

## Hilariously Queer: the Transgender and Transsexual Body in Malagasy Culture

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There is an old saying in Malagasy that “*Ny tarehy ratsy no tsy azo ovaina fa ny toetra ratsy azo ialàna*”, literal translation “it is impossible to modify an ugly face, but it is possible to change negative traits of character”. This saying summarizes the traditional and deeply-rooted Malagasy belief that the body is an immutable receptacle, to be accepted and complied with. However, starting particularly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a growing interest in body modification is visible in the country, a fact that raises much controversy. Indeed, body art changes the classical image of the body into a malleable surface on which meanings are inscribed. Among the most polemical aspects of body modification is queer body modification, a practice which is viewed as embodying two forms of transgression: violation of the “agreed-upon meanings of bod-

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ies and identities” (Pitts 2003: 196) and sexual deviance. Clearly, the subject of body modification tells a lot about Malagasy notions of self and society, cultural politics and power relations. Yet, little has been written about the issue because of one main reason: the invisibility of transsexual and transgender bodies in Malagasy society. One of the very few Malagasy cultural expressions that showcase queer bodies is humor. A study of the representation of the queer body in *The Torak’Hehy*<sup>1</sup> sketches offers a more systematic understanding of body modification in Malagasy culture: on the one

hand, the transgender body is the ultimate “Other”, on the other hand, there is a conscious effort not to dismiss the denatured body but to make it more acceptable.

### **Body Modification and Homosexuality in the Malagasy Context**

Nowadays, the sight of young people’s tattooed and pierced bodies is very common in Madagascar. It testifies to the popularity of body art, more particularly, tattoos and piercing among certain groups of the population. Tattooing and piercing services are available in many urban areas around the country at quite accessible prices. *Feeling Tattoo*, a tattooing and piercing salon for example, has up to 15<sup>2</sup> people a day coming for tattoos and/or piercings.

Queering practices, however, are totally different matters. Transsexual surgery is not yet done in Malagasy public or private hospitals but transgender bodies can be seen in a small number at public places all over the country, especially in the capital city. Such a situation can be explained by two factors, namely the dominant sexual secrecy typical of Highland culture<sup>3</sup> and the general rejection of homosexuality. In Malagasy culture, especially among the Merina people, sexuality belongs to the realm of the hidden, the ineffable or the taboo (Rakotomalala 2012: 216). An even more predominantly silent and negative attitude surrounds homosexuality in Malagasy society. Within the private sphere, attitudes about homosexuality range from tacit acceptance to outright physical violence, particularly against transsexual and transgender sex workers. Homosexuality is therefore kept secret. In fact, according to many, making sexual transgression public is disruptive because, firstly, by informing the audience of the very existence of the transgression, one urges imitation. Knowing about it may encourage others who are morally susceptible. Secondly, publicizing homosexuality is viewed as a form of provocation as it publicly challenges norms and authorities. Finally, publicity of homosexuality contaminates third parties such as schools, families and religious communities.

One of the very few public texts that clearly refer to homosexuality is the law. The penal code provides for a prison sentence of 2 to 5 years and a fine of 2 to 10 million Ariary (\$1,000 to \$5,000) for acts that are “indecent or against nature with an individual of the same sex under the age of 21.”<sup>4</sup> However, the law does not prohibit discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) activity. The artistic representation of queer bodies is

thus a rich and appropriate cultural expression to read and have a better understanding of queer body modification in the Malagasy context.

### **The Spectacle of the Other: the Transsexual and Transgender Body in Malagasy Humor**

An in-depth analysis of the representation of the transgender and transsexual body in the *Torak'Hehy* sketches reveals that it is first and foremost perceived as the ultimate “Other” in Malagasy culture. Otherness, put simply, is understood not in terms of what it is, but in relation to what we are not or do not wish to be. The representation of otherness is mainly achieved through humor based on the incongruity of the queer body.

Up to 20 *Torak'Hehy* sketches feature transgender characters, but 8 have been selected for this article as they focus mainly on transgender humor, that is to say, the butt of humor is “all sorts of infirmity, littleness, discomfiture, unworthiness and so forth” (Penjon 1893: 113) related to the transgender and transsexual. The nature of the humorous stimuli generally involves language and setting as well as the body, looks, gestures and movements of the characters.

