Constructing history, culture and inequality: the Betsileo in the extreme Southern Highlands of Madagascar
Evers, S.

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Chapter seven

The Process of “Ancestralisation”: 1

Tombs, Funerals and the Hereafter of Free Descent People

During the last few months of my 1996 field work, I was allowed to participate in discussions concerning death and the hereafter for the first time. The privileged forum for my education in this field was the funeral. During Mitsiky’s funeral, a random conversation led to an open discussion by the lompon-lanj of these topics for the first time since the beginning of my field work.

October 21. The huts and houses of Marovato are filled with hundreds of guests, who have come to pay their last respects to Mitsiky. Mitsiky died two days ago at the age of eighty-one. He was a member of the toinpon-taiiy village council, and claimed to be of commoner (alompaity) descent. Immediately after his death, his relatives set funeral preparations into motion, and dispatched family members to extend invitations.

The first outward sign of the importance ascribed to toinpon-taiiy funerals is the size of the gatherings, which unite family members and friends of the deceased from throughout the region. The second is the sheer length of funeral rites, which for toinpon-taiiy families take place over three to four days. Guests are expected to remain awake for the duration of the rites, a feat which they accomplish with the assistance of heavily sugared coffee, toaka gasy (a Malagasy spirit produced in the village) and equally heavy doses of conversation.

It is the third night of Mitsiky’s funeral. I am seated around a wood fire with eight elders, one of whom is Rafidy Andriana. We are engaged in a general discussion about funeral proceedings and how they should be conducted according to the “Malagasy customs”. Ramasy who comes from the neighbouring village of Fenoarivo, asks how funerals are performed in my family.

SE: “Well, there are two possibilities. Either our dead people are buried in tombs, a bit like your way, or they are burned.”

My interrogator’s eyes bulge and he shakes his head with disgust and disapproval. Rafidy Andriana interjects: “What barbarians (baribariana)! The others chime in, each of them indicating in turn that they also consider the custom barbaric. Rafidy Andriana pauses, scrutinises me momentarily, then asks: “But will you get burned too?”

SE: “After having lived with you, I have my doubts. I feel it is better to be buried, just in case I need some body parts in the hereafter. But my mother wants to be burned.”

Rafidy Andriana: “Well, it is your responsibility to make sure this does not happen. If she gets burned, she will be very (‘lost’). Her ambirina (“body double”) will get burned.

1 The process of “ancestralisation” refers to the rituals required to ensure a deceased becomes an ancestor. Data for this chapter was collected during field work carried out in 1996, 1997 and 1998.

2 There is no word in Malagasy for cremation, so I used the verb mandoro meaning “to burn”.

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and her *hasina* ("vital energy") will be lost."

I have attended many funerals, but this is the first time I have heard the terms *ambirina* and *hasina* openly discussed. It is clearly the risk of my mother becoming "lost" which has provoked Rafidy Andriana's reaction.

SE: "I do not understand. What do you mean by *ambirina* and *hasina"?"

Rafidy Andriana: "Everybody has an *ambirina* and *hasina*. The *ambirina* is the *trans* ("house" or "box") of the *hasina*. When children are born, they have little *hasina*. Their *hasina* develops as they grow up. Since you always want to know about the *andevor...* they are born with very little *hasina*. This remains so until they die. Mitsiky is an important *tonpiai-andra*. He has much *hasina*. Now that he is dead, his *ambirina* has left his body, bringing all the *hasina* with it. He will become an ancestor now. If he arrives well with the other ancestors and he is happy, he will use his *hasina* to help his descendants."

Ramasy from Fenoarivo adds: "Yes, the *ambirina* of the dead stays close to the living people. It lives in the village with us. After some time, the *ambirina* joins the ancestors. His *hasina* then becomes one with that of the other ancestors. It becomes one strong energy. But there still is something else that leaves the body at death. It is called the *fanahy*. Like the *ambirina*, we cannot see it. But it is there. The *fanahy* migrates to Ambondrombe. These mountains are the home of Betsileo *fanahy*. They live there, as we live here. Do you know Mademoisely ... this is only possible for the people with tombs. People can only become ancestors via the tomb. *Andevor*, who do not have tombs, can never become ancestors. That is why we always say that they do not have ancestors. They do have an *ambirina*, with very little *hasina*. But, after death, this often turns into *heri*. *Heri* is dangerous. For us and for their descendants. *Heri* causes illness and death. I am not sure if *andevor* have *fanahy*. If they do, it stays in their body after death. There is no point for it to leave because without a tomb it can never travel to Ambondrombe."

The other elders nod their heads in agreement with Ramasy. Then, Rakotobe from Besoa speaks: "I think Ramasy is right. But there is also what we call *aina*. *Aina* is breathing. You need *hasina* to be able to breathe. So, everybody needs *hasina* to live. *Aina* dies when the body dies, when the breathing stops. I am not in the clear about whether our ancestors breathe. So everybody needs *hasina*. It is the amount of *hasina* that makes people different. In the past, when ordinary people became slaves, they lost most of their *hasina* and became *maloto* ("impure" or "dirty"). This is because they were humiliated. For their descendants, it stayed the same. Their *hasina* could never develop. They always will have less *hasina* than people of free descent. They cannot change this. It is in their nature. Just like their blood is *maloto*. Yes. This also. I think that slaves became *maloto* because as soon as they were caught, their owners put manure on them."

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3 Betsileo see the here and the hereafter as a continuum. Death only changes the status of a person, which is why they find it necessary to refer to *olombelona* "living people". Unless the qualifier "living" is added, a Betsileo listener might presume that "people" referred to also include the ancestors.

4 Graeber (1999: 320), working on the Merina, also describes this practice: "Almost all stories I did manage to cull about the "days of slavery" centered on the insidious means masters used to ritually pollute their slaves - rubbing excrements on their heads, making them sleep alongside pigs - and so destroy their *hasina*, a word
Rafidy Andriaina interrupts, anxious to add his knowledge on the issue: “I think you are right, but remember also that *andevro* did dirty jobs all the time that made them *maloto* as well. I think that doing this a lot made their bodies absorb the dirt. It went into their blood. This is how their children are born with *maloto* blood. *Andevro* will always be *andevro*. This is also why they should keep their distance from us. They are different from us. They do not have family everywhere like us. They have no ancestors like us. They do not follow the Malagasy customs like us. They are just not like us. They might even harm us. That is why we must be so careful with them.”

Rakotobe then concludes: “Yes, that is it. I can understand very well why Rafidy Andriana and his son Randriamahalasa want them out of Marovato. All they bring is trouble.”

This short conversation of the elders contained a wealth of concepts. Once raised, the discussion was principally engaged in between the *tompon-tany* themselves, who no longer directed their comments towards me. However, it is noteworthy that they still felt compelled to refer to the *andevro* and to reassert their inferiority in terms of “impurity” and “andevoiness” (cf. chapter nine). Finally, even going so far as to relating them to the origins of illness and death. These issues will be discussed in the following chapter.

I will first give an overview of the meaning of the concepts used by the elders, before describing funerals and its related rituals of the *tompon-tany* and migrants of free descent.

### 7.1 Concepts explained

During any discussion I had with villagers concerning life and death, five concepts recurred regularly: *aina*, *ambirina*, *fanahy*, *hasina* and *heri*. Where applicable, I will discuss these concepts with reference to past research conducted by Madagascar specialists.

**Aina, hasina, heri: All that lives needs hasina**

*Aina* is derived from the verb *miaina* which can be translated as “to live”. *Aina* refers to the act of breathing (cf. Dubois 1938: 722). During the above conversation at Mitsiky’s funeral, Rakotobe related the act of breathing to *hasina*. More precisely, he stated that *hasina* is a necessary condition for it. One needs *hasina* to breathe. In other words, it was whose meaning in this context falls about halfway between “state of grace” and “power”. I will elaborate on the socio-political significance of *hasina* in relation to the *andevro* in chapter eight.

