

David Graeber
Universidade de Yale
(EUA)

I arrived in Madagascar on June 16, 1989. For the first six months I was there, I lived in Antananarivo, the capital, studying the language and doing archival research. The National Archives in Antananarivo are a remarkable resource. In their collection are thousands of documents from the nineteenth century kingdom of Madagascar, most from the highland province of Imerina, which surrounded the capital. Almost all of it was in Malagasy. I went through hundreds of folders, carefully copying out everything concerned with the district of Eastern Imamo, the part of Imerina in which I intended to work. Eastern Imamo seemed, at the time, to have been a rather sleepy place, a rural hinterland far from the tumultuous political struggles of the capital, but at the same time insulated from the unstable fringes of Imerina, half-empty territories full of raiding bandits, industrial projects, and periodic revolts. It was a place where not much ever happened—and thus, the perfect field on which to study the slow-moving processes of social and cultural change I was interested in. What had attracted me to East Imamo, in other words, was almost exactly the opposite of what attracted me to Betafo.

Once I felt I had a minimal command of Malagasy, I set out for Arivonimamo, the major town of the region – of about ten thousand people. It was not at all difficult to get there: Arivonimamo is only an hour from the capital by car. Before long I had established myself in town, and had begun making regular trips to the surrounding countryside, gathering oral histories, keeping an eye out for a likely place to do more detailed research.

Betafo lies along the southern flank of a long mountainous ridge called Ambohidraidimby, most of it only a thirty to forty minute's walk from the center of Arivonimamo. It is close enough that one can live in town and still cultivate

one's fields in Betafo – as many people do – or have a house in both places and move freely back and forth between them.

My first work was on oral history: I started visiting villages like Betafo, usually accompanied by one or two Malagasy friends from Arivonimamo. I never had a formal research assistant, but there were always people actively helping me in my work: Ramose Parson, the biology teacher, who helped me especially when I first arrived (and school was out of session); then, Chantal Raolintalama, a woman in theory performing her year of National Service at the time. Since in practice, this meant having to put on a green and brown uniform twice a week and give a geography class at the CEG, she had little else to do. These were also the people whose families I was living with; for all the time I ended up spending in Betafo, I never permanently relocated there.

The fact that I lived in Arivonimamo, only occasionally spending the night in Betafo, obviously has had an effect on my vision of the place. Among other things, it means that I have a much more intimate familiarity with the minutiae of everyday life in town. But living in Betafo would have led to all sorts of problems. It would have made it almost impossible to avoid being identified with one faction. I felt this struck a nice balance; a balance it would have been impossible to strike had I been forced to choose a single place to stay.

Research on spirit mediumship and curing was also much easier to do in town. It's not that there were no mediums in Betafo – there were, and they played an important part in its political life – it's just that the ones in Arivonimamo seemed much more interested in working with me.¹ So if here too I will be forced to fill out my description and analysis of Betafo, in part, with information drawn from other sources, it is largely because I always preferred to deal with the people who seemed the most enthusiastic about having me around.

A word on this latter point: like most anthropologists, I spent a lot of time thinking about the political aspects of conducting research. It is hard not to be a little self-conscious in a milieu where urbanites seemed to find a special joy in telling me how terrified country folk were of Vazaha (people of European stock, such as myself) and country folk, how terrified children were. For most Malagasy, the very word "Vazaha" evoked the threat of violence. Fortunately for me, it also had as its primary meaning "Frenchman", and (as I endlessly had to explain) I did not even speak French. Speaking only in Malagasy took a lot of the edge off things. But conducting research itself had associations. On the one hand, Imerina is a highly literate society: no one had any problem understanding what I meant if I said I was an American student carrying out research for his doctorate in anthropology.

I rarely conducted formal interviews; instead, I would take out my tape-recorder and turn it on whenever

I had the slightest excuse; usually I would ask some questions or raise issues, but, once everyone was aware of the sort of topics that interested me things would often follow of their own accord. It helped that verbal performance is so much appreciated in Madagascar; rather than people freezing up or becoming stifled, the presence of a tape-recorder would often set people into playful competition in conversational skills, wit or knowledge. Of course, in a place like Betafo, who said what in front of whom was a question full of politics. The political aspects of conversation are one of the major theoretical issues of my work.

BETAFO'S CONVERSATIONS: ARMAND, RATSIZAFY, MIADANA

The first person I met from Betafo was named Armand Rabearivelo. At the time I was living in Arivonimamo, where Armand was known as the man who trucked in bananas from the coast. He supplied most of the vendors in and around town. Two or three of his employees were usually to be seen in the marketplace, in front of a vast pile of bananas, young men unusual for their red berets and military-style clothing. I should explain here that roughly a third of the population in this part of Madagascar were called *olona mainty*, "black people" – supposedly more African than the "white" majority², and mostly made up of the descendants of nineteenth century slaves. Unlike most other black people in rural Imerina, Armand and his workers affected a style that recalled something of the African Nationalist posture popular in the capital in the late '70s and early '80s, mixed with the more generic idiom of the Third World Revolutionary. They listened to reggae and funk music; Armand, tall, slightly bearded, with a swagger (at least, by Malagasy standards it was a swagger) that was tempered by his obvious good nature, was a prime mover in local left-wing politics.

Armand saw himself as rising above the divisions in Betafo partly because he saw himself as an actor in a much larger world. He was a man of humble origins who had worked his way through college; for all the Africanist posturing, he ultimately saw those divisions – largely, divisions between black and white – as simple racism, the result of rural ignorance and narrow-mindedness: the very thing which reasonable people should unite to overcome.

