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**“Tie it on tight, girls!”  
Speaking and Acting through Cloth in Southern Madagascar**

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It was another scorching day at the height of the dry season. Masy had come to visit me, bringing her basket of cotton to work. A Tandroy woman’s hands should never be idle. She began pinching out cotton seeds and the gathered girls and I picked up handfuls to join her. At one point, when conversation lagged, Masy held up a piece of cotton fluff and spontaneously began to tell a tale.

*Long ago, we did not know woven cloth, but dressed in cotton fluff. Once there was an unhappy senior wife. She was unhappy because her husband loved his junior wife better. One day, she went to the forest to fetch firewood, and met a kokolampo nature spirit who was weaving.*

*‘Come back tomorrow and I will teach you to weave,’ said the spirit.*

*Everyday thereafter, the woman went back to learn to spin and dye, and to weave.*

*‘Oh, where does that woman go every day?’ the other villagers gossiped behind her back.*

*When the woman had completed the cloth, the spirit said, ‘wear this back to the village, but never say where it came from.’*

*That very day, her husband was hosting a healing dance in the village. The people were astounded when they saw her new dress, and whispered to each other. They questioned her but she remained silent and refused to say where it came from. The junior wife was filled with jealous rage. The husband had the senior wife stand up before the crowd in her finery, and performed a sacrifice to honor her. Then he sent away the junior wife, and she turned into a crow.*

*That is the tale of the unhappy senior wife. That is so.*

That is what Masy said. This paper is the story of how I came to unravel Masy’s story as a master cultural narrative, with its motifs of women’s rights and honor, the rivalry of co-wives and the duties of husbands and wives. Elsewhere, I have analyzed in some detail Tandroy weaving and costume traditions<sup>1</sup>. The theme of the 2006 TSA conference, “Narratives,” invited a more personal look at the topics– reflections on how I had come to study and know textiles while living in Tandroy villages in the 1990s, and on the women who had been my patient instructors. I heard Masy’s story early in my stay, but it was only much later, through fits and starts and lived experiences, that I came to appreciate its meanings.

When I first went to Madagascar, I knew nothing of textiles and had no intention of studying them. But on my very first day in a southern Tandroy village, an elderly woman walked up to me and said, “give me cloth.” When I later explained to another woman my desire to learn what it is to be Tandroy, she silently handed me a spindle. Cloth and weaving became the key to my acceptance in the village. But on an even deeper level, they became a serendipitous key to unraveling several central cultural institutions, such as ceremonial gift exchange, and to opening

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Fee, “Textile traditions of Southwest Madagascar,” in *Unwrapping Madagascar's Textile Traditions*, eds. Chap Kusimba, Claire Odland and Ben Bronson (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum/The Field Museum of Natural History, 2004), 92-111.

the door into the everyday agency of Tandroy women – portrayed in both historical literature *and* in Tandroy ideology as minor figures. Cloth revealed how women express honor and command respect, the social institutions that support them, their active roles in ceremonial life, and even their changing strategies in a changing world.

In the past twenty years, an outpouring of studies from around the world has shown how cloth can shed light on social life and vice versa, usually with profound connections to women. Oftentimes, however, “women” is analyzed only as a broad category, a large nameless group, rather than individual women, or different types of women.

To begin, let me briefly situate Madagascar and its textile traditions. The island, with a landmass about the size of Texas, lies in the Indian Ocean, just 400 km from Mozambique. Yet, the first settlers arrived not from Africa, but from the Indonesian archipelago, 6,500 km to the east. The early migrants were later followed by waves of African and Muslim voyagers. These diverse roots blended into a fairly uniform physical and cultural pool, including a single language and a religious system based on ancestor veneration. Not surprisingly, descent from textile-rich cultures resulted in rich textile traditions in Madagascar. Reeds, raffia, hemp, cotton, bark fiber, wild silk and, later, Chinese silk were fashioned into loincloths, blouses and wrappers. As dress and as a ritual gift, cloth was central to many dimensions of Malagasy society and identity.<sup>2</sup>

My own story involves one small corner of Madagascar, the southern tip, a semi-desert dotted with thorny scrub and forest. This area is called Androy, and the people who inhabit it are known as the Tandroy. Their main activities are raising cattle and growing corn and cassava. But today, with diminished fields and pastures and repeated drought, earning cash to purchase food is also a daily pre-occupation. 30% of villagers emigrate to more prosperous parts of the island, making occasional visits to the homeland.

