’, as well as some others. And I have the ones I learned from, likewise.

Shared idols and mentors at home – and increasingly abroad – bind their community of political cartoonists as distinct from other artists, and link quite often to a global network of mostly US, French, and African political cartoonists. This kind of cosmopolitanism, never novel to this island society, has been the major drive for a subsection of cartoonists to write in French and to frequently interact with foreign journalists and cartoonists. Jôs, a young university-educated cartoonist, wishes to earn international acclaim for his cartoons and is thus motivated to write in French only. In Jôs’s fifteen-year career he has received training outside Madagascar and met other political

Figure 4.1  The mentor to so many cartoonists, Aimé Razafy, depicts the velocity of Ravalomanana’s development plans through his controversial purchase of a personal jet, which he names Air Force One after the US president’s plane. Aimé places the unwilling prime minister in the seat of the Radar Intercept Officer, evidenced by his sweat and plea to “slow down.”
Source: Reproduced by permission of La Gazette/Tribune.
cartoonists across the Western world, whose drawings now wallpaper his bedroom as proof of his inspiration. Because of this connection, Jôs stayed in Tana to observe and comment on the political crisis between Marc Ravalomanana and Didier Ratsiraka, feeling as though he had a kind of “spiritual, if not physical, backing by a family of cartoonists beyond his own borders who uphold the principles of democracy and will defend Malagasy cartoonists’ work, even in crisis.” Today, Jôs not only works full time with the major newspaper, but has also served as an illustrator for civil society education programs sponsored by US international aid grants. His professional story, though in stark contrast to other cartoonists in Tana, is one that reflects the rather inextricable connection the cartooning community now has with transnational governance initiatives, but also the kind

Figure 4.2 “Route Construction. Let us start it with TIM.” Several cartoons appear weekly as critiques of current trends in the state’s mode of development. This cartoon by Elisé depicts the president’s mode of development through his political party (TIM) as a bulldozer for modernity at the cost of tradition, represented by traditional *hiragasy* dancers.

Source: Reproduced by permission of *Gazetiko/Midi-Madagasikara*. 
of philosophy and ideology informing the Malagasy cartooning community. It also points to how Malagasy cartoonists think of their audience and convey political cartoon worlds to them.

**Speaking in Their Language: Code Choice, Access, and Cartooning’s Audience**

There is one all-Malagasy language source in Imerina for news and political cartoons, the *Gazetiko*, a paper owned by the company that produces the French-language version, *Midi Madagasikara*. Jivan, political cartoonist for *Gazetiko*, always writes in the Malagasy language as a point of strategy, no matter how well the pictures may speak for themselves. He tells me, “it is better for me to use Malagasy because with this language it is much better to tell it in a way people will really get it: the way Malagasy comic strip drawers do their *sary* is not the same as the European, and this is because we can speak so much more through our language.” *La Gazette*, a French-language daily, often features Malagasy-language cartoons on its cover and inside pages. *Ngah?!*, a cartoon gazette, provides many political cartoons that are always placed on the front page, always in Malagasy or phonetically derived French. Sély explained that quite often for cartoons on the front page, language choice is not an issue: “The cartoon on the cover, the one I described as being the most political, can be understood by anyone because the pictures speak for themselves! That’s our job!”

Reading the newspaper is a collective and extremely extroverted practice in Madagascar. People unable to read stand shoulder to shoulder as someone reads aloud the front page of stories. After the typical stories of flooded bridges, cattle rustling, the political speeches of yesterday, and the spin of the political cartoon are recounted by the reader, everyone participates in talking *about* the news. The analysis provided by the cartoon on the front cover certainly discursively steers that conversation at the market stall. Together, talk and cartoons create a daily dialogical interaction emergent of the public sphere. This mediated talk is the objective for these cartoonists, to cause more talk about talk by their customers. Satire through pictures prods them to consider and weigh the effects, methods, and motivations informing everyday governance, even if it means making fun of these very people through reinforcing certain stereotypes.
In general, cartoon-reading audiences vary with the language of the newspaper. More than any other factor, placement of the cartoon and the language indicate the market it is intended to reach. This is mostly because the audience that benefits most from cartooning normally consists of disadvantaged, generally politically disfranchised people unable to read well or at all. The Malagasy-language newspapers follow this strategy to provide them content and analysis all in the cartoon frame, as well as provide the paper for a lower price than the typical French-language paper, which costs 1,000FMGs, the cost of a loaf of bread and double the cost of *Gazetiko*.

