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

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Chapter ten

Conclusions and Comparative Theoretical Analyses

The final chapter of this thesis first examines Marovato's transition from frontier to village in the light of Igor Kopytoff's frontier process model. The chapter also sets forth my own theoretical conclusions, and possible avenues of future research.

10.1 Marovato and frontier society theory

Igor Kopytoff (1987) developed a theory of frontier society largely inspired by Frederick Jackson Turner's American frontier model, a model which he adapted and applied to the African context. The frontier which Kopytoff spoke of was a local frontier, lying at the fringes of the numerous established African societies. It is on such frontiers that most African politics and societies have, so to speak, been "constructed" out of the bits and pieces - human and cultural - of existing societies (ibid.: 3).

Kopytoff's essentially morphological analysis views frontier not as frontier per se, but as a process of construction of a new society by a sub-group that has separated from a larger socio-political entity. He sees this "continuum" as the essence of many African societies. Kopytoff traces the frontier from its inchoate form through to maturity.

Kopytoff's model contains eleven steps, which are reproduced in the following table:

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The first two components of Kopytoff's analysis concern the beginnings of the frontier process, and the later phases might be termed "emerging" facets which come into play once the frontier starts showing nascent forms of a society. The last three components of Kopytoff's model will not be discussed as they apply, if at all, at a later stage of Marovato development.

Kopytoff's general model provides a useful comparative grid. Many of the developments described by him also occurred in Marovato, although not always in the same manner. Both the underlying circumstances and the hallmarks of Marovato society are harsh and extreme, but Kopytoff's model shows us that the Marovato experience is not the only one of its kind.

The production of frontiersmen

A frontier, as Kopytoff points out, is built by frontiersmen. It is a social construction, and a process through which African societies developed, and not merely a newly inhabited stretch of savannah. A frontiersman is created by an event, one that is often triggered by

1 Cf. Frederik Jackson Turner (1893).
forces beyond his control. He is, to use Kopytoff’s language, ejected from the metropole. Before opting for the frontier, the frontiersman faces an even less desirable set of alternatives. His departure is often preceded by famines, exclusion or war (ibid: 17-23).

Kopytoff further asserts that the creation of frontiers was facilitated by “the Africans’ relative indifference to rootedness in a physical space, together with an indifference to a permanent attachment to a particular place.” Place, according to Kopytoff’s view of the African psyche, is principally perceived to be social space. If people migrate, the social space allegedly changes. This is apparently founded on the belief that ancestors move with the migrants no matter where they are buried (ibid: 22-23). The foregoing statements should, however, be qualified. Even Kopytoff himself admits that the source and inspiration for the frontier is the metropole, something far more indicative of attachment than of “relative indifference”.

In the Highlands of Madagascar, being anchored in space is very important. Social existence depends upon having a tomb and ancestral land. This does not mean that people lack mobility. Even Merina and Betsileo, who are reputed to have the strongest attachment to their ancestral homeland, will resort to migration when their original land base is no longer economically viable to support the whole kin group (Bloch 1971). But, even after relocation, people claim they maintain ongoing contacts with their kin. Indeed, villagers frequently express their yearning to return to the homeland for burial. Their ritual ceremonies reflect this longing for the tomb (cf. chapter seven). In reality, most will never return. Where possible, migrants occasionally build their own tomb in the area of migration. This would appear to be more common for the Betsileo than the Merina (Kottak 1980: 229).

By their own admission, the Marovato tonpan-tany are all originally migrants. It is more difficult to determine precisely where they came from, or as Kopytoff might express it, where their metropole is located. The following paragraphs describe my inquiries into the geographical origin of the Marovato tonpan-tany (cf. also chapter two).

Rafidy Andriana and Andriamaro created Marovato in the no-man’s-land of the extreme Southern Highlands. They were born in the region, respectively in Vidia and Marovotry. The oldest descendant of the former royal house in Anjoma, Andriamaheva, spoke to me at some length about these villages. He said that they were all founded at the beginning of the twentieth century by olona vaovao (“new people”) but claimed to have no further knowledge of their origins.