Incongruity theory has its origins in comments made by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* and was later developed by Kant (1790) and Kierkegaard (1846). Primarily focusing on the object of humor, this type sees humor as a response to an incongruity, a term broadly used to include ambiguity, irrelevance, and inappropriateness. According to the incongruity theory, humor is generated when there is conflict or incongruity between what we expect to occur and what actually occurs. Common examples include a play on words, polysemy, misspelling and mispronunciation. (Billig 2005: 57)

The first humorous stimulant based on incongruity in the representations of transsexuals and transgenders is the body. All the queer figures are cross-dressed, men dressing as women. The incongruity lies first of all in the imperfection of the transformation which indicates that the true body beneath clearly signals a particular gender in inappropriate outfit. The male voice and the badly shaved face reinforce such incongruity. Here, the construction of the queer body as the Other is obvious as the body on stage is neither male nor female but something in-between. The subject here has totally failed his transformation because the first “thing that constitutes success in queer body transformation is [...] to pass... Passing means the denial of mixture” (Stone 1997: 352).

Another recurrent characteristic of the transgender and transsexual body as represented in the sketches is its grotesqueness<sup>5</sup>, a typical feature of incongruity. In *Safety Belt*, *Full*, and *It doesn't Work*, three sketches staging Honorat, a transgender, clothes are important signifiers among the elements constituting physical appearance. In an effort to look female, the character wears a woman's red and flashy, tight-fitting pants and T-shirt, which are intended to reveal the contours of her body, namely her curves and edges. What the clothes reveal, however, is a grotesque body, the incongruous par excellence, characterized by a very flat chest and a pot-belly that is half covered by the clothes. According to theorists, the grotesque body is: “open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple and changing, it is identified with non-official ‘low’ culture or the carnivalesque (Russo 1995: 78).

Indeed, the transgender and transsexual body is also represented as carnivalesque<sup>6</sup>. In *Full*, for instance, the carnivalesque aspect is shown

through the dance performed by the character. Dance, especially in the open air in Madagascar, is a very popular form of carnival. But the belly dance of the transsexual in *Full* is particularly carnivalesque in the Bakhtinian sense. Bakhtin says that the carnival is a special way to reveal a certain type of body:

the body that censorship has caused to disappear reappears and this reappearance, which occurs in the form of gigantic, hypertrophied forms and in the grotesque doubling through noses and phallus, 'exposes' both the body and official culture (cited in Lachman 2007: 151).

It is this idea of transgression, of inappropriateness, the very essence of the carnival, which is emphasized in the dancing scene. In fact, through the dance, the often concealed body, especially its sexual parts, are revealed. Additionally, the revelation focuses on the grotesque body's excesses and abnormalities which are put to view through the dancing performance.

In a nutshell, the *Torak'Hehy* sketches offer a real "spectacle of the other" (Hall 1997: 223) to borrow Stuart Hall's terms. The persona of the Other who is grotesque and carnivalesque unites the audience in ridicule of the transgender. Another aspect of the humor, however, as will be seen in the last subpart of this article, makes viewers feel empathy for the transgender and transsexual. Indeed, the fact that those queer characters make the audience laugh everyday in a way informs the audience that they are not harmful, that on the contrary, they are likable. Such a situation marks a shift in Malagasy people's perception of queer body modification.

### **A Changing View of the Transgender and Transsexual Body**

In spite of its conservative aspect,

the *Torak'Hehy* phenomenon signals a shifting paradigm in the representation and reception of the image of the transgender in Malagasy culture. The use of humor to deal with body modification and homosexuality, as well as the portrayal of queer sexuality are significant details.

*Torak'Hehy* is viewed by more than 50 000 households on TV and is watched by thousands on YouTube. When interviewed about the reason why they enjoy the sketches so much, most viewers mentioned the funny transgenders. As said earlier, queer bodies and homosexuality belong to the ineffable in Malagasy culture. The simple fact that such a taboo subject as transgenderism is represented publicly and is well-received is a huge change, marking a step towards acceptance.

The choice to use humour to represent queer bodies is also noteworthy. It reflects a conscious effort to make the topic acceptable. One possible explanation of the suitability of humor to represent sensitive issues in the Malagasy context is that it deals with the subject only superficially. It does not intentionally attempt to correct or change the situation. When watching the humorous sketches, people think it is time to feel and not to act. The audience enters into aesthetic rather than practical relations with the object of humor. The humorous process, then, like play, is its own end and justification" (Billig 2005: 137).

Another visible effort to make the transgender body "culturally intelligible" (Butler 1990: 105) can be traced through the elimination of every shocking element in its representation. No direct reference to the intimate, especially to sexual parts are made, words are carefully selected to avoid hurting the susceptibility of the audience. In so doing, the humorists mostly rely on psychic release theory<sup>7</sup>. Humor based on

psychic release includes a saving of emotional energy, since what might have been an emotionally provoking situation turns out to be something that should not be treated seriously. According to this theory, humor is a method of releasing the audience from their inner battles or torments, by giving a sense of release from threat. Dark jokes, dirty jokes and jokes dealing with taboo topics are within this category.