Figure 4.3  Jivan’s cartoon suggests corruption in voting processes by way of cracked glass in the otherwise “transparent” voting box.
Source: Reproduced by permission of *Gazetiko/Midi-Madagasikara*. 

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Most readers of Malagasy dailies differ from those who read French-language news. Readers of French-language papers such as *L’Express*, *Tribune*, and *Midi-Madagasikara* tend to be urban professionals, civil servants, or students in higher education. The latter, however, often read papers in order to improve their French, the official language of instruction in the university. Most readers of Malagasy news include white-collar support staff, market people, and those in the informal work sector. French papers are considered more socially valuable only in that the readers who buy them may also buy Malagasy papers, but the reverse is hardly ever the case. I was told and observed that most adults from upper socioeconomic and educational backgrounds would not be seen in public reading *Ngah?!* because they worried that they may be perceived as puerile, poor, uneducated, or lacking in character and mentality. In fact, many informed me that the choice of paper generally indexed the individual’s level in society and education. The persistent question was whether the purchase of a French paper was to show one could read the language, and therefore a more intellectual paper, or to show one could afford a paper that costs twice as much as *Gazetiko*. The answer is probably a little bit of both. All in all, I found people had less to assert about who reads what paper than the conversations assembled around the news reported. Talking about what was talked about was key. The newspaper got them there.

Language choice not only reflects audience and what ties journalists and cartoonists perceive they have with various local and international audiences, but also affects how news content is handled for that audience, notably local news. What topics are covered in one newspaper versus another, the placement of stories and cartoons, and the degree to which the issues are covered, all differ. In French-language newspapers, political cartoons are almost always offered up inside the newspaper rather than its front page, making it impossible to see it without purchasing the paper. Where bandits arrested for stealing cattle would take the front page of *Gazetiko*, often in papers such as *Midi* and, more pervasively in the French-language newspapers, this news would be clustered on one page deep into the paper and provided in Malagasy. This code and placement choice by the editors indexes their understanding of their readership, but it also is productive of telling that readership what is considered significant and what is only of interest to some other audience, the local population. As Sély explained, “that category of people who would read that section are not the ones who will be very interested in economical or political
matters, so that is why in that case we use Malagasy and place it somewhere near the fold.”

Language choice, content, and placement, along with prohibitive costs, may not be the only barriers to French-language cartoons and stories located in the inside-fold of major newspapers; rather, perceptions of mentality tied to language choice and audience are at play. Cartoonists of the French-language newspapers claim to speak to a different “mentality” (toe-tsaina) than Gazetiko, the all-Malagasy language press. Says Sély of his all-French-language newspaper, “my target readers” for cartoons in the middle sections that tell a longer story “are usually intellectual people like businessmen, diplomats, or politicians – in short, people who have some fineness or subtlety, those who can process difficult and complex ideas more so than the others.”

Here is a brief excerpt from a conversation I had with Sély concerning this issue of mentality, language choice, and audience:

Do you ever use Malagasy in these cartoons in the inside-page?
I always use French for these because it targets intellectual people. No simple person [olon-tsotra] can understand it because such categories of people do not have the means to watch TV, to buy the papers, or to listen to the radio. Moreover, most of them have a low level of education. To be able to understand the cartoons I put throughout the newspaper one has to think. Not all the people can do that, because it appeals for some higher knowledge. They need an mpikahary to help them and kabary are too long for cartoons! And, because I do not expose the real message in a direct manner. So this is not intended for them but only for middle-level educated people or for intellectuals.