On hearing of my project, Armand immediately volunteered to take us to Betafo, where, he said, there was a notable andriana – a royal ancestor – named Andrianamboninolona, whose descendants still occupied the place today.

Actually, Armand ended up taking us – Parson and me – to talk to two different people. We went first

to a hamlet called Morafeno, to talk to a black person, one of Armand's own relatives, a very old and rather eccentric astrologer named Ratsizafy; only afterwards did he take us to speak with a representative of the andriana, the President Fokontany³, in the nearby village of Belanitra. Now, even at the time, it did strike me that the President seemed nervous about something. Not that I thought much about it: perhaps he was just a shy person, or found my presence intimidating. Anyway he seemed to loosen up considerably as time went on. After a while, all of us – Armand, Parson, the President and myself – ended up walking together to the ancient village of Betafo, its center now largely abandoned and overgrown. We gazed admiringly into the vast moat-like ditches that surrounded the village, admired the stonework of some fallen pillars in the remains of a ruined mansion just outside it (I made sketches); inspected the ancestor's large white tomb inside. It was a pleasant visit, informative enough as such visits went, but I had no idea of the undercurrents running beneath it all.

Which was, no doubt, what everyone would really have preferred. Or – not quite everyone. I should make a confession here. Actually, the President had every reason to be nervous, seeing me walk in with Armand, fresh from a visit with Ratsizafy. No doubt he spent the first hour or so of our meeting hoping I wouldn't ask him who Ratsizafy was, or about anything he had told me; and when he became more relaxed, it was only because I never did. This was not surprising, considering I hadn't really understood much of what Ratsizafy said. When I had met him, he was coming back from the fields, with a spade over his shoulder and a wool cap on his head, drinking rum from a hip-flask; I turned on my tape recorder by a tree and he began to tell us stories in an old, cracked voice, talking mainly to Armand and not to me, softly at first, more and more forcefully as he consumed the additional rum we'd offered him but also a lot more slurred. (At the very end, caught in a sweeping gesture, he tripped and fell over. "Oh, he's all right," said Armand, as I moved to help him up, "it happens all the time. He's used to it".) To be honest I had no idea what the story was even supposed to be about. It was only when Parson and I began trying to decode the recording later that I began to realize how interesting it really was.

But what really made up my mind to concentrate on Betafo was when I met a woman named Miadana.

I first met her completely by accident. Together with another friend from town, Chantal Raolintsalama, I had wandered into Betafo on the first day of Alahamady – the lunar new year. This is a day marked all over Imerina (indeed, all over Madagascar) by rituals called *fanasinana*, and Armand had assured us that Ratsizafy always celebrated it by sacrificing a sheep or at least a chicken, and that while Armand himself couldn't make it, he'd asked, and Ratsizafy would in no way mind if we sat in. Unfortunately, the message reached me

somewhat second hand – or, maybe it was just another example of my still uncertain command of the language, because when I set off that morning all that I was completely sure of was that I was going to Betafo to see some *fanasinana*.

Well, I don't know anything about *fanasinana*, Miadana said, but I could tell you something about history. Come inside.

Inside was a large room with a double bed and several rattan chairs. Miadana – for it was she – shooed away a couple chickens that had wandered in from the yard, introduced us to her husband, a son and daughter, sent the daughter off to the kitchen to make us coffee, and began to narrate the history of Betafo. For the next two hours or so, she talked almost continually. She told us about the origins of the local andriana (her family was andriana), described traditional custom and taboo. It was a very traditional community. There was no end to customs and taboos. Her family systematically violated them. We break all the ancestral customs, she said. We've only been living here five years now, we're still used to the life of the capital – to living like normal people – and all of a sudden we're supposed to completely give up eating onions and garlic? But of course, one has to be secretive about these things. If you grow garlic, you have to grow flowers around them to disguise the smell. People are always scolding us, threatening to tell Ratsizafy, but no one's ever caught us red-handed. And she also intimated something else. These aren't really ancestral customs, she said. Not ours, anyway. Really, all this fuss about taboos was part of a game played by Ratsizafy and his cohorts, a way of intimidating the andriana and making their lives more difficult.

Before I go any further let me remark that Miadana was a stupendous verbal performer. Also, a very enthusiastic one. During this first meeting – during which she incidentally never even stopped to ask me who I was and why I was interested in Betafo – her husband, a handsome man of about fifty, remained almost completely silent. Occasionally, he would try to throw in some gruff comment, or to answer one of our questions, but only to be immediately overwhelmed by Miadana's flow of words. It didn't seem to bother him particularly. But for me, the effect was almost surreal, because one thing I had consistently noticed in rural Imerina was that women *always* deferred to men when it comes to the telling of history. I had even seen mothers insist I interview their sons – and then proceed to coach them when they made mistakes. I suppose I could have written this family off as obvious eccentrics, anomalies, misplaced members of an educated elite entirely unrepresentative of the community around them. An anthropologist who showed up in Betafo twenty or thirty years ago almost certainly would have. They are just the sort of people whose existence would tend to be ignored in a tradition ethnography. But as it was, this never even occurred to me – unless it be now, in

retrospect, anticipating how other anthropologists might criticize me. When I met them, my main reaction was that I really liked them. Perhaps it was Miadana's way of immediately making me feel complicit in transgression, perhaps it was her sense of humor, or the fact that she so obviously *wanted* to talk to me, to talk about things others preferred not to. But when she urged me to come back soon, I decided that she meant it, so I did. Before long I was a regular visitor.

