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

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Chapter nine

The concept of “andevoness”

Andero are defined as people without history, without ancestors and without descent groups because they have no tombs. They are believed to be an “impure” people who possess little hasina and who cannot control the force of hery. The sum of these negative qualities may be referred to as “andevoness”, although it must be mentioned that the name “andevoness” is not explicitly employed by the villagers. Nor does it appear anywhere in the literature on Madagascar. Nevertheless, its determining features appeared in day-to-day tonpon-tany discourse and had real consequences for the people called andero.

It also should be stressed that the concept of “andevoness”, as defined for the purpose of this thesis, reflects the position of the andero in a specific time and place, being the Marovato region. The concept comprises the principal features of the andero, which are revealed in how they are viewed by others, but also in their perception of themselves. Although the concept is based on my 1989-1999 field work, it clearly changed over time. To cite just one example, allegations of andevoness witchcraft only became common after the tonpon-tany had unsuccessfully tried to evict them from Marovato. Finally, it should be emphasised that “andevoness” is more than a simple compilation of the features mentioned below. It is the whole social context within which the andero live that expresses their socio-cultural position.

I have defined seven features that are central to the concept of “andevoness”. “Andevoness” concerns people who:

1. are associated with the history of slavery.
2. do not possess tombs.
3. do not have a “history”.
4. possess little hasina.
5. cannot control the force of hery.
6. do not have ancestors or larger descent groups.
7. are seen as “impure” (maloto).

This naturally begs the question as to the existence of “andevoness” in other regions of Madagascar. One might also ask whether “andevoness” is rooted in the Betsileo past or is a recent invention born of the harsh existence and unique conditions underlying the creation of Marovato and other villages with similar configurations. In this chapter, I will attempt to see what parallels may be reasonably drawn with other parts of the country and will analyse how the concept of “andevoness” relates to the position of slaves during the period of slavery.

9.1 Past manifestations of “andevoness”

The literature on the history of slavery in Madagascar principally reflects the politico-economic impact of slavery in the Merina kingdom. Little attention is paid to the socio-cultural position of slaves.¹ The next section will examine where, if at all, elements of “andevoness” appeared within the lives of slaves in Imerina.

¹ My investigation into the relevant literature turned up virtually no discussion of the andero with reference to hasina and hery. Despite a dearth of this particular kind of information, some references appear to indicate that being a slave was an ontological condition not unrelated to a deficiency in hasina. Slaves in Imerina were
Household slaves in Imerina

As stated in chapter one, what was called slavery in Madagascar varied considerably depending on time and place. Furthermore, the economic position of those called slaves was diverse. Some worked directly for the king, others as household slaves. The latter category was numerically more important, and will be the focus of this section.

Usually, male slave work involved a range of activities, including toil in the rice fields, chopping wood, building their masters’ houses, collecting grass for cattle feed, carrying the master, and also replacing the master when he was absent fulfilling his corvee work obligations for the royal Merina house (cf. Callet 1908: 323-324). Women engaged in, among other things, collecting water, piling rice, transporting wood, house-cleaning, making fires, but also commonly took care of the children of the master (cf. Callet 1908: 324-325).

In the literature on Madagascar slavery, the relationship between master and slave is described as “humane” (cf. Callet 1908, Saravon 1932, Sibree 1883). Relations between master and slaves were conducted in a paternalistic jargon. Slaves were often referred to as children (aŋkiny) (cf. e.g. Raison-Jourde 1997: 121-123, Rantoandro 1993/1994: 146, Saravon 1932: 292, Sibree 1883: 235). The kinship idiom that is employed here must be understood in a hierarchical sense and not necessarily as in reference to the sentiment parents would feel for their children. Kopytoff and Miers stress a similar point for slaves’ in many African communities where the kinship terminology also was very common: “Quite consistently, the metaphor "child" in fact signifies that the acquired outsider is a legal minor (1977: 25). Slaves also were legal minors in Madagascar (cf. Bloch 1980: 107, Rakoto 1997: 65-84). Although Malagasy slavery is commonly portrayed as being benign compared with, for example, plantation slavery in America, slaves were kept to the margins of social Merina society.

prohibited from receiving the new year blessing of fertility and filiation, which was bestowed by the sovereign sprinkling holy water on his subjects during the ceremony of the royal bath. When slaves were accidentally touched by this water, they were automatically freed (Bloch 1980: 109, cf. chapter seven). One could postulate that, by accidentally receiving the blessing, the slaves’ basina was restored i.e. they had regained the ontological status of free persons. Graeber (1999: 320), working on the Merina, agrees that peoples’ basina was destroyed upon enslavement (cf. chapter seven).