Sély links language choice to some innate ability to cope with more intellectual matters, as though the language itself holds the key to accessing some topics over others. This postcolonial remnant of having a capacity to understand and process complex ideas in a language other than the colonized language is intensified by the fact that Sély knows many of his readers are vazaha, foreigners, and they do not understand Malagasy. Though their main market is the Malagasy business professional or civil bureaucrat, cartoonists for all-French-language papers anticipate an equally swayed audience of foreigner bystanders, which affects the way they shape the content and form of their cartoons. This is surely because in Madagascar, unlike the United States, an international audience is assumed by the press – and not so much the readers – to be a prominent secondary audience that should have
access to island news. Jôs, longtime cartoonist for one of the most popular newspapers in the capital, explains it this way:

The use of Malagasy will never work beyond Madagascar: this is a very big barrier for its use. Malagasy language cannot work beyond our borders. If we use Malagasy, for example, only the local people would read our paper. You might be an exception since you can understand Malagasy language, but that is not the case for the rest of the world. So if I only use Malagasy, no French or English reader would have understood what I have to say – then what good is my work?! For that reason, I decided to write in an international language.

With access to that news even a small handful of foreign readers have the resources to bring opportunity to Madagascar in a way that the largest Malagasy readership does not. Or so it is thought. Aside from this international audience who may or may not affect the Malagasy local politic, cartoonists anticipate that some in this audience may intervene in serious political matters or at the very least may help with their career development by facilitating travel abroad for training in journalism. Jôs explained that because of his choice of languages, which brings him a certain audience abroad in addition to his Malagasy intellectuals who are literate in French, he has a good chance of being awarded travel opportunities or invited to attend shows or festivals. This potential option is especially hopeful to cartoonists because their occupation is not recognized in Madagascar as a profession. For this, Jôs sees his work as an artist not just as a medium for local Malagasy political action but also as a profession that must be honed by international non-governmental organizations in and outside the country.

I gave Jôs a hard time for linking smarts to language choice. He really wanted me to recognize that his motivation for language choice is based on the language barriers to his audience and his career and not on his lack of respect for his language or Malagasy readers: “If I were using only Malagasy, all of my targets would not understand them. Even if I love my Malagasy identity, even if I love Malagasy language, I have no choice.” What Jôs did not mention but surely knows is that outside his target audience of foreigners and French speakers, many Malagasy who are not literate in French still experience these cartoons on a daily basis through talk about the cartoons at newspaper market stalls or small coffee and snack shops in the market. Nonetheless, language barriers on readership have the pragmatic effect of limiting
the extent to which those who cannot access this dialogue are knowledgeable of or can participate in local politics and in the public sphere.

Literacy, thus, is an issue involved in the relationship between the cartoonist and his public. Cartoonists link language choice to certain groups’ perceived capacity to access and understand information conveyed in cartoons, in particular languages, and about particular subjects. And the issue of accessibility to language and subjects is an obstacle they link to an issue of competence rather than the fact that certain groups are unable to circulate in those social fields where they may access this knowledge. Paradoxically, their view of group competence, and how it plays into the public sphere, is indexed in languages used by the caricatures in their cartoons. Within this context they often iconically represent the very people who are thought to be unable to access these cartoons, indexing ways of being and perceived mentality through language and embodiment. Trying to explain to me that this was not racist or reductive in any way, Sély explains: “If I were asked to draw some Betsileo’s characters, you should know that their hats are like these – they are called *satro-bory* [rimless hats]. Moreover, Betsileo people should be wearing *lamba* and *malabary* [highlanders’ traditional men’s clothing] like this. In addition, Betsileo’s typical landscape should show rice fields built in terraces on the sides of the mountains, like stairs.” Jôs added that they simply want their readers to know they are talking about them, representing their lives:

It is a “message” that we pass on, that means even the way to pass it has an impact on how we do this through our representatives, our caricatures. Because of this message and how we need to speak about it through comics, political caricatures represent and say something about what it means to be Malagasy, so there is something about them, the reader, inside each caricature. Caricatures often find themselves as symbols of Malagasy habits, and there are many cultural things like that which are related through the caricatures.