CATASTROPHE: THE COMMUNAL ORDEAL OF 1987

Armand's opinion was that the tensions in Betafo had not been going on for very long. When he was growing up, Betafo was a really strong, solidary community. It was only since he had come back from college, really, that it had gotten to the point where people in the northern – black persons – and southern halves of the fokontany wouldn't even invite each other to weddings and funerals. The definitive break had only happened about three years before.

This was an opinion I would hear repeated quite frequently over the next year or so, during which time I became more and more immersed in the affairs of Betafo. Most, in fact, were willing to be even more precise. The definitive break occurred in 1987, during a communal ordeal that ended in disaster. Over and over, I heard the story of the disastrous ordeal of 1987. In its own way, it served as a charter for the rupture of the community: though the fault lines had been evident long before, it marked the point where no one could any longer deny them.

It was Miadana herself who told me the story the first time, during our first meeting, though I had little idea of its import at the time. The basics of the story were this: there had been a spate of robberies in the community of Betafo. The *fokon'olona* – the communal assembly – decided to hold a collective ordeal, which was a way of invoking the power of the ancestors to punish whoever was responsible. The usual practice was to have everyone drink some water which had been mixed with earth taken from the ancestral tomb. But there was a problem. The inhabitants of Betafo were of two different ancestries. So they took dust from the tombs of both major ancestors, and mixed them together. Mixing them, however, turned out to be a terrible mistake.

Here is her own first account of the affair:

Miadana: There was a time here when there was lots of petty thievery: if there was manioc growing in the fields, if there was corn growing in the fields, then someone would be stealing it. So "we'll hold an ordeal," they said. They

were going to hold an ordeal. So over in Belanitra – you know where that is? There’s a fokontany office in town there, and everyone, the entire community all gathered together there. And they took a bowl and put water in it. They got some dust from here, and someone else went to get dust from over there [pointing northeast] – because there’s a tomb up there, too⁴.

That is, one of the people organizing the ceremony collected dust from around the andriana tomb in the center of the Betafo – a few yards from the house where Miadana was telling me this – while another went across the rice fields to a hill to the northeast, where Ratsizafy, the astrologer’s tomb was, and got some there. Generously, Miadana allows Ratsizafy’s claim that his ancestor was some kind of andriana as well:

Miadana: Now, that one: that too is the tomb of an andriana; it belongs to the people from Morafeno. But you know, the two of them were rivals. That is to say: the andriana who lived here, and the one who lived over there. They were opponents. Rivals.

So they took the bowl of water and dropped some gold into it. Gold. Then they took the dust from here and the dust from there, and when they’d added that the people all lined up. One by one, each was taken up and given a spoonful of the water to drink.

And each drank it, saying as they did “we drink this water, so that if it was ever I who stole, if it was ever I who did this, if it was ever I who did that, then let those two ancestors kill me on the spot” – as it would be both the two ancestors who would – how do you say? – who’d smite them.

So “what”, you say, “happened next?”

It was summertime. It was the middle of summer. And according to the belief around here, both of these ancestors were of andriana status – but the two of them had been chasing each other around constantly in the past. They both used to live here, you know, but then there was a fight, and one was defeated and left. And later his children made those tombs.

David: What was his name?

Miadana: Rainitamaina. From Morafeno. Nowadays they have their tomb way over there; they don’t come around here any more.

David: And he and Andrianamboninolona, were they related?

Miadana: There was some slight relationship. But... they didn’t get along, and the one was defeated and driven away. He left.

But despite that, during that ordeal, they combined the two. After all that happened, they were combined. During the ordeal.

So what happened then?

Now, I don’t know if this was really true, or just a coincidence – I have no idea. But this is what happened:

It was summertime, like it is now, and the rain was due. The rice: the rice had all been harvested. It started raining, hard. And the rice belonging the people who had called the ordeal was...it was...

The rice belonging to the person from Morafeno was all swept away. *Carried* away by the rainwater. It went all the way down to Ambodivona – and only his! (Laughs). It was *really* funny. Really really funny. All the rice he’d harvested winded up down there – more than a kilometer away! And what? So they started asking: “so how come all of our rice got carried down into the fields by the water, but your rice didn’t get carried off, none of your rice was carried off at all?” And some people said: “Yeah, well, didn’t you put people who didn’t get along together in the same bowl?” The rain came. “And wouldn’t it be carried away by the rain?”

So it was obvious what had happened. And from then on there haven’t been any more ordeals. Not any more.

The “person from Morafeno” is again, Ratsizafy, the aged astrologer. He and an andriana named Randoza, one of Miadana’s neighbors, had been the main organizer of the ceremony. When the rains struck,⁵ then, they struck only the rice of those two men – the men responsible for having mixed the two ancestors together.

The more I learned about these ancestors, the less surprising it seemed that they should have been irate at having been combined together in one bowl. In fact, I began to wonder how it could have occurred to anyone to mix them in the first place. Even in death, they were actively hostile: veritable icons of hostility. One – the ancestor of the black people – was said to have fought a magical battle against the andriana, who tried to enslave him (this was the story Ratsizafy was trying to tell me, that first day). To this day, he is said to be so bitter about the whole affair that his tomb cannot be opened without hanging a cloth across the door, because if he catches sight of the village of Betafo again, whirlwinds strike the town. At the same time, I was told that if a black person so much as touches the tomb next to Miadana’s house, guns go off inside. Ratsizafy himself – though he had spent his entire life in Betafo – has never been known to set foot in that quarter of the village.

Anyway, the ordeal set off a whole chain of events, a rapid polarization in which the ancestors appeared to become an active force in tearing the community apart. Miadana implied so much herself when she ended the story by telling us how most black people (who constituted the vast majority of her neighbors in the north half of the fokontany) began to follow Ratsizafy’s example and avoided the central area, with its hostile tomb, entirely⁶.