Rafidy Andriana and Andriamaro’s parents are buried in tombs built by their sons in Marovato. This would appear to indicate that the parents had not previously established their own permanent tomb in the region. Furthermore, Rafidy Andriana and Andriamaro’s brothers and sisters, who now still live in their natal villages or in villages near Marovato, also will be buried in the respective family tombs established in Marovato. Finally, those family members who have pre-deceased have all been interred in these tombs as well.

2 Kopytoff defines the metropole as the established society from which the frontiersmen originate (ibid.: 26).

3 The no-man’s-lands around the Highlands are known to be areas where ex-slaves settled (cf. Bloch 1980: 114-115). Comparative research in these regions might disclose valuable information on settlement of slave descendants.

4 For details on the settlement history of the Marovato region see chapter two.
Of all the *tompon-tany* in Marovato, I was only able to trace back the genealogical roots of one family (G. on Marovato maps). They are descendants of two brothers of Andriamaheva (see above), the oldest living member of the former royal house in Anjoma. The two brothers moved to Marovato in the 1960s. The remaining *tompon-tany* arrived during the same time period, just prior to 1967, the year of the land pact which entrenched their status as *tompon-tany*. These families all claim to be firstcomers to the region, and can therefore be viewed as frontiersmen.

No conclusive proof exists that the Marovato *tompon-tany* are of slave descent. However the following factors would point to this (with the exception of the one family mentioned above) as a very plausible hypothesis:

1. Historical sources state that the region was peopled by ex-slaves and their descendants (archives Aix-en-Provence).
2. The *tompon-tany* only recently established their family tombs.
3. They cannot trace their genealogy further back than one generation, whereas free descent Betsileo in other parts of the Southern Highlands are able to recount several generations of their family history (cf. Kottak 1980).
4. They are unable to identify their named descent group. This also sharply contrasts with Betsileo in other regions of the Southern Highlands (cf. chapter two).
5. The particular structure of the kinship networks, with a very limited patrilineal descent group (cf. chapter two).
6. The harsh and unforgiving territory where they settled is reputed to be extremely dangerous (cf. chapter one).

However, even if we accept the premise that virtually all *tompon-tany* of Marovato are of slave descent, there still remains the problem of determining what constituted their metropole in the absence of information with respect to their place of origin.

Kopytoff (*ibid.*: 26) introduces the notion of Metropole as follows:

Frontiersmen usually came from an established society, which I refer to here as their metropole, and their co-frontiersmen came from the same or other metropoles abutting more or less closely on the frontier.

The metropole could be a large state or a set of states, or be a quite small socio-political unit. In the case of slaves (cf. Cassanelli 1987 for the Bantu slaves escaping from Somali lineages) it could occasionally take on the form of an acephalous system of autonomous kin groups (Kopytoff *ibid.*: 26). Although Kopytoff discusses metropole as a physical place, his metropole may be described in broader terms, a notion not limited to a particular socio-political space. This metropole would comprise ideational systems of shared ideas, concepts, rules and meanings that underlie and are expressed in the ways people live. For, although metropole necessarily connotes a strong association with a defined territory, one might argue that the values and traditions of a metropole are internalised by its constituent members long prior to departure, and it is this internalisation which safeguards metropole values for the frontier, where they are externalised by the frontiersmen.

If we apply this reasoning to the people of Marovato, metropole may be said to be contained within the interdependent concepts of tombs, ancestors and kinship. This triangle of society exists throughout Madagascar, but is most closely linked with the Merina and Betsileo living in the Highlands. In building their society, the *tompon-tany* of Marovato
have, in a highly articulated and innovative manner, resuscitated the memory of tombs, ancestors and kinship. Later migrants also share the memory of these concepts. Today, Marovato villagers, even those labelled andro, believe in the importance of tombs, ancestors and kinship.

Movement in groups

In the African context, people often left for the frontier as part of latent groups of solidarity. In essence, it means that rupture from existing groups occurred in sub-groups rather than individually (Kopytoff ibid.: 23-25). This, however, does not appear to be the pattern for settlement of the no-man's-land in the extreme Southern Highlands. All current tompon-tany of Marovato came to the village unaccompanied by their extended families.