*Dubois wrote an impressive 1500 page monograph on the Betsileo. Dubois (1938: 721) categorises four groups of terms referring to spirits ("esprits"), which he defines as invisible forces: 1. Terms that denote essential manifestations of human life: *aina* and *fanahy*. 2. Terms which describe the spirit of the deceased as having survived in an abnormal condition in the hereafter: *angatra*, *lolo*, *matiata*. 3. Terms which designate the spirit with reference to the dual phenomena of the shadow cast or the image reflected: *aleka*, *tandindona*. 4. Special terms that refer principally to the spiritual continuation after life: *avelo*, *ambirina*, *fahefahe*. Dubois states that the Malagasy often use terms imprecisely and interchangeably. In this respect, Dubois quotes Abinal (Abinal 1885: 211) who observed a similar practice: “Si on leur demande ce qu’ils entendent par le premier de ces noms, ils répondent par le second, ils définissent le second par le troisième et le dernier par le premier.”

*Bloch (1989: 65) states that hasina is one of the most difficult Malagasy words to translate, but that it derives from its adjectival form *masina* meaning "holy".*
explained as being necessary for life itself, which would seem to indicate that everyone has it. So what is hasina and what does it represent? Most authors studying Madagascar make mention of the concept,\(^8\) and it has been dealt with in some detail with respect to the Merina and Betsileo (a.o. Bloch 1989: 46-89, Delivré 1967, Dubois 1938, Edholm 1971). Delivré (1967: 167-184) describes hasina as an energy that is innate to life. It is a supernatural essence that can be beneficial, but which also contains destructive properties (cf. Kottak 1980: 69, 212). My informants believe that the converse of hasina, vital energy, is hery, destructive energy. They assert that hasina can be transformed by ancestors and individuals into hery if they wish to express their discontent. Fertility, good harvests, health are all ascribed to hasina, whereas hery is said to cause illness and death.\(^9\) Hasina is present in all living entities, but it may also be contained in inanimate things.\(^10\) Ratema, a Marovato tompon-tany, once spoke to me concerning this distinction:

“All that lives needs hasina. Also animals, trees and plants. It comes from the ancestors and people get it through elderly people like myself. I transmit it to my children and they in turn pass it on to their children. According to what you are, you possess hasina. I have a lot because I am an important tompon-tany. The impure people have the least hasina. So, that is what hasina of living things is like. Then there is the hasina of things that do not breathe. For example, amulets (ody) can contain a lot of hasina. This hasina comes directly from the ancestors. This hasina is not in ambiroa anymore. It is everywhere. Whereas our hasina, but also the hasina of our zebras or any other animal, tree or plant, is inside ambiroa.”

**Hasina as source of social prestige and political power**

Both Ratema and Rakotobe (cf. opening case of this chapter) relate the concept of hasina directly to the position that people occupy in the current social configuration. Hasina resides with the ancestors. Its vehicle of transmission is through the socio-political order. The most powerful members, the tompon-tany family leaders and the ombiasy (“traditional healers”), of the Marovato region are said to possess the most hasina.” They are considered to be the closest to the ancestors. Their roles during rituals are a reflection of this. Noble descent tompon-tany have more hasina than those of commoner descent. The andro, who occupy the lowest position in the local hierarchy, possess the least hasina. This, combined

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\(^8\) Southall (1986: 414) translates hasina as “sacred ritual potency”. He considers it to be a central concept for all groups in Madagascar: “Here is one of those pervasive themes which justify emphasis on the essential unity of all Malagasy culture, despite its apparent regional contrasts.” Bloch (1989: 65) also writes that the notion of hasina is the “kernel of Malagasy thought”.

\(^9\) The concept of hery is often viewed as ambiguous by the Malagasy. Hery commonly means strength and it is neither positive nor negative, it is morally neutral or amoral. It is a good thing only if you can control it (cf. Bloch 1989: 65). Delivré (1967: 188), however, describes hery more in negative terms, as do my informants. Delivré writes: “La signification du hasina dépend donc essentiellement de l'utilisation qu'on en fait: cette puissance n'est bénéfique que lorsque les rapports hiérarchiques entre certains être (...) sont soigneusement sauvegardés. Mais si ces rapports sont inversés et que le hasina est détourné de sa fin propre, il devient accidentellement une force du mal, et on emploie de préférence le terme "hery" pour le qualifier.”

\(^10\) The concept of hasina parallels the notion of mana, the Melanesian term for an impersonal power or energy ascribed to people, animals, plants but also to objects (see also Bloch: 1989: 66 and Kottak 1980: 72).

\(^11\) The ombiasy and their working methods are worthy of a separate study and beyond the scope of this thesis. It should nevertheless be noted that the tompon-tany highly depend on the services of their ombiasy who they believe have superior hasina to all other living beings. The ombiasy also interpret the wishes of the ancestors and ensure that rituals are executed according to the “Malagasy customs”. That is why ombiasy are seen as the intermediary between the dead and the living.
with their presumed impurity, is the topon-tany explanation for exclusion of the andevo from rituals of free descent people.\(^\text{12}\) *Topon-tany* say the mere presence of the andevo will upset the ancestors and bring misfortune.

Bloch also discusses hasina as a source of legitimate or traditional authority. He postulates (1989: 64-65) that each deme (local kin group) of Merina society possesses hasina which corresponds to their rank in the socio-political hierarchy. Bloch makes a division between what he calls hasina mark I and mark II. With hasina mark I, he refers to the supernatural virtue that is possessed in differing degrees by all living beings and whose “innate religious superiority” was concentrated in the Merina king. The hasina and authority of the king was presumably unchallenged, given and religious. Hasina mark II refers to the recognition of that hasina, i.e. the practice of inferiors rendering homage to superiors.\(^\text{13}\) Several authors have drawn parallels between the political component of hasina and the concept of “honour” in English. Superiors might possess honour but only provided they continue to be honoured by inferiors (a.o. Bloch 1989: 66, Kottak 1980: 70).

Historically, the Merina king infused his subjects with hasina through the ritual of the royal bath (see Bloch 1986: 43-47). In turn, his subjects rendered homage to the king by giving him the symbolic gift of an uncut silver coin, also called hasina (cf. Callet 1908: 663-665, Delivré 1967: 186). The replication of this interaction between king and subjects was performed within each kin group through the ritual of tsodrano. This means the “blowing of the water”.\(^\text{14}\) As a father’s hasina surpassed that of his sons, the rite was performed by elders for their juniors as a form of blessing for fertility and success. The juniors in turn respected and honoured the elders in order not to be deprived of hasina.

Offerings to the ancestors and presenting gifts to elderly people as signs of respect and honour are essential for receiving hasina.\(^\text{15}\) I often observed this form of reciprocity in the Marovato region as well, although it was rarely expressly stated that the gift was given in order to obtain hasina. Rakotonirina, a son of topon-tany Ratema, explained this.

> “Every year, before I plant, I give my father a gift and present an offering of a chicken to the ancestors, so that I will get a good harvest. You know it actually is about the hasina you need. Although everybody knows this, you should not mention it.”

\(^{12}\) Rasolomanana (1997: 333), working on the Northern Betsileo, also observes that andevo are not allowed to participate in funerals of free descent people. He writes: “... une femme "sy madio" (ayant du sang andevo) qui voulait à tout prix s'intégrer dans le groupe des descendants s'acheminant vers le tombeau ancestral, a été enlevée par un tourbillon subit, pour ne plus être retrouvée!” Unfortunately he provides no further details on this issue (cf. Rasoamampionona 2000: 369-375).

\(^{13}\) Hasina mark I is a supernatural essence, an innate religious state of superiority, which flows in the form of fertility from the superior to the inferiors whereas hasina mark II is a natural action, manifested by the giving of gifts, respect and honour, flowing upwards (Bloch 1989: 67-68).

\(^{14}\) In the tsodrano ritual the elder sprays junior family members with water from a saucer he holds before his lips (Bloch 1989: 68). In the Marovato region, this practice is still engaged in by free descent fathers for their children.