2 Andrianampoinimerina in this context had said: “Je vous donne des esclaves pour que vous soyez en mesure de me servir” (quote from Rantoandro: 1993/1994: 145).

3 In 1895 the French administrator M. Ranchot concludes: “Des nombreuses observations qui ont été recueillies, il résulte que l’esclavage revêt à Madagascar un caractère particulier. Dans la pratique il paraît être devenu une sorte de servage domestique. On s’accorde aussi à reconnaître que les Hova sont doux et humains envers leurs esclaves et que la condition de ces derniers n’est point matériellement malheureuse.” (quoted from Saravon 1932: 294). And Razafimanantsao even went so far in an article of 21 March 1993 (in Martura Vavolombelona Laharana 274) as to call slaves “andevo miadana”, andevo means “slaves” and miadana can be translated as “be in luck”. Slaves, then, who were lucky.

4 J.P. and B. Domenichini (1999) argued that the position of slaves, whom they prefer to call “sujets privés”, was not so different from that of the free: “Ils sont les sujets de leurs maîtres, comme les maîtres sont les sujets du souverain. Ils doivent un service à leurs maîtres, comme ceux-ci doivent un service au roi.” In a similar vein, J. Carol (1898: 37) wrote: “L'esclave est plus libre que l'homme libre lui-même, et il le montre par une constante gaité”.

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Imerina slaves had no descent groups, ancestors or history

The thousands of slaves who were abducted from their ancestral land became “lost” (repy) people. They were separated from kin, friends, lovers, ancestors and history. They lost everything and everybody they had cared for (cf. Graeber 1999: 319). In the specific case of Imerina, slaves were unable, even after arrival in the area of enslavement, to attach themselves to people and places. The nature of this rootlessness can only be understood by juxtaposing it against the social points of reference of those who did not suffer a similar fate.

As stated earlier, all free Merina were, and remain to this day, anchored in space and time through tombs. The tomb is located on a specific plot of land called tanin-drazana (“ancestral land”). Metaphorically, it serves as a tangible reminder of many things: kinship, the bond between the living, the dead and the ancestors, the measure of current social status. Even when people emigrate from their ancestral land, they still establish their social status by referring to their ancestral homeland. In principle, every Merina has the intention of eventually returning home for burial and reunification with their descent group and their ancestors (Bloch 1971).

Slaves, however, were severed from their descent group and tomb. They languished in a social vacuum between the society they had lost and the host society of their masters. Free Merina lived at higher altitudes. Slaves dwelled in makeshift settlements in valleys, within the vicinity of the rice paddies. Slaves had no permanent residence and circulated between several hamlets, and often several masters, in different parts of Imerina (Ellis 1985: 8, Graeber 1999: 320-321, cf. Sewell 1876, Cousins 1896, Piolet 1896). Nor were they allowed to socially integrate into the host society, as was permitted in many other African societies (Kopytoff and Miers 1977) since the “slavery-to-kinship continuum” simply was not an option for them.

Merina kinship organisation is strictly oriented towards group endogamy, felt to be necessary to keep land within the descent groups. On the other hand, slaves were prohibited from creating their own social networks with other slaves. Although marriages between slaves were permitted, they were not allowed to built permanent tombs and thereby anchor themselves to a particular territory and become integrated into the social fabric of free society. They were seen as non-persons. As Bloch (1980: 131) writes: “In the Merina case, the outcast nature of slaves is a by-product of the highly elaborate devices for the ideological reproduction of the free society with its in-marrying kinship groups and their mystical association with land and tombs. ..., it literally leaves no room for them.” As they did not have permanent tombs, slaves could not lay the groundwork for a new ancestry. In their case, the rituals of burial and “ancestralisation” were not performed.

5 There are recorded cases of slaves allowed to be buried in their master's grave, but this was an atypical situation. As Callet (1908: 273) writes that slaves can be buried anywhere: “... quelque part sur les coteaux [n'importe où].”