Even as superficial icons of everyday life, cartoonists’ parodied representations of material reality point to and reproduce certain ideologies and aesthetics of language and language users, particularly once they depart from the hats, *lambas*, and rice-field depictions and represent people in voice and embodiment. This process that moves from iconic representation to iconicization shapes and reflects how speakers are heard and the extent to which social actors participate in the political public sphere.
Hooking the Talons in Deep: The Conditions of Political Critique as Political Action

As part of my field research I worked daily with cartoonists from many of the most popular newspapers in urban Imerina. I followed them around the city to attend press briefings, political events such as kabary, and meetings with journalists. Back at their studios and often at their homes, my cartooning informants would smoke cigarettes and debate certain topics as they performed sweeping adagios with pen, whisking it across cheap paper to make political figures, poor urbanites, and rural farmers come alive on the page. In all of our discussions about their work and their place in everyday politics, everyone agreed that the cartoonist’s creed is to always provide an unconditional critique of all things political. But cartooning is not simply a spontaneous reactionary political protest or complaint delivered directly as such. It is artful, dialogical, and rich in linguistic stylistic features that tell a parable reflective of the messiness and vagaries of everyday life, the social consequences of political decisions significant to civil society – as Sély summed up, “everything the politician pretends does not exist when he weaves his fable of a perfect society where everyone is the same and wants the same thing.” Acting as Abu-Lughod (1986) describes lyrical poetry among Bedouin women, cartooning in Madagascar serves as counter-discourse speaking against the homogenizing social imaginary typically put forth in kabary oratory. Cartooning speaks to the heteroglossia of the urban public essentialized in political oratory, having great effect on public opinion as a result. Consider, for instance, Sély’s comment on the relationship between his work and his audience:

The cartoons I draw in my newspaper recall the political matters of every day. For that, I look for anything ridiculous . . .

You look for any ridiculous saying/happening based on political events? What I mean by “ridiculous” happenings are things that the ruling people should not do/say; in other words, when what they say hides something tricky, or when they lie. Overall, I look for happenings, which involve the relationship between ruling people and the vahoaka [the people]. The second cartoon, which is in the middle of the paper and much longer than the front page, there is a different audience, so I mix politics with some economical, social, or cultural matters. I make a little story for them. For both audiences, though, I always
show the message in an amusing manner. Do you have this in the United States?

Sure, I think our political cartoons but also there is the show I taped for you, The Jon Stewart Show, and also the parody of the newspaper, The Onion. Oh yes! Our cartoons and newspapers are about making a good story, really. Even sometimes the story is not fact, like The Onion, but we will make it anyway because it gets the point across that something in politics is ridiculous, like that man Stewart.

Even if the cartoonist agrees with the current political administration, he should avoid entangling alliances and always be alert as the alika, the watchdogs, for this ridiculousness. The way this distance is maintained and how critique is delivered depends on the broader sociopolitical purview and semiosocial matrix of the time (Volosinov 1973: 105). For Malagasy cartoonists, this critique is usually deployed in a code that covertly re-represents or recontextualizes what something else “really means,” a langue de bois as Sély describes. It’s the code of plain speech marked by sarcasm, satire, parody, and otherwise plain humor. Like Gupta’s observations about rumors cultivated and circulated through newspapers, cartoonists’ parody, sarcasm, satire, and other forms of humor become especially effective vehicles “to challenge official accounts, especially when agencies of the state transgress local standards of behavior” (1995: 386). And it is through such semiotic vehicles and the anticipated evaluation of readers that cartoonists, as a community, maintain an agentive power — through cartoon voices rather than their own — to undermine state power through words about words (Bakhtin 1981).

Of course, state orators tend not to respond directly with words to control the critique by cartoonists. This speaks to the asymmetrical power dynamic between these two sets of actors. In this instance, silence indexes the power of the state to moderate what Bauman (2000: 142) explains as “the capacity of discourses to both represent and regulate other discourses.” Though cartoons can deftly and subtly recode state power’s key symbols, and recirculate them in counter-discourses of a quotidian “fugitive politics,” cartoonists are nonetheless susceptible to retribution should their cartoons undermine political efforts too overtly or cause an individual to lose face (Scott 1990: 111–16). This was obvious to me when I first saw the piles of cartoons in Jôs’s bedroom that were never allowed in the newspaper for fear
of political retribution. There were so many gut responses to political matters retold through cartoons that I often had to ask him to remind me which ones the real public saw and which he only wished had been seen by the public he fantasizes about.