\(^{15}\) “Donnez-nous pour que nous donnions, semble en être le principe.” Dubois (1938: 801).
**Hasina preservation**

The fact that demes possess differing degrees of *hasina* "... is not the result of their achievement but is given in their nature. The concern of the *hasina* holders should be to preserve it; creating *hasina* is out of the question." (Bloch 1989: 66) People try to achieve preservation of their *hasina* through deme endogamy, which raises the question of the correlation of possessing *hasina* with the different status groups in Marovato. This is particularly evident in the link villagers make between the concepts of *hasina* and *hery* and the *olona madio* ("pure" or "clean people") - *olona malolo* ("impure" or "dirty people") dichotomy. I will return to this aspect of *hasina* in the context of the ontological meaning of being *andevo* in chapter eight.

**Fanahy and the ambiroa**

The concepts of *fanahy* and *ambiroa* also are primary points of reference used by people claiming free descent when they speak about the essence of life, death, funerals and the hereafter.

Authors who have studied the eschatological perceptions of the Highland population have rarely paid attention to the *fanahy*. It is principally described as a spirit that leaves the body after death (Dubois 1938: 722-723, Kottak 1980: 219). Even *ambiroa* has received relatively little attention from Madagascar specialists. Abinal (1885: 211-212) and Dubois (1938: 729) trace the etymology of the word *ambiroa* to meanings such as "being two", "the body double" and "the surplus of two". These translations all imply that the *ambiroa* is a copy of the body. This belief is shared by my informants. Ramonja, a migrant of free descent, described it in the following manner:

"Like the body, the *ambiroa* is the house of *hasina*. When you travel towards the ancestors, you need the *ambiroa* to protect your *hasina* because your body stays behind. Do you know that some people lose their *ambiroa*? I am not quite clear how this happens, but I know that they can still live without one. But they need to find it back before they die since they need it on their way to the ancestors."

Dubois (1938: 734-749) also writes about the nature of the *ambiroa*, both before and after death. He calls (ibid: 751) the *ambiroa* the vital life power: "L'ambiroa serait donc pour le Malgache la force vitale de la plénitude humaine, survivant dans l'homme complet." When I presented this idea of the *ambiroa* to Rafidy Andriana, he responded:

"He is talking about *hasina* and not the *ambiroa*."

Villagers with whom I conversed also confirmed this. They perceive the *ambiroa* as nothing more than the *trans*, "house" or "box", of the *hasina*. In their view, it is not the *ambiroa* that is vital to life, but the *hasina* contained within. This also would explain why people can lose their *ambiroa* without dying. Dubois agrees (ibid: 734) : "...on peut perdre son ambiroa, mais aussi, heureusement, le retrouver, sans en mourir." He does not detail how and under what conditions people are likely to lose their *ambiroa*. He nevertheless describes the special ritual of retaking one's *ambiroa* called *fakan'ambiroa* ("calling of the *ambiroa*"); for details see Dubois (ibid: 735-738).

None of the literature which discusses *hasina* and the *ambiroa* appears to make a connection

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16 Abinal (op. cit.) says "La mort ne fait que séparer l'homme de sa doublure."
between the two. They commonly are perceived as being identical, as Dubois' above comments also imply. Although *ambitena* has received relatively little attention from Madagascar specialists, it is an essential element in the process of "ancestralisation".

### 7.2 Physical description of the tombs

For the Betsileo, tombs represent family unity and the entrance to the hereafter (cf. Rajaonarimanana 1979: 182). In daily life, Marovato villagers often refer to tombs, and also demonstrate their social status through them. At the same time, it is strictly taboo (fady) to actually point out the exact location of the tomb. When I sought specific information concerning the physical location of tombs, villagers generally responded by indicating its general direction, for example, by stating that the tomb was located to the Northeast or North. When I discovered tombs near the village of Marovato, and asked villagers to whom they belonged, I met with evasiveness, usually justified by the explanation that revealing the names would bring bad luck. While participating in funerals, I gradually determined the location and ownership of Marovato tombs with greater precision.

Most tombs of the Marovato *tompon-tany* are located in the Northeastern Ifaha mountains, approximately one kilometre to the North of the village. There are only two exceptions. The tomb of Randriamahalasa's paternal uncle and the newly constructed tomb by Randriamahalasa himself are located on a hillock to the Southeast of Marovato. I asked *tompon-tany* Andriavola, a cousin of Randriamahalasa, the reason for the exceptional location of the two tombs:

"We always have to make sure that the ancestors will be able to survey their descendants. So, the tombs always have to be higher than our houses. Most *tompon-tany* of Marovato have their tombs in the mountains. They are well protected there. My father made his tomb to the Southeast of Marovato as you know. He was a proud man and wanted to show everybody his tomb. Also to show that he had become a *tompon-tany*. Now, my brother Randriamahalasa 17 installed his tomb close to my father's. This shows how important we have become in Marovato. Thanks to our ancestors, we have become important."

Andriavola and Randriamahalasa’s family land extends outwards from their tombs all the way to the river. In all, it comprises an area of approximately seventeen hectares. Other *tompon-tany* tombs are generally located on the upper portions of their land, which coincides with the foothills of the Ifaha mountain range to the North of Marovato. Their land spans downwards from the tombs towards the Zomandao river. Other authors have also observed the Betsileo practice of constructing their tombs on sites overlooking their dwellings, reputedly to provide the ancestors with a better vantage point from which to view their descendants (Dubois 1938: 669, Rajaonarimanana 1979: 182). Dubois (op.cit.: 669) states that a wide perimeter is open for choosing location of the tomb, provided it is not to the North of one's house, an area reserved for royalty. In Marovato, however, most of the tombs are located to the North of Marovato. Rafidy Andriana provided the rationale for this as follows:

"Yes, the North. It is the place for royal families. But that is exactly what we are as *tompon-tany* here. In this region, we are the first to have settled it. So we are obliged to rule over the others. Our ancestors are the first ancestors of the region. They deserve

17 Despite being cousins, Andriavola and Randriamahalasa call each other "brother"(*rabaraha*), a common custom throughout Madagascar.
a place in the North. This is why I decided to create my family tomb in the mountains Northeast of Marovato. Later, I allowed others to build their tomb in the mountains as well, so that their ancestors can see how their family works the land.¹⁸

The policy of placing tombs to the North of the village was obviously facilitated by the fact that the region was previously uninhabited. While participating in funerals, I discovered eight tombs located in the foothills of the Ifaha mountains near the village.¹⁸ There are no distinguishing features between tombs of noble descent and commoner descent tompon-tany.¹⁹

The architecture of the tombs is uniform. The materials used in the cube-shaped, top portion of the tombs, visible from above-ground, are stones which are hauled from rock quarries and cut into forms sufficiently flat and small for the walls of the structure. A larger square slab of stone, supported by four columns, serves as the roof. Horns of zebus sacrificed to the ancestors during the funerals are placed on top of the tombs. The portals of the tombs are usually constructed of hardwood (often from merana or nato trees). Some tombs use the more traditional rafeta, a massive flat stone, as the entrance door. The tombs measure approximately two and one half metres wide, four in length and two metres high. The tombs are generally divided into three parts: a razihon-kanony (small entrance and gallery) which leads inside the tomb, the underground hady (burial vault where the corpses are placed), and the ahahy, or upper cube-shaped construction.²⁰

7.3 How a tompon-tany becomes an ancestor

Funerals, despite the efforts at joyousness, trigger ambivalent emotions among villagers. A transparent nervousness marks their expressions and gestures during the rites, something subsequently explained to me as their fear of doing something wrong and displeasing the ancestors.

Two types of funerals are common for free descent villagers in the Marovato region. Firstly, there is the more elaborate tompon-tany ceremony and secondly, the simpler ritual practised by migrants of free descent.

One does not become an ancestor simply by dying. The entrance to the hereafter is the funeral and its accompanying rituals, which can be divided into three phases, each of which plays a role in the process of “ancestralisation”:²¹ 1. the funeral itself (fandevenana), 2. the

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¹⁸ These are the tombs of tompon-tany Andriamaro (who created Marovato with Rafidy Andriana. He died in 1985), Rafidy Andriana, Ratena, Andriabae, Mitsiky, Ragaby, Ralambo and Niaina.

