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

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Citation for published version (APA):

Evers, S. (2001). Constructing history, culture and inequality : the Betsileo in the extreme Southern Highlands of Madagascar

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English Summary

This thesis is the product of ten years research and field work (1989-1999). It is entitled:

Constructing History, Culture and Inequality:
The Betsileo in the Extreme Southern Highlands of Madagascar

The study focuses on the Betsileo village of Marovato and its surrounding region, located in the south of Fianarantsoa province. The choice of setting was derived from archival research on the Malagasy history of slavery in the *Archives d'Outre Mer* (Aix-en-Provence). The archives indicated that the region was a no-man's-land, where runaway slaves and, at a later stage, ex-slaves were the principal settlers. Beyond this affirmation, virtually no information existed. My initial purpose then, was to determine who currently inhabited the region.

As it was the first time that the Marovato region was studied, I adopted an inductive, empirical approach to my research. The settlement of the region dates from the beginning of the twentieth century and the creation of Marovato only from the 1930s. This provided me with the opportunity to study the origins and development of the hierarchical society that Marovato is today.

During the early months of my research, my principal source of information was the ruling group of the village, who had succeeded in implanting their myth of themselves as *tompon-tany*, or "masters of the land" despite probable slave origins. Through the *tompon-tany*, I learned that the underpinnings of both their material and spiritual existence were comprised of three interdependent components: tombs, kinship and ancestors. This trilogy contains the essence of what "history" (*tantara*) is for the *tompon-tany*.

The first part of my research then, consisted in becoming acquainted with this history, while learning the rudiments of daily life in Marovato, or as it was expressed by the villagers, learning to "behave like a Betsileo". During this apprenticeship, I encountered a sub-group of Betsileo living in the Western periphery of Marovato. These people were called *andevo* ("slave", "slaves descent") and "impure people". The *tompon-tany* spoke of these *andevo* as "people without history", as they were supposed to have no tombs, ancestors or kinship groups.

From valuable counterpoint to the *tompon-tany* view of history and culture, these tombless people became the central aim of my study. During this process, I developed a theoretical concept called "andevoness". The theory of "andevoness" comprises features specific to the ontology of the *andevo* and postulates that they reflect a negative mirror image of the *tompon-tany*.