Two of the most representative of these sketches can illustrate this idea. In *Mugged*, a queer character is attacked by a mugger who threatens her with a knife and asks for money. She says she does not have any but the mugger does not believe her and starts to search her body. The queer character then begins to enjoy the mugger's touch and urges the mugger to continue searching. If he does that she will give him a check, she says. The mugger is frightened and attempts to run away. The queer character is outraged and refuses to let him go. As she chases the mugger, she says that the latter is an amateur mugger and forces him to continue what he has begun: touching her. The mugger begs her to let him go and offers to pay her if she does.

The psychic release here operates on two levels. First, the act of robbing which is a frightening one turns out to be funny as the queer persona enjoys the process. Then the possible tension elicited by the gay intimate scene becomes a source of laughter as the situation is reversed: the mugger runs away and proposes to pay if she leaves him alone

Another show staging Olga, a transgender, portrays the homosexual's open sexual invitations to men. The "victims", as they are generally called in the sketches, always manage to escape from the sexual predator, Olga. The humor lies in the different tricks the victims use to get rid of their predator. Psychic release

is here made possible because homosexual intimacy is avoided in a funny way.

The other set of sketches involving psychic release are the ones staging Philomena, a transgender in her fifties. She is hyper-feminine and is toothless. In a show entitled *It's Been a Long Time*, the storyline presents two characters, one of whom is a younger man who seems to be about to say something very important to Philomena, though he is hesitant as it might offend her. The two characters stand very close to each other, in a place that is ideal for romance and physical intimacy. Philomena looks to be particularly smitten with the young man, something which is reflected in her facial expression, her hyper-feminine, sugar-coated tone of voice and words. She is very impatient to hear what the man has to say, and the spectator is led to believe that she expects to get a proposal or a love declaration. Finally the man says that for a long time he has wanted to tell her that her teeth need to be fixed. The hilarious moment is here, based on the different expectations of the two figures. Moreover, psychic release happens when the anxiety incited by the possible intimacy involving a transsexual and a young man turns into something funny.

In *The Shrew and the Drunkard Husband*, a man who is always drunk is persecuted by his old<sup>8</sup> wife. He always tries to find tricks to escape from domestic duties, and one day he pretends to fall and faint. The wife's brother comes to help and is about to practice mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. The man refuses to be touched by another man, and stands up saying that kissing a man is just unthinkable, it is even worse than kissing his old wife. The punch line at the end of the sketch provokes laughter and prevents the intimate scene from happening, in

other words, engendering psychic release.

In the generally conservative Malagasy society, humor is a subtle and interesting way to represent queer body modification. The use of humor in the *Torak'Hehy* sketches is a double-edged sword though: on the one hand it reinforces the stereotypes related to transgenders and transsexuals; on the other hand it presents queer bodies as funny and likable. By way of conclusion, the body and its treatment has gained importance in Malagasy culture. It reflects the changes brought by globalization to Malagasy values and society in general. Through the *Torak'Hehy* phenomenon, we can say that body modification is not just an art, it has become a powerful tool for the country's "Others" to become visible, and probably later to claim their rights to diversity, justice and tolerance.

### Notes

1. *Torak'Hehy* is a prime-time humorous program broadcast on the National TV channel since the mid-1990s. Performed in Malagasy by 4 male star humorists, the episodes generally deal with everyday situations and hot topics such as corruption, poverty, politics, adultery and homosexuality in a satirical way.
2. Fifteen can be considered as a large number if compared to other tattoo salons in the city.
3. Highlands is a term which refers to the mountainous central regions of Madagascar. The central regions encompass Antananarivo, Fianarantsoa and Ambatondrazaka. The populations of these areas are mostly the Merina, the Betsileo and the Sihanaka.
4. Those same acts are not condemned by the law if done with individuals over 21 years of age. It is moral law that it against homosexuality.
5. The term grotesque here is not used to refer to the bodies of transsexuals and transgenders in general. It refers to the body of the transsexual and transgender as represented by the comedian.

6. The term carnivalesque does not refer to transsexuals and transgenders as a group of population. It refers to the show performed by the queer characters in the sketches.
7. Put simply, psychic release or relief theory is based on the idea that laughter is a mechanism by which psychological tension is reduced. Thus, humor facilitates relief of the tension caused by one's fears. Also, according to relief theory, humor is used mainly to overcome sociocultural inhibitions and reveal suppressed desires. The two most prominent relief theorists are Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud.
8. Old here means older than him

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