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Some (a)musings on human encounters with powerful “things”* and on the poetics of non-anthropomorphic forces in the highlands of Madagascar

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Rakelimalaza, can the Higher Powers “take a joke”?

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EDITOR'S NOTE

There is a Betsileo proverb: *Aza fady, Rakelimalaza, fa ny atiny tsa mba kisoa* (Excuse me, Rakelimalaza, but the liver is not [‘technically’] the [the flesh/meat of the] pig), that we will return to later in this work.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Raha and *zavatra* are terms indicating something or some phenomenon hard to name or describe. They are also occasionally used as respectful terms to avoid pronouncing the name of an ancestor or spirit, similar in manner to avoiding the pronunciation of the name of “God”, which was considered too sacred to pronounce when reading the bible.

A “short tale”² from the field

[...] fieldwork-based writing affirms that truth must not be seen as an unmasking which eclipses the appearance of the thing unmasked, but a form of disclosure which does it justice.
(Jackson 1996: 4).

¹ The answer to the question in the title of this contribution would seem to be, “No!” an answer reinforced by the Malagasy adage *tsy azo vazivaziana ny masina* (“one should not

joke around with things sacred”). Many practitioners of today’s world “religions” of the book would certainly understand this response, confounding sacred with sacrosanct.³ However, the reader bemused by the article’s title will surely suspect that is not the answer we will offer here. To amuse the reader and direct attention to our concerns of both vocabulary and the further framing of our question, let us begin with an anthropological tale from the field.

- 2 This is a tale told by the non-Malagasy anthropologist among the authors of the article. More than fifteen years ago, while on sabbatical leave to do research in Madagascar, her Malagasy-American daughter, eight years old at the time, came home one day to tell her about the *angatra* that was in a cleared field not too far from their house on the rural edge of the regional capital of Fianarantsoa.⁴ For the non-Malagasy, one could think of *angatra* as some mixture of *fantômes*, *pixies*, *lutins*, *imps*, or *sprites* (but we need to be clear that sprites and such have different properties as one crosses cultures [Bohannan 1966]).⁵ If one happened to be in that field⁶ at high noon, this *angatra* would do something particularly sp(r)iteful like pluck out your eyebrow hairs.⁷ This is part of the conversation that ensued between mother and daughter:

– “Mom, are there such things as *angatra*?”
 – “I think some people believe that there are.”
 – “But, Mom, do you believe in *angatra*? Are there *angatra* in America?”
 – “Well, you know, Dear, we talk about witches and ghosts in America.”
 – “Yeah, but nobody really believes in those, do they? But what I mean is you, Mom, do you believe that *angatra* are real?”
 – “Well, what do you mean by ‘real’? [A troubled pause.] I think that if people have been in a place long enough, that they know what is ‘going on’ and, I’m not going to take a chance by being disrespectful of that knowledge.”

- 3 With the classic American move of rolling her eyes, the daughter of anthropologists walked off shaking her head and expressing her dissatisfaction with an added “Oh, Mom!” under her breath.
- 4 The American anthropologist, too, walked off dissatisfied with that conversation, unclear of how to express her own questions about the nature of sacred subjects of belief.
- 5 Perhaps, the important and ultimate question posed by the above tale is: what are the practical and theoretical entailments of professional agnosticism or of personal allegiance to a supernatural belief system (including Catholicism and Protestantism as is the case for some historians and social scientist of Malagasy culture) for those who purport to study and to speak of matters of belief and the sacred? However, discussion of such ultimate matter(s) is for larger forums and beyond the limited focus of this short contribution. While the ancestors are certainly central forces in the daily lives of Malagasy highlanders, and while many highlanders are practitioners (to varying degrees) of religions of the book, we are interested rather in encounters with “powers” beyond ancestors and singular godheads. We are interested in encounters with essential⁸ forces that are also part of these populations’ “lifeworlds.”
- 6 The Malagasy highland countryside is one of both gentle and dramatic “earth-sky-scapes” animated by a range of potent and docile forces. Among the forces are ones that some might be inclined to label as “natural”: rivers, wind, rain, hail, mist, plants and animals. *Angatra* are one of an assortment of yet other forces that include (but are not limited to) *zazavavindrano* (one possible translation is “water sprites”), *kalanoro* (“magical dwarfs”), *lolo* (“phantoms”), *ranakandriana* (voices without form), *tandindona* (silhouettes, shadows) and *biby* (creatures); forces that possess certain degrees of anthropomorphic

characteristics from physical features to abilities to communicate with humans. In the countryside, there are also entities never quite seen, only glimpsed, impossible to describe, ambiguous, ambivalent and amoral in their powers and acts. The words *zavatra* and *raha*, literally meaning “thing(s),” are used to reference them. In this world of occulted and ineffable forces, there are (and have been) individuals, wise and observant ones, who attempt to understand, to align themselves with, to placate, and even to control and cajole these forces and “things”. There are specialists who study and “arrange” destinies and offer advice on major life events and passages; other specialists are capable of “influencing” crop threatening wind, rain and hail; others placate *raha* and *zavatra* found in caves, on, around and under large boulders in rivers, at heads of springs, and in *tany fady* (small patches of dense vegetation); others properly orient houses and tombs in space and time; and there are also those that “charm” the occasional “sprite”. (Certainly, there are individuals who would use such forces to malefic ends,⁹ however they are outside the scope of this contribution.)

- 7 In some ways, the preceding limited listing of forces might lead one to see the contemporary highland world as populated by an agglomeration of both magical and religious entities. However, in order to begin to appreciate the cultural and ecological specifics of a Malagasy world that accommodates immanent and autochthonic forces, as well as transcendent ones, and to further understand the *stance* of both ordinary individuals and gifted intercessors in such a world, we contend that customary terminology, concepts of “religion” and “magic”, are obfuscating. Minimally, we need to pause before using such abstract categories to assertively classify, to intellectually contain and constrain, vibrant traditional practices. Indeed, to this end we, the authors, have insisted above on privileging indigenous categories of phenomena (e.g., *angatra*, *zavatra*, *fady*) before allowing them to be subsumed by conventional and foreign categories, some of whose origins are themselves indigenously foreign.¹⁰ We also began this introduction by deliberately employing the term “lifeworld”, (rather than “culture” or “world view”) so as to bring our attention back to the “anthropology of experience” (Turner 1985, 1986 as discussed in Jackson 1996: 29). Jackson argues that “to shift our focus from the privileged world of detached intellectual activity to the often underprivileged domains of the lifeworld is to reconstitute our notion of knowledge as something urgently of and for the world rather than something about the world” (1996: 29). Such understanding of (cultural) knowledge as “urgently of and for the world” is critical to our appreciation of Malagasy ritual specialists who interact and intercede with essential forces and powers for the immediate “worldly” needs of their family, friends and neighbors.
- 8 In the sections that follow, we propose to briefly examine the vocabulary available to us to do justice to a *stance* assumed by ritual specialists in a world that includes immanent non-anthropomorphic forces. We eventually bring our focus to the practice of *mpanandro* (“maker[s] of days) where attention is paid more to the “spirit” rather than the “letter of the law” in their interactions with such forces. Their syncretic “spirit”, revealed in the materials, gestures and words of their practice, is profoundly poetic and occasionally humorous.