Miadana: And after a while, no one came up here any more, either. That is to say: no longer would people come through here; they would go around on that lower road instead. [Softly] There are people saying that we’re mean, but we really aren’t mean!

About six months later, Randoza – one of the two organizers of the ordeal, the andriana – suddenly fell even more afoul of this same ancestor. He was struck by an economic catastrophe; within the space of months, he went from being one of the richest men in Betafo to a landless, penniless pauper. He had offended Andrianamboninolona, people said, by marrying a woman descended from slaves, and as a result lost everything. Though, some added that his downfall did also have a more immediate cause in the machinations of his rivals, including, in fact, the astrologer himself. If nothing else, those rivals were certainly the ones to profit by it. They ended up with almost all his land; and this, in turn, became the flash point around which long-standing resentments about the gradual encroachment of former slaves on noble property exploded into outright hostility between the two sides. The ordeal, in other words, was taken to presage what happened in its wake; it was proof that it was impossible to join two such ancestries together in a single community. By crystallizing

tensions that had long existed, on a more covert level, in a form that could be made completely public, the story could both make it easier for people to act on them, and afterwards, imply those actions were inevitable. The destructive downpour became the proof of that state of affairs which began in reality to coalesce around it.

But why should a flash-flood have become the point around which a community breaks apart? To ask such a question is, ultimately, to ask a question about history. To answer it, one would have to understand how people like Armand, Ratsizafy, Miadana and their neighbors imagine their place in society: who or what they feel they represent and who represents them, their origins and destinies, and the moral stakes that are at play. It is to ask what kind of actions they consider to be politically significant, or for that matter – as the example of the feuding ancestors implies – what sorts of being constitute politically significant actors; along with a whole host of other questions about power, authority, action, justice, value.

THE VERY EXISTENCE OF THE STATE

Shortly before I left for Madagascar an American who had done a lot of work there warned me to be very careful poking around the countryside. State authority, he said, was dissolving. In many parts of the island, it had effectively ceased to exist. Even in Imerina there were reports of *fokon'olona* – village assemblies – beginning to carry out executions.

This was one of those concerns forgotten almost as soon as I actually arrived in Madagascar. In the capital there was quite obviously a functioning government; almost every educated person seemed to work for it. When I moved to Arivonimamo, things did not seem particularly different. Certainly, people talked about the government all the time; everybody acted as if there was one. There was an administrative structure, offices where people typed up documents, registered things, kept track of births and deaths and the number of people's cattle. One even had to get permission to carry out the most important rituals. The government ran schools, held national exams; there were gendarmes, a prison, an airfield with military jets.

It was only in retrospect, once I left, that I began to wonder whether what he told me might actually have been true. Perhaps it was simply my own bias, the fact that I had always lived under an efficient and omnipresent government, that made me read the clues the wrong way. Perhaps there really wasn't a state in Betafo at all; perhaps not even in Arivonimamo – or anyway, not one in any way like what I or other Westerners have come to assume a state is like.

The key issue in most Western definitions of the state is its power to coerce. States use violence to enforce the law. The classic definition here is Weber's: an organization "will be called a 'state' insofar as its administrative staff successfully upholds the claim to a monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force in the enforcement of its order"⁷ (1968 I:54). A definition like this is mainly a way to focus the mind; it is not much use for determining whether or not any particular organization is a state, since for that, everything depends on how one defines "successfully". But as often, Weber manages to capture the implicit common sense behind modern Western institutions – one in no way foreign to the Malagasy state, which was organized very much on a Western model. And most Malagasy, I think, would have agreed that the ability to apply force in this way was, essentially, what made a state what it was – even though, in most of the Malagasy countryside, the state had in reality become almost completely unwilling to do so.

In the capital, there were police. Around Arivonimamo the closest thing to a police force was a unit of gendarmes who had a barracks somewhat to the west of town. Mainly, they patrolled the highway. Occasionally, I was told, they would fight bandits further west; but they did not like to travel into the countryside. Outside of town, or not along the highway, gendarmes would never show up unless someone had been murdered.

Occasionally, there might be a clash between principles of order. The immediate cause of the 1987 ordeal at Betafo, for instance, was the theft of a whole storage pit full of rice belonging to a notable elder. The suspected thief was eventually killed, beaten to death by men from another village. Some said he was beaten to death by "the *fokon'olona*", implying that this was a legitimate action: there seems to have been a tacit rule that the *fokon'olona* can take matters into its own hands when even a man's parents are no longer willing to defend him.

Theories of social class almost always assume that a key role of the state – perhaps, its most important role – is to underpin property relations. Contractual, market relations can only exist because their basic ground, the basic rules of the game, are enshrined in law; those laws in turn are effective only in so far as everyone knows they will be backed up – in the last instance – by clubs and guns and prisons. And of course if the ultimate guarantor of property relations is state violence, then the same is true of social classes as well.

But in a place like Betafo the state simply did not play this role. I cannot imagine a situation under which it would dispatch armed men to uphold one person's right to exclude another from their land – let alone to enforce a contract or investigate a robbery. This too was something whose full significance dawned on me only afterwards, because everyone acted as if the government did play a crucial role in such things. The government kept track of who owned each piece of land: whenever someone died, the division of their fields

and other property was meticulously recorded at the appropriate offices. Registering property, along with births and deaths, was one of the main things such offices did. There were all sorts of laws concerning land, and no one openly contested them, just as when talking in the abstract, they always talked as if they felt land registration did give an accurate picture of who had ultimate rights to what. In practice, however, legal principles were usually only one, relatively minor, consideration. If there was a dispute, legalities had to be weighed against a welter of “traditional” principles (which usually provided more than one possible solution to any given problem), the intentions of former owners, and not least, by people’s broader sense of justice – the feeling, for instance, that no accepted member of the community should be completely deprived of the means of making a living. Certainly no one would think of taking the matter to court – except in a few rare cases where one of the disputants was an outsider. Even then, the court served mainly as a neutral mediator; everyone knew no one would enforce a court decision⁸.