Kopytoff states that African frontiersmen generally maintained relations with the metropole. The reverse is true for the tompon-tany of Marovato who, by their own admission, arrived in the extreme Southern Highlands without networks and were forced to create their own. They accomplished this through the creation of ritual blood-bonds, fosterage relations and marriages. The average male tompon-tany has married five times. These relations were principally established with Betsileo communities outside the region, but within the Southern Highlands.

Rafidy Andriana was married when he arrived in the village, a situation typical for the average tompon-tany settler of the first generation. His later spouses came from the region between Ambalavao and Fianarantsoa, where the tompon-tany frequently visited the livestock and produce markets. In this regard also, Rafidy Andriana is emblematic of other tompon-tany of his generation. He ultimately married six times according to his own accounts.

Tompon-tany children married either into local tompon-tany families or with spouses originating from their mothers' region. The patrilineal family, with the exception of the descendant of former royalty, is numerically very small, comprised of a limited number of brothers and sisters of tompon-tany family leaders principally dwelling in neighbouring villages. The limited number of tompon-tany patrilineal descent groups, as compared with the social networks created through their wives, would support the thesis that most of the first migrants to the extreme Southern Highlands were ex-slaves who had no kinship networks.

According to Kopytoff, the “continuing connection with the metropole and the metropolitan identity” laid the foundation for the identity of the frontier in Africa (ibid: 25). At its worst, the metropole can be a stifling inhibitor and oppressive force, but, following rupture and striking out for a new frontier, it often serves as source of political and social legitimacy. As mentioned, the tompon-tany were forced to forge their own version of this process due to the absence of a physical metropole as a reference point. The tompon-tany met this challenge by creating their own networks. The tompon-tany affirmed their historical origins and staked their claim to primacy and legitimacy through the trilogy of tombs, ancestors and kinship. They defined their tompon-tany status by building tombs in the region, thereby establishing an ancestral link. The 1967 land monopoly created by the villagers effectively excluded later newcomers from acquiring tompon-tany status. Both prior to and following the creation of the land monopoly, the tompon-tany continued to build kinship networks in the Southern Highlands. This entrenched their temporal position of superiority as free descent tompon-tany, while infusing it with a divine element via myth and the ombya, “traditional healer”.
The institutional vacuum

The Kopytoff model tells us that frontiersmen went to the new frontier with the ambition to establish themselves "free of their metropolitan ties and without being beholden to new political masters". They nevertheless often found themselves confronted with other groups in the region where they settled (ibid.: 25-33).

In the case of the extreme Southern Highlands, the region was virtually uninhabited prior to the turn of the twentieth century according to archival records. This was confirmed to me by elders dwelling near Anjoma, to the Northeast of the former no-man's-land and during discussions with first migrants. Thus, the original settlers, many of whom survive as the current to/npon-tany elders, were free to build their own society.

Pre-existing social models

Kopytoff states that frontier societies substantially replicate the features of the metropole. This implies the reproduction of a familiar cultural inventory of symbols and practices in a novel manner. The process is quite natural in Kopytoff's opinion, as the metropole is "near at hand and fresh in memory" (ibid. 33-40).

This is also true of Marovato, although it is the memory of another sort of metropole which has conditioned the construction and evolution of the village and surrounding region. The first settlers in the no-man's-land built a society with many elements clearly inspired by the interactive trinity of tombs, ancestors and kinship, yet specifically tailored to suit their needs.

Social organisation of Marovato currently flows out of two principal binary dichotomies. The first divides villagers on the basis of their settlement status: to/npon-tany ("masters of the land") - mpiany ("migrants"). The second binary dichotomy distinguishes between olona mado ("pure" or "clean people") and olona maloto ("impure" or "dirty people"). Of the four Betsileo status groups in the region: andriana ("noble descent", those who reincarnate as crocodiles), hova ("noble descent", who do not reincarnate), olonpotsy ("commoner descent"), andevonon ("slave descent"), only the last is considered to be "impure". It is worth repeating that nothing physically distinguishes the andevonon from the free descent groups.