In this difficult environment, women have particularly difficult tasks. While men herd cattle, tend to political matters and help in agricultural tasks, women fetch wood and water, plant, hoe and harvest, cook and tend children. Until World War II, women also wove cloth using cotton and wild silk. After the War, people began to dress in commercial cloth, and most women stopped weaving. But not in the central zone, where I happened to take up residence. There, women of all ages spin cotton, which they sell to a neighboring clan that produces burial cloth. In addition, some older women continue to weave fine cloth for ritual occasions: loincloths for men’s ceremonial dancing, and silk cloth in preparation for burying close kin.

As an anthropologist in training, I took observation-participation seriously. I went with women on their long journeys to fetch wood and water; I helped to plant and hoe. But it was in textile activities and talk that I found my best opportunities for confidences, and for slowly absorbing the details and variability of Tandroy women’s lived experiences.

Fiber preparation remains an extremely time consuming task. Cotton is, to this day, degreined and fluffed one boll at a time, and spun on a hand spindle. Each wild silk cocoon must be cleaned and stretched 3 times by hand before it can be twisted into yarn. In these monotonous

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<sup>2</sup> See Chaprukha Kusimba, Judy Odland, and Bennet Bronson, eds. *Unwrapping the Textile Traditions of Madagascar* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 2004); Christine Kreamer and Sarah Fee eds. *Objects as Envoys: Cloth, Imagery and Diplomacy in Madagascar* (Seattle: University of Washington Press.2002).

tasks, women appreciated any company they could get, even from a foreigner with a limited vocabulary.

As it turns out, however, speech is not always necessary for communication. While the Tandroy take pride in their intricate oration, in fact, there is a competing notion that words are not to be trusted. Sincerity and commitment must be demonstrated by action or through material gifts. This is doubly so for women, who are normally excluded from public oratory. In an ethnolinguistic study of the highland Merina of Madagascar, Elinor Keenan Ochs<sup>3</sup> revealed the different cultural appraisals of men's and women's speech: men's highly ritualized and indirect oratory is positively valued as conducive to human relations, whereas women's "everyday" blunt speech and gossip are generally maligned as disruptive. A similar pattern holds among the Tandroy, although women's speech is held to be even more potentially nefarious: female gossip can provoke ancestral punishment (*hakeo*) that can wipe out the entire village and descent line.

As I came to learn, and as evidenced in Masy's tale on the origin of weaving, women's most powerful acts are usually marked by silence. If a Tandroy wife cannot get justice for a grievance with her husband through appeals to him and his elders, she has one important tool at her disposal: "to go on the run" (*lia lefa*).<sup>4</sup> *Lia lefa* is not a spontaneous act, but a social institution with well-known, codified phases, rules and terminology. The angry wife waits for the village to empty, then leaves "without announcing" (*tsy mañombara*). Jaw-clenched, her few personal possessions on her head, she walks with long, determined strides back to her father's village. It is the removal of her property — most significantly the mats which she brought to the wedding— that serves as a telltale sign of her intentions. By "going on the run" (*mandeha lefa*), however, the wife is usually not definitively leaving the husband. Rather, she is demonstrating the great degree of her dissatisfaction, hoping to garner the support of her own kin, and provoke her husband into "following the wife" (*mañori-baly*) to cajole her. Should the husband choose to follow her, and should she be judged in the right, he must offer her a gift known as *taha* — consisting in livestock, cloth or, today, cash -- before she will return to him.

Four women in particular taught me as much by deed as by word about cloth, their lives and the larger society.



Figure 1. Andromare and the author in front of her loom. Her foster daughter Pela looks on from behind. Village of Befatike, 1993. Photo by Narivelo Rajaonarimanana.

<sup>3</sup> Eleanor Ochs Keenan, "Norm-makers, Norm-breakers: Uses of speech by men and women in a Malagasy community," in *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*, eds. R. Bauman and J. Sherzer, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 125-143.

<sup>4</sup> Literally, "journey to the outside".

Andromare<sup>5</sup> provided gentle instruction in weaving (fig. 1). She had married six different men but had never born a child. And so—as custom dictates—finding herself divorced after menopause, she had returned to her natal village at age 50 to finish out her life (*mivantotse amaty rae'e*). Childless, older women tend to receive little material support from their immediate male kin. In many instances they have no living brothers and their father is long dead. Their solution is to create bonds to more distant relations. Fostering children (*mamelogne zafe*) for a period of several years is vital in this strategy. The older woman cooks and provides instruction, while the younger member performs the more physically onerous tasks of fetching wood and water. I eventually became one of those “children.” Andromare was the village’s most prolific weaver and she sought to impart this skill in her charges. My “classmate” was 3-year old Pela, her half-sister’s grandniece whom she was fostering in her home. Doors are never closed in the daytime on the Tandroy’s small 1-room huts, and people circulate in and out all day, preferring groups to solitude. Privacy is in short supply. Working at the loom and walking across the landscape in search of dye plants, proved to be the private moments when Andromare could tell me about her trials as a woman with no children. She also confessed that over her life she had owned several cattle and goats, procured through her weaving activities. This was my first indication that, contrary to stated Tandroy ideology, women can and do own livestock; a fact that follow-up investigations would confirm.

Andromare’s continued weaving of loincloths, I learned, was also a strategy to create ties. She enjoyed the art but forced her arthritic hands for additional reasons. She wove and presented cloth to several distantly related men to bind them into ties of obligation. In return, they would bring her cartloads of food and, perhaps more importantly, one man – Pela’s father -- agreed to provide an ox at her funeral. The concerns of traditional Tandroy are not for life on this earth, but for the hereafter: the sacrifice of an ox at death is necessary to reach the afterworld and one’s family waiting there. Not coincidentally, it was Andromare who had approached me the first day in the village and said “give me cloth.” Over the years I gave her many pieces of commercial flannel; I never saw her wear them, however. I eventually learned that she had hidden them away, to serve as shrouds at her death, the second item necessary for a proper burial. And this she received in 2002, I would learn by letter.

In stark contrast to Andromare was my second instructor, Haova. Haova had married into the village, born seven sons to the village headman and now had countless grandchildren. She lived in relative material comfort, receiving honorific cuts of meat and having her water delivered by oxcart. She, too, wove loincloths, but only for her sons (fig. 2). Yes, it was a labor of love directed at her boys, but she also had a larger audience in mind.

Haova was a more severe instructor, and made it clear that preparing fibers concerned not only physical skill. Once I tried to leave her home before I’d finished my pile of silk. “Uh, uh. Finish that before you go,” she said as she grabbed my ankle. “People say a woman’s vagina stinks if she leaves work half-finished.”

The Tandroy are patrilineal and patrilocal. A man will reside in one village all his life, among men who are close kin. A woman’s experience is quite different. She will begin in the village of her father; but at marriage, she leaves to follow her husband to his home. There, she is known as a “village wife” (*valy*) and lives among other people who are not close kin. Residing

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<sup>5</sup> All names are pseudonyms, except for Andromare’s. She insisted in my recorded interviews that she be known as the person who taught me most about weaving.

among “strangers” (*ndaty*) she becomes the daily, public emissary of her lineage. What’s more, at some point in her life, she is likely to have a co-wife, a woman from a rival descent group. Expressing and defending the honor of that group defines much of a woman’s life, and fuels much of Tandroy social life more generally.<sup>6</sup>



Figure 2. Haova (her head shaved in mourning) poses with a granddaughter and three of the loincloths she has made for her sons. Village of Befatike, 1999. Photo by the author.

Haova viewed me from her own perspective as an in-married woman who should be concerned to protect her honor and demonstrate her worth through industry and, conversely, to avoid becoming the target of gossip through idleness. It was Haova who had silently handed me a spindle when I expressed an interest in women’s work. She later explained that in northern Androy, at the marriage ceremony wherein a husband takes a second wife, the presiding senior wife gives a bundle of reeds to the new wife. It is a challenge. The younger woman spends the next few days weaving a mat to prove herself. Not coincidentally, it was Haova who felt it incumbent upon her to teach me to dance properly (at least she tried). By her own admittance, Haova was not good at weaving. She confided that she had hired another woman to do the intricate twining on the borders of her sons’ loincloths so that neither she, nor they, would be criticized.

While both the little girl Pela and I were willing apprentices to Andromare, Saroy was more reluctant (fig. 3). In her early 30s, she had recently divorced and returned to her father’s village to wait for a new suitor. As other girls her age, Saroy saw weaving as old fashioned, and cotton spinning as drudgery to be done to earn money. She preferred the arts of embroidery and mat making. Yet, she had much to teach me about cloth. Commercial fabrics and embroidery have largely replaced the art of handweaving in Androy, and people choose to dress in Western-style clothing, wearing a factory-made rectangle of brightly colored cloth as an outer wrapper. Like many before me, I first saw this cloth only as a jarring sign of encroaching globalization and the

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<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion of female honor in southern Madagascar, see Karen Middleton, “The Rights and Wrongs of Loin-Washing.” *Taloha* 13 (2000): 65-98.

demise of local “tradition.” But through Saroy, I learned that it retained much of its symbolic import as both a gift and an emblem of female honor.

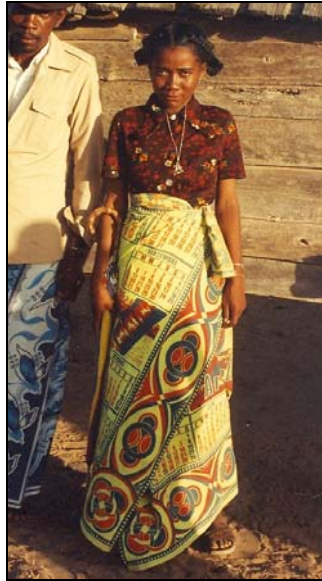


Figure 3. Saroy dressed in the finery of a young woman of the 1990s. Village of Befatike, 1995. Photo by the author.

The conventional wisdom of both printed literature and spoken Tandroy ideology holds that men are the active partners in sexual encounters and women have little say. Saroy taught me otherwise. Self-respecting women do not give out their sexual favors without receiving a mark of respect from the man. This must come in the form of either cloth or money towards buying clothing. Should the man not be able to produce it, she has the right to refuse him. Over many months, I watched Saroy consider and reject dozens of propositions. By extension, dress becomes an external sign of a woman’s mystical power (*asy*). *Asy* is a central pillar of Malagasy political and religious thought. It is a mystical essence present in all beings, but concentrated in social superiors, and manifest in wealth and authority. The associated adjective *masy* is normally translated as "sacred," and appears in the ethnographic literature in conjunction with ancestors, elders, and royalty. I was therefore surprised to hear the term used most frequently in daily conversation in connection with a seemingly more mundane matter: sex appeal. Like having many cattle or children, a person's ability to attract the opposite sex is a central manifestation of his/her *asy*. Since women receive cloth from lovers, it thus becomes a prime material sign of female attractiveness, and the well-dressed young woman signals her mystical power.

Not only do women receive cloth from lovers, but also from husbands. In emigrating, one of Haova’s sons had left behind a new bride. I had heard conflicting reports about the status of the marriage. When I asked Haova, she responded in her terse manner, asking rhetorically, “well, did he send her cloth when he last wrote?” and would say no more.

“What’s cloth got to do with it?” I wondered. From my readings and interviews, I had come to believe that the groom and girl’s father settled the affair through the exchange of livestock. But cloth? As time passed, and I participated in actual marriage negotiations and ceremonies, I found that indeed, as part of the ceremony, the groom is required to present his bride with a piece cloth, or today, money to buy clothing and kitchen goods. This gift becomes more culturally elaborated when a man decides to take a junior wife. While conventional Western belief holds

that polygyny is the prerogative and privilege of men, in fact, there are a number of institutions in the ceremony and practice which accord great power to the senior wife. Indeed, cloth becomes a major tool for her to delay or sabotage her husband's plans. By convention, the husband cannot begin marriage negotiations with the new wife until he has secured the permission of the first. Typically, she will greet his request with stony silence and ignore it for weeks. She will eventually speak only to demand an exorbitant sum of money to buy herself clothing. And she may well "go on the run," returning to her father's village in the hope the husband will follow with apologies. If the husband cannot pay, he must renounce either the senior wife, or his plans to take the second. I watched several friends succeed with these strategies.

If cloth is the essential prestation made by the groom to the bride it is because this is the moment when she will first be introduced to, and scrutinized by, her sisters-in-law. It is said that the bride "dresses up for her sisters-in-law" (*mihamiñe rañaotse*).

In the many Tandroy tales that take female rivalry as a main theme, such as Masy's, which opened this work, the maligned woman typically gets her revenge over her sisters-in-law or co-wife when her husband hosts a large public ceremony. In a dramatic moment, she stands up before the crowd dressed in the finest cloth and dances.

In real life, too, dancing is an important means for women to show their strength and honor. Today, funerals are the largest and most frequent public dancing ceremonies, people attending upwards of a dozen in a year. The ethnographic literature on the southern Malagasy has tended to focus on the man's ritual dance of boasting known as "bull bellow" (*mitre*): a man stands up before the crowd and, hopping on one leg, shouts out for all to hear his wealth in cattle, crops and children. In matter of fact, it is women who perform the vast majority of the dancing. And they, too, are concerned to prove their honor and worth. Once again, however, the boasting is accomplished less through words, and more through action and cloth. Clothing and accessories – earrings, umbrellas, etc.-- are the major weapons in their battle. For hours at a time, under the beating sun, women sit and clap or dance in a line, their cloth worn high on the chest, while men rest in the shade. To inspire and challenge each other, women cry out "tie it on tight, girls!" (*msikina mafe, kolahe!*). Now and then, a group of men will go and dance before them.

Observing a gendered spatial division in funerary dancing among the Bara peoples of Madagascar, R. Huntington<sup>7</sup> concludes that women represent "vital chaos," a sort of wild force, in contrast to the men seated in descent groups who represent "order." However, among the Tandroy at least, while women's dancing may appear from a distance to be "chaos," in fact, it likewise concerns descent and order. It is true that all the women stand in one continuous line but, within it, women group themselves by kin ties. What's more, the manner and intensity of their dancing depends on their relation to the hosting village: daughter of the deceased, wife of the host, or wife of the hosts' guests. Finally, close observation reveals that when a particular group of men comes forward to dance, a few individual women will leave the line to join them. They are the men's female kin who have come forward (*mañaty*) to show their own affiliations and to contribute to the glory of the group. These women dance with extra intensity, stamping the ground and raising their arms high in the air, literally quivering with pride and emotion. And during dull moments, when no men are dancing, small groups of three or four women will leave the line and dance in front of it (fig. 4). They are women representing a descent group.

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Huntington, *Gender and Social Structure in Madagascar* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).





Figure 4. Several kinswomen have emerged from the line of women to dance and honor their descent line. Village of Ankazota, 1999. Photo by the author.

The final woman in my tale is Selambo, the daughter of Haova. Selambo liked to boast that she didn't even know how to spin cotton. As a young girl, she had begged her brothers to take her to the land of immigration, to the northwest coast, a prosperous area inhabited by the Sakalava people. Among this group, women own land and cattle and have a say in family affairs. On her occasional visits to Androy, I noticed that Selambo's dress was subtly different from her sisters'. She wore her commercial wrapper sewn into a tube, wrapped it at the middle of the waist rather than the hip, and called it *salova* in Sakalava fashion. Her brothers, too, would wear Sakalava-style dress upon their return to Androy. But for ceremonial events, they would give it up, and wear loincloths instead. Loincloths remain an essential symbol of virility in many parts of Androy and wearing them signals continued allegiance to patrilineal order and ancestral custom. Selambo, and other female migrants that I came to know, were instead opening new avenues. Their competitive spirit, independent will and industriousness, honed in their arid homeland, allowed them to become successful business women once outside its borders. Many, like Selambo, had come to shun marriage in order to keep control of their earnings.

I will end my talk where Masy's tell ended, with a dancing festival. In this case, I present a funeral that took place for the village headman in 1994.<sup>8</sup> Published accounts of Tandroy funerals tend to focus exclusively on the gifts of long horned zebu made by men. But if we widen the spectrum to include all types of gifts, both cloth and money, we find that many type of people participate in them, and women are active transactors.

Saroy's experience at this particular funeral was one of shame and misery. With no son or husband, there was no one to offer cattle in her name for sacrifice, no one to provide food for her guests, which put her at risk for supernatural sanctions from the deceased man. She grimly went about her duties of cooking and hosting. Andromare, meanwhile, gave her deceased kinsman a large silk cloth lavishly decorated with metal beads which she had herself woven. Its monetary value was the same as a full-grown ox. Her gift counted as a great one, and brought her blessings. For weeks after, she proudly told everyone that her cloth had been used as a shade

<sup>8</sup> For more details on this funeral and Tandroy ceremonial exchange, see Sarah Fee, "Enga: Further Descriptive Notes on Tandroy Funerary Prestations," in *L'Extraordinaire et le Quotidien, Variations Anthropologiques*, eds. Claude Allibert and Narivelo Rajaonarimanana, (Paris: Karthala, 2000), 523-550.

over the transport coffin, and then placed closest to his body when buried at the grave. Moreover, Pela's father, on whom she'd lavished loincloths, presented an ox in her name. Selambo, too, had no husband and no son. But she solved the dilemma in another way. With her substantial savings from emigration, she bought her own cloth to offer as a shroud. In figure 5 she helps direct the wrapping of her father's coffin. What's more, she bought her own ox, which she had sacrificed to acquit her duty.



*Figure 5. Selambo, dressed in mourning, helps to direct the wrapping of shrouds around her father's coffin. Village of Befatike, 1994. Photo by the author.*

The former wife of the headman, Haova also presented a handwoven silk cloth. But as an in-married woman, she was less concerned with giving than receiving, and proving the glory of her own descent group before the crowd. Indeed, it is in-married women who become the focal point of spectators. Their kin assemble gifts of cash, which they attach to sticks and dramatically parade into the dancing arena. The receiving woman dances out to greet them. Thus even little Pela, Andromare's young foster child, as an "outsider" girl received a sizeable gift of money from her own kin. And it is in-married women who animate the dancing. Unlike village daughters, who must dress in somber mourning and effect a subdued demeanor, dancing quietly (if at all) in the back rows, village wives dress in their finery. They occupy the front row, setting the pace, singing and dancing boisterously sometimes emerging one by one to dance before the assembled women, and challenging all – including anthropologists -- to pay attention to them and their cloth with their occasional shouts of "tie it on tight, girls!"