“Our way of critique keeps people thinking, it keeps our readers critical, which is our job,” remarks Jós. “For example, even if a decision made by the government is clearly for the good of the nation’s poor, cartoonists might suggest that such decisions are even better for the coffers of the rich or tied to some international obligation that will indebt Madagascar more so than it already is.” “According to me, the message of political caricatures is made to awaken and to make you think. It takes a long time to finish reading the text of an article. Rather, you can read cartoons in two seconds. We facilitate this message that makes you think through an image you can leave with and talk about with others.” Extending his implied emphasis on this collective practice, Jós adds, “Political cartoons often come without text at all, so consequently, the message can be passed even to illiterate people.” Sélé’s comments corroborate this:

We have to show those in political cartoons with the goal of making people conscious that these things are actually unfair – to call upon their consciousness through images.

So, just as kabary builds the image for people, so do cartoons? But in a very different way?

Exactly, ny haftra amin’ny sainiteny, the message through images. You know, if we show this in long articles, this would be discouraging to read. As soon as people see the long article, they will not read. But, with cartoons, as soon as the reader looks at it, not only will he find it pleasurable in an entertaining manner, but he will get the message with the least intellectual effort: “What does he want to tell by this?”

What I want to say is this: Through the cartoons [political cartoons], the reader finds along with the amusement and the humor, some information – the real news/messages. It always contains some tsindrom-paingotra [sting].

This sting comes from exposing the intent behind a person’s words, what Jivan of Gazetiko calls in the title of his daily cartoon, fantsy, referring to the “sting” of the talon of a rooster. Jivan, who claims a moral obligation to break silence when he sees something “wrong” or ill intended, explains that his words must be cutting in order to “work”:
If for example a person – the one I targeted in my drawing – is happy with my cartoons, that means that my message had not been properly received. I can tell so because a fantsy must always hurt. So as soon as the targeted person had seen the fantsy there must be a change in his/her attitude and behavior. All that is to say that any fantsy is meant to “shoot” at someone like a rooster’s spur. Nobody is happy after being hit by a rooster’s spur because it hurts. However, it’s a necessary bad thing as it’s meant to bring someone back into the right path.

But even when exposing what is wrong or what something else “really means,” Sély and Jivan, just like the others, cannot be too direct with their fantsy or sting as they all wish to be, even though their cartoon caricatures are ventriloquating or animating their ideas. For example, when a cartoonist believes that his audience anticipates that politicians are hiding something, are tricky, or lying, Sély explains, “I always change those incidences into something mampihomely [funny or amusing]. But, when what I draw is ruthless or mean, I explain with the headline to the cartoon that this cartoon is intentionally direct and strong.” One finds such metapragmatic acts, or acts that point to an awareness of what language does, in cartoon series titles such as Elisée’s Sans Cible (“without a target”), suggesting the cartoonist has exactly that and aims carelessly (Silverstein 1993). “Everyone knows by the headline that I intend to be this way and they know what to expect.” As Elisée explains:

That’s why we choose Exprès as the heading for my cartoons! Exprès means vazivazy [a joke] but carries with it also some ironic message. So straight away the reader is warned that it is not a real serious article, yet there is something to it. A reporter is more secure with cartoons [than with written articles] because it’s meant to be a humor and you know that it’s difficult to fight against humor.

Elliott Oring writes on jokes and their social relations, suggesting in this context that “humorous communications tend to have an inverse relation with the truth” (1992: 132). On the one hand, “statements that are patently untrue are often regarded as humorous. On the other hand, the potentially serious messages encoded in humorous communications are generally taken as ‘asides’ and discounted in an unfolding social encounter” (1992: 132). Seta, another among the roster of cartoonists I worked with for several years, builds on Oring’s account:
Politicians always say that we have been applying democracy for so many years so it’s not normal if they cannot support humor in such a regime. Politicians rarely fight with caricaturists. A president who cannot support jokes is generally perceived as a bad one, so he has to support humor in a democratic country. So, generally, he [any politician] is not very strict about it. My cartoons might make him angry but he does not show that in public. What he may be doing is knocking on the table in his office but he would never fight with Ralanto in public and say “Look at this sary that Ralanto drew of me!” or “I really don’t like what he drew on me so I will send some policemen to arrest him!” He would never do that because it’s not good for the public opinion on him. Everyone knows that not supporting critics is no good for politicians.