To/npon-tany are exclusively comprised of people who settled in the region prior to 1967, all of whom participated in the creation of the 1967 land pact. They possess family tombs in the region. Mpiany are migrants who lease land from the to/npon-tany. The to/npon-tany/migrant paradigm can be found in various other parts of Madagascar, particularly within the Highlands. The second binary opposition between olona mado and olona maloto, however, seems to have specifically evolved under the to/npon-tany of Marovato and neighbouring villages. Although the "impure"/"pure" dichotomy has manifested itself at other times and places in Madagascar, it has been taken to an extreme in the Marovato region (cf. chapter nine).

5 The andriana status of some of the to/npon-tany is an example of how they created the image of themselves as being of noble descent through the myth of their reincarnation into crocodiles (cf. chapter 2).

6 The subject matter of this thesis obviously invites parallels with configurations of "impurity" outside Madagascar. India is the most obvious example. However, comparative studies of this kind are problematic. Slavery in the Malagasy Highlands, "andevoness" in the Marovato region, and the Indian configurations of "impurity" are all time and place specific (Evers forthcoming).
It is significant that whenever a migrant identifies himself in the region as Betsileo, this is accepted at face value by the *tompon-tany*. This sharply contrasts with the *tompon-tany* approach when assessing claims of descent status, i.e. whether somebody, usually a new migrant, is of free or slave descent. Any claims to free descent are scrutinised carefully. Success depends upon the production of convincing evidence that the migrant has a tomb.

If the *tompon-tany* are satisfied that a migrant actually does have a tomb, he or she will be classified as a migrant of free descent and allowed to live in the Eastern part of the village. He or she will henceforth be considered as a member of the “pure people” category, alongside the *tompon-tany* themselves. If, on the other hand, the *tompon-tany* are not convinced or conclude that evidence of the ancestral homeland and the tomb is deficient, the migrant will be assigned to dwell in the Western part of the village, and classified as a migrant of “slave origin” (*andevo*). The very name *andevo* automatically carries with it the label “impure person”.

The *tompon-tany* refer to themselves as guardians of the *fomba gasy* with great pride. “Malagasy customs”, however, do not refer to the stable and timeless system as the *tompon-tany* present it, but to the values, customs and institutions which they wish to protect within their recently created society. In this sense, *fomba gasy* also serves as a very effective societal strategy. The categorisation of all newcomers into a clearly demarcated hierarchy brought social, political, economic and cultural advantages for the *tompon-tany*. As successive groups of migrants arrived, the myth of themselves as backbone of society and defenders of the *fomba gasy* was strengthened. In this way, they overcame the contradiction of being recent settlers. That they were able to sustain this myth can be attributed to their adroit manipulation of the powerful symbols of tombs, ancestors and kinship.

**Adherents as kinsmen**

Success of a new frontier society largely depended on attracting a sufficient number of adherents and dependants. The first and most natural candidates were other family members. At the same time, frontiersmen developed alliances through the creation of marital ties (Kopytoff *ibid.*: 40-49).

In the Highlands, there is a well-established pattern of kinsmen taking initiatives to attract relatives to the area of migration (cf. Bloch 1971, Kottak 1981). The Marovato situation stands in direct contrast to this. During the first decades of Marovato’s development, *tompon-tany* only invited their brothers and sisters and accompanying offspring to live with them. Upon arrival, they were immediately integrated into *tompon-tany* families and obtained their own land. The numbers who actually arrived and integrated in this manner, however, are not significant. No migrant (*niplany*) who settled between about 1970 and 1990 is related to the *tompon-tany*.

**Adherents as subjects**

According to Kopytoff’s model, the recruitment of kinship adherents reaches a critical threshold when the numbers of the group become sufficiently high. Kopytoff states that upon society attaining sufficient maturity, the allied kin group no longer feels threatened by non-kin migrants, and allows their entry into the socio-political unit as subjects. This

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7 After 1992, the category of “pure people” was further reinforced with the arrival of the *mpikarama* who were principally drawn from the families of the wives of the *tompon-tany*. They commonly claim *ombotsy* descent.
naturally depends upon a clear hierarchical distinction being made between the kin-based ruling core and the newly arrived non-kin adherents (ibid: 49-52).