There are various ways one might chose to consider the meaning of all this. One would be to assume that Merina culture has a different conception of the state than the western one. Maybe the protection of property is simply not one of the functions anyone expects a government to fulfill. (To the extent people seem to say otherwise, they might just be paying lip service to alien principles imposed by the French colonial regime.) But in fact, the pre-colonial Merina state was veritably obsessed with protecting property. King Andrianampoinimerina, its founder, emphasized this role constantly in his speeches. Law codes, beginning with his own, always made the regulation of inheritance, rules about buying and renting, and the like, one of their most important areas of concern. Even the registration of lands predates the colonial period; records began to be kept in 1878, seventeen years before the French invasion.

On the other hand, existing evidence gives us no reason to believe that people then paid much more attention to this elaborate legal structure than they do today. Not that there is any record of anyone openly challenging it. Legal systems have always been accepted in principle, and appealed to only very selectively in practice. Mostly, people go about their business much as they had done before. It is this phenomenon, I think, which gives the best hint as to what’s really going on.

Let me make a broad generalization. Confronted with someone bent on imposing unwanted authority, a typical Malagasy response will be to agree heartily with whatever demands that person makes, and then, as soon as they are gone, try to go on living one’s life as if the incident had never happened. One might even say this was the archetypically Malagasy way of dealing with authority. Admittedly, it is hardly a strategy limited to Madagascar. Something along these lines is often considered a typically “peasant” strategy: it is an obvious

course to take when one is in no way economically dependent on those trying to tell one what to do. But there are many other routes to take, all sorts of possible combinations of confrontation, negotiation, subversion, acquiescence. In Madagascar, where there has always been a strong emphasis on avoiding open confrontation, the preferred approach has always been to do whatever it takes to make them happy until they go away; then, ignore them⁹. It even takes on a cosmological dimension. Malagasy myths on the origins of death claim that life itself was won from God in a deal that humans never really intended to keep. (Hence, it is said, God kills us.)

The mythological point is, I think, suggestive. One might well argue that this whole attitude is ultimately one with the logic of sacrifice, which at least in Madagascar is often explicitly phrased as a way of fobbing off the Divine Powers with a portion of what is rightfully theirs, so as to win the rest for living people. The life of the animal, it is often said, goes to God; hence (implicitly) we get to keep our own. Consider then the curious fact that all over Madagascar, sacrificial rituals – or their functional equivalents, such as the famadihana rituals of Imerina – always seem to require government permits. The fact that this permit has been received, that the paperwork has been properly done, is often made much of during the ceremony itself. Here is a fragment of a speech from the Betsimisaraka of eastern Madagascar, spoken over the body of a sacrificial ox:

“For this ox is not the kind of ox that lazes in its pen or shits anywhere on entering the village. Its body is here with us, but its life is with you, the government. You, the government, are like a great beast lying on its back: he who turns it over sees its huge jaws; so we, comrades, cannot turn that beast over! It is this official permit that is the knife that dares to cut its hide, the ax that dares to break its bones, which comes from you who hold political authority” (Aly 1984:59-60).

Not only is the state figured simultaneously as a potential force of violence and its victim; the act of acquiring a permit becomes equated with the act of sacrifice itself. The main point I am trying to make here is about autonomy. Filling out forms, registering land, even paying taxes, might be considered the equivalents of sacrifice: little ritualized actions of propitiation by which one wins the autonomy to continue with one’s life.

This theme of autonomy crops up in any number of other studies of colonial and postcolonial Madagascar – notably, those of Gerald Althabe (1969, 1978), about these same Betsimisaraka, and Gillian Feeley-Harnik (1982, 1984, 1992) on the Sakalava of the northwest coast. But in these authors it takes on a sort of added twist, since both suggest that, in Madagascar, the most common way to achieve autonomy is by creating a false image of domination. The logic seems to be this: community of equals can only be created by common subordination to some overarching force. Typically, it is conceived as arbitrary and potentially violent in much the same way as the traditional Malagasy God. But it can also be equally far from everyday human concerns. One of the most dramatic responses to colonial rule, among both peoples, was the massive diffusion of spirit

possession; in every community, women began to be possessed by the souls of ancient kings, whose will was considered (at least in theory) to have all the authority it would have had they been alive. By relegating ultimate social authority to entranced women speaking with the voices of dead kings, the power to constitute communities is displaced to a zone where French officials and police would have no way to openly confront it. In either case, there was the same kind of move: one manages to create a space for free action, in which to live one's life out of the grip of power, only by creating the image of absolute domination – but one which is ultimately only that, an image, a phantasm, completely manipulable by those it ostensibly subjects.

To put the matter crudely: one might say that the people I knew were engaged in a kind of scam. Their image of government had, at least since the colonial period, been one of something essentially alien, predatory, coercive. The principle emotion it inspired was fear. Under the French, the government apparatus was primarily an engine for extracting money and forced labor from its subjects; it provided relatively little in way of social benefits for the rural population (certainly, from the point of view of the rural population it didn't.) In so far as it did concern itself with its subjects' daily needs, it was with the conscious intention of creating new ones, of transforming their desires so as to create a more deeply rooted dependence. Nor did matters change much after independence in 1960, since the first Malagasy regime made very few changes in its policy or mode of operation. For the vast majority of the population, the common-sense attitude was that the state was something to be propitiated, then avoided, in so far as it was in any way possible to do so.