Metapragmatic stipulations about the illocutionary force of language – that is, statements about how to deliver language in a certain way for certain effect, in this case to be fantsy – describe how important it was to sting with one’s words during the crisis of 2002. This came to pass because what one said or wrote in such mass-mediated venues as kabary and the cartoon frame became indices of political alliance. There was no space for dissent, and cartoonists had to be very cautious because of what Seta calls that unique state of mind in which solidarity sans dissent becomes the only means to communicate through one’s art. He claims most cartoonists operate according to a common etiquette of neutrality and are critical of all politics. But cartoonists’ criticism may be read as a sign of allegiance in times of crisis. This was the case in 2002. Seta explains:

There had been a wind of fanaticism over here, as if there was a folie populaire. During that time there was a sort of pensée unique, a sort of unique way of thinking, where there is no alternative: If it was not to be Ratsiraka, it shall be Ravalomanana. The people had decided that only Ravalomanana was that alternative. Those who were for Ratsiraka found their houses burnt, or were attacked. That’s why we had to be cautious and be certain not to criticize Ravalomanana.

Often, dissenting opinions were suppressed by the solidarity of the folie populaire packaged and conveyed in the trope of community, referred to in Malagasy as fihavanana. Fihavanana is that shared Durkheimian notion of effervescent communitas built up in the pep rally of performances from kabary politika to outdoor church sermons. It’s also the individual person’s kindness he imparts on his family, his neighbour,
his countrymen. Although it is deployed to claim unity by way of respect for diversity of opinion and a way of life, the trope of fiha-vanana put to work in political speeches often serves to promulgate a singular homogenized image of solidarity through sameness. Following this vein of solidarity, my conversation with Seta about the crisis and the problem of this pensée unique continued:

Can you tell me more about this obstacle to criticize due to ideologies espoused in political speeches about community solidarity? Because you say so many Malagasy look to cartoons for how they should think about politics and form their opinions and criticisms, tell me about how you handled your work during the political crisis and this pensée unique.

I was not afraid to do my drawings when I was far away in France. I sent back my drawings through email. I watched/read the news through the Internet so I was aware of everything which went on over here and so every day I sent my drawings over here without any fear and through which I made my criticism, whether toward Ratsiraka or Ravalomanana. As Ravalomanana gained power, we could say whatever we wanted to say. But . . . [pause] . . . we did feel some sort of pressure: we could not criticize Ravalomanana too much.

When I asked him how he felt this pressure, his story corroborated with many of the other cartoonists:

In the streets, we were checked every one to two hundred meters. If one of us wrote something hafahafa [that which is against the general tendency; against the grain] . . . [pause] . . . if the people recognized the faulty reporter by his professional card, they would react: “So, you are this Seta!” We had to be very cautious.

No matter what linguistic tricks cartoonists may have up their sleeves, often their stylistic knack for fantsy criticism keeps them away from the press scene, but never from their drawing tables. Longtime cartoonist Elisé tells his story of the costs of being critical:

I began my work as a cartoonist in another gazette than this one, from 1991 to 1994. It was during that time that I started to do political cartoons. That gazette appeared during the tolon-bahoaka [people uprising] of 1991. There was a big strike at that time: the objective was to overthrow Ratsiraka. There had been an enormous number of people at the Place du 13 Mai demanding Ratsiraka resign. “Ratsiraka, resign. Ratsiraka, resign.” At that time, this newspaper was an opposition gazette. I worked there and I can already say that my drawings con-
tributed in a big part in its making up, because it was in it that we really exposed and criticized Ratsiraka’s dictatorship. So, cartoons began to flourish, and in 1994 Zafy Albert – the one who has a long chin – became president of Madagascar. Consequently, my cartoons became inappropriate with the situation, because on the one hand, I had to criticize him as a ruling person. If I did continue, he would on the other hand become the target of political criticism by our audience; however, he was the one who created that gazette. So they did not like what I did. “Do not criticize Zafy. We cannot do that!” And I told them “No way, cartoons cannot survive without critics.” The status of that paper changed when Zafy was elected and so I had to quit. . . . I left it in 1994 because its spirit did not match with mine anymore. Do you understand? After that, I remained jobless for one year.