Here again, the process was exactly the reverse in Marovato. Non-kin were integrated at a relatively early stage of Marovato's development, immediately following the 1967 land pact. They were appointed to a specific social category, as either “pure people” or “impure people”. It is not clear whether this label was attached to the migrants upon arrival or whether it developed over time. It was, however, well-established by the time I commenced research in the village. Only after the tompon-tany had created marital networks were next-of-kim on the wife’s side allowed entry as mpikarama, “labourers” (cf. chapter five). Furthermore, their position in Marovato society had been fixed well in advance by the tompon-tany. Despite their kinship relations, these newcomers were no longer integrated into the tompon-tany group and were initially prohibited from leasing land.

Firstcomers and latecomers

In Africa, firstcomers to a region were often able to establish local roots old enough to make claims to great antiquity of residence and even to primacy. The firstcomers were the first to claim “ownership” over land and assert the special ritual relationship to it and its spirits. Firstcomers tried to further extend signs of seniority and engaged in the creation of a “tradition” to which they could later appeal. Latecomers found themselves subject to the authority asserted by the firstcomers in the local socio-political situation. (Kopytoff ibid: 52-61)

In Marovato, a similar process took place. Firstcomers claimed authority over land and by extension, over newcomers. Newcomers were assigned to pre-established socio-economic positions. All migrants, whether of free descent or not, were duty bound to individual tompon-tany under land lease contracts (cf. chapter four). This structure created a quasi-permanent debt relation between migrant and tompon-tany. Furthermore, migrants of free descent had to offer their services during the harvest season to the tompon-tany leasing land to them. They were paid a nominal sum for this work. This was not the case for the andeo, who were obliged to perform unremunerated work for the tompon-tany nobility upon demand. This latter system lasted until about 1993, when the land was taken from the andeo and they were replaced as a work force by the mpikarama (cf. chapter five).

Patrimonialism

In the process of developing further authority over people, firstcomers developed elaborate cultural justifications for their political position. In Africa, this often manifested itself as “sacred chieftainship”, or in the form of “divine kingship” (cf. Murdock 1959). The ruler’s supremacy was legitimised by appropriate local ritual symbols. These were accepted and reinforced by those being ruled. All African authority figures were venerated as “sacred” by the subjects (Kopytoff ibid: 62-68).

The concept of “sacredness” of the ruler is well-known in Madagascar. It was most clearly exemplified in the period of the Merina kingdoms of the Highlands. Hasina, a supernatural virtue, was concentrated in the king as a symbol of his innate religious superiority. The hasina and the authority of the king were presumably unchallenged, innate and religious. Subjects of the king rendered homage to him by presenting an uncut silver coin to him, also called hasina. This ritual exchange confirmed the relationship between the ruler and the ruled and legitimised the political and “sacred” superiority of the king (cf. chapter seven).
Andriamaheva, the oldest descendant of the former Anjoma royal house to the Northeast of the Marovato region is still recognised as a ritual authority. Even Marovato people, who did not form part of the historical kingdom, see him as their spiritual leader. Marovato tompon-tany often visit him for consultations. Andriamaheva also is the sole person qualified to perform “purification” rituals, to the exclusion of the tompon-tany or even their ombiasy (“traditional healer”). At the local level, the tompon-tany and the ombiasy are considered to be in closest proximity to the ancestors since they allegedly possess the most hasina. All villagers concur in this belief, even those labelled andeva, despite the fact that such an acknowledgement implies that andeva are consequently deficient in hasina and ritually “impure”. These concepts have been internalised to such a degree that the andeva currently speak about themselves in similar terms as those employed by the tompon-tany.

Tompon-tany preserve their superior position by demanding group endogamy of the “pure people”. Marriages with the andeva are forbidden (cf. chapter three). Tompon-tany try to realise group conformity by openly condemning people who deviate from their norms, the usual example held up being that of the andeva. To underline the andeva inferior status, and their danger to free descent people, they are often accused of witchcraft (cf. chapter eight). Tompon-tany enforce these beliefs, according to several accounts, by poisonings or sorcery.