6 Dubois (1938: 718), like virtually all of the authors who have written on the Highlands, principally examines socio-cultural life of the elite. In his analyses of funerals in the Southern Highlands, he dedicatdes only one paragraph to slave funerals, where he states: "Autant les choses se compliquent pour les princes, autant elles se simplifient, à l'autre bout de l'échelle sociale, pour les esclaves. On entre, vise, les discours se font assis; ... il faut croire que leurs mélora ne sont pas beaucoup à redouter, car l'introduction du défunt dans le monde des mânes se fait, c'est le cas de le dire, <sans grande cérémonie>."
The “impurity” of slaves


Graeber (1999: 335) asserts that slaves in Imerina were not allowed to enter certain ceremonial and burial places because they were deemed a contaminating presence. This would appear far from absolute in the face of evidence that slaves sometimes lived with their masters, and interacted with them on a daily basis, even engaging in physical contact, such as when slaves bathed their master. Women slaves even dressed the hair of the master's wife (Callet 1908: 323-324, Ramamonjisoa 1984: 39-72).

The abolition of slavery

In 1896, the reign of the Merina monarchy came to an end and Madagascar officially became a French colony (1896-1960). The French considered the practice of slavery on the island a clear violation of the republican principles of “liberté, égalité, fraternité”. Slavery was abolished that same year.

The freedom which followed upon emancipation was nominal, as slaves were left with no means of subsistence. Three principal avenues of survival were open to ex-slaves: the first was to return to their native region, a largely theoretical avenue, as enslavement had severed all previous ties with their kin. Some ex-slaves searched for available land to cultivate, which led many to the no-man's-land surrounding the Highlands. A third group remained on or near the property of their former masters where they continued to work, share-cropping small plots of land allotted to them during enslavement, thereby meeting subsistence needs, and little more. What emancipation did not bring was an improvement in economic prospects or an increase in prosperity. Rights of usufruct could be passed on from father to son but, under the law, the land remained the property of the former slave master (Bloch: 1980: 103-106, Saravon 1932: 294-296).

The abolition of slavery did little to alter the social status of slaves. Ex-slaves retained their former designation (*andeho*) and their children could not easily accede to the status of a free person, contrary to other regions of Africa where integration was possible through adoption by or marriage to a free person. Merina and Betsileo rules of endogamy

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7 Impurity and the absence of tombs, ancestors and descent groups, are also mentioned in connection with the Menabe-Sakalava (Goedefroit 1998: 110-115, Feeley-Harnik 1991: 22, 57-58), and the Betsimisaraka (Ottino 1998: 135-139) slaves, respectively in the central West and East coasts of Madagascar. However, little in the way of ethnographic evidence supports this contention. In the dialect of the Southern Sakalava, the term *abile* can mean either "slave" or "impure, vile" (Beaujard/Tsaboto 1997: 395).

8 Authors, generally appear to be citing each other and rarely expand on the issue.

9 In 1890, Britain and France signed a treaty exchanging French recognition of British control over Zanzibar for British acceptance of the French claim to Madagascar.

10 This does not, however, appear to be the case for some sub-Saharan communities, where, slave descendants still are relegated to positions in the margins of society (cf. Ensel 1998, Villasante-De Beauvais 2000).
prevented the andev of the Highlands from achieving social mobility through adoption or marriage. Kin groups were arranged hierarchically, and marriage to someone from an inferior family meant that their children always belonged to the lower group (Bloch 1980: 108). Thus, the abolition of slavery legally emancipated the slaves. But the failure to define their future social and economic position left them exposed to being relegated to the margins of society.

9.2 Current manifestations of “andevoness”

The next sections will discuss whether features of “andevoness” can be found in other Malagasy communities, particularly in Merina society.¹¹ This inquiry is by definition preliminary, as the notion of “andevoness” has yet to be addressed and discussed among scientists studying Madagascar.

Features of “andevoness” in Merina society

The gateway for an ex-slave into the free world could only be passed by establishing a tomb and thereby creating local descent groups and ancestors. As ex-slaves who remained on the land of their former masters were in leasehold relationships, they were precluded from ancestral land and consequently, a permanent family tomb. But, the mere act of leaving was usually insufficient to shed their status as ex-slaves:

The slaves only had perishable tombs in old Imerina and, many of them have built new permanent tombs in the new area and not in the old where their inferior status is remembered. This aspect should not, however, be overestimated since there are many other ways in which ‘free’ descent can be demonstrated. Most important of these is the fact that physical appearance is usually sufficient indication of slave descent (Bloch 1971: 136).

So, whereas not having a family tomb implied that one was a non-person (Bloch 1980: 120), creating a tomb did not mean that the mainty (“blacks”)¹² could free themselves from their past. Their distinct physiognomy meant they were easily labelled as people of slave descent. Even today, many mainty live on the fringes of society.¹³

Furthermore, Merina and Betsileo show remarkable cultural resemblance and share the same spatial symbolism, in which the West is perceived as an inferior place. In her study of the descendants of slaves in the Antananarivo region, Rabearimanana notes that in Merina villages they also predominantly reside in the Western parts (1997: 291).