On the contrary, Jós stayed in Tana during the crisis and intimated to me and my interview partner and cartoonist, Lanto, that the crisis was the most democratic time in the city. He measures this by the amount of what he refers to as the “echo” he received from his cartoons. There was a great deal of discussion and commentary by readers because of his cartoons and he felt his work was in dialogue with those who experienced it on a daily basis. As Jós explains:

I enjoyed my work during the crisis because I am not militant, not a partisan but here I am with just my own opinion. My work developed during the crisis. The time helped me to refine more and more my way of thinking, and there were so many events, I could have drawn five comics if I could draw one. How to make this one perfect, I would ask? And the answer would come from the many people I heard from during the crisis about my cartoons. Every day there was an echo made from my cartoons, made by people in response to it. And I would respond to them with more cartoons. It was a difficult time but I found this to be something very beautiful, this communication with the people who use my work to think about things.

In the dialogic echo between cartoonists and readers the extent to which there is a mode of effective political participation by non-state actors – whether motivated by state or party alliance – determines the extent to which the public sphere exists and persists in urban Imerina. It is this ongoing echo that shapes the productive and social role of cartooning in political process in a complex, heteroglossic public sphere.
**Kabary and Cartooning Dialogics: Speaking Disorder to Order**

Cartoonists’ agency draws on speech genres of classes of social actors whose public actions are otherwise limited to market stalls, trash heaps, slums, bathroom lines, and other public venues. Ironically, these spaces are state-sponsored and inherently very public, but are very different from the secluded corridors of state power, where negotiation and decision-making take place. The spaces themselves are down-classed, too, just as caricatures are perceived and presented as socially undesirable and unable to participate in politics because of this stigma in ways marked by lack of knowledge about linguistic rules of engagement and a corresponding lack of mental capacity to engage at that level. Unlike mipikabary whose ritual act of fialan-tsiny removes impending guilt, cartoon caricatures’ speech is often portrayed as riddled with tsiny and therefore of bad character (ratsy fanahy), a person unable to take responsibility for words or be aware of their consequences.

Daily, however, cartoonists seep into the public politic vis-à-vis their cartoon worlds. Matters of the state, expressed in the subtle and delicate language of the state, are reembodied and recontextualized in direct and explicit cartoon talk, jolting and delegitimizing public opinion and the flow of public political discourse. Shifting aspects of accent, dialect, and even syntax allow the enregisterments of group types (Agha 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2007; Bauman 2005), undermining the discursive authority of dominant state elites. This device for the creation of authoritative discourse by figuring particular linguistic constructions in caricatured reported speech comes also from iconic, direct embodiments of the reality this performance presumably represents. To make up for their lack of ability to animate their own words and claim authorship, cartoonists speak strategically through caricatures in the recontextualized public sphere of the cartoon frame, showing their political resistance to elite interests “by taking their symbols, recoding them, and reworking them into another – opposing – message” (Scott 1985; 1990: xii, 184). This continual recoding speaks to the qualities of meaning in language as semiotic, beyond denotation and grammars.

Cartoonists may also negotiate the conditions of critique simply by speaking through their characters. In this, they open up possibilities of agentive power. In what Goffman refers to as a “say-for,” “projecting
mimicked words into the mouths of figures that are present” (1974: 535), through double-voicing and reported speech of both political elites and non-elites who would otherwise not interact, cartoonists gain agentive political power while often evading responsibility as principals of their speech. That is, in Goffman’s production framework following a dramaturgical metaphor, social actors may inhabit different roles in a single speech event. One may animate words authored by oneself or another. One may author but never animate. And in all cases the responsible party for the words may be the animator, author, or someone entirely different. In this case, because cartoonists embed words in iconic characters that “say for,” they may avoid the role as principal Style shifts in the language of caricatures allow cartoonists to distance themselves from the “real” social matrix iconically indexed in the cartoon. For example, use of agent-less grammatically passive forms with –voa and tafa affords some distance between author and caricatures. This manipulation of syntax, in particular, is further discussed in chapter 6.