**10.2 Memory as cornerstone for the future: tombs, ancestors and kinship**

Several historical and contemporary factors point to the probability that, with the exception of one family, the current tompon-tany of Marovato are of slave descent. Despite the lapse of more than a century since the abolition of slavery, social, economic and cultural relations in Marovato seem to be grounded in the memory of slavery and the exclusion of slaves from principal cultural components such as tombs, ancestors and kinship.\(^8\)

The emancipation of slaves in 1896 did nothing to resolve their economic and socio-cultural dilemma, freeing them in name only. As it proposed no substitute system, the net effect was simply to unhinge slaves from their environment, without providing them any useful reference, other than the past, to commence their new life.

This process may be described in the language of Kopytoff. It appears that, both as a result of the period of slavery and its aftermath of emancipation, the tompon-tany experienced a radical and traumatic rupture, departure and separation from their place of origin. This event removed them from whatever geographical location constituted their metropole. Thus, the tompon-tany, who ceaselessly reiterate that “history” and “Malagasy customs” are of their essence, cannot trace their family histories back further than one generation.

They did, however, preserve their sense of themselves as a people, apparently by internalising their metropole, and preserving the memory of tombs, kinship and ancestors. When the conditions became appropriate, i.e. with the founding and early development of the village of Marovato, the metropole was once again externalised, literally born from the ashes of their memory. But, the resurrecting of this memory also brought with it a malaise, one which made it imperative to exclude the andeva and relegate them to pariah status. This exclusion, it is suggested, may be due to the slave origins of the tompon-tany themselves.

Throughout my field research, I was struck, time and again, by the fact that the andeva represented the negative expression of tompon-tany values. This led me to the conclusion

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\(^{8}\) Cf. Connerton (1989) and Friedman (1992) on how people use memories of the past to define the present.
that those currently called *andero* by the *tompon-tany*, may provide a key to what the *tompon-tany* are no longer.

The prohibition against *andero* establishing tombs effectively removed them from any possibility of playing an active role in Marovato society. By necessary implication, they were unable to create ancestors or extended kinship groups, whose very existence depend upon being anchored in space and time by tombs. The *andero*’s early economic role as labourers came to an end with their exclusion under the Randrimahalasa/Rafidy Andriana land scheme. Ironically, and contrary to its intended purpose, the scheme resulted in the intensification of their position as a sort of shadow people, an alter ego of the *tompon-tany*’s newly acquired ontological status. Just as they are marginalised in day-to-day village life, the *andero* are also denied access to the hereafter by virtue of their tombless status. *Andero* are said to be deficient in *hasina*, unable to control the malignant forces of *bery*. Excluded from the process of “ancestralisation”, the *andero* are *olona very*, “lost people”.

Nowhere is the *andero* role as negative counterpoint more evident than in funerals. The funeral is the quintessential cultural expression of the *tompon-tany* sense of being. Through their funeral rituals, *tompon-tany* hope to join the ancestors. When the *ambiroa* or “body double” of the deceased enters the tomb successfully, it may assume its rightful place in the hereafter. The metaphors, icons and symbols associated with the funeral rites of the *tompon-tany* often refer to homes or the homeland. Even the tomb itself is a home, not only as a present symbol of a group’s authenticity in a particular area, but also as an entrance into the final abode. One cannot fail to be impressed by the explicit, concrete and outward expression of the *tompon-tany* longing of a final return to one’s home.

Accompanying this yearning to join the ancestors is the pervasive fear that the deceased might in fact not succeed, and that his *hasina* might be transformed into *bery* and become misdirected, dispersed and ultimately lost, thereby creating incalculable misfortune.

The *tompon-tany* fear nothing more than being “lost” people or people “without history”, or without a tale to tell. The deep rootedness of this fear is also consistent with possible slave descent. The *tompon-tany* need to accentuate and perpetuate the features of “andevoness” appears to be borne of the precariousness of their own recent past.

Thus, “andevoness” for the *tompon-tany* was a technique for survival. Its sustainability depended upon the extent to which it evolved and adapted to circumstances. Although portrayed as such by the *tompon-tany*, its constituent features are in no way a stable and timeless system. They form part of a construction of history, culture and inequality which allowed the *tompon-tany* to establish a society under harsh conditions without severing their link to the past. Future events will determine to what extent this choice of societal strategy will endure.