¹¹ Throughout this thesis, I have already referred to elements of “andevoness” among the Betsileo whenever I came across analogous situations in different parts of the Southern Highlands.

¹² Conversely, it does not necessarily follow that being “black” (mainty) proves actual slave descent. Free Malagasy have also migrated to Imerina. Moreover, most Merina do not clearly fall within either the fotsy or mainty category since they are neither “white” or “black”. Most Merina are classified under the fotsy-mainty dichotomy according to whether they have a family tomb and not physical appearance. Fotsy are those Merina who have a family tomb and mainty are those who have none or who have only recently established one. Slaves in the Betsileo region usually could not be distinguished by their physical appearance.

A number of authors have observed the custom of prohibiting marriages between fotsy and mainly Merina (Rabearimanana 1997: 291-302, Rajaoson 1997: 347-356, Ramamonjisoa 1984: 39-77). Merina who defy this rule are often expelled from the fotsy family network and their andero partners and children are not allowed entry into the family tomb of the fotsy parent (Bloch 1971: 199). Authors who have studied fotsy-mainy relations make ample reference to racial discrimination and economic distortions. They make little or no mention of the “pure”-“impure” dichotomy. But in view of the cultural similarities between the Betsileo and the Merina, the “pure”-“impure” distinction could very well be a parameter in Merina concepts of inequality as well.  

The foregoing comparative survey was undertaken to determine whether any other regions in past or present Madagascar display features which are analogous to the Marovato configuration of “andevoness” and its constituent components. This inquiry concludes that the literature reveals no situation where all the components of “andevoness” exist. Nor did I come across any situation where any of its single constituent elements currently exists to the same degree as in Marovato. Possible explanations for this will be discussed in the following chapter.

9.3 The Marovato memory of the past

In the Marovato region, villagers are reluctant to discuss the history of slavery in Madagascar, despite the fact that the current position of the andero is usually justified by their alleged slave origins. Villagers of free descent unanimously asserted, however, that slaves had become “impure” and lost most of their hadna (“vital energy”) upon enslavement. The tompon-tany considered this condition as irreversible. Not even the abolition of slavery could remedy their state.

Unlike the Sakalava and Betsimisaraka (cf. Goedefroit 1998: 110-121, Ottino 1998: 134-139), who used “purification” rituals in order to restore the “pure” status of former slaves, the tompon-tany stress that, for them, “purification” is a ritual only available to free descent people who have become temporarily “impure” due to contact with an andero. For the andero, such a ritual would not be relevant because their “impurity” is in their blood.

The andero, and “andevoness”, represent something obviously crucial, organic and inherent to the worldview of the Marovato Betsileo. It is an expression of what the tompon-tany are not. One is sorely tempted to postulate that “andevoness” is an expression of what tompon-tany are no longer. For, if they have highlighted certain things of the past, have they not equally omitted certain others which are of such importance to the period of slavery? Slaves interacted with masters. Andero do not. Slaves did the hair of their masters. Andero

14 The Sakalava and Betsimisaraka also prohibit intermarriage with slave descendants. This survives even in cases where ex-slaves have been able to establish tombs and have been ritually cleansed (cf. Goedefroit 1998: 110-121, Ottino 1998: 134-139).

15 For example, Rabearimanana writes: “Beaucoup manquent, en effet, de terres, ce qui les place dans une situation de dépendance par rapport aux propriétaires fonciers” (1997: 297).

16 As the work of Ramamonjisoa (1984: 39-76) also indicates. On the question of ritual impurity, the Antemoro deserve to be noted in passing. This group, living on the Southeast coast of Madagascar, also uses a concept of “impurity” but there, it is principally related to a free descent group (the Antevolo). This concept of “impurity” is different from that described for the Marovato region. This may be due to the Arab influence on Antemoro society (cf. Benjard/Tsaboto 1997, Chandon-Moët 1972, Deschamps/Vianès 1959, Ravelomandrosolo 1994: 161-162, Rolland 1998).
do not. Slaves lived in masters’ houses on occasion. Andevos have progressively been pushed

to the margins, and then completely into the shadows of the tompotany consciousness.

Indeed, for the tompotany of Marovato who represent even death itself in explicit, tangible

forms and architectures, what could be a more eloquent, yet occulted expression of the

memory of slavery than to conserve living monuments in the form of the andevos and their

“andevoness”? 