Mikhail Bakhtin explains the effectiveness of this distance between author and language: “the author does not speak in a given language (from which he distances himself to a greater or lesser degree), but he speaks, as it were, through language, a language that has somehow more or less materialized, become objectivized, that he merely ventriloquates” and refracts “authorial intention” (1981: 299). By animating their characters’ temporary engagement with political matters in a social field to which they would otherwise never be privy, a cartoonist operates as an “alien animator at work” (Goffman 1974: 534). Entextualized speech and social stereotypes embody a cartoon’s alternate publics in ways taboo outside this social domain of verisimilitude. Volosinov’s observations are similar: “what is important for the speaker about a linguistic form is not that it is a stable and always self-equivalent signal, but that it is an always changeable and adaptable sign” (1973: 68).

Cartoonists who facilitate the production of an alternate view of the public sphere in this symbolic process of recoding “power’s key symbols” (Scott 1990: 184) of state elites in another footing embody in their caricatures the stratification of group belonging across social fields by way of stratified embodiments of fashions of speaking in particular speech styles.

For various political reasons and for varying effects, kabary speakers work hard to map a normative social order to the images they make
in *kabary*, reproducing social identities and relations from a particular social imaginary to serve certain political interests. Political cartoons, on the other hand, embody the heteroglossia of this public with voices dissonant to *kabary*’s objectified and politicized mythic past. Cartoonists foreground disorder and disagreement emerging in everyday social interaction as they parodically play on *kabary* through representations of the specificities of everyday life in contrast to the style of *kabary* (Bakhtin 1981). As an interactional text built within a heteroglossic context in which order and disorder are always possible, political *kabary* speakers’ work is to reduce tension between the ritual order presupposed in formalized language and the contingencies of a world of social relations – most immediately, a public audience. Where cartooning thrives in the disorder and parodying of the formalized social order, *kabary* speakers reckon with such social contingency of any kind in order to redress and stabilize it through a highly stylized structure and style. Rather than it being read as diametrically opposed to the oratorical and poetic style of *kabary*, cartooning is inculcated in a relationship with *kabary* in which its very existence is predicated on the beings and goings on of political *kabary*. In essence, cartooning is because of its dialogical relationship with speakers of *kabary*.

In mediating the social relations of these actual speakers, both *kabary* and political cartooning frame time and space that presuppose publics in which animators – as *mpikabary*, caricatures, authors, speechwriters, or cartoonists – are bound to an identity and a moral footing transmitted through speech. It is through this transformation of time, space, and selves that social actors become political actors mediating embodied language (be they orators or in caricatures). In this sense, genres, as ways of speaking, are ways of being in the world, modes of presentation and of identity through which relations are acted out, indexed within the event itself, and shaped beyond the event. In their everyday work, state orators, cartoonists, and the audiences they anticipate and address are productive of a political process embodied and motivated by the everyday production, maintenance, reproduction, and contestation, even revolt, of multiple publics bound in some common biography or sense of purpose in which the problem of social order in the context of governance is mediated.

We move into the next three chapters with this discursive production in mind to see how the structures and styles of *kabary* and cartooning have a hand in shaping identity and sensibility, enabling entry of some into a political landscape. In particular, we will look at how language
mediates ideas about group belonging, a sense of community that manifests into political publics, and how ideologies about speaking as moral ways of being augment some voices while muting even the loudest of others’ participation in the process.

Notes

1 French cartoonists undoubtedly influenced political cartoonists here, but the details of this influence are beyond the scope of this book.
2 The Malagasy national archives, a repository of historical documents dating back to the monarchy of Imerina, holds a vast collection of past gazettes and their political cartoons.
3 As an informal taboo, people avoid saying the actual name of the former leader, Ratsiraka, as though mention of the name may bring back bad memories or to say the name is to acknowledge the individual spirit of this person. I learned this as most field researchers would, through my own dim-witted transgressions.
4 This lack of recognition of artist as a profession is evinced in the national identity cards all Malagasy are required to possess. The card-holder’s occupation may be listed as “journalist” but “artist” is not an option, even for the most popular, internationally renowned, and perhaps wealthiest people in the country, Malagasy musicians.
5 Betsileo is the name of an ethnic group just south of Imerina province.

References