Re-considering vocabulary and categories so as to do justice to rich and complex lives

[...] In matters of religion, as of art, there are no ‘simpler’ peoples...
 [Wo]Man’s ‘imaginative’ and ‘emotional’ life is always
 and everywhere rich and complex.
 (Turner 1991: 3).

- 9 Anthropologists know that in common parlance, most often, the unmarked term “religion” stands in contrast to a grab-bag of marked terms such as “magic” and “superstition,” with the latter terms suggesting some form of misguided and intellectually inferior understanding of the world. Indeed, early anthropological theories of religion followed the leads of Tylor, Frazer, and Freud who proposed evolutionary intellectual schema transitioning from magic to religion to science (e.g., Tambiah 1968: 176; Glucklich 1997: 9, 40). While the evolutionary arrangement of these categories has been justly called into question by anthropologists, the categories themselves continue to infest our writings and reflections. More than forty years ago, Mary Douglas admonished us, across the entire field of anthropological study, not to impose “*our provincial logic... on the native thought [by beginning] with our own familiar [Western] world divided by its established categories and activated by the principles we know*” (1972: 27; cf. Kus 2012). Jackson, complementing his advocacy of attention to “lifeworlds”, has more recently reiterated this admonishment (1996: 6):

[...] it is only by abandoning the conceptual baggage anthropology inherits from colonial and imperial discourse that we are free to experience other worlds from the ground up, as it were, and recognize that many of the reified categories that still define our discourse—ritual, magic, totemism, witchcraft, lineage—are largely figments of our own intellectual imagination and have no counterparts in the vocabularies and views of those we study.

- 10 Indeed, looking just to Madagascar, one finds that there is no “traditional” term for magic. However a (not so poetic) term has been created, *fanovamaso*,¹¹ which literally means “to change the eyes,” implying changing how one sees.
- 11 To be clear, it is not that categories and generalizations are to be abjured. Rather, what is problematic for anthropology is to grant primacy or “omniscient status” (Jackson 1996: 19) to categories and theoretical generalizations, primacy to attempts to fit the messy stuff of lived-in-worlds into neat abstract packaging. Categories and generalizations, nevertheless, are useful when they continue to remind us to use our individual trees to contribute to a discussion of the forest, rather than describe the forest from the perspective of our individual tree (*ibid.*). Generalizations are useful if treated thoughtfully, judiciously as hypotheses to test against the “facts” of lifeworlds and to be subsequently revised if needed. Perhaps, an alternative manner to think about generalizations is to think in terms of numerous overlapping “patterings” or “clusters of characteristics” to be found across the range of lifeworlds past and present.
- 12 Matters of sacred belief within a lifeworld are part of a larger constellation of local practices and knowledge. Societies vary in degrees of flexibility and fixedness of composition; vary in size of population with consequences for possibilities of face-to-face contact and for both the extension and the attenuation of kinship calculations. Lifeworlds are found in contexts of diverse ecologies, geological formations, geographies, weather phenomena. They are found in tundras where landscape features are minimal, but vision

is only limited by the horizon; animal protein is the central dietary component, and life involves continuous movement across vast territorial ranges. Lifeworlds are also found in tropical rainforests where vision is restricted in range but complex in patterning of vegetation, color, light and shadow; diet includes a range of fruits, vegetables, insects and animals; and territorial wanderings are relatively constricted. Lifeworlds are found in temperate forests, on volcanic atolls and among and on mountains, in valleys and near deserts. Across different lifeworlds, dissimilar raw materials, organic and inorganic, are available to be worked with diverse technologies. Some technologies, deceptively minimalist but incredibly elegant in their multi-functionality (e.g., Inuit), are available to all individuals, other technologies involve social partitioning of knowledge among individuals or groups. Members of some lifeworlds are all primary producers, other lifeworlds include part-time specialists, and still others full-time specialists removed from primary production. Some societies are fiercely egalitarian (e.g., Clastres 1974), others infested by a hierarchy of power and privilege. Members of some lifeworlds leave minimum impact on their “natural” surroundings, others create urban landscapes obliterating the nature that preceded them. Given such diversity in the contexts of human practical and expressive engagement in the world (some engagement immediately physical, sensual and/or conceptual and some engagement reflective and analytic), why would we expect to be able to capture such diversity and experiential depth within a simple binary schema of “magic” versus “religion”? Stepping aside from such sterile comprehensive dichotomization, however, we might more fruitfully narrow our focus to selected patternings in our attempts to *comparatively* reflect upon alternative belief systems while rendering justice to aspects of their *singularity*.

- 13 In the following section, we propose two “patternings” that may help us to both to grasp the *stance* of some ritual specialists in Madagascar, in particular, *mpanandro*, and further understand elements of their practice. One pattern echoes elements of the traditional magic versus religion contrast. Another pattern brings attention to the wild and to the domesticated elements and rhythms of earth-sky-scapes and their interface.

Supplicatory stances and audacious attitudes

If God did not exist, man would have to invent him.
(Voltaire, French philosopher).

- 14 As entry point into the continuing discussion, let us begin with a focus on one “patterning”, bringing attention to the contrast between, on the one hand, societies of institutionalized, orthodox “religions”, most often anthropomorphic in their doctrinal logic, and on the other hand, alternative lifeworlds wherein complex and ambiguous occulted forces of the cosmos are beyond the comprehensive doctrinaire control of any king, priest or specialist. The former “religions” are almost invariably associated with, and in service to, hierarchized “states”.¹² Indeed, the archaeologist Frankfort recognized this pattern in his work *Kingship and the Gods* (1948) and the anthropologist de Heusch brought focused attention to the argument that “a comparative study of politics should begin with a comparative study of religion” (1962: 15) for almost invariably royalty are privileged intermediaries of the gods or are themselves gods (as is the case in the highland states of Imerina¹³) (cf. Kus 2012: 12). Such privileged stance provides elements of ideological justification for a social hierarchy that results in the monopolization of wealth, power and prestige in the hands of a few at the expense of the majority; a

supplicatory stance before “god(esse)s and kings/queens” follows suit. (To be clear, such “religion” can also be used to contest and depose existing states in the creation of new constellations of hierarchized power. The histories of Judaism, Christianity and Islam offer immediate, obvious examples.) Belief systems that stand in degrees of contrast to “religions of the state”, and that have been tossed into the general category of “magical”, are, in fact, exceedingly variable. Let us use a second patterning to bring attention to some aspects of those alternative systems that are important for our continuing discussion.