It was only after the revolution of 1972 that things really began to change.

An anti-colonial revolt in its origins, the '72 events introduced a succession of state-capitalist, military-based regimes – from 1975 until 1991, dominated by the figure of President Didier Ratsiraka. Ratsiraka found his political inspiration in Kim Il Sung of North Korea; in theory, his regime was dedicated to a very centralized version of socialist development and mobilization. From the beginning, though, he was uninterested in what he considered a stagnant, traditional peasant sector with little revolutionary potential. In agriculture as in industry, his government concentrated its efforts on a series of colossal development schemes, often heroic in scale, involving massive investment, funded by foreign loans. Loans were easy enough to get in the 1970s. By 1981 the government was insolvent. Ever since, Malagasy economic history has mainly been the story of negotiations with the IMF.

There is no room here to enter into details on the effects of IMF-ordered austerity plans. Suffice it to say their immediate result was a catastrophic fall in living standards, across the board. Hardest hit were the civil service and other government employees (who made up the bulk of the middle class) but – aside from a

narrow elite surrounding the President himself, who stole liberally – pauperization has been well nigh universal. Madagascar is now one of the poorest countries on earth.

For Ratsiraka’s “peasant sector” – rural areas not producing key commodities – this whole period was marked by the gradual withdrawal of the state. The most onerous taxes from the French period – the head tax, cattle tax, house tax – intended to force farmers to sell their products and thus to goad them into the cash economy, were abolished immediately after the revolution. Ratsiraka’s regime first ignored rural administration; after 1981, it increasingly became the object of triage. The state, its resources ever more limited as budgets were endlessly slashed, was reduced to administering and providing minimal social services to those towns and territories its rulers found economically important: mainly, those which generated some kind of foreign exchange. Places like Arivonimamo, where almost all production and distribution was carried out outside the formal sector anyway, were of no interest to them. Indeed, it is hard to imagine anything that could happen there – short of the area becoming the base for armed guerrillas (hardly a possibility) – that would seriously threaten the interests of the men who really ran the country¹⁰.

Resources to rural areas dried up. By the time I was in Arivonimamo, the only sector of administration that was receiving any significant funding was the education system. Even here the sums were paltry: the main government role was to post the teachers (who were sometimes paid at least in part by parents associations), provide curriculum and administer the tests. The latter, particularly the bacclaireate examinations, were of particular concern to the center because they were the gateway into the formal, state sector: those who passed it had to undergo several weeks of military training and then carry out a year’s “National Service”, though – as I’ve pointed out – this mainly consisted of lounging around in meaningless make-work jobs. But National Service was, I think, important. It was a way of marking passage into a domain where effective authority really did exist, where orders had to be obeyed. For those not ensconced in the educational system, the government provided nothing¹¹, but it also had next to no immediate power over their lives.

Still, even in the countryside, government offices continued to exist. The typewriters were often crumbling, functionaries were often reduced to buying their own paper, since they could no longer requisition any, but people dutifully continued to fill out forms, requesting permission before uprooting trees or exhuming the dead, reporting births and deaths and registering the number of their cattle. They must have realized that, had they refused, nothing would have happened. So: why did they play along?

One might I suppose call it inertia, sheer force of habit: people were still running the same scam, propitiating the state without having noticed its huge jaws were toothless. Certainly, memories of colonial

violence were still vivid. Many times I was told of the early days of mass executions, or of how terrified rural people used to be when they had to enter a government office, of the endless pressure of taxation. But I think the real answer is more subtle.

Memories of violence were mainly important because they defined what people imagined a state to be about. I found little notion that the state (for all its socialist pretensions) existed to provide services; at least, no one much complained about the lack of them. People seemed to accept that a government was essentially an arbitrary, predatory, coercive power. But: the one theme of official ideology everyone did seem to take seriously was the idea of Malagasy unity. In the highlands, at least, people saw themselves as “Malagasy”; they hardly ever referred to themselves as “Merina”. Malagasy unity was a constant theme in rhetoric; it was the real meaning, I think, of the Malagasy flags that inevitably accompanied any major ritual (whose official meaning was to mark that the forms had been filled out, the event approved). It seems to me that it was the very emptiness of the state which made it acceptable as a unifying force. When it was powerful, the state in Imerina was essentially seen as something French – this remained true even in the early years of independence. The 1972 revolution was first and foremost an effort to achieve genuine independence, to make the state truly Malagasy. For the highland population, I would say, this effort was largely successful – if only because at the same time, the state was stripped of almost all effective power. In other words, the government became something along the same lines as the ancient kings discussed by Althabe and Feeley-Harnik: absolute, arbitrary powers that constitute those they subjugate as a community by virtue of their common subjugation, while at the same time, extremely convenient powers to be ruled by, because, in any immediate practical sense, they do not exist.

The most significant thing about violence in Arivonimamo is that there was little of it. Murders were shocking, isolated events. Nonetheless, rural assemblies had to develop all sorts of creative strategies to overcome the reluctance of the forces of order to enforce the laws. The practice of holding communal ordeals itself was one¹².