¹⁹ Rajaonarimanana (1979: 181-193) describes two types of Betsileo tombs (Northern Betsileo). One type is reserved for the nobility and the other for people of commoner descent.

²⁰ For more detailed information on the physical construction of Betsileo tombs, see Rajaonarimanana (1979: 181-193) and Dubois (1938: 666-670).

²¹ Rajaonarimanana (1979: 181-193) also describes Betsileo funerals as the commencement of this three-stage process. Dubois (1938: 644-720) principally emphasises the funeral itself and the separation of the ambitena from the corpse, an analysis which appears to be tailored to fit the Christian concept of the ambitena as the soul of the deceased. Dubois, interestingly, states that in the hereafter the ambitena goes through three phases, without however, connecting the phases with specific rituals. After death, following Dubois’ analysis, the ambitena leaves the body but is not directly integrated into the hereafter. The ambitena in this phase would be a replica of the living person: “Le mère, dans un autre style, devient non pas seulement la réplique mais la prolongation du vivant: il garde son rang social, des besoins et ses goûts personnels.” (ibid: 740) In the
ritual of separation (toetiambiro), 3. the ritual fisena, feast at the end of the mourning period, which marks the final integration of the ambiroa of the deceased into the general category of the ancestors (ra^ana).22

Funeral: Pre-burial events

The funeral rites of tompon-tany Mitsiky (see also introduction to this chapter) serve as an illustration of the three phases of “ancestralisation”.

Mitsiky dies early in the morning on October 19, which falls on a Saturday. His wife Bakoly, and her five children, place the corpse in the Northeastern, ancestral corner of his house. Mitsiky’s eldest son Rakotozafy washes the corpse and wraps it in a lambamena (a dark red lamba used to clothe the deceased) while continuing to speak to him as if he were still alive.23 The adolescent grandchildren have already been dispatched to announce the death to villagers and family residing further away. The first to be informed is the family ambisy (“traditional healer”), as he has the task of selecting an appropriate day for the funeral.

October 22 is set as the funeral date. In the days following Mitsiky’s death, hundreds of funeral guests stream into the village. They are lodged in the houses of Mitsiky’s family or with other tompon-tany. Everybody in Marovato, except the andevo, is also invited to participate in the funeral.

Family members alternate to ensure Mitsiky is accompanied throughout the four day vigil (fiaretantory). Guests arrive continuously, for the most part during the first two days, prior to the official commencement of the ceremonial funeral proceedings. Upon arrival, the guests present their condolences to Bakoly and her children. They offer money, rice, sugar and coffee. Close relatives have brought zebus that will be slaughtered during the funeral. The guests sit together and discuss the funeral rites, Mitsiky’s life and otherwise engage in small talk. During the funeral, the guests are fed by Mitsiky’s family.

As is customary, the ceremonial part of the funeral starts on the third day. Early in the morning October 21, the ambisy informs the guests, who have gathered in front of Mitsiky’s house, that he has selected a bull of Mitsiky’s herd for a tolon’omby (“bullfight”). The bull will be the first offered to the ancestors. The forebears have appeared in the ambisy’s dream, ordering that the bull chosen should be red. He waves to Rakotozafy to show the bull to the audience. Rakotozafy emerges from

second phase, when the ambiroa is received in the tomb, it gradually becomes part of the ancestors. This process is completed when people no longer recall the deceased. Betsileo call this the second death: maty indroa. It is only when no memory of the deceased remains that he becomes part of the impersonal category of ra^ana, “ancestors”. This is accomplished by the arrival of the ambiroa in the Ambondrombe mountains, which represents Dubois’ third phase and final abode of the ancestors. Although there are parallels to Dubois’ descriptions, my informants think that two “spirits” leave the body, the fana//y and the ambiroa. They believe only the fana//y travels to Ambondrombe.

22 It should be noted that not all three phases are always performed. The third phase, which involves great expense, is primarily reserved for senior tompon-tany.

23 The outside observer meets with the incongruous, yet common, phenomenon of watching the deceased be treated very much as a participant in his own funeral. For example, as the rites are carried out, they are explained to the deceased. This also was the case with Mitsiky, whose wife, children and other relatives talked to him throughout the funeral.
behind the house, pulling a bull with a rope. The bull, however, proves to be a reluctant suitor. As it rounds the rear corner of the house and faces the throng of guests for the first time, it frantically struggles to retreat in the opposite direction. In the crowd, the bull has found sympathisers who are yelling encouragement for his efforts.

The ombyasy now invites the guests to direct their attention towards Mitsiky’s cattle corral, which is located several metres further on, to the West side of the house. This is where the bullfight will be held. Despite the short distance, it takes Rakotozafy over ten minutes to drag the bull from the house to the cattle corral. The villagers have gathered around the corral, which is penned off by a fence made of branches. The first young men to enter the ring have already taken their places at the corral entrance.

The men will fight the bull armed with roughly cut bamboo rods called tehina fanererekonana (cane). The rods are approximately half a metre. They are used to strike parts of the bull, particularly the head, during the bull fight. It is a hollow, cylinder-shaped stretch of cane that has been sharpened by one clean, diagonal cut. A five-man drum and flute band (lopanao amponga) engaged for the duration of the funeral, strikes up a tune which signals the fights are about to commence. Any of the men watching are drinking toaka gasy in liberal quantities.

The first aspirant now steps forward to do battle. Although there is no strict rule, most of the candidates are young, single males. He is no exception, and is displaying considerable bravado, something which no doubt will enhance his stature further when orgiastic events of a different order follow later in the evening. He struts into the ring, carrying the cane in his right hand, saluting the crowd with his left. The bull, which hitherto has experienced nothing more aggressive than the taps of young children gendy herding him in one direction or another, initially remains passive. Only the crowd appears eager for action. The boy marches straight up to the bull, and soundly thwacks him on the head with the cane. This confuses the bull and provokes a loud cheer from the watchers. Encouraged, the boy now stabs the cane’s sharp end straight into the head of the cow. He repeats the process a number of times. Oddly, the bull emits little noise, but its flaring eyes and frantic spinning gait are ample evidence of its rage and pain. The bull has now reached a state of frenzy. Still, the boy persists. His cuts are not well placed. Some find the mark, but more simply graze the bull’s thick skin. The sight of its own blood pushes the bull beyond the point of no return. He rears up, charges the boy and gores him in the torso, then turns around. The boy looks desperately in the direction of the tonpon-tany elders, who wave him out of the ring.

One boy after another is admitted to the corral and each in turn strikes the bull violently, stabbing the rod into its head. The bull gores each of its tormentors. They hobble or are carried off the “battle field” and the blood flows freely from both boy and beast. Skills of the combatants are further compromised due to the heavy

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24 During the period of the funeral, apparently because the ombyasy and fanahy must be entertained, everybody may freely choose their sexual partners(cf. Dubois 1938: 661-666). The ombyasy, however, do not participate in this since that would upset the two spirits Even marital commitments are temporarily set aside. Additionally, people believe that there is a lot of haena flowing through the village during the funeral, which helps the women to fall pregnant. Having children is extremely important in village life and the identity of the father in this context is only secondary.
consumption of *toaka gasy* which has been going on for two days. Some of them find even standing up a difficult task, let alone fighting the bull. The ranks of willing and able youngsters are quickly depleted. When no willing candidate remains, the *ombiasy* announces the bullfight has come to an end. He orders four young men to put the wounded animal to the ground. They bind its legs and hold it to the ground with its head facing towards the Northeast, the direction of the ancestors. The youngsters retreat and the *ombiasy* advances in their place. He incants a short *sahsa* ("blessing", "thanks"), expressing gratitude to the ancestors for all the good things they have granted Mitsiky's family. While speaking, he sprays the animal with a liquid from a little bowl he holds in his hands. It contains water with *hazomanga*, charcoal from sacred wood, and a silver coin (*volafotsy*).

Rakotozafy now enters the corral to cut the throat of the zebu, holding a knife with a wooden handle and a 20 centimetre blade. He begins by slicing through the dewlap hanging from the cow's throat. Even after the horrors of the bull fight come to an end, the bull is spared no suffering, and the sawing through the epidermis endures several minutes before Rakotozafy finally thrusts the knife into the throat, severing the carotid artery and killing the bull.

