

## Literature and Visibility – or, Why the Comoros don't need me



Literature exists everywhere around the globe, and yet, we are made believe that it is not so.

It's true: go to any bookshop in the UK and you'll soon find out that writers from some place are way more visible than others.

Let's have a look at this map. We could maybe all name a few writers from the UK - easy. France? Ok... Let's go a little South now – Portugal? Morocco? What about the Comoros?

It seems like the further away from Europe we go, the less visible literature gets.

And what's truly fascinating about the Comoros is that it has not received academic attention so far: oral and written literature in five languages have been interacting in the Comoros for centuries, and yet we are made believe that there is no such thing as Comorian literature!

When I first planned my Laidlaw research on Comorian storytelling, I imagined myself landing in Moroni airport, to study tales that had never been studied before, discovering a brand new area of scholarship that I could write my Laidlaw report on, but also my dissertation or a PhD thesis! Wow, I would bring light on this literature.

But, the thing is, the Comoros don't need me.

The Comoros don't need yet another French scholar to come up and say 'I am here to help you' – which very much means, 'I am here to save you'.

The Comoros do have scholars that have recorded, transcribed and studied folktales for decades –they're simply not visible in Western academia. Here we go again: Academic literature exists everywhere around the globe, and yet we are made believe that it is not so!

I'm not saying that we shouldn't study literature from the Comoros. I'm saying that we shouldn't think we are doing a favour to the Comoros by making its literature more visible. The only people we're doing a favour to is ourselves.

At a time in which our borders are slowly closing, we **are** doing ourselves a favour by studying a literature that is so outward looking, that interacts in an incredible variety of languages with its neighbours of the Indian Ocean, say Madagascar, Mozambique, Mauritius or Djibouti.

I must say that at the end of my research, I came back with more questions about my own ambivalent position as a young, French, female researcher studying the literature of a former French colony, than with answers about my actual research topic. But I surely developed a key skill to any leader and scholar, which is self-awareness.

In literature and in life alike, it's all a matter of shifting perspective.  
Thank you for listening.