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

Evers, S.

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Description of the “Purification” Ritual

During the first months of my research, I attempted to set up a meeting with Andriamaheva, the oldest descendant of the former royal house near Anjoma, a village located approximately twenty kilometres to the Northeast of Marovato. Despite the fact that the Marovato region was not part of this kingdom, I hoped that Andriamaheva would be able to provide me with more information about the settlement history of the former no-man’s-land.

On several occasions, I asked Ramosa to approach Andriamaheva to request whether I would be allowed to visit him. Ramosa met each of my requests with a more elaborate excuse. Finally, after a month of ceaselessly raising the issue, he relented.

The difficult terrain and high savannah between the two villages can be walked in one hard day of travel. Ramosa returned after five. He refused to say anything more than that “it had been hard, very hard”. Later, I learned that Andriamaheva had refused to see me. Ramosa initially would not give me the reason for it.

On the following day, Ramosa stated that he had something very embarrassing to tell me. After considerable hesitation, he informed me that I had become *olona maloto* (“dirty” or “impure person”). The term meant nothing to me. But Ramosa refused to expand, other than disclosing that my “impurity” had been transmitted by the two girls, Fara and Raozy, who lived with me. He referred to the girls as *andevo* (“slave” or “slave descent”). According to him, Andriamaheva would tell me more. How would this be possible, I inquired, given my “impurity”. The answer lay in the “purification” ritual, he responded, but was unable to provide further details, ostensibly because he only had returned to Marovato himself after a long absence. The “purification” ritual could be performed by Andriamaheva. On the following day, we set out for Anjoma.

The following record, taken from my field work diary (April 23, 1992) describes what happened upon arrival.

Andriamaheva lives with his family in a hamlet just outside Anjoma. There are two houses, similar in appearance, in the centre of the hamlet. They are both old and have first floor balconies.

A small-statured man of undetermined age stands on the balcony of the first house. Ramosa tells me this is Andriamaheva before we are within earshot. As we arrive inside the courtyard, Andriamaheva begins speaking to us. The children who welcomed us into the area have gathered around us in a circle and stare at me. Andriamaheva asks whether we have brought the bottle of rum, an essential gift prior to commencing the “purification” ritual. I pass the bottle to one of the children upon being prompted to do so by Ramosa.

Andriamaheva waves us to enter the ground floor front entrance of the house. He makes no move to shake my hand or otherwise acknowledge my presence. Other than Ramosa and me, Andriamaheva’s younger brother and his eldest son are present. The three men sit on a small bench behind a wooden table. They are in the process of separating and arranging small pieces of charcoal (*hazomanga*) on the table. Ramosa and I take a place on a grass mat facing them.

Andriamaheva takes a ceramic bowl and places some of the charcoal in it. The people of Marovato had previously informed me that the charcoal symbolises purity, goodness, respectability and holiness. Andriamaheva removes his silver colour bracelet (*volafotsy*) and lays it next to the bowl, announcing that the bracelet belonged to his ancestors. He pours water into the bowl, explaining that it comes from a well accessible only to himself and his family members, which enhances its potency as a purifier. He places the bracelet in the bowl. Andriamaheva:

“The bracelet is full of *hasina* (“vital energy”) It infuses the water with ancestral energy.” He adds rum to the water. “Rum also is a purifier.”

Andriamaheva about-faces and walks towards the Northeast (the ancestral) corner of the room. He addresses his ancestors, stating the reason why he is contacting them. He removes the bowl from the table, sprinkles water into the corner, and repeats the process in each corner of the room. He approaches me and sprinkles more of the water over my head. Upon his instructions, I remain at a distance of several feet, so as not to “pollute” him. Then he reseats himself on the bench behind the table.

“In general, the polluted person will be pure again after the ritual.¹ With you, I am not sure. I will wait to hear from my ancestors. Then I will know.”

Andriamaheva orders the children watching from the doorway to prepare the shed in the yard.

“You will sleep there.”

Later that evening, I retire to the shed, pile some dried grass together to serve as a bed, then chase out a large rat, before trying to sleep as best I can. Ramosa is allowed to sleep in a little hut used by the personnel of Andriamaheva. This is the first time I am not offered the hospitality of my host’s own quarters. Prior to retiring, Ramosa expresses his embarrassment, but explains that Andriamaheva simply cannot take the risk of me polluting one of his family members.

The next morning I am anxious to hear the verdict of the ancestors. I ask Ramosa to make an inquiry. He returns half an hour later with the news that Andriamaheva has not seen his ancestors during his dreams. I spend the day waiting in the courtyard, conversing with Ramosa. Family members visit during the day to inspect me but keep a safe distance. On the third night, Andriamaheva sees his grandfather in a dream. He tells Andriamaheva that I have rebecome a “pure person” (*olona madio*) and that he may welcome me and share the family history with me. For several days afterwards, Andriamaheva, Ramosa and I converse and socialise. I am now welcome in the house, where I share a room with five adolescent girls.

I returned to see Andriamaheva on several occasions thereafter for “purification”. During these later visits, I underwent the ritual upon arrival, and did not need to wait for the “appearance” of the ancestors.

¹ People in Marovato often go to see Andriamaheva when they feel they have been polluted by an *andevo*. Rafidy Andriana orders his sons to go every month since he fears that they have intercourse with *andevo* girls. Whether they obey the patriarch’s orders proves difficult to verify. They certainly left the village at such times, but whether they actually went to see Andriamaheva was unascertainable.