HISTORY, AUTONOMY AND “POLITICS”

One might say there were three important groups in Betafo: rich nobles, poor nobles, and slaves. This would not be strictly accurate. The “nobles” were never really nobles; the “slaves” are certainly no longer slaves. But

the English words evoke much the same associations as the Malagasy words *andriana* and *andevo*. Most andriana did imagine their ancestors to have been wealthy and powerful, and at some point descended from kings; black people mostly imagined their ancestors to have been bondsmen, fieldhands, people kidnapped from their homes to be bought and sold “like cattle,” prone to be punished arbitrarily by their masters – most all the things normally called to mind by the English “slave.”

During the nineteenth century, most andriana were simple farmers, but there were a handful of very wealthy families. These were the families who owned by far the largest share of slaves. After the French conquest and the abolition of slavery, in 1895, most of them managed to find positions in the French administration; within a generation, they had moved out of Betafo entirely, giving a portion of their land to former slaves, and arranging for the rest to be sharecropped by them. Their present-day descendants live in Antananarivo, or in Paris; they have moved on to an entirely different social class. Most of Betafo’s andriana remain what they have always been – poor farmers – even if they see themselves as descendants of lords and slave-owners; many are convinced that as a group they are slowly declining into poverty, even as the black people advance, as punishment for this ancient guilt.

Miadana was a nice person in an impossible situation. She was a woman who enjoyed science fiction novels and classical music; the wife of a civil servant named Claude Ravorombato who had followed him to postings all over Madagascar; a woman who had lived all her life within the apparatus of state. Then, in the ‘80s, salaries collapsed, a series of stomach operations forced her husband into early retirement. They had six children, but none yet old enough to take government positions of their own. With no source of income, they were forced, for the time being, to move back to Claude’s mother’s natal village, and support themselves as best they could by farming the land that had until then been worked by descendants of their former slaves.

Having lived all their lives in an environment defined by state power, they found themselves growing rice in village in which state power did not exist, among people who saw her family as the living representatives of an historical tradition of repression. I think they made a sincere effort to do whatever it took to get along; they studiously avoided doing anything that could be interpreted as placing themselves above their neighbors; still, many of those neighbors refused from the start to have anything to do with them. After the ordeal, it got worse. “There are people saying that we’re mean,” Miadana complained – the term she used, *masiaka*, “fierce, savage, cruel”, being one that is usually applied to ancestors, and particularly to her own ancestor in the great white tomb next to her own house, the one that people were really avoiding when they started staying away from that part of the village. Miadana’s complaint expresses perfectly the fusion of ancestor and descendant

that was the real basis of people's chariness in having her around. They did not really distinguish between the power of slave-holding ancestors and modern bureaucrats. They were considered to be essentially the same thing.

The historical traditions I collected didn't have much to say about the colonial period. But stories about the precolonial past, and particularly, those about masters and slaves, can be read as veritable meditations on the nature of coercive power. This was an even more fundamental way in which coercion had become embedded in the structure of daily experience: the very existence of a division between "black" and "white" people is seen as testimony to a history of violence. In Betafo, both groups suddenly found themselves confronting each other within in a *de facto* Autonomous Zone¹³, a place where the props of state violence have suddenly been kicked away. The result was a political struggle; in the end, a major political confrontation.

But as the story of the ordeal makes clear, this struggle was not carried out by anything we would consider conventional political means. True, there were periodic elections. Most black people were adherents of the ruling party (AREMA), most white ones, to the theoretically pro-Soviet AKFM. But no one took party politics very seriously. Formal political institutions, in a place like Betafo, had become almost meaningless. This was largely because people saw the organizational techniques they were based on, techniques that would have to be employed to create or maintain any broad, openly political alternative organizations, as intrinsically coercive, or anyway foreign, which came down to basically the same thing. The accustomed strategy of dealing with power was to fend it off and try to establish an autonomous, Malagasy domain outside its sight – one sheltered from the "political" domain and the threat of violence on which it was based. The result was that, when state-sponsored institutions began withering away, new ones did not arise to replace them¹⁴. With no overtly political sphere, or none to speak of, politics had to be conducted through other means. As a result, everything became political. Particularly, everything "Malagasy." Manipulating stories, interpreting dreams, making veiled hints about the possible extent of one's magical powers, preventing others from eating garlic, claiming credit for freak acts of weather – such things became the principle medium of politics.

I doubt that Betafo is a unique community. Clearly there are many communities like it in Madagascar. But one wonders if there might not be hundreds, even thousands, of similar communities across the world, communities which have effectively withdrawn or drifted off from the control of national governments and become effectively self-governing, but whose members are still performing the external forms and tokens of obeisance in order to disguise that fact. It is something of an irony that it is only when "anarchy", in the sense of the breakdown of state power, breaks down into violence and destruction—as in the case of, say, Somalia

in the early '90s—that we actually hear about it. The case of Betafo suggests that for every case like that, there are hundreds outsiders never hear about it, precisely because they manage the transition peacefully. The inhabitants of Betafo, after all, might have been at each other's throats in all sorts of figurative ways, but they were certainly not at each other's throats literally. They lived, in effect, in a provisional autonomous zone; and while such zones are by definition fragile and ephemeral, liable to be overwhelmed at any time by a new infusion of guns and money, and the reestablishment of state power, since 1990 two different revolutionary regimes have attempted to reassert themselves and by all indications, communities like Betafo remain effectively independent.