- 15 We might initially label the second pattern as one ranging across elements of the environment from wild to domesticate to urban. To be clear, we are not arguing for a singular label for the environment of any given lifeworld, quite the contrary; nor are we arguing that this continuum of categories should not be subject to further nuancing and questioning. Nevertheless, for the purposes of our discussion of Malagasy ritual specialists below, this continuum allows us to direct our attention to the range from the wild to the domesticated.
- 16 There are societies of gatherers and hunters where one lives with and within forces of nature, of the lifeworld, immanent forces that are of wills of their own. They are “knowable” to an extent if one lives alertly among those forces (e.g., waves, clouds, wind, rain, ice flows, verdant vegetation) constantly monitoring the earth-sky-scape; if one is attentive to the behavior of other sentient entities (e.g., snakes, rivers, birds, trees), “essences/souls/spirits”, and “things”. In some cases, such attention allows one to accommodate oneself to, and in other cases cajole, such forces. In some instances, the rare individual, in shared sentient and shamanic¹⁴ participation, is able to engage with formidable predators such as polar bears and remarkable beings such as pythons. Any singular word or label such as “animism” is insufficient, inadequate on its own, to capture the quality of such lifeworlds. Yet, various older terms such as “cosmological” (Crick 1982), “wholistic” (Fernandez 1986: 188-91) and “organicism” (the world considered as a living organism), and newer coinages such as “sensorial”¹⁵ and “participatory” (Tambiah 1990) might aid in our descriptive fumbling. Again, we make no pretention to comprehensiveness, only evocativeness of “the wild”.
- 17 Over centuries and millennia humans have “marked” and worked the land they have lived on, in some cases creating alternative relations with plants and animals, including intimate relations of domestication. Hopi (of the American Southwest) sing to their corn crops; domesticated corn cannot propagate itself without human intervention. Life force is present everywhere and interaction with such forces is essential for human life. Hopi, Zuni and Tewa dance with the Kachinas who represent elements and phenomena in the natural world (e.g., thunder, cactus flower, cumulus clouds, mountain lion, cricket) (Carolton 1959: 31-43, 71) as well as sounds¹⁶, qualities and even concepts.¹⁷ The Diné (Navajo) sing “The Blessing Way” of creation; their participation in chanting at sunrise brings the world into existence each day. Nuer (of Southern Sudan) and Antandroy (of Southern Madagascar) descriptive poetry of cattle hides and knowledge of cattle “genealogy” have captured the attention of anthropologists. These are diversely rich “animated” worlds. Yet, these are not completely docile and domesticated worlds.
- 18 Archaeology has revealed the close ties over *la longue durée* between domestication, sedentism, urbanism and the state. The populations of the highlands of Madagascar had and have urban centers. They are and have been subjects of and subject to states: indigenous, foreign, legitimate, and illegitimate. They are and have been subject to the

ideologies and religions of those states. We need to be clear on several points here concerning states and religions. (1) The co-optation of core symbols, assumptions and values from local knowledge is essential to the propaganda of states when the “constellation of power” is still nascent, (2) however, such scaling-up of experientially local symbols and propositions is neither facile nor straightforward (Kus and Raharijaona 2000, 2005, 2011). (3) It is also the case that one should not assume that state ideology can be “read backward” or “downward” into local levels through the symbols and elements that have been “ripped” from local knowledge and belief. This is because such local knowledge and belief is “grounded” in immediate experience and subsequently “woven” into systems of nuanced reflection over generations (see Kus 2012 for fuller elaboration of this point.) (4) Perhaps, most important for our present discussion is to recognize that centralized states have close and distant peripheries; they have remote edges. We want to talk about practitioners at the edges where “undomesticated”, and even “wild”, forces are critical components of lifeworlds. We further want to talk about the *stance* of specialists in face of such forces.

- 19 Many of us are accustomed to supplication, entreaty, prayer, accustomed to “stances” of back, neck and knees bent, and accustomed to hands in a petitionary position when it comes to practices of religions of the book and of the state. “Communication” (*parler avec*) with the anthropomorphic “Higher Powers” of these religions sometimes transpires in one’s own native language, and even if it does not, communication still often assumes a degree of comprehension on the part of the “Higher Powers” of the “human condition.” But what of “communication” with other powers and forces, both powers and forces “of nature” and “other” (labeled *raha* and *zavatra* among the Malagasy), that are of a being and even will of their own, “alive” or even sentient, but potentially amoral in action? A stance in face of, or surrounded by, such forces must certainly be different. It must be *audacious* to a certain extent.
- 20 Several of us (Raharijaona and Kus) have recently (January 2014) been privileged to witness, in Imerina (in a village a mere 30 kilometers from Antananarivo), the efforts of an individual, gifted by *zavatra* (his word choice), to hold rain and hail at bay while rice crops come into harvest. Standing straight, attentive, but respectfully, watching a dark cloudy sky and listening to distant “claps” of thunder, holding a forked stick, and making various sounds, he “admonished”, “directed”, “enticed”, “held at bay” (again, attention to vocabulary is important) the threat of crop damaging rains. This audacious gesturing and entreaty was accomplished with no sense of duper and duped (as conventional images of magic would have it). This action transpired in relative privacy in a courtyard facing the rice fields of the village. If one walked up (a matter of 20 steps or so) into the more central part of the small village, one encountered a group of youth near a little “store” front that Sunday afternoon playing a game of petanque/bachi ball, elsewhere children were amusing themselves, and still elsewhere elders were sitting near the village founder’s tomb discussing only matter known to them. This specialist’s action was performed without an intended audience or expectation of recompense. But those who respected and understood his talent would offer an unsolicited gift, not anything as vulgar as money (cf. Kus and Raharijaona 2008: 176-18) rather, a small basketful of rice from their yearly harvest.
- 21 It is what we have too often labeled as magic that should be understood as a remarkable stance of challenge and “familiarity¹⁸” in face of natural and other forces, rather than as the response of infantile/savage omniscience in place of scientific understanding.

“Audacity” is a strong term, but it is an “attention grabbing term” to focus our attention on the forces of the undomesticated, and occasionally the wild, in the countryside of the Haute Matsiatra where we have been privileged to observe the work of and to speak with *mpanandro* over more than 20 years¹⁹.

Mpanandro as ideo-syncretic, poetic practitioners

*Aiza ny olon-kendry, aiza ny olon-tsotra ?
Nandrefy ny fotoana araka ny fiainan'ny biby
sy ny fofon'ny zava-maniry izy.
... Indrindra indrindra ny toeran'ny aloka tsy mahasarak'olombelona...*
(Rabearivelo 2006: 51).²⁰

- 22 When the lovers’ quarrel of sky and earth turned bitter and threatened to bring destruction to creation, a Higher Power stayed matters terrestrial and celestial. Yet, even today early morning mists enveloping boulder-strewn heights allow ephemeral lovers’ embraces; calm sunny days enable compelling conjoining.²¹ The earth-sky-scapes of the highlands took rhythm, form and pattern before human presence (as both noted by Malagasy traditional wisdom and Western scientific belief). This is a lifeworld of a complex system of immanent forces of varying strengths that can attract and that can oppose; that are additionally in flux and overlapping in moments and places. Individual humans enter disruptively into the “force field” of this ongoing lifeworld with birth, individual humans leave disruptively with death. Everything in-between is ultimately a “matter of life and death.”
- 23 In between the ultimate matters of life and death, individuals express a number of *hopes*: for children, bountiful harvests, health, and wealth. They also face a certain number of *dilemmas*. “If you are in love; if you have a rival in love; if you are in litigation; if you or your fighting cock is in engaged in battle; if you have cattle that are ill or [are] threatened by cattle thieves; if you have a sick child; if your crops are threatened by hail or threatened by locusts; if you have lost an object; or if you are sterile...” (Kus 2012: 14), you can seek the help of a range of specialists. Such individuals (e.g., *mpisikidy*, *ombiasy*, *mpimasy*, *mpitaiza*, *mpanazary*) offer counsel and can provide powerful materials both apotropaic and “charming” (e.g., *faditra* and *sonona*), for such variable and individual caprices and concerns.
- 24 It is the case, however, that in the highlands all individuals need shelter in life and in death. Houses and tombs are invariably serious concerns of almost everyone. Their construction and occupation must be fit into the fluctuating rhythms, patterns and singularities of time and space in lifeworlds; this is so as to foster life in its growth and well-being, and to constrain death to its proper domain. Consequently, while everyone might not need the services of an *ombiasy*²² or *mpitaiza*, ritual specialists who orient houses and tombs in space and time, *mpanandro trano* and *mpanandro fasana*, offer services needed eventually by almost everyone. Though most highland Betsileo adults of the countryside know the large “do’s and don’ts” of house and tomb construction and occupation, the proper orientation of such structures is a complicated affair and beyond the abilities of most individuals. It is the gifted specialists, the *mpanandro*, the “makers of days”, who can “divine” the dense palimpsest of patterns and singularities of earth-sky-scapes in movement. Theirs is a gift/*lova* (inheritance) that is continuously practiced through sustained physical and sensual engagement with the lifeworld and in continuing immediate and prolonged reflection upon such engagement. Such engagement takes

place across seasons and changing weather patterns, involves observations of celestial phenomena and knowledge of plant and animal behavior (both domesticate and wild), involves knowledge of *tany fady* (“sacred location”), *raha* and *zavatra*, and is additionally informed by “grounded” knowledge of historical moments and human manipulations of landscapes, and even abstract reflections on directions, numbers and “names” (of places, plants, beads, objects, etc.). This is to say that, “thick descriptive” (à la Geertz 1973) and “familiar” knowledge of things, forces and events that are “essential”, enduring, and ephemeral need be taken into account in house and tomb construction and occupation; this is the knowledge that underlies the skills of *mpanandro*. These skills include: the ability to choose appropriate days and times for the inauguration of house and tomb construction, the start of the construction of a second story in the case of multi-story houses and the placement of the central beam of the roof; choosing the *tanjom-belona* (“life-orienting point”) for the orientation of the central house beam; choosing the time and the details of a family’s first day of occupation of their new house; and consulting on safeguarding *tafotona* (“protection”) plants to be grown and/or to be buried near the house. Understandably, it is said that one needs “white hair” (*mipihi-bolo*) to be able to practice as a *mpanandro*, for this is a practice that comes not only at the cost of the health and well-being of others, but at the very cost of the life of the *mpanandro*²³ as well.

- 25 If one does a casual reading of information available on the practice of *mpanandro* (e.g., Danielli 1949), one can get the impression of a complicated, but nonetheless, “cook-book” practice. Cardinal directions have their meanings. Times of days follow the grand rhythms of sunrise and sunset, and in between, there is the time when the cock crows, the time for taking cows to pasture, the time for bringing domestic fowl home, the time to begin cooking rice, and the time when all (but the *mpamosavy* [“sorcerers”]) retire to bed (Callet 1981: 35-36). There are also the “imported” rhythms of weeks and months and even/uneven years. There is *Talata gorobaka* (Tuesday “torn open”²⁴). There is also the month of *Asorotany* whose meaning is derived by loose homophony from the Arabic word, *As-saratanu*, which designates Cancer (Heseltine 1971: 64). The Malagasy linguistic aptitude for amusing and serious wordplay allows a translation of this word as “*soroka*” conjoined with “*tany*”: to rake, level, remove, clean –the land. Even numbers are complete, an image of either fullness or closure. Uneven numbers can be open to either sustained continuation or endless drainage.
- 26 While the talents of *mpanandro* are numerous, let us use three as illustration of their diverse poetic and syncretic skills: (1) “Where [and how] to begin a house foundation” (cf. Raharijaona and Kus 2000), (2) what to choose as protection for vulnerable points of the house (e.g., *tafotona*), and (3) how to orient the central beam of the house. It is important to add several qualifications at this point. The *mpanandro* we had the privilege of working with were part-time, not full-time specialists, consequently their talent and skills were “an addition” to their role, most often, though not exclusively²⁵, as full-time agriculturalists. Further, they were not apprentices of other *mpanandro*, but had inherited their skill from ancestors and/or *zavatra*, and honed that skill through practice, contemplation and revelation.

Where to begin a house foundation

- 27 Where and how to begin a house foundation is not obvious. Another “short tale”, this time from the United States, might help quickly illustrate this point. If one explains to a

classroom of U.S. undergraduates, enrolled in an Introduction to Anthropology course, the significance of the four cardinal directions for Malagasy of the highlands (*i.e.*, north is noble, south is humble, east is the sacredness of the rising sun and west is the ambiguous setting of the sun) and then ask them where they think the first of the six (*eni-noro, enin-kahavelomana*,²⁶ “surrounded by joy, enveloped by vitality”) digs is placed for the initiation of a house foundation, invariably, the majority of them respond, “in the northeast corner” for that is the most powerful point, so of course, one should begin there. Actually, only one of six *mpanandro* we directly talked about this with offered that response. Five different answers were offered by the other *mpanandro*, each with a thought “full” justification: begin at the north so as to circle back for a powerful beginning and end (clockwise); begin at the south and follow the contour of the island whose land mass rises to the north (clockwise); begin at the northwest and go counterclockwise to end up at the most powerful point of the northeast; begin at the north of the door and end at the south to protect this vulnerable point; begin at the east of the sunrise and end at the powerful point of the northeast (clockwise) (Raharijaona and Kus 2000). If you further explain to this same classroom of students the “compare and contrast” of the inauguration of house and tomb construction, and ask them to fill in the blank in the following chart, what might you expect their answer to be?

House foundation inauguration	Tomb construction inauguration
Being with the rising of the sun	Begin with the sun’s decline
Built with earth or brick	Built of stone
Foundation is “dug” and dirt is piled above ground	Foundation is dug below ground
Dug with a new spade not previously used for other purposes	Dug with an old, worn spade that is tossed (at least ritually) aside when finished
Inaugurated by an individual whose parents are both still living (<i>velon-draiamandreny</i>)	?

House and tomb inauguration

- 28 If the reader guessed that it would be a child whose parents are both deceased, then they would fit well into that American classroom, but they would be wrong. A thoughtful Malagasy might know the answer to be: an only child or (*tsa misy tampo iraika*)—for death has its proper domain, not to be denied, but to be respected and delimited. There are two major points to draw from these examples. The first example brings our attention to the fact that rather than one formulaic “traditional” answer to the question “where to begin a house foundation,” each individual *mpanandro*’s answer is a considered response to “divining” a larger, complicated world of meaning and forces. The second example brings our attention to the “quick” western (Levi-Straussian) response of considering binary oppositions as basic and universal. Rather, in lifeworlds of organic cosmological scale, there is the ontological assumption that the world is a whole (Fernandez 1986: 188-213). The challenge for such societies is to understand the complementarity of the parts, the subtleties and the dramas of which might not be so obvious to a novice.

What to choose as protection for vulnerable points of the house

- 29 The practical consideration that strong winds and rains blow into the highlands from the east has resulted in rural house construction where there are most often no openings on the eastern wall. Some *mpanandro*, understanding that this leaves the east side of the house vulnerable, will recommend a protection, a *tafotona*, in this case, a collection of plants grown in a small plot along that wall. Such plants might be considered as elements of the “natural” world that generate a gentle poetry to foster and protect life. For example, one *tafotona* we observed contained three plants commonly found in *tafotona* for houses (and cattle parks). (1) The name of the *ramiary* translates as “the gathering of wealth and health.” This name has a second sense involving a play on the word “*miarina*”, which means “to redress oneself or one’s affairs” and may be related to its medicinal uses, including its use to calm those mentally troubled. (2) The *vahondrano*²⁷ is a plant that grows easily with little tending and whose name further suggests a source of permanent water. (3) The *saonjofotsy*, or “white taro”, is easy to grow, even in harsh conditions of soil and weather. One Betsileo informant remarked that even when one leaf of this plant wilts, another springs up quickly in its place.
- 30 The house, in fact, has both vulnerable and powerful points, and some additional *tafotona* of objects, including beads are also buried as protection for the house. Most often, such objects are placed in the center of the house under the central supporting pillar and/or at the threshold of the door and/or in the northeast (the most powerful direction) corner of the house. During a particularly insecure time in the highland countryside, a time of *dahalo* (“outlaws”) and of food shortages, one *mpanandro* recommended that shiny crystalline rock fragments and glass shards be included in the *tafotona* buried at the doorway. These items evoked both the image of blinding reflection and wounding sharpness to deter would-be evil-doers. Most often buried *tafotona* also contain beads. There are over 70 named bead types²⁸ for sale in the market places of the highlands. There is a Betsileo proverb that suggests: “While all might be able to admire the beauty of an individual bead, not everyone is capable of stringing them together in a beautiful and efficacious manner” (*ny taroña fihengo vakaña eko ny mañendrika ro atoa*).²⁹ This adage should help us appreciate the interpretive skills that *mpanandro* bring to their task of protecting, fostering and furthering the life of those who occupy the houses they help orient, build, and inaugurate. Let us illustrate this proverb with yet another “tale from the field,” this time, from Imerina.
- 31 By wondrous chance in a situation of participant-observation (in 1999), two individuals from two different Merina villages (at least 50 km apart) independently visited two different bead sellers in the market place of Antananarivo on the same day, seeking materials for new house construction. Not being witness to their purchases, nevertheless, we were able to obtain a copy of the list of materials they were given by two different *mpanandro*, including beads, that were required. One list contained nine beads and the other list ten with an optional eleventh. Three names were the same and were quite familiar to us from previous discussions with *mpanandro*: *manarimbintana* or that “which corrects destiny”, *tsileondoza* or “danger cannot harm [you]”, and *vakamiarina* or the “bead that stands up straight”, carrying the sense of dignity. These three beads often found in repertoires of *tafotona* and other protective “strings” address general concerns of well-being, protection and honor. The variations in the two lists, that include

manjakabenitany (“the lord of the earth”), *tsiresy* (“unbeatable”), *velomody* (“return home alive and well”) and *soamanodidina* (“surrounded by goodness”) were choices made by individual *mpanandro* to serve more specific needs and concerns of a new house and its occupants. These choices speak to thoughtfully created constellations, drawn not from formulaic understandings, but rather crafted to meet the dynamic and changing circumstances of life.

- 32 The “unremarkable” *tafotona* of plants along the east wall of the house and the evocative poetry of their names bring our attention to the honed observational skills of both *mpanandro* and residents of the rural countryside. Widmer (1992) has suggested that the original vegetal materials used to create “medicine” or *ody* drew on “morpho-symbolic” resemblances. However, we would argue to replace the term “symbolic” by the terms of “icon” and “index.” “Icon” is a sign that is linked to its represented object by some shared quality (e.g., a plant used to “calm” coughs and mental agitation, and the wish for a calm, steady, dignified life). “Index” refers to a sign defined by some sensory feature(s) in common with what it signifies (e.g., a plant that grows luxuriously, sturdily, and with offshoots without much tending, and the wish for the growth, health and well-being of a family). The term “symbol” refers to an arbitrary association between a sign and what it signifies and is better applied to the “remarkable” names of beads, often more abstract than concretely descriptive (e.g., *soafarimbona* or “goodness that comes in successive waves”, *velonamiriaria* or “fully alive”, *tongalafatra* or “attains to perfection”). These beads used as *tafotona* (and *sorona*) should bring our attention, certainly in societies of primary orality, to the intrepid power “to name” and the power of language to cajole and to control.³⁰ To be clear, attention to both the sensuous experiential concreteness of “icon” and “index” and the human capacity for speech and symbolic behavior are necessary to understand the poetic logic of *mpanandro* practice in face of both ineffable forces and intimate local knowledge.

How to orient the central beam of the house

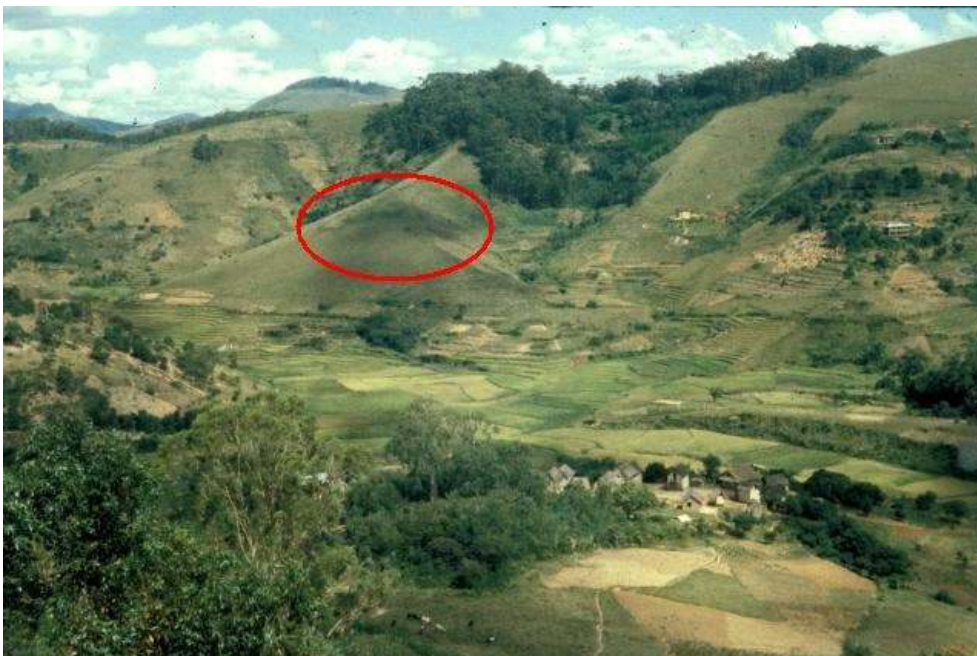
- 33 All houses need life-orienting points, *tanjom-belona*, but contrary to what one might suspect, it is not a question of the orientation of the top-central beam to “true north” according to the *mpanandro* with whom we spoke. A number of them also remarked that each house has its own *tanjom-belona*. As mentioned earlier most adults know what *not* to orient houses to: tombs, abandoned villages, flyways of birds and open valleys that suggest drainage and misdirection, boulders that drip water reminiscent of tears, etc. What *can* serve as a *tanjom-belona* is less obvious to the uninitiated. “To sight a *tanjom-belona* on a landscape necessitates the knowledge not only of a geographer (i.e., what surrounds and what might lay beyond the immediate point) and historian (i.e., social history of the land) but also the skill of an artist/poet” (Kus and Raharijaona 2011: 82). While we have discussed the following examples in published literature previously (Kus 2010, Kus and Raharijaona 2011), we reintroduce them here for at least two reasons. One is that the original discussion was directed toward archaeologists (and appears in archaeological sources). A second reason is that one example of a *tanjom-belona* continues to develop and allows us to address the syncretic skill of the *mpanandro*.
- 34 As anyone who has visited the highlands of Madagascar knows, it is a country of dramatic and resplendent beauty, and even the most prosaic among us would find many eye-catching moments for “life-orienting points” in the earth-sky-scape. Consider Figure 1

below, one might be inclined to focus on the luxuriant forest growth on a height surrounded by so many denuded ones. However, the *mpanandro* who explained to us the *tanjom-belona* of his own house remarked that if one seeks the highest available point for orientation, the only direction then left is downward. He pointed out a gentle flattened rise that served as a point of poise, of stability and, with the eye of a philosopher and artist, pointed out that one’s attention is further directed upward to the forest growth:

The landscape of the highlands offered and offers many such rich poetic moments of orientation for rural houses within the hands and vision of *mpanandro* whose local knowledge is based on a sensuous empiricism. But what of those houses forced down into lower elevations and into clusters near roads, forced either by colonial law (e.g., *folotafo*) or by laws of the contemporary marketplace? They too have *tanjom-belona*!

(Kus and Raharijaona 2010: 82-83).

Figure 1



- 35 Now consider Figure 2 below. A main road from Fianarantsoa to an outlying large local market cuts several village clusters in two. Constant traffic of bush-taxis, dust, and searches for firewood do not make for a pastoral photo. Yet, one individual explained to us that the *mpanandro* he consulted used the large tree as a *tanjom-belona* for his house. This was a tree that stood above all others, but also survived the ravages of roadwork and weathering. Such is the skill of a *mpanandro*, to see beyond the immediate and reason reflectively. This is a tree that is *icon* and *index* of an orientation of life. In more recent field seasons, this part of the road has actually witnessed regrowth of bushes and greenery, seeming to fulfill the original objective for growth and plenty. However, the large tree is no longer there along the side of the road. It fell victim to JIRAMA’s³¹ continued “improvements” of this rural road. When we recently inquired as to the implications of the fate of that tree, we were told that the *tanjom-belona* had served its purpose and the house itself is now well-rooted, well-established after a number of years. It was further suggested that one must be ready to accept such change for the betterment of society (*satria ilain’ny mpiara-monina*)³².

Figure 2



- 36 One might speak of “after the fact” explanations and rationalizations, but when one considers the entirety of the practices of *mpanandro*, we would suggest that theirs is a long-standing *tradition of syncretism*. While the term syncretism has often been applied to indigenous belief “systems” that uncritically incorporate imported practices and beliefs in a patchwork quilt fashion, here, we understand “syncretic” not as an indigenous response to foreign assaults, but rather as a core “operating principle” of “traditional” practice. When your earth-sky-scape is “force”fully alive, is dynamic, then you must always be alert to change: whether this is changing weather patterns, boulders that become dislodged after heavy rains, villages that are created, villages that are abandoned, or the introduction of the bible.³³ Orthodoxy would appear to be an abomination in such a context.

Attention to “the spirit of the law” rather than “the letter of the law”

The philosopher [Voltaire] said: “If God did not exist, man would have to invent him.”

The child replied: “Perhaps, but so far they have got the description of Her all wrong.”

- 37 The discussion above has only “scratched the surface” of the complicatedness of the practice of the *mpanandro* in face of the complexity of the lifeworld. Nevertheless, it should compel us to accord all specialists “special attention”, rather than conferring the false compliment of the generic title of magician.

- 38 The complexity of the Betsileo lifeworld derives in part from the multiplicity of phenomena and forces (e.g., essential, immanent, transcendent) that form a multifarious, vibrant, and changing *whole* of which humans are potentially only an ephemeral feature. The practice of the *mpanandro* is complicated as it involves divining the patternings of the lifeworld so as to be able to be “faithful” to “the spirit of the law”, that life is to be fostered and death is to be held to its proper (complementary) domain. As we have tried to illustrate above, the practice of the *mpanandro* is poetic and pragmatic, as well as sensuous and contemplative. Further it is a practice that encourages a particular *stance* that we have tried to capture by using the term “audacious.” Sometimes, this audacity involves speaking with (“*parler avec*”) or even “sweet-talking”/cajoling “Higher Powers”, but more often it is a question of discerning or, as we have said previously “divining”, the continuous rhythms and capricious singularities of the “forces that be” and “Higher Powers”. Further it is a practice of continuous synthesis (rather than “bricolage”), “syncretic” in its style of adapting to such a dynamic lifeworld.
- 39 The rural Betsileo world is certainly one of challenges in terms of survival, but it is also a world of beauty and humor. Let us return to the question posed in our title. Given that Betsileo society is a society of high oral art forms (cf. Michel-Andrianarahinjaka 1987), we should not be surprised to find some humor in storytelling and in “tall tales” (e.g., tales recounting harrowing experiences on mountain tops suddenly covered in mist or encounters with forces such as *zazavavindrano* and *angatra*). On a bright sunny day, to reach a mountain top and become suddenly lost in mist for hours is terrifying, but telling the story with an ending of running, tripping over things and scattering small wild life “all the way home” can bring comic relief to such a tale. An animated description of swirling waters of a temporary whirlpool that receives the small gift offered to a *zazavavindrano* in a stream where one habitually washes clothes can leave one with an uncanny feeling, but the storyteller’s animated facial expressions and hand gestures of astonishment in the recounting can bring laughter to an audience, and the details of eyebrows plucked out by an *angatra* in a rice field at “high noon” can bring smiles to some faces.
- 40 In our title, we made reference to the Betsileo proverb: “Excuse me, Rakelimalaza, but the liver is not [‘technically’] the [the flesh/meat of the] pig.” Kelimalaza was an important “fetish” of the imperialist Merina state of Madagascar, a state that came to control one-third of the island, including the Betsileo region, during the 19th century.³⁴ This “fetish” was surrounded by numerous taboos, including a very strong prohibition against its association with pork or anyone who had eaten the flesh of a pig. The proverb provides a satirical argument concerning “the letter [technicalities] of the law”, while dissimulating Betsileo irreverence for an imposed state religion. This humorous proverb also contains the elements of the “flip-side of the coin”, so to speak, of demonstrating respect for “the spirit of the law” despite technical violations (e.g., the case of *fady*). Almost invariably a *mpanandro* will advise that no blood should be spilled while the construction of a house is ongoing, this is to say, one should not slaughter any animal for food. However, in more than one case, the *mpanandro* added the nuanced qualification that meat could indeed be purchased in the marketplace for meals during that time.
- 41 It has been said that “the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil” (1 *Timothy* 6: 10). Martin Luther certainly appreciated this biblical verse when he published his 95 Theses wherein he condemned the sale of salvation. Betsileo (and other Malagasy) have long recognized the humorous and the profane potential of money in its uses. A casual survey

of the colloquial names given to past and contemporary money will certainly reveal Malagasy critical wit.³⁵ With the introduction of French coins into circulation, the pieces that bore the faces of Louis XVIII and Charles X were referred to as *Behatoka* or “Big necks” (Chauvicourt and Chauvicourt 1966: 54). The street term for a bill of *iray alina*, literally one (*iray*) ten thousand (*alina*), is “*maizina*” or “darkness”. The term “*alina*” is a homonym for night, and one might be inclined to think that it echoes the sentiment of 1 Timothy 6: 10.³⁶

- 42 *Mpanandro* have been given a gift from *zavatra*, a heritage from *razana*. This is a gift to be shared freely for the benefit of all without thought of recompense (e.g., *karama*). Yet, interestingly enough, in practice, *mpanandro* do receive money. This money might be said to be “miraculously” transformed, through the power of naming and of speech, when it is offered as *tandra* (as recognition and honoring of the gift of the *mpanandro*). Money is also transformed in gesture. Betsileo say that “death is a thing of silence (or solitude)”.³⁷ They also say that paper money is “mute.” However, when a small amount of coins³⁸ is added to the *tandra*, it is reminiscent of the sounds of life, in particular, the laughter of children.

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NOTES

2. By contrast, a “tall tale” is an improbable (unusual or incredible or fanciful) story.
3. Sacrosanct can be defined as above or beyond criticism, change, or interference.
4. Recent inquiry (February 2014) about this field revealed that a house of substantial size and worth, built on the edge of this field, sits unoccupied. Further, the guardian of the house refuses to live in the house, choosing to stay in a smaller structure nearby.
5. In her classic short essay known to many generations of beginning students of anthropology, BOHANNAN, in attempting to explain Shakespeare’s tale of *Hamlet* to the Tiv of Nigeria, became embroiled in a complicated discussion of what properties (*i.e.* speech) are and are not characteristic of ghosts. One is left to wonder how “humor” would have been discussed were she to have attempted to tell Molière’s tale of *Le Misanthrope*.
6. *Masiaka angatra* is defined by ABINAL & MALZAC as “*lieu regardé comme fréquenté par des esprits malfaisants*” (1987: 44-45).

7. *Lelafin'angatra*, according to ABINAL & MALZAC, “*se dit des cheveux qui tombent prématurément; on croit que les lutins les emportent ou les lèchent*” (1987: 44).
8. While the term “essential” has multiple definitions, we are referring to its definitions as: (1) pertaining to or constituting the essence of a thing and (2) being such by its very nature or in the highest sense; natural; spontaneous.
9. Each week, contemporary Malagasy newspapers and radio stations report on various nefarious acts such as that of young girls being *envoutées* (bewitched) at a high school, or that of a high ranking government official who “*milalao amin'ny varatra*” (“plays with thunder”) to thwart political rivals.
10. “*Tabu*” is a Fijian term and the related term “*tapu*” is Tongan. The term “*totem*” is derived from the Ojibway word, “*nintōtēm*”.
11. This term is currently used when speaking of the skill of a former president as a prestidigitator.
12. Archaeologists have called into question the label “state” as a singular political phenomenon, indeed, the indigenous Malagasy term for the “state” is *ny tany sy ny fanjakana* (“the land and the rule/order/kingdom”). Smith (2003) has suggested the alternative term “constellations of power”, which the reader will find echoed in this text. For fuller discussion of these points, see KUS & RAHARIJAONA 2014.
13. *Andriamanitra hita maso; andriamanitra latsaka an-tany* (“divinities visible to the eyes; divinities descended to earth”).
14. “Shaman” originates from the Siberian Evenki (formerly known as Tungus) word “*šamán*” (Laufer 1917).
15. “... *The sensory perception that all elements in the world are interrelated, not in a mystical union, but in a tapestry of natural interactions*” (Glucklich 1997: 22).
16. Huhu and Aholi are such sounds (Carolton 1959: 6).
17. Examples are “proud or sporty”; “elaborated with more color” or “beautiful”; “compassionate”; and “disheveled” (Colton 1959: 6, 8, 18, 74).
18. Interestingly enough, one definition of “a familiar” is a spirit (that usually takes an animal form) that acts as an assistant to a witch or wizard.
19. We have also had the privilege to consult with several *mpanandro* from the Vakinisisaony region of Imerina during this same time.
20. *Où sont les sages, où sont les simples ?
Ils mesuraient le temps d'après la vie des bêtes
Et l'odeur des plantes :
[...] Surtout, d'après la place de l'ombre inséparable de l'homme vivant...*
21. On such days, the blue of the sky and the movement of passing clouds along with dominant boulder strewn heights are mirrored and intermixed with clods of dirt in inundated rice plots before sowing.
22. To be clear, this term in Malagasy vernacular is sometimes used to reference *mpanandro*.
23. Unfortunately, we have been told stories of lives of *mpanandro* that have been put into danger, and even lost due to misalignment of a house or a tomb.
24. This has the sense of a “draining force” or “without closure”.

25. Of the more than eight *mpanandro* we had the privilege to know and work with, two were employed as public servants and two were employed as construction workers before retirement.
26. This Betsileo expression involves a play on the word “*enina*” which can be translated as both the number “six” and the verb “to envelope or surround”.
27. According to Richardson’s dictionary, this is an “*herb planted by the Betsileo near their houses as protection from robbers, lightening, etc.*” (1967: 724).
28. The stock of beads are not fixed in Madagascar, some beads disappearing and other beads of new forms, color and decoration have and still continue to be added to the “stock” (e.g., Bernard-Thierry 1959: 85).
29. To be clear, we first heard of this proverb in reference to the recitation of history, with the allusion being that while some might know tales and episodes of a group’s history, not everyone is capable of being a *mpitantara* (historian).
30. For fuller discussion, see KUS 2006, KUS & RAHARIJAONA 2002.
31. *Jiro sy Rano Malagasy*, Malagasy Light and Water.
32. “*Efa tsara orina ny trano. Nipetrahana ela, nahazahoana soa. Tsa maninona raha tapaka ilay kininina natao tanjom-belona*” (The house is already well-built. The house has been occupied for a long while, and “so far so good”. It is not a problem that the eucalyptus tree that served as a *tanjom-belona* has been cut.)
33. One *mpanandro* explained to us that the order and significance of the days of creation in the bible reinforced the Malagasy understanding of the order and significance of the days of the week.
34. It is interesting to note is that this “idol” was originally brought to Imerina from the Betsileo region (Rajemisa Raolison 1966: 158).
35. See KUS & RAHARIJAONA 2008 for fuller discussion of these matters.
36. “In Madagascar, the love of money is not called the root of all evil; it is ‘the tail of witchcraft!’” (Linton 1927: 352).
37. *Ny mate raha mangiña*. The ethnographer DUBOIS has translated this as “Death is a thing of silence” (1938: 662). The Betsileo scholar MICHEL-ANDRIANARAHINJAKA argues rather than “silence,” the term “*mangiña*” carries the central significance of “[to find oneself in a state of] solitude, isolation, deprived of company” (1987: 80).
38. To be clear, there is still more poetry to sum and number of coins than can be presented in the short contribution.

ABSTRACTS

This contribution is based on ethnographic fieldwork among both rural populations and ritual specialists (*mpanandro*) in the Betsileo highland region of the island. While the ancestors are certainly central forces in the daily lives of Malagasy highlanders, we are rather interested in encounters with and attempts to understand and cajole amoral forces of nature and “things”

(e.g., *raha*, *zavatra*) that are also parts of these populations’ “lifeworlds”. We argue that traditional vocabulary and conceptualizations of “religion” and “magic” need to be re-examined in order to begin to appreciate the particular “stance” of individuals in a world of immanent non-anthropomorphic forces. This is a stance of “audacity” rather than “supplication” before such forces, particularly as seen in the practices of ritual specialists. Ritual specialists such as *mpanandro* need to be understood as engaged not in “replication”, but rather in continual “re-creation” (in some ways, always syncretic in manner) of tradition where attention is paid to the “spirit” rather than the “letter of the law”. We explore these characterizations and assertions concerning rural Betsileo “lifeworlds” with examples drawn from the concrete, poetic, and occasionally humorous practices of ritual specialists, as well as non-specialists.

Notre contribution s’appuie sur des travaux de terrain ethnographiques parmi la population rurale betsileo, avec un intérêt particulier vis-à-vis des *mpanandro*, spécialistes traditionnels. Il va sans dire que les ancêtres prennent une très grande importance dans la vie quotidienne des Malgaches des Hautes Terres. Mais au sein de leur monde (*lifeworld*), il existe également des « forces » d’une nature non-domestiquée, aussi bien que des « choses » indéterminées (p. ex., *raha*, *zavatra*). Des rencontres avec de telles « forces » et « choses », des efforts de les comprendre et même de les persuader de satisfaire aux exigences des êtres humains ont attiré notre attention dans cet article. Nous maintenons que le vocabulaire traditionnel et les conceptualisations de « religion » et « magie » ont besoin d’être remis en question. Cette remise en question nous aidera à mieux comprendre le comportement des individus face au monde des forces immanentes et non-anthropomorphiques. Face à ces forces, les spécialistes traditionnels, dans l’exercice de leur savoir-faire, agissent comme des « audacieux » plutôt que comme des « suppliants ». Les spécialistes traditionnels, tels que les *mpanandro*, méritent d’être appréciés comme des individus engagés, non pas dans la « réplique » mais plutôt dans la « re-création » continue (toujours synchrétique en esprit) des traditions, fidèles à « l’esprit des lois » plutôt que scrupuleusement attentifs aux détails de règles traditionnelles. Nous examinons ces caractéristiques et assertions à propos du monde rural Betsileo à l’aide d’exemples issus des pratiques concrètes, poétiques, et même parfois humoristiques des *mpanandro* aussi bien que du commun des Betsileo.

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