The *ombiasy* now invites Ramaly, Mitsiky's elder brother, to enter the corral. He stands next to the dead bull and addresses the audience, commencing his speech (kabary) by thanking the guests for attending and his ancestors for all the goods bestowed upon his family. The thrust of this speech, however, is a direct plea, asking the ancestors to remove Mitsiky's *ambiroa* and *fanahy* from the living. He ends the prayer with the phrase *Misina haito ny maty* ("so that the dead will be separated from the living").

The importance of the notion of separation between the living and the dead cannot be overemphasised and it largely explains the nature of what has preceded. It both permeates the rituals and is verbally expressed during the funeral. Separation, or at least its descriptive metaphors, contain a high element of physicality, and one which seems to suggest migration. In a society where everyone, whatever their current social status, is of migrant origin, it is not surprising that they once again "migrate" to a better place when they die. At any rate, the theme of migration is a recurrent one in the discourse of both *tompon-tany* and *mpiaiy*, whether speaking of life or death.

Villagers say that, upon death, two spirits leave the body: the *ambiroa* and the *fanahy*. The *fanahy* travels to Ambondrombe via the tomb, a mountain to the Southeast of Ambalavao. Ramaly, Mitsiky's brother, explained this to me:

"Both the *ambiroa* and the *fanahy* continue living in the village until my brother has entered the tomb. This is a dangerous period, because the *hasina* in the *ambiroa* could turn to *hery*. That is why we have to appease it all the time. We distract it by organising the *tolonianbi* and making music. Once the body of my brother and his *ambiroa* and *fanahy* are in the tomb, we are relieved."

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25 Both villagers and the *ombiasy* proved unable to explain this rite and the utilisation of *hazomanga* and *volafotsy* to me, they simply replied by saying that is was all part of the "Malagasy customs". The *volafotsy*, however, can be seen as the symbol of submission to the ancestors and *hazomanga* as the symbol of the ancestors themselves.

26 This is confirmed by Kottak's research (1980: 219-220).
The pre-burial all-night vigils, which are characterised by sexual excess and heavy alcohol consumption, are held to entertain and distract the fanahy and ambiroa. These practices are normally condemned by the village elders, but during funerals, machismo is encouraged and valued. The same men who have spent long days herding cows and bulls, now partake in the bloody violence of the bull fight. The atmosphere is somewhat hallucinatory, as normally gentle villagers are suddenly possessed by a savage boisterousness, the effect of which is not lessened by the ceaseless din of the music.

In summary, the overall atmosphere is one of excess and of imminent peril, none of which diminishes until the villagers have ensured that the ambiroa and fanahy are well inside the tomb. Only then can they pass safely on to the world of the hereafter, and the villagers return to their daily lives in tranquillity.

The world of the hereafter

Andriananahary is both the centre of the hereafter and the creator of the universe. This concept of Andriananahary predates the European arrival on the island. Andriananahary’s hasina is superior to any thing or being in the universe. The living do not directly derive benefit from its hasina. It is channelled through the razana (“ancestors”). The razana direct the hasina to the living through tombs. The ancestors surround Andriananahary and are closest to him. Razana is an impersonal category of ancestors. As tompon-tany Ragaby explained to me:

“Razana are all those ancestors whom we have forgotten. When the living people do not think about a dead person anymore, he becomes part of the razana.”

Dubois (supra) states that the process of slowly forgetting the deceased parallels the progressive movement of the ambiroa of the deceased away from the living, but makes no mention of the ultimate fate of the ambiroa, whereas my informants describe the process in detail. As Ramasy stated during the funeral of Mitsiky:

“After some time, the ambiroa joins the razana. His hasina then becomes one with that of the other razana.”

According to this explanation, the ambiroa of the still remembered deceased initially will dwell between the living and the ancestors. Once the living have forgotten the deceased, his ambiroa will melt (manempa), liberating the hasina to merge with the hasina of the ancestors. Thus, the three-gated way of “ancestralisation” is the ideal path for the ambiroa to merge with the hasina of the ancestors.

27 This section is principally based on my analyses of the numerous conversations I had with a great variety of informants on their perception of the hereafter.

28 Nabary is the past tense of mahaty which means “to create”. The indigenous concept of Andriananahary (or anahary) was found convenient by the Christian missionaries who adapted the concept to Andriananantara for God.

29 Despite the ephemeral and mystical nature of the topics under discussion, I always was struck by the simple clarity and concreteness of the explanations offered. In my opinion, this was partially due to the fact that when I arrived in Marovato, the villagers considered me as a child in their ways, who still had to be taught how to behave like a Betsileo.
The *ambirana* of the still remembered dead takes on the form of the deceased when appearing in dreams. As Rafidy Andriana explained:

"My father's *ambirana* often visits me in my dreams. Then I really see my father, and yet I know that it is only his *ambirana*.*

Still remembered illustrious historical characters, particularly kings and princes, also return to visit the living. They may appear in dreams, but also manifest themselves through *tromba* ("possession"). Cases of possession are usually deemed to be brought on by the *ambirana* of deceased royalty. As the *ambirana* of the royal character still lives on in villagers' memories, it cannot yet become part of the *ra'ana*.

Table 1: possession of *hasina* and the process of "ancestralisation"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>maximal hasina</strong></th>
<th><strong>&quot;ancestralisation&quot;</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Andriananahary</strong></td>
<td>Creator of the universe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Razana</strong></td>
<td>Impersonal category of ancestors, those who are no longer remembered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ambirana</strong></td>
<td>of the deceased with tombs who are still remembered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ambirana</strong></td>
<td>of people who recently died</td>
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The process of "ancestralisation", referred to in this table, is perhaps best described as a "moving towards" the ancestors and *Andriananahary*. As the "moving towards" progresses, the *hasina* of the deceased person increases until finally it joins *Andriananahary* and becomes one with the ancestors. This spiritual component is also visibly externalised in the funeral rites, as exemplified in Mitsiky's process of "ancestralisation", which commenced with burial of Mitsiky on the final day of his funeral, continued with the *toets'ambirana* or separation ritual, and concluded with the *jie/ana*, the ritual which completes the process of "ancestralisation".

The burial

Mitsiky's burial took place on the fourth day of the funeral.

Tuesday, October 22. Early morning. The guests gather in front of Mitsiky's house. The twelve cows provided by family members of Mitsiky are presented to Mitsiky's wife Bakoly. She is standing on the first floor balcony, accompanied by her five children. The cows are brought forward by twelve different family members. Each of them in turn steps forward with their cow, identifies which side of the family he

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30 *Tromba* is seen as a positive phenomenon. When somebody is possessed, he or she makes gestures which remind people of the late king or prince who is manifesting himself through the possessed person. Possession endows the possessed with healing powers. Villagers say that it is the *hasina* in the *ambirana* of the nobleman that is at the disposal of the possessed for the duration of the possession. People believe that the possessed person only has to touch ill people in order to cure them (cf. Estrade 1977, Sharp 1993).
represents, and acknowledges that it is only the generosity of the ancestors which has allowed them to offer a zebu during the funeral.

After the presentation, Bakoly explains to the crowd that she also has selected four cows from Mitsiky's herd, on the recommendation of the ombiasy. The cows are brought forward by Bakoly's grandchildren. After presentation, the sixteen cows are immediately herded into Mitsiky's cattle corral and slaughtered without ceremony by a group of young men. This takes them the better part of the morning. Women cook some of the meat for the midday and evening meals. The rest of the meat will be divided among the funeral guests to take home.

During the noon meal, the guests sit on grass mats which surround Mitsiky's house. Meat and rice to feed the ambiroa and the fanahy are placed in the Northeast corner of the room where the corpse awaits burial. Once everybody has eaten, Mitsiky's eldest son Rakotozafy, accompanied by three of his paternal uncles, enters Mitsiky's room. They have the duty of placing the corpse inside a wooden coffin.

The coffin is transported outside where everybody is waiting. The lid of the coffin has been left open and the body is clearly visible, entirely swathed in the funeral cloth (jambamend).

To avoid the sun, the coffin is temporarily moved into the shade. One by one, seven male elders, representing family members of Mitsiky and his wife, hold their speech in front of the coffin. Each of them recounts Mitsiky's life, his illness and concludes with the prayer expressing the hope that Mitsiky will successfully join the ancestors.

The speeches come to an end at approximately five o'clock. Once concluded, a group of twenty-three young men of Mitsiky's direct family, leave the village to prepare the opening of the tomb. They are led by Mitsiky's son Rakotozafy and the family ombiasy. Mitsiky's tomb is in the Northeastern lower foothills of the Ifaha mountains. He is predeceased by two of his adult sons and seven grandchildren, all of whom are buried in the family tomb. Upon arrival, the ombiasy and Rakotozafy each make short speeches, addressing those who have preceded Mitsiky into the hereafter, asking their permission to open the tomb and allow Mitsiky to join them. It takes eight men to remove the rajeta (flat stone), blocking the entrance. Rakotozafy enters the tomb to verify whether conditions in the tomb are suitably dry so as not to offend the ancestors. This is no mere formality, as can be clearly seen in the

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31 This is in addition to the cow slaughtered the day previous.

32 The ambiroa of the cows are said to accompany Mitsiky to the hereafter. Zebus mediate between the ancestors and their offspring. The trinity between ancestors, the living and the zebus is very visible during funerals. This thought is best expressed in the saying: fio fan-dravo aman-dreamby ("death unites human being and zebu"). Additionally, people consider the offering of zebus crucial in establishing proper interaction with the ancestors during important ceremonies as for example marriages, circumcisions and funerals. Unless a zebu is sacrificed during these events, it is deemed impossible to conduct ceremonies according to the "Malagasy customs". In short: without zebus a proper ceremonial life is unthinkable.

33 Malagasy believe the human body passes through various transitions in life corresponding to its "wetness" (rano or body liquids. Rano more generally refers to water and liquids in humans and nature). At birth, a human being is perceived as wet. While growing up the person becomes drier. Elderly people are the driest. The tomb should be kept dry at any cost because if for example rain enters, villagers believe the ancestors will get upset. Children under the age of four are buried next to the family tomb. They are not
apprehensive expressions of those waiting for results of the investigation. Some remain silent. Others titter nervously. But, they all look relieved when Rakotozafy emerges with the news that the tomb is dry.

Seven boys remain behind to watch over the tomb while Rakotozafy, the *ombiasy* and the other men return to the village to retrieve Mitsiky’s corpse.

Rakotozafy and Mitsiky’s three brothers carry the coffin out of the village, following the drum and flute band which is playing loudly. Bakoly and her children are the first to follow the coffin. The remainder of those in attendance complete the cortège. Only elderly people too frail for the trip have stayed behind. Everybody sings and dances, or just makes a lot of noise. Bakoly carries a cup of rum. Mitsiky’s daughter Razafindrasoa walks next to her. She holds a ceramic bowl containing meat and rice. I walk alongside them. Bakoly explains that she has brought the rum for a purpose:

“This rum is for the *ambina* and the *fanafy*. We have to make sure they accompany us to the tomb. They like rum. The meat and rice also are for them.”

Upon arrival, the music ceases and the crowd falls silent, quietly awaiting the next stage of ceremonies. The four pallbearers enter the tomb, remove the body from the coffin and place it on the right top bed, immediately above the corpses of Mitsiky’s two predeceased sons. Mitsiky’s three brothers leave the tomb, but Rakotozafy stays behind to bid goodbye to his father. The *ombiasy* approaches Bakoly and Razafindrasoa who hand over the rum and meat/rice, then goes inside the tomb. He sprinkles some of the rum on the corpses in the burial vault, then asks Rakotozafy to place the remainder with the meat/rice in the Northeast corner of the tomb.

The *ombiasy* goes toward Mitsiky, uttering an incantation:

“Go. Do not come back to us. Follow your family members who departed before you.”

This entreaty reiterates the message of the speeches given by the seven *ray anan-drenj* earlier in the afternoon. Once completed, the *ombiasy* and Rakotozafy emerge from the tomb. Rakotozafy carries a worn grass mat that was laying on the tomb floor and hands it to Razafindrasoa. The three brothers and five other young men of Mitsiky’s family replace the entrance stone. Dusk has fallen by the time everybody returns to Marovato. The funeral guests sit down for their final communal meal. The

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allowed to enter the tomb because they are considered to be too wet. They are called *za raoma* (“children of water”).

34 Bakoly insisted that I walk next to them. I had spent many hours with Mitsiky and his family during my field work. She often referred to me as part of their family, a *bana* (“family member”).

35 Mandebana ro atovo koa aq a qehaditena any atyo, fa marala vo bravina any aloha. I was to hear this sentence frequently during subsequent funerals. Dubois (1938: 696) already recorded it among the Highland Betsileo in the 1930’s.

36 Razafindrasoa is twenty-six years old, but still has no children. That night and during the following weeks she will sleep on the grass mat from the tomb. Villagers believe that it is full of *bauina* of the ancestors, which will favour fertility.
crowd disperses early the following morning.37

The central goal of the funeral and its accompanying rituals is to ensure that the ambiroa and the fanahy enter and remain in the tomb. As mentioned before, people believe, that upon entering the tomb, the fanahy travels to Ambondrombe. However, two remaining rituals are necessary so that the ambiroa may join the world of the ancestors.

The end of the funeral marks the beginning of the mourning period. I observed no external signs, such as changes in clothing or coiffure during this time. The mourning phase is particularly characterised by long discussions and anecdotes about the deceased. Following the end of the funeral, however, the deceased is no longer referred to by name, which is discarded in favour of the label Ratsampokolaha, if male, or Ratsampokovan, if female.38

The general tension and anxiety displayed during the funeral ceremony continued well afterward. During the following weeks, I sensed that people, particularly members of the immediate family, were reluctant to return to their regular tasks, anxious to learn whether the funeral had accomplished its intended goals. When I asked Rafidy Andriana if this were not due to fear that the ambiroa and the fanahy perhaps did not succeed in arriving in the tomb, he confirmed this:

"Yes, we always are very afraid. We often only realise later that something went wrong and that the ambiroa and fanahy are still in the village. We know this when people in the family start falling ill. It is the Hasina in the ambiroa that causes this. It has turned into akey.

When Bakoly’s granddaughter, the child of her son Rakotozafy, fell ill with a stomach illness one week after Mitsiky’s funeral. Bakoly immediately presumed that something had gone awry during her husband’s funeral. She consulted the family ombiasy, who promised to look into the matter. Three days later, he returned with the news. He had seen Mitsiky’s ambiroa in a dream. The ombiasy had also explained the remedy against the illness of her granddaughter, as Bakoly told me the next day:

"The ambiroa is still in Marovato. It is lonely and wants to meet the other ancestors. It demands that we offer a red cow. The ombiasy says that we have to perform the toets’ambiroa vow. Most of the tompon-tanj families do this some time after the funeral. Just to make sure that the ambiroa finds his way to the ancestors and leaves us in peace. The ombiasy says that as soon as the toets’ambiroa is done, my granddaughter will get better.39

The ombiasy advised that the best day for the toets’ambiroa ritual would be Saturday, November 2.

Toets’ambiroa, the ritual of separation

Early Saturday morning, Mitsiky’s three sons slaughter the highest quality red zebu of Mitsiky’s herd. The killing is accomplished without ceremony. After the zebu is

37 Several of Mitsiky’s children and grandchildren placed the horns of the seventeen zebus slaughtered during the funeral on his tomb the morning after burial.
38 Dubois (1938: 697) also refers to this practice.
butchered, a small cut of meat is removed from each part of the animal and placed in a bowl. Bakoly cooks the meat over a fire, then adds rice. The meal is called *vary tsatsatra*.

At about one o'clock in the afternoon, all family members living in Marovato and the surrounding villages reunite. The family *ombiasy* is also present. He blesses the *vary tsatsatra*, then places a portion of the food into a small bowl and faces the assembled crowd.

"Ratompokalalhy was a great tonpon-tany. He always executed the Malagasy customs correctly. Unlike the people in the Western part of this village, he was a great example to all of us. But now he must leave us alone and go in peace to the ancestors. Now come with us. We will lead you in the right direction."

The *ombiasy*, still holding the bowl of *vary tsatsatra* in his hands, stands up and orders everybody to follow him towards the tomb. Bakoly and Rakotozafo, Mitsiky's eldest son, are first in line. When he is within approximately fifty metres of the tomb, the *ombiasy* comes to a stop, removes a handful of food from the bowl and sprinkles it seven (*fito*) times in the direction of the tomb:

"Go and join the ancestors."

He about-faces and is emulated by all present, who follow him back to the village, without looking back.

One week later, Bakoly's granddaughter recovered from her stomach illness. Everybody felt relieved and pleased. They saw this as confirmation that the *ambiroa* of Mitsiky had left the village.

**Fiefana, completion of the funeral**

About ten months after the *toets'ambiroa*, Bakoly arrived at the door to extend an invitation to the *fiefana*, or “completion of the funeral”. This feast marks the end of the mourning period. Through the *fiefana*, descendants of the deceased hope to facilitate the passage of the *ambiroa* into the world of the ancestors. The ritual is usually performed between seven months and two years after death. I will refer again to Mitsiky’s process of “ancestralisation” in order to illustrate the *fiefana*.

The *fiefana* is held on September 10 and 11. These dates have been carefully picked by the family *ombiasy*. Approximately one hundred and twenty-five people from Marovato and neighbouring villages are in attendance. For the most part, they are

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39 They take small pieces of meat from the following parts of the zebu: the head (*holany*), hump (*trafony*), loins (*salabany*), back (*tozany*), neck (*rany*), breast (*tratranja*), teat (*snokely*), hoof (*tongany*), leg (*fianany ambony*), chuck (*fanangany*) and ribs (*tsivalany*). See also Rajaonarimanana (1979: 188).

40 Dubois (1938: 647) notes that the number seven, *fio*, is often invoked in funerals because it is derived from the root *ito* which means cut or separated. This would appear to refer to the divide between the living and the dead. (*Mha hainy ny mexa* “so that the dead will be separated from the living” cf. *supra*).

41 I had returned to Marovato three months previous.

members of either Mitsiky’s or Bakoly’s family. All the tompo-tany family leaders of Marovato are also present. On the first day of the fiefana, all the guests assemble before the ancestral home of Mitsiky. Rakotozafy welcomes the guests from the balcony. He announces that, on the advice of the family ombiasy, a prime, red cow has been selected as an offer to the ancestors. After Bakoly also extends a word of welcome, they descend to greet the guests individually and to receive gifts from them, principally in the form of money and white rice.

Bakoly’s two daughters and her grandchildren have been busy cooking since early morning. Large amounts of toaka gay have been purchased and are ready for serving from twenty-two jerrycans. Just before sunset, the same drum and flute band which played at Mitsiky’s funeral arrives. The appearance of the family ombiasy signals the crowd that they may now enter the large main room of the house. The ombiasy recites a short saotsa expressing gratitude to the ancestors while sprinkling rum in the Northeast corner of the room. When this rite is completed, the alim-belona (“living night”) may commence. The guests eat, drink toaka gay and dance to the music of the band until dawn.

The following morning, everybody meets at Mitsiky’s cattle corral, gathering around it for the sacrificial offering of the cow. Rakotozafy, his brother and two of their cousins catch the cow, push it to the ground, and bind its legs with rope. The head of the animal is turned to face the ancestral Northeast. The four men leave the corral and are replaced by the ombiasy. He pronounces another saotsa while sprinkling liquid over the animal from a small bowl he is carrying which contains water with hazomanga, sacred wood, and a silver coin (rolafotsy).

Rakotozafy now enters the corral and slits the throat of the zebu, using the same technique as was employed during the funeral. Rakotozafy’s attention is firmly fixed on the ceramic bowl, which he holds against the throat in order to collect the blood as it gushes forth, before it spurts past onto the ground. When the bowl is half full, he transports it to the ombiasy, who stands waiting at the entrance of the cattle corral. The ombiasy mixes some hazomanga with the blood and places a silver coin in it. He sprinkles the surface of the cattle corral with the liquid, then enters the house to perform the same rite in each room of Mitsiky’s house.43 The atmosphere is restrained and quiet. No one present, either man or woman, has slept. Many are showing the effects of the previous night’s revelry, and stare on apathetically during the proceedings.

Rakotozafy, his brother and two cousins now proceed to slaughter the zebu, carving out small portions of meat from each part of the cow as was done during the funeral. This meat is later prepared by Bakoly and her two daughters.

At the end of the afternoon, all the guests assemble in one of the large rooms on the upper floor of Mitsiky’s house for the last communal meal. The ombiasy pronounces another saotsa to the ancestors and asks them to bless the meal. Everybody appears happy and converses in a relaxed manner while eating. A portion of the meal is placed in the Northeast corner of the room, no longer for the fanahy and the ambirana of Mitsiky, but for the impersonal category of ancestors (ra^ana).

As dusk is falling, the butchered sacrificial cow is divided between the guests. During

43 The sprinkled blood is believed to both attract and transmit the basina of the ancestors.
the evening, the guests bid farewell and return to their own homes. The next day, I approach Bakoly to ask her whether she is satisfied with the fiefana.

“Yes, I think everything went well. Now, I will no longer speak of Ratompokolahy. He is with the other ancestors now. That is what we call maty indra (“second death”), since we stop thinking about the person who died. Today, I will divide up the land and the cows of Ratompokolahy between me and the children. He is no longer with us.”

As mentioned, the villagers believe that after the fiefana, the ambirina finally joins the world of the ancestors by disappearing, or melting, as some people phrased it to me. The memory of the deceased as an individual has ceased to be. Nor will the deceased be referred to as Ratompokolahy or Ratompokorny. After the fiefana and the division of the heritage, people employ the general term razona, when referring to the deceased. Bakoly’s discussion with me was the last time I heard her use Ratompokolahy when speaking of her husband. She never mentioned him again, except as razona.45

7.4 How a migrant (mpiavy) becomes an ancestor

Migrant funerals are modest in comparison to their tompon-tany counterparts. This is conditioned by the distant location of their tombs and their lack of financial resources. When a migrant of free descent dies, the family is faced with two options. The first consists of transporting the body to the tamn-dramana (“ancestral land”) for burial in the family tomb.46 The remaining option is temporary burial in the Marovato region pending transport home once the family obtains sufficient money. In practice, however, virtually no body returns to the homeland due to the onerous costs involved.

I will describe a typical funeral of a free descent migrant that took place during my 1998 field work.

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44 The heritage of the deceased is commonly distributed after the fiefana because it is only then that the village sees him or her as an ancestor. Doing this prematurely risks offending the ambirina of the deceased which has not yet joined the ancestors.

45 Some tompon-tany families, principally those of noble descent, often speak of organising yet another ceremony for the deceased after the three aforementioned phases of “ancestralisation”. This ceremony is called ati-damba, but some villagers also refer to it as the famadiliana. The last term and the practice are borrowed from the Merina, where the ritual is most widespread. Maurice Bloch (1971) discusses the famadiliana in considerable detail, which literally can be translated as “to rum over the dead”. During the Merina famadiliana, family members remove the corpses from the tomb and rewrap them with new lamba (“cloths”). They do this to appease the ancestors in order to receive blessings from them. In Merina society, famadiliana are organised when a new tomb is inaugurated, and occasionally when somebody who dies away from the ancestral land is brought home. These are called return famadiliana. Thirdly, they are organised as ceremonial expressions of gratitude towards the ancestors. The third category of famadiliana is celebrated every six to eight years. Its frequency largely depends on the financial situation of the family. For the Southern Betsileo, ati-damba or famadiliana are rare events (cf. Kottak 1980: 222). They are generally only performed upon inauguration of a new tomb. I never observed them. Randrimahalasa, however, is planning on organising one soon in order to bring his father to the new tomb he built for him.

46 When mpikarama die in Marovato, they are transported back home. The costs are shared by the parents of the mpikarama and the tompon-tany family leader for whom they worked. Between 1996 and 2000, six mpikarama died, two worked for Randrimahalasa, three for Rafidy Andriana and one for Ratena.
Funeral: Pre-burial events

Ramonja died on October 12 at the age of about 65. He had migrated to Marovato with his wife Soa not long after the 1967 tompan-tany meeting, which created the land monopoly. Upon arrival, they leased their land from Rafidy Andriana. Soa died in 1988. Ramonja fathered two sons with Soa during their thirty-year marriage: Rasolo and Razara. The sons live in Marovato. Each of them married women from villages near Fianarantsoa, where their father Ramonja has his ancestral land and tomb.

Ramonja had a stomach ailment that caused him great suffering. I visited him regularly during that time. The following visit took place three days prior to his death.

Ramonja sits against the South wall of his little hut. He is wearing only a lamba, which is tied around his waist. As I greet him, he announces:

"Mademoiselle, I am going to join the ancestors soon. I am old. My wife already left for the ancestors a long time ago. She still is buried here. We never had the money to bring her home. Now, the same will happen to me because my children do not have money."

SE: "Can you not return home before you die?"

Ramonja: "Yes, I did think about that. I have sent my son Rasolo to Fianarantsoa last week. He is going to discuss the issue with our family ambiazy. You know that there are no ambiazy who can help us here. They all work for the tompan-tany families. We will not consult them. They are too expensive anyway."

SE: "So you will follow the advice of your ambiazy?"

Ramonja: "Yes. I will wait for my son to come back before I join the ancestors."

October 12. Just before dusk, Rasolo arrives home. Two of his father’s younger brothers accompany him. Their trip from Fianarantsoa to Marovato has taken fourteen hours, including several hours by public transport from Fianarantsoa to Ambalavao (about fifty kilometres), followed by a forty kilometre walk to Marovato. Despite their fatigue, they come to see me immediately following their visit to Ramonja. Rasolo knocks on my door around ten o’clock.

"Mademoiselle, are you still awake?"

I open the door and greet Rasolo and Ramonja’s two brothers.

SE: "I heard that you had returned."

Rasolo: "You better come with us. Just to see him."

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47 Elderly people from migrant families of free descent often go back to their ancestral land before they die. They say to do this to ensure they can be buried in the family tomb. Also, it is far less expensive since there is no public transport in the Marovato region. People travel on foot or hitch-hike. This makes the sheer logistics of transporting a body out of the village almost impossible.
I accept. While walking towards the hut of Ramonja, Razara, his second son, comes to meet us and announces that his father has just died. Nobody seems surprised at the news. Rasolo says to me:

"My father told me that he was going to die. That is why his two brothers have come with me. For the funeral. The ombiasty told us that we can bury him here. It should be done on a Wednesday. So that is the day after tomorrow. We will have to slaughter one of the two zebus we have."

That night, I stay with Ramonja's family. They discuss the funeral for several hours. Each decision taken is duly reported to Ramonja by Rasolo, who approaches his bed in the Northeast corner of the hut and speaks close to his ear, as Ramonja had been a little deaf in the last years of his life. Ramonja will be buried on a graveyard in the Ifaha mountains, about three kilometres to the Northwest of Marovato. The site was designated by the tompyv-tany during the nineteen-seventies as a burial place for free descent migrants living in Marovato. I was only authorised to visit the graveyard while attending funerals. On those occasions, I was able to come within sufficient proximity to count over one hundred and seventy graves in the Marovato graveyard.

The Burial

October 14. During the early morning, Rasolo and Razara slaughtered the zebu, without performing any of the formal ceremonial rites. Before Rasolo slit its throat, he pronounced the following words to the cow: “It is your task to make sure that my father finds his way back to his ancestral homeland. That is why I kill you.”

Most of the meat of the animal is cooked with rice by the wives of Rasolo and Razara. This takes the better part of the day. It is nearly five o'clock when the funeral guests arrive. All free descent villagers of Marovato are invited. Approximately one hundred people are present. But today, no band strikes up music, as would be the case for tompyv-tany funerals. Most guests have brought rice with them for the family of the deceased, but the quantities are substantially less than what I had seen during tompyv-tany funerals.

After Rasolo and the older of Ramonja's two brothers welcome the guests, Rafidy Andriana asks for the floor. He praises Ramonja and his sons as good cultivators and hard workers and expresses the wish that Ramonja will arrive home safely.

At about seven o'clock, Ramonja is placed on the wooden stretcher made of branches, which Rasolo and Razara had made earlier that day. Ramonja is clothed in the ordinary cotton lamha, rather than the more expensive lamharena. Rasolo, Razara and Ramonja's brothers carry the body outside the hut, and onwards to the graveyard. Everybody follows. Rasolo's oldest son is carrying a gravestone (vato fasana), carved out of the rock mountains the day previous, which measures about thirty centimetres long and twenty centimetres wide. He carries it in a cloth slung over his shoulder. Rasolo's wife Raharo is holding a small white piece of cotton that

48 During my research, I came across four graveyards of this kind. Three of them are set aside individually for three villages, the Marovato graveyard being one of them, whereas the fourth is shared by three other villages.

49 Contributions of rice and money are smaller as most of the guests are unrelated to the deceased. Due to the expenses involved, few family members from the ancestral homeland attend the funeral.
she waves a few times before she leaves the village with the funeral group. I join her and inquire as to why she waves the white cotton:

Raharo: “That is to make sure that the fanahy and the ambirina are following us.”
SE: “Tompon-tany use rum for that, no?”

Raharo: “Yes, but for us the white cotton is good enough. We do not have money to buy all the rum and toaka gasy like the tompon-tany. There is none of it during migrant funerals.”

The burial itself is simple and short. The body is lowered into the grave by the four pallbearers. Rasolo and his brother Razara seal off the grave with sand, using two spades that were brought by their children from the village. After this is completed, they place a pile of square rock stones on top of the grave. Rasolo then orders his son to approach with the gravestone, which he places on top of the grave at the position of the head of the deceased. Rasolo’s wife hands him the white piece of cotton which he lays on the grave, placing a stone on it so it won’t be blown away by the wind. Rasolo steps back and stands in front of the grave intoning:

“The time has come that we say goodbye to you. Return home to your ancestral land and tomb. Go. Do not come back to us. Follow your wife who departed before you.”

After Rasolo utters these words, he turns his back to the grave, a gesture emulated by all present. They walk home without looking back at the grave. Upon arrival, the gathering is served meat and rice. No food is placed in the Northeast corner of the house, as they hope that the fanahy and ambirina have already departed for the ancestral land.

There are no further rituals performed by migrants of free descent to ensure that the fanahy goes to Ambondrombe and the ambirina joins the ancestors. If, however, a death occurs in the migrant family within a few months after burial, an emissary will be sent home to consult the family ombiasy. The ombiasy will determine whether something happened during the funeral that prevented the fanahy and ambirina from going home and entering the hereafter through the family tomb. The ombiasy then advises the family as to what remedial steps should be taken. Commonly, he suggests they offer a chicken to the ancestors, asking them to guide the fanahy and ambirina towards them.

Thus, both tompon-tany and mpiaiy take great pains to ensure that the fanahy and the ambirina successfully enter the hereafter. This is crucial to prevent the hasina inside the ambirina from being converted to hery, the destructive supernatural energy, but also to receive the

50 Dubois (1938: 753) also describes the migrant practice of burying their dead in temporary graves with a grave stone to which they bind a piece of white cloth to guide the ambirina to the place where it is expected.

51 The following morning, Rasolo and Razara go back to the grave of their father to put the horns of the slaughtered zebu on the grave.
beneficial flow of *hasina* from the ancestors, source of fertility, health and abundance, of all that is essential to life itself.

The next chapter will examine how the tombless *andero*, those deemed to have no ancestors, view their departure from this life.