NOTAS

- 1 There are other reasons too: the sheer number of Zanadrano, or mediums, who tend to collect in any town the size of Arivonimamo; the fact that mediumship is organized on a regional basis with pilgrimage sites that very much follow the road network, and so on. For most of the time I was in Arivonimamo I was also living with a household headed by a noted local curer, which provided obvious advantages.
- 2 All Malagasy are of mixed Afro-Asian descent, but “white” Merina tend to make much of the fact they all have straight or wavy hair; “black people” (who are assumed to be descended of slaves taken from the coast) do not. In fact, roughly half the black people I knew did have straight or wavy hair, so you can’t necessarily tell by looking at someone. Armand’s family and friends however were unusually African in appearance, as certain of the snootier townspeople were fond of pointing out.
- 3 A fokontany was the smallest administrative division: this office would, in colonial times, been called “chef du village”.
- 4 All extensive quotes that are not from written texts are my translation from the original Malagasy. The original Malagasy texts are available in an appendix to my dissertation (Graeber 1996).
- 5 Combined, according to other accounts, with a driving hailstorm.
- 6 The way she put it also provides a nice illustration of how ancestral character becomes fused with that of their living descendants.
- 7 Actually he says, “a compulsory political organization with continuous operations” that does this.
- 8 In Arivonimamo there was one man with a gendarme’s uniform who would occasionally rent himself out to money-lenders or merchants to intimidate people into paying debts, or surrendering collateral. An acquaintance of mine from Betafo was terrified one day when he showed up in the company of a notorious loan-shark – even after his neighbors explained to him that the man could hardly be a real gendarme, because even if you could find an officer willing to trudge out into the country on such a trivial matter, lending money at interest was against the law and a real gendarme would have had more cause to arrest his creditor than he. The case only underlines how little the forces of order cared about economic affairs: usually, there is little that irritates police more than someone impersonating an officer. It strikes at the very essence of their authority. But this impostor confined his activities to a domain in which the gendarmes had no interest.
- 9 Some took it to remarkable extremes. French officials in charge of dealing with the Tsimihety, a people of northern Madagascar complained that if one tried to recruit labor at some village, the elders would always seem perfectly accommodating; but as often as not the next time one came to visit the entire village would be gone (Wilson 1992:29)
- 10 The gendarmes’ occasional zeal in pursuing bandits probably did have something to do with a perception that they were the only organized, armed group that had the capacity to form the nucleus of a rebellion – unlikely though that might have been. There had been times, mainly in the last century, when bandits actually had turned into rebels. But I suspect the concern was rooted in deeper understandings about what a state was all about: under the Merina Kingdom, bandits (referred to in official documents simply as *fahavalo*, “the enemy”) were, along with witches, the archetypal anti-state, that which legitimate royal authority defined itself against.
- 11 Medical services for instance were in theory provided free, but had been effectively privatized by corruption, which, in turn, became universal once government salaries declined to next to nothing.
- 12 The practice had fallen into desuetude for most of this century, it was undergoing a widespread revival in the ‘80s. I even heard rumors that some fokonolona had secretly revived the use of tangena – the notorious poison-ordeal abandoned since the 19th century – though I wasn’t able to confirm them.
- 13 In contemporary anarchist circles it has become common to talk of “TAZ”s, “temporary autonomous zones” (Hakim Bey 1991). The idea is that, while there may no longer be any place on earth entirely uncolonized by State and Capital, power is not completely monolithic: there are always temporary cracks and fissures, ephemeral spaces in which self-organized communities can and do continually emerge like eruptions, covert uprisings. Free spaces flicker into existence and then pass away. If nothing else, they provide constant testimony to the fact that alternatives are still conceivable, that human possibilities are never fixed. In rural

Imerina, it might be better to talk about a “provisional autonomous zone”, rather than a “temporary” one: in part, to emphasize that it does not stand quite so defiantly outside power as the image of a TAZ implies; but also, because there is no reason to necessarily assume its independence is all that temporary. Betafo, even to a large extent Arivonimamo, stood outside the direct control of the state apparatus: even if the people who live there passed back and forth between them and zones, such as the capital, which are very much under the domination of the state.

- 14 A few educated people – particularly Armand, and fellow members of the MFM, a party founded with the intention of creating grassroots democratic institutions – would clearly have liked to try; but proposals for creating cooperatives and similar initiatives tended to receive the same response as government initiatives had before: everyone would agree, and then go about their business as if the whole thing had never happened.

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Catastrophe: Magic and History in Rural Madagascar

ABSTRACT

The essay recounts the beginning of my fieldwork in a Malagasy rural community an hour's drive from the capital of Antananarivo in 1990. The community itself was, at the time I arrived, locked in a kind of intense symbolic warfare between *andriana* – descended from what might be called a noble clan – and *mainity*, the descendants of their former slaves. The struggle took on all the more significance when I came to understand that the Malagasy state had, for most intents and purposes, effectively withdrawn from such rural communities, but that members of those communities were engaged in a subtle game of appropriation of the representatives of what was seen as a predatory and coercive state power so as to fend it off, a habit that made the fact that rural communities were now effectively self-governing very difficult to perceive.

KEY WORDS: Madagascar, state, rural communities, conflict

Catástrofe: Magia e História em Madagascar Rural

RESUMO

O ensaio trata do início de meu trabalho de campo, em 1990, em uma comunidade rural malgaxe, localizada a uma hora por carro da capital Antananarivo. A comunidade estava, naquela época, tomada por uma intensa guerra simbólica entre *andriana* – descendentes do que se pode chamar clã nobre – e *mainity*, descendentes dos ex-escravos daqueles. A luta ganhou ainda mais significado quando percebi que o estado malgaxe tinha, por vários interesses e propósitos, se retirado de comunidades rurais como aquela, mas membros delas estavam engajados em um jogo sutil de apropriação da representação do que era visto como um poder estatal predatório e coercitivo, de modo a defender-se dele, um hábito que tornou muito difícil de perceber o fato de que comunidades rurais estavam efetivamente se auto governando.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Madagascar, estado, comunidades rurais, conflito