

THE RIGHTS AND WRONGS OF LOIN-WASHING

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Among the Karembola of southern Madagascar¹, a woman is entitled to demand a sacrifice to purify her body when her husband sleeps with a 'stranger', a woman unrelated to the wife. This paper describes some of the cultural values that lie behind the practice of 'loin-washing' (*sasa valahañe*), and seeks to understand why Karembola represent this simple rite in contradictory ways. It relates these contradictions to broader paradoxes in Karembola communities, and in so doing highlights the contribution women make to local political and social processes through their sexual politics and exchange relationships.

The contradictions in Karembola representations of loin-washing are as follows. On the one hand, when I asked Karembola to explain why women seek to wash their loins of other women, they explained that it is because they are *npirahambañe*, 'people of different kinds'. This, I shall show, aligns loin-washing with all that is positive in local political culture because of the great value Karembola place on ancestry. Indeed, I argue that it is in no small part through woman-to-woman activities like loin-washing that Karembola give material expression to their belief that the world is constituted by 'kinds of people', that is, bounded descent-groups.

On the other hand, these ritual loin-washings are an exclusively female practice and are often characterised as typical of women's spite. As such, the activity is negatively valued: it is represented as being

¹ The Karembola live in the arid south of Madagascar on the limestone plateau that runs south from the little administrative and market town of Beloha to the sea. There is a predominantly subsistence economy based on the hoe agriculture of manioc, maize and sweet potatoes and the herding of zebu cattle and goats. Never one of the officially recognised ethnicities of Madagascar, the Karembola have much in common with their better-known neighbours, the 'Mahafale' to the west and the 'Tandroy' to the north and east. To emphasise their cultural and political interstitiality, they define themselves as the 'in-between people' (*ondate añivo*).

driven by an antisocial, individualistic sentiment which threatens to break the bonds between Karembola village communities, and which the counsel of wise men must keep in check.

It is of course not uncommon for anthropologists to uncover multilayered, often contradictory, constructs of gender in the societies they study. The way they respond to such complexity, however, differs markedly (cf. Sanday & Goodenough, 1990). Some seek to order the multiple imagery they encounter according to a structuralist logic of hierarchy and encompassment that owes much to Dumont. Others suggest that the contradictions might be understood if they were shown to be correlated with significant aspects of the political and economic structure of the society concerned (Collier and Rosaldo, 1981). Yet others argue that conflicting representations of gender exist, and that it would be mistaken to try to reconcile them in one unified cultural model (e.g., Bloch, 1987; Astuti, 1993). Finally, there are those who also rule out the possibility of final resolution, but then focus on the dynamic movement of actors as they negotiate the contradictions of their lived in worlds (Comaroff, 1987). It is this last approach that I have found most helpful in the analysis of my field data relating to loin-washing.

In this paper, I argue that the contradictions in Karembola constructs of women's role in loin-washing should be read against broader dialectical processes at play in the Karembola political community, and that the contradictions are irresolvable because hostility and peace-making are equally necessary parts of Karembola political life. To make my argument, I draw on those scholars who, applying Sahlins' famous essay on the sociology of primitive exchange to the analysis of New Guinea cultures, argue that our discipline has tended to neglect the hostile, often violent, side of exchange dynamics (cf. Brown, 1979 ; Whitehead, 1987). In his essay, Sahlins presents a continuum of forms of reciprocity that typically appear in tribal systems : this ranges from altruistic helping (sharing) among a close in-group through carefully balanced giving among the not so close to the types of negative reciprocity (chicanery, theft, sorcery accusations, vendettas) that obtain between those who are most alienated from (or disappointed in) one another (1972a, 1972b). In theory, the 'negative' reciprocity is as much part of a system of reciprocities as is the 'positive'. In practice, however, as Whitehead observes, 'some of the best-known articulators of exchange theory - Lévi-Strauss and even at points Sahlins himself - tend to confine their theoretical speculations to the peaceful side of exchange dynamics' (1987 : 256). The contribution of scholars working on New Guinea communities has been to treat both ends of the continuum as equally necessary parts of political life (cf. Schiefflin, 1976 ; Lemonnier, 1990).

As in New Guinea, the formation of politically solidary units and subunits is one of the central dynamics in the formation of the Karembola political community, and these are, in an important sense, constituted through exchange. Those who define themselves as one kind are found pooling their resources in opposition to other "kinds", and this opposition takes the form of exchange relations: hostile, friendly, or oscillating between the two (Whitehead, 1986; Schwimmer, 1973). The social process is essentially fluid: each point along the continuum represents a form of reciprocity, and relations between any two social entities can shift in either direction. Or as Brown (1979) puts it in his study of Polopa feasting and warfare, blows turn into gifts and gifts into blows in the 'flow of social life'. Contradictory constructs of Karembola women's role in loin-washing, I argue, make sense when viewed in terms of their articulation with this flux and flow.

The value of such an approach is that it moves beyond the documentation of contradictory imagery of gender to look at action in the world, thereby leading us to appreciate more fully the importance of the actor and of the individual social field. In turn, this approach highlights the agency of individual Karembola women positioned in contradictory social fields (cf. Comaroff, 1987). From this perspective, narratives about women and how they manage their social bonds, emerge as the basic stuff of Karembola politics. Just as the alternately peaceful and violent encounters of men are said to be the essence of political life in New Guinea (cf. Collier and Rosaldo, 1981), so Karembola women's acts of 'social creation' - some hostile, some co-operative - are constitutive of the 'flow of social life'.

To develop this model, I begin with the symbolism and politics of loin-washing as seen from one woman's perspective

Pengelina's Complaints¹

As we sat together shelling groundnuts in the clearing before her house, Pengelina catalogued her husband's infidelities at length. Like most Karembola men, Manjo liked chasing women; in fact, he went with other women all the time. Why, only some weeks previous, Pengelina had caught him in flagrante delicto with a woman from a village below the escarpment, far away². Pengelina had reported her discovery to her agnates, and they had gathered the elders together to hear the plaint. A long, often very heated, series of village councils

¹ The names of villages and persons are pseudonyms, although the events took place exactly as described.

² Pengelina had tracked her errant husband just as men track cattle that stray. I was taken aback by how quickly villagers became familiar with my own tracks and could trace out my movements.

(*zaka*) had followed¹, as a result of which Pengelina had been awarded a cow to compensate her for her husband's adultery (*mitaha*) and a goat to make the sacrifice 'to wash her thighs' (*manasa fe*)².

Pengelina had brought two complaints to the village tribunal. The first had been that the other woman had 'stolen a husband' (*mangalatse ty valin-ondate*). 'I'm the husband-owner' (*tompon-baly*), she explained, 'so I am entitled to compensation in the case of theft'. Her second complaint had been that 'the stuff of this foreign woman was polluting' (*mañiva ty raha ampela rahambañe*); contact with the alien vaginal mucus carried back by her husband's penis had made Pengelina unclean.

To understand what Pengelina was saying about her husband's activity and its effect upon her person, we need to know a little more about how Karembola view sex and marriage. As Collier and Rosaldo (1981) observe, men and women everywhere may resent their spouse's adultery but the terms on which they do so will differ between cultures. To begin with, then, I should explain that for Karembola the ideal marriage is between agnates (*fanambaliañe anak'mpirahalahe*, lit., the marriage of brothers' children). 'Brotherhood is marrying' (*firahalahate, fivaliahe*), Karembola say, 'brother and sister are husband and wife' (*mpivaly, mpirahalahe*)³. Epitomized by the union of children of actual brothers, this also includes the marriage, more broadly, of 'people of one hamlet', that is to say, close agnates. Among the many reasons Karembola praise this type of marriage is the fact that it unites 'people of one kind'. 'Nothing different, nothing other,' they say, 'all are of one kind.'

While 'kind' or 'ancestry' (*karazana*) has always figured prominently in the anthropological literature on Madagascar (Lavondès, 1967; Huntington, 1988), recent scholarship has moved away from the essentialist models borrowed from Africanists to more fluid, even performative, models of kinship and descent. It is now said that for most Malagasy peoples, as in Austronesia generally (Fox, 1987), descent identity is at most a possibility, created from *valo raza*, 'eight sides', cognatic kinship (Southall, 1971; Bloch, 1993:

¹ Karembola *zaka* - councils or assemblies which meet to settle disputes - are robust, impassioned, volatile affairs, unlike the highly formalised and largely predictable *kabary* which Bloch (1975), and to a lesser extent, Keenan (1975), describe for the Merina.

² In addition, Manjo had to give a cow to apologise to Pengelina's father, because it was he who as Manjo's FB had inherited Manjo after Manjo's father died.

³ Karembola relationship terminology differs in significant respects from those recorded for other Malagasy peoples, partly on account of its agnatic cast. One feature of this is the way opposite sex siblings and opposite sex patrilineal parallel cousins are termed *mpirahalahe*.

Graeber, 1995; Lambek & Walsh, 1997). Indeed, it has been argued for the Merina and the Vezo that a person is really only kindred, that is, grouped in exclusive, bounded ancestries, in the tomb (Bloch, 1971; Astuti, 1995).

Karembola take a different view of the person, seeing themselves as having exclusive, bounded identities based on agnatic descent. 'Ancestry', they say, 'comes through fathers' (*karazañe avy ama ty rae*), and, moreover, shapes the living person in important ways: where they reside, and how they marry, whom they respect, and who sacrifices on their behalf. The belief that there are 'kinds of people' (*karazañe ondate*) is basic to Karembola cultural practice, and a concern with documenting the 'kindness of people' permeates the rituals Karembola perform and the narratives they tell about themselves, including those around loin-washing, as we shall see. This is why I describe the Karembola polity as a polity imagined around kind. As in many Middle East cultures with agnatic ideologies (Bourdieu, 1977; Abu-Lughod, 1986), this sense of being kindred is both expressed and reaffirmed in marriages between close agnates¹. Pengelina and Manjo had themselves made such a marriage as patrilineal parallel cousins, the children of actual brothers.

The value Karembola set on demonstrating the consubstantiality of agnates goes beyond their setting up house together as husband and wife. As in many parts of Madagascar, terms like *fivalia* or *fanambaliañe* have broader referents than the English term 'marriage', denoting sexual partnerings as much as formal unions. So when Karembola declare that 'brotherhood is pairing', they mean not only that agnates should marry but that sets of agnates of the same generation should continue to sleep together, even after they are married, in the constant exchange of bodily substance. For us Karembola, Pengelina explained, it is ancestral custom (*lilin-drazañe*) that 'sisters, i.e., kinswomen, share husbands' (*mitraoke valy mpirahavave*) and 'brothers, i.e., kinsmen, share wives' (*mitraoke valy mpirahalahe*). All are 'owners of the spouse' (*sambe tompom-baly*). Thus, Pengelina continued, if her husband had slept with a 'sister', i.e., an agnatic kinswoman, it would not have mattered for a sister's body 'is still of the self' (*tsy mañahe fa mbo an-teña*). In this instance, Pengelina would have sought no compensation nor would she have felt herself polluted in any way. Indeed, in the indigenous cultural logic of dispute, she would 'have no grievance to put to the village council' (*tsy manan-zakañe*). For 'agnates own each other'. They 'eat' or 'consume one another' (*mifampihomañe*). They 'spouse-share' (*mifakahaze valy*).

¹ Esoavelomandroso (1980) notes a similar marriage preference for the Temilahehe of the Mahafale Plateau.

The problem with Manjo, however, was that he refused to confine his attentions to female agnates and agnates' wives. He went with 'other women', beyond the hamlet. This could only cause difficulties for Pengelina. For if agnates 'know how to swop partners because they are consubstantial' (*mahay mifanalia valy fa raha raike avao*), the corollary is that those who are strangers 'know not how to share' (*tsy mahay miharo*). This is why Karembola expect hostility of women like Pengelina and her husband's lover(s) from beyond the hamlet. Such women, they say, are rivals (*mpiravetro*) because they are of different kinds.

Being kindred means more to Karembola than simply belonging to named, corporate groups, with consequent jural rights, for something happened to Pengelina's body when her husband went with the stranger. The filth brought back by Manjo upon his penis had defiled her body, and made her sick. This is why a goat had been slaughtered, and husband and wife had trodden upon the blood. Like other sacrifices performed to effect the separation (*eferañe*) of things which ought not to mix, this had 'purified their bodies' (*hifikifike ry vata'e*), while reiterating for the public record that 'they and the other woman were of different kinds' (*tsy miharo karazañe ama'e*)¹. Afterwards, Taratasy explained, the husband is no longer free to 'visit' the other women, that is, have sexual relations with her. In effect, the rite marks out the boundaries between kin and stranger by creating a kind of taboo (*faly*). Besides, she added, a sense of pride would make his erstwhile partner and her kin shun him because, by agreeing to the loin-washing, he has 'rejected their very self' (*malain-anteña*). Sensing that I was finding it hard to grasp the connections Karembola make between sex and kinship, Taratasy explained again. 'Wouldn't you be insulted to learn that a lover had made a sacrifice to purify his thighs of you? Kin don't revile one another; so to treat a person's substance as *tiva* ('polluting') is to say they're not kin².'

Already, then, local discourse on loin-washing conjoins both ends of Sahlin's continuum of different types of exchange. At one end, there is the positive type of reciprocity, conceptualized by Karembola as the sharing of partners, and thus of bodily substance, that characterises relations between 'people of one kind', 'people who

¹ As a result, the meat is tainted and has either to be discarded or given away. When people want to eat the goat meat, they substitute a chicken in the loin-washing sacrifice, and throw away its carcase, and then kill the goat in a 'blessing' sacrifice.

² The use of terms like *mañiva* ('to make unclean', 'to defile', 'to desecrate'), drawn from the pan-Malagasy vocabulary of hierarchy, implies that the contrast Karembola draw between sharing and not sharing relates not simply to difference of ancestry but also carries connotations of differential rank. This issue is discussed at length in Middleton, n.d..

are typically close' (*mpifohe*). At the other end, there is the negative type of reciprocity, defined as the refusal or inability to share partners and bodily substance, that characterises relations between non-agnates. As elements in a culturally constituted value system, these oppositions, are vital to the construction of descent identities in the Karembola because, as in many parts of New Guinea, the kindness of people is created as much through performances in the present stressing contrast with other kinds as by reference to the past¹. Describing the formation and resolution of oppositions, both friendly and hostile, as the process of Kaluli social life, Schieffelin observes that 'it is not groups that produce oppositions so much as oppositions that crystallise groups' (1976 : 223). Likewise, Karembola politics are the highly volatile politics of confrontation. The difference, however, is that whereas the politics of positive and negative reciprocities are predominately the domain of men in New Guinea (cf. Collier and Rosaldo, 1981), Karembola women's management of their exchange relationships to other women, both hostile and friendly, play a primary part in the flow of political life.

Body, Gender, and Kind

I want now to begin to document the contradictions in Karembola representations of loin-washing, by looking at how the practice relates to sameness and difference between women and men. In keeping with a greater emphasis on complexity and multiplicity in constructs of gender, recent contributions to 'gendered anthropology' have highlighted the importance of studying sameness as well as difference between women and men (e.g., Atkinson, 1990; Yanagisako and Collier, 1987; Moore 1993; Astuti, 1993). Taking this argument one step further, Howell and Melhuus (1993 : 45) suggest it is equally important to look for differences between women. Since gender is as much about same-sex relations as it is about cross-sex relations, they argue, 'within any one society, we must be open to the possibility that persons of the same sex are not necessarily of a kind'. What will become clear as we explore loin-washing from this perspective is the complex, fluid interplay of Karembola constructs of gender and kind even around this apparently simple rite (cf. Middleton in press).

¹ In so far as they picture themselves arranged in named patrilineal lineages, envisaged as the sub-units of clans, the formal model Karembola hold of their society has much in common with that described for the Afomarolahy, a Tandroy group, by Heurtebize (1986). However, whereas Afomarolahy appear to draw primarily on genealogy in the construction of agnatic descent identities, the Karembola, as this essay shows, place an equal emphasis upon body and exchange practice in the here-and-now (e.g., endogamy, spouse sharing).

In its most obvious sense, Karembola discourse on loin-washing stresses the primacy of kind. According to this discourse, people have ancestries and this ancestry encompasses their bodies too. It is because bodies and bodily products are kindred, that they are inassimilable, and mutually hostile. Or as Pengelina expressed it, 'the stuff of other people, of those who are not kin, is polluting because it is not of the self whereas a sister's [substance] doesn't matter because it is still one's own, my body'¹. For Karembola, descent identity permeates the living body, linking together those of one substance and separating those of different kinds².

The emphasis Karembola place upon ancestry has crucial consequences for Karembola constructions of gender because in many important ways it means that kind comes between people of the same sex. 'Although they [Pengelina and her rival] are both women, they are divided by kinds' (*sambe ampela feie sambe manan' ty karaza'e*, lit., 'each has her kind'). What they have in common as women becomes the other's 'filthy, alien substance' because they are not agnates (*fa tsy sambe mpirae*, 'not related through fathers')³. They cannot tolerate that which makes them alike. As a matter of fact, beliefs in the kindedness of women, and the power of bodily difference to pollute, extend far beyond exchanges of vaginal mucus to encompass bodily products of all kinds. All the bodily fluids - the menstrual flow, breast-milk, post-partum fluids, excrement, and urine - are said by Karembola to 'be kindred' (*manan-karaza'ne*, 'to have ancestries') because they are 'rooted' or 'owned' (*manan-tompo'e*, lit. each has its owner). This essential 'kindedness' of bodily substance has importance for everyday because it makes unrelated women reluctant to assist each other in childbirth or to nurse each other's child. As *mpirahamba'ne*, people belonging to opposed kinds, these women know not how to exchange bodily substances. They simply cannot incorporate aspects of the other into the self.

It is without doubt the great emphasis Karembola place upon the kindedness of women that gives Karembola women their central and culturally recognised role in the public domain. For if, as I noted,

¹ *Raha ondate hafa, raha tsy longo teña, tiva, veta fa raha tsy an-teña: feie ty rahayave teña, tsy mampañahe fa mbo an-teña, mbo vatako avao.*

² The obvious contrast here is with the Vezo described by Astuti (1995) who see themselves as kindred only when their corpses lie in the tomb.

³ Again, the interplay of kindedness and gender in Karembola cultural practice can be elucidated through comparison with the Vezo ethnography. At first sight, Vezo and Karembola cultures appear rather similar to the extent that both downplay the difference between men and women (see Astuti, 1993). However, while Vezo downplay gender difference in order to be unkinded, Karembola play down gender difference in order to heighten kind.

ancestry is the focus of Karembola political activity, and if the kindedness of people is constantly created through performances that emphasise otherness, loin-washing is but one of innumerable instances when women appear in inter-communal disputes as the embodiment of kind (Middleton, n.d.)¹. Female rivalry figures strongly in the Karembola social imaginary, with narratives about the seemingly interpersonal encounters of 'kinded' women forming the core of the narratives Karembola tell about themselves. In this way, idioms of kindedness inform and shape the interactions of individual women, while the rivalry of individual women in turn gives material form to the notion of kind.

If Karembola accentuate differences between unrelated women in order to heighten a sense of kind, a corresponding feature of their culture is that they often play down difference between male and female agnates. Their keenness to link together men and women as people of one kind is clearly implicit in the practice of 'eating one another', i.e., sleeping and marrying together. It is also evident in the way that menstrual taboos, for instance, are felt to be less *mahery* (maleficent) between male and female agnates than between strangers. In this sense, loin-washing is part of a broader cultural practice which holds women to be more at risk from contact with bodily fluids of stranger-women than men are from their female agnates.

It would not be true, however, to say that gender has no significance for 'people of one kind'. To begin with, it would be important to take account of the fact that loin-washing rituals are an exclusively female practice, peculiar to the claims and counter-claims of women. While men also seek compensation when they discover or suspect their partner's adultery with a stranger, they do not 'wash the loins' of their adulterous wives. At first sight, this asymmetry appears to suggest that Karembola men are concerned solely with property rights in adultery disputes with outsiders, and that their bodies are impervious to sexual pollution by foreign substance. This, however, is puzzling given that Karembola explain the practice of loin-washing in terms of the antipathy of people of different kinds. If loin-washing is grounded in the kindedness of bodies and bodily products, why do men, who surely are the epitome of kinded people (i.e., agnates), not also seek to wash their loins of the filthy substance of stranger men? Why was Manjo able to go with the unrelated woman while Pengelina

¹ My data conflict with Decary's (1933 : 222) report that the husband's adultery is of no consequence, and ought in principle to be tolerated by a woman.

felt herself polluted by his act? Does it mean that Karembola women's bodies are more bounded or less bounded than men's bodies¹? Or that female bodily products are more kinded or less kinded than men's? What makes for this difference between male and female agnates?

Actually, when I asked Karembola to explain why only women seek to loin-wash, they seldom, if ever, invoked gendered bodily difference. Rather they turned to the characteristics of women's minds. Loin-washing is women's business, one man commented, because women are *masiake*, 'spiteful', 'angry', 'jealous', 'malicious'. Of course, this view of Karembola women as 'bad-minded' (*heren-kavia*, *heren'ampela*, lit. 'left-sided') runs counter to the primary discourse that Karembola carry out on loin-washing, viz., that women wash the loins of other women because they are of different kinds, a discourse which, as I noted, aligns their activity with all that is good and noble because of the high value Karembola put on kind. I shall subsequently say more about this ambivalence.

Focusing for the moment on the body, however, let us trace out a parallel gender asymmetry in body practice. As many informants pointed out, the term *manasa valahañe* ('to wash the loins') actually has two meanings because, in addition to the ritual loin-washings, it describes the everyday genital ablutions women perform. Similar practices, I understand, are observed by women throughout Madagascar², although Karembola practice seems singular in one respect. Even now that the wells created under the first Ratsiraka government have made water more freely available³, Karembola women fear that using only water will make their loins slack and cold. As a matter of fact, Karembola women feel rather anxious about their vaginas, dreading they will be found sloppy and too wet (*malalake*, *be*

¹ In fact, Karembola men are not concerned simply with property issues in their disputes concerning adultery because their bodies are vulnerable to the condition known as *hamen-boky*, sex-polluted food. I discuss this, and the broader issue of how gendered bodies are used in the practice of constructing descent identities, in my forthcoming monograph. There is of course an extensive literature on women's body as symbol from Douglas's (1966) classic to more recent work (e.g., Boddy, 1989; Broch-Due, Rudie & Bleie, 1993).

² Philip Thomas (pers. comm.) and Jennifer Cole (pers. comm. 11/12/97) report from their fieldwork among the Antaimanambondro of the South-East and the Betsimisaraka of the East Coast respectively that local women emphasised the need to wash their genitals 'all the time'. They both add that informants claimed that Merina women do not share in this practice.

³ According to Decary (1933 : 77), the women of this arid region did not wash their 'parties intimes', believing that 'des ablutions un peu répétées seraient un obstacle à leur fécondité'.

rano). They know and use all kinds of herbal treatments, garnered from the xerophilous forest, to tighten the vagina (*tery*), making it dry (*maike*) and hard (*ga*). This is supposed to give a woman advantages over potential rivals for a husband's or lover's affections, by pleasing the man. At the same time, it appears to involve an element of masculinizing what is female, by making what is wet and soft, hard and dry.

The 'gendering' of female agnates in cultures with patrilineal ideologies, especially those that, by the practice of endogamy, seek to encompass agnates of both sexes in a male kind, generally makes for fascinating cultural practice precisely because it involves articulating two contradictory pulls: the femaleness of women as women and their maleness as agnates (cf. Abu-Lughod, 1986; Bourdieu, 1977). In many cultures, one finds that this tension is worked out in body practice. Among Somalis, for instance, the female body is subjected to particularly harsh treatment as people seek to transform women into 'pure' agnates (Talle, 1993). From this perspective, it is tempting to read the everyday genital ablutions of Karembola women as an (albeit 'soft') practice by which they strive to 'masculinize' ('kind') their bodies by ridding themselves of female wetness. This suggests some kind of parallel between the two kinds of loin-washings. Just as women emphasise their identity as agnates by purifying their bodies of other women's vaginal mucus in the ritual loin-washings, so in their everyday loin-washings they seek to rid themselves of their own female wetness. However, this also highlights the element of uncertainty in women's agnatic identity because, while the ritual loin-washings evidence a strong distaste for incorporating the female bodily substance of non-agnates, in their daily ablutions they turn their attention on a female bodily substance that lies within themselves.

To untangle the many paradoxes that lie behind the gender asymmetry in loin-washing and, more broadly, in the ways the female body is used by Karembola as a key site in which political struggles and the embodiment of local ideals are played out, would take us far beyond the scope of this paper. I shall make only two points here. First, whatever the tangled logic that lies behind the asymmetry in loin-washing, the practical consequence is that the female body serves in inter-communal disputes as the embodied symbol of bounded, agnatic groups. But secondly, the fact that the loin-washing sacrifice is peculiar to women also means that it is not simply about kind. Ostensibly about how people are kinded, loin-washing is, more subtly, about gender: sameness and difference between agnates. It simultaneously expresses both the valued kindedness of women and what makes them women rather than men.

Of course this double *entendre* makes sense for Karembola cannot fully negate gender in favour of kind because the way Karembola are kinded depends upon gender difference since 'ancestry

lies on the father's side'. Karembola, I argue (Middleton in press), experience considerable difficulty in balancing the avowed consubstantiality of men and women as 'people related through fathers' (*sambe mpirae*), the 'descendants of men' (*enta ty lahe*), against the gender difference that is implied in an ideology of patrilineal descent. Thus, while gender is supposed to make little or no difference between agnates in many contexts, in certain key domains for the production of descent identities, notably, sacrifice and priesthood, the difference between men and women is fundamental and absolute.

The power to speak

Another context in which gender makes a significant difference is in the dispute process itself. I indicated that Karembola envisage their *zaka* primarily as the confrontation of opposed kinds of people, and that many of these confrontations rest on cases arising from conflicts between women. It is, therefore, doubly curious that the *mpizaka* - the elders who debate and settle matters of inter-community interest - are always men. Karembola give a number of reasons for this asymmetry. First, people said that women do not become *mpizaka* because they have not learned the *lily*, the histories of the Karembola clans. Actually, many Karembola woman possess detailed knowledge of ancestries, and men often consult their wives on a point; but because women cannot be *mpizaka*, they are unable to display this knowledge in a public context. Secondly, people said that women's minds make them unsuitable to be *mpizaka*. They are too immature, too irresponsible and too quick to judge without weighing the evidence to be charged with settling disputes. Indeed, one way men have of making light of an opponent's speech-making is to dub it 'the words of children, the words of women' (*volan'ajaja, volan'ampela*), meaning that their opponent's words are superficial and ill-judged. 'Women's talk has little power' (*tsy manan-kery*), Karembola say, 'it's just talk' (*volam-bolañe avao*).

The inability of women to speak in public oratory (*mizaka*) has other important implications for gendered participation in the jural process because it means that women cannot bring cases on their own. For instance, to obtain compensation for her husband's adultery and to secure the loin-washing, Pengelina had been obliged to enlist the help of her agnates. This may seem somewhat paradoxical given that her entitlement is said to be enshrined in the *lilin-drazañe* ('the ancestral commands'), but it corresponds to other ways in which Karembola women are defined as jural minors. For instance, according to local cultural understandings, Karembola women are not held fully responsible for their misdemeanours; instead it is their male agnates who are held culpable. This asymmetry in the allocation of blame is

obvious in the settlement of adultery cases because when a woman sleeps with a stranger, her husband seeks compensation of her lover; but when a man sleeps with a stranger, it is he, and not his lover, the other woman, who must make the *taha* payment to his wife. This, Karembola explain, is because men are the active partners in sexual encounters. 'Is it not men who go courting?' 'Since when did women take men?' Of course, this contradicts Pengelina's view of the 'other woman' as having actively stolen her husband; but it is typical of the ways in which Karembola women are defined as jural minors.

Thus, Karembola imagery of gendered participation in the jural process discloses a curious mix of female passivity and active agency, of entitlement and dependency. This reinforces the strong bonds between women and their agnates by ensuring their co-operation in disputes. To display their knowledge in oratory, men depend upon women to quarrel. Conversely, women depend upon their menfolk to present their complaints. However, it reveals yet further paradoxes in the relationship of gender and kind. While disputes stemming from the kindedness of women form the core subject matter of village tribunals, these disputes cannot be ruled on by women. Difference of kind is held to overrule the likeness of women when village elders rule on loin-washings; but the organization of the jural process discloses profound differences between male and female agnates.

It is worth noting that the explanations Karembola give of gendered differences in jural status - that women are quick to anger, and lack the wisdom, self-control and maturity of men - are the very same reasons Karembola give for why only women loin-wash. And yet the fact remains that the predominant explanation Karembola give of loin-washing is that it is about kind.

Cutting the trailing stems of melons

Thus far, our study of loin-washing has shown Karembola to be a people intent on patrolling boundaries, a people driven to classify others as either kin or stranger on account of the emphasis their culture places on the creation of discrete, bounded descent identities. I shall now show how this pull towards producing exclusive descent identities meets with opposing social proclivities that accentuate the ambiguities around loin-washing, and most notably, the tensions in how Karembola view women and men.

The complaint brought by Pengelina had been relatively simple to settle because it involved a man, his sister-wife, and a woman who was stranger to both. Pengelina had witnessed the adultery in person, and

since no-one disputed her testimony¹, her rights in the matter were very clear. As her father observed tartly, when she had married her 'brother' (FBS), she had not agreed to share husbands with strangers : she had agreed only to share him with their own kin. 'Do stranger and kin tally ?' (*mindra vao ty rahambañe naho ty longo ?*), he asked the assembly rhetorically. Since no-one would challenge this basic cultural premiss, this 'ancestral dictate', it remained only to settle the size of the fines.

Owing to their clarity, cases like that brought by Pengelina against the unnamed stranger-woman figure as prototypical in local discourse on spouse ownership. We could describe them as expressing the 'norms' of Karembola culture. Or, in the simpler language advocated by Bloch (1992), we could say that Pengelina was describing what a 'sister' is like; what a 'stranger' is like. As logi-sentential propositions, these are the 'rules' that are invoked during the *zaka* that settle disputes (cf. Comaroff & Roberts, 1981). Few of the complaints that Karembola have to determine in practice, however, are as clear-cut. There are innumerable other scripts to follow because of the multiple ways Karembola are related amongst themselves. The case I shall now describe is more typical of the majority of cases that women bring.

The quarrel between Endeza'e and her husband had started when, learning of Botoringa's adultery with 'another woman', Endeza'e had refused to cook for three days. Even so Botoringa had persisted in 'roaming', so collecting together her dowry, Endeza'e had marched off home to her father's (*mandeha lefa*), cooking-pot upon her head, and mats rolled under her arms. Absconding to their natal hamlets is a recognised part of the 'script' that Karembola women follow when angered by their husband's behaviour. Its rationale is partly to underscore that a woman's good will is held by Karembola to be vital to the success of a marriage and partly to emphasise that, however far they travel in marriage, Karembola women always retain their ancestry. 'A woman always has fathers; her root is never broken; she can always draw on the support of her agnates'. The errant husband then follows to retrieve her, but her 'father people' refuse to let her go until he 'apologizes' (*mitaha*) with a handsome present, usually a cow or goats. By the time Botoringa showed up, however, Endeza'e was no longer content with a present, however handsome, but was insisting that he 'taboo' his lover for good with a ritual loin-washing.

The elders who set about determining Endeza'e's complaint soon uncovered a problem. Although Endeza'e and the other woman were unrelated, the other woman and Botoringa were kin. While they were

¹ A woman who suspects her husband's adultery with a stranger, but has no proof can, if, as sometimes happens, they deny it, subject them to an ordeal (*sangy*). These complicating factors is another reason why Karembola elders claim to find adultery disputes 'troublesome'.

not agnates - he was Tambala, she was Lavaheloke - they were distant cousins on their mothers' side (*mpirahalahe an-tanañe*, related through women stemming from one hamlet). A loin-washing would reaffirm the difference of ancestry that existed between Endeza'e and the woman but it would involve Botoringa tabooing a kinswoman. 'It's taboo to wash the loins of a woman with whom one shares ancestors,' Botoringa protested. 'Loin-washing is something one does to strangers, women far away. Is it not ancestral practice among us Karembola that a man can sleep with kin?' His agnates sympathised. If Endeza'e feels jealous of her 'co-wife'¹, one toothless, old woman from his village muttered, she should vent her anger in the way we all do : by sleeping with her husband in turn.

The plaint brought by Endeza'e had touched on a basic contradiction in the picture Karembola hold of themselves as one people divided into kinds. Karembola believe themselves to have exclusive, bounded identities based on agnatic descent, but the fact is, as the village elders reminded the assembly, that most Karembola are related (*mpilongo*) because their families have intermarried over time (*mifamotepotetse*). The constant movement of women in marriage between the various Karembola hamlets over the generations has created 'long, trailing stems of melons' (*voazavo lavalaly*) between them all. As a result, it could be said that all Karembola 'share ancestors' (*mizarazara razañe*), and to the extent that they share ancestors, they can be described as 'people of one kind' (*ondate karazañe raike*). Mandimbe stressed the long duration of the ties that made Karembola 'one people'. Had the various Karembola ancestries (*Tambala, Lavaheloke, Tetsiatreke, ...*) not shared 'one word, one spear' in battles against the 'Mahafale', long before the foreigners had come? (i.e., in pre-colonial times), he asked. Farezoke summed up the dilemma: 'I can only say, yes, all the Karembola ancestries are one people, one kind, but each of us also has its kind'².

For the elders, then, charged with settling the complaints of women, the boundary between 'kin' and 'stranger' is seldom as clear-cut as

¹ The term *rafe* is used by Karembola not only of co-wives in a polygynous union, but of all unrelated women who are expected to share husbands, including brothers' wives where the wives are not agnates.

² *Karazañe-Karembola, ondate raike, karazañe raike, feie sambe manan-karazañe zahay. Mboe mpilongo taloha; afara tsy mpilongo.* Comparing our data to Cole's (1997) study of Betsimisaraka sacrificial narratives, we might say that the competing narratives produced in the *zaka* following complaints made by women reflect the complexity of experience, the tangled bonds which produce conflicting rules for how people should behave, while the clarity of the brief speech that precedes the loin-washing shows how people have selected one among these narratives to re-order ancestry definitively.

local discourse on kindedness makes out. When people described Botinga as 'seeking another woman' (*mila ampela hafa*), the expression was intrinsically ambiguous. It might mean that he had slept with a complete stranger or simply a distant kinswoman in another hamlet. Beyond close agnates, 'people of one hamlet', the referents of terms like *longo* ('kin'), *rahavave* ('sister'), and *rahalaha* ('brother') are always uncertain and malleable. Thus, when Karembola insist that 'kin share spouses' (*mitrao-baly mpilongo*), it is unclear whether they mean that Botinga should sleep with all Karembola women, or simply with women of his own hamlet? How about his clanswomen? Or women of his wife's clan? To a great extent, 'kinship' for Karembola crystallizes around people of one hamlet, but to keep strictly to this definition of kinship would mean washing the loins of women in other hamlets, women with whom one shares ancestors, but who are not close agnates. If, on the other hand, these terms were to be given a bilateral (cognatic) definition, extending relatedness beyond the hamlet indiscriminately, what would happen to the value put on kind?

In effect, the simplicity of local discourse on loin-washing, with its transparent, unambiguous distinctions between kin and stranger, belies an enormous element of personal choice in the constitution of kinship bonds. For this reason, demanding and securing a loin-washing is almost always an intricate, negotiated process, whose outcome is seldom predetermined but inevitably of great significance to those concerned. Between those who are truly strangers, like Pengelina and the stranger below the escarpment, loin-washing simply reaffirms a pre-existing social distance. But in the majority of cases, the ritual marks the end of kinship, turning erstwhile kin into strangers. Loin-washing, as one man put it, 'alters ancestry' (*hañovañe razañe*) because it frequently involves 'disowning kin' (*manasa razañe*, lit., 'wash ancestry'). 'Beforehand both sides recognise their kinship; afterwards they do not'. As highly charged acts of taboo-making (cf. Lambek, 1992) that redefine interpersonal and inter-communal connections, loin-washing sacrifices also set important precedents for the settlement of disputes in the future on matters as diverse as mortuary payments, or the compensation that can be demanded when stray cattle damage crops. In effect, decisions around loin-washing become part of the *lily*, the body of traditions which subsequent *zaka* must take into account. Thus, although kindedness is supposed to be a fixed, essential attribute of the person, that is recorded in the *lily*, a form of knowledge monopolized by men, it is in fact shaped through activities defined as the province of 'jealous women'. It is because loin-washings effect important metamorphoses in socio-political relationships, that they, like all other acts of washing, require a sacrifice witnessed by the wider community (*fokonolo*), if they are to take proper effect.

I noted earlier that, asked to explain why only women seek loin-washings, Karembola replied that it is because women are *masiake*, jealous or spiteful. We now can see that one reason why women like Endeza'e are seen as *masiake* is because with their zest for loin-washing they often make enemies of kin. From this perspective, the practice of loin-washing is perhaps inevitably seen as an antisocial activity that is typical of women's bad-mindedness and their lack of self-control. As one man put it, men do not bother with loin-washing because 'they're superior and therefore in charge' (*lahilahy ty ambone; lahilahy ty mitondra*). Breaking the bonds between village communities, loin-washing becomes a gendered activity which men as *mpizaka* must keep in check.

And yet, as I indicated, Karembola also present loin-washing as stemming from a highly valued sense of kind. Indeed, Pengelina was also described to me as *masiake*; but in her case *masiake* meant more in the way of a righteous anger than malice and spite. Her 'jealousy' was upheld by the elders as a manifest expression of 'ancestral custom'. Her 'fierceness' (*hasia*) in taking action against the 'stranger' made her a 'person of worth'. Perhaps more to the point, however, even Endeza'e's *hasia* against her husband's kinswoman could be seen as a justified anger, at least from her and her own agnates' perspective. For in refusing to share her husband with a stranger, she too was acting on a sense of kind.

What is clear is that the category *ampela masiake*, 'fierce, jealous women', is a highly ambiguous category that fluctuates between a positive and negative interpretation of women's zest for loin-washing¹, and that this is partly because of the irresolvable contradictions that permeate Karembola imagery, not only of male and female agnates but of themselves as a people divided into kinds. Documenting kindedness may be the essence of socio-political activity, yet Karembola in search of 'many kin' (*maro longo*) also value cognatic bonds. There is a danger, however, is that too much cognatic kinship will leave everyone unkind, creating an undifferentiated world with no place for the special bonds between agnates. Indeed, in a sense, the closer Karembola become by marriage, the louder they need to shout about kind. This is why the greater part of Karembola ritual is oriented to the production of difference between hamlets that are otherwise indistinguishable.

Disputes between women constitute one very important element in this ongoing process of turning those who are in danger of becoming 'one (undifferentiated) people' back into opposed kinds. Significantly,

¹ The Oxford Dictionary likewise gives a range of meanings for 'jealousy': 'solicitous for preservation of (rights etc.); resentful towards another on account of known or suspected rivalry; envious (of person, his advantages, etc.); (Bibl., of God) intolerant of unfaithfulness.

people are said to *mitete razeãe* when they make a loin-washing, a term which has the sense of sorting out, disentangling, separating, and re-ordering ancestries that are becoming indistinct. In this sense, it is the *hasia* of women that helps keep Karembola kindred amongst themselves. Creating difference where there is only likeness, restoring boundaries that are becoming blurred, *masiake* women literally patrol the borders, actively constituting, deconstituting and reconstituting the 'kinds' that form the 'bones' of this imagined polity.

And yet even as female agnates enact this positive value, their behaviour is often construed as antisocial, typical of the ways in which women, even as agnates, differ from men. The politics of loin-washing therefore speak both to the deep ambivalence Karembola experience about sameness and difference between male and female agnates and to the paradoxes in Karembola imagery of themselves as one people composed of opposed kinds. We can see how one tension plays poignantly to the other as kindred women are blamed for severing the trailing stems of melons that their movement between hamlets creates.

Sisters and Wives

I have thus far explored the positive and negative aspects of women's *hasia* by focusing on disputes that arise when women respond to their husbands chasing women from other hamlets. I want now to explore this tension further by focusing on the situation of unrelated women who marry into one hamlet.

In certain respects, the problems of balancing kindredness against cognatic kinship affects both sexes because Karembola men also have to work out how to handle their wives' 'brothers', men who may not be related to themselves. However, there is one reason why the tensions are exaggerated in women's lives. This is because while the ideal is for agnates of both sexes to stay in the hamlet by marrying together, in practice the majority of marriages take place between hamlets, and when marriage takes place between hamlets, it is generally the woman who moves. This makes post-marital residence another context in which the difference between male and female agnates is often marked. It also, as Karembola explain, puts in-marrying women in a dilemma. As the wives of men who are 'brothers', they are expected to 'share husbands' on the pattern of 'sisters', yet because they are unrelated, they find it difficult to behave like agnates. They are not supposed to 'taboo' each other with loin-washings because their husbands, being 'brothers', are expected to share wives. Yet sharing husbands with women from other hamlets makes them angry, and inclined to fight, because as strangers they 'know not how to share'.

In another paper, I describe how Karembola elaborate this paradox - women who must share husbands because they are married to brothers but find this difficult because they are not themselves

agnates- into a core metaphor for their ceremonial exchange system (Middleton, n.d.). I show how Karembola weddings are in no small part structured around the confrontation of *mpiravetro*, women of different ancestries marrying into one hamlet, and how the bride and her sisters-in-law act out their inability as kindred people to incorporate aspects of the other during the wedding ceremony. I then show how the rivalry of in-marrying women subsequently provides a organising paradigm for the ceremonial exchanges that are hosted sequentially by Karembola hamlets during funerals and spirit-curing rites.

In their ceremonial exchange system, Karembola emphasize the sexual rivalry of in-marrying women of different kinds to the point that it becomes a positive, energizing force. The boasting of kindred women generates wealth and prestige for key participants, and helps to 'make Karembola feasts ripe' (*mahamasake havoria*). Imagery of female rivalry and female efficacy in this context is positive partly because the ritual encounter of rival ancestries is seen as appropriate to feasts. Feasts are therefore another context in which the positive aspects of women's *hasia* are highlighted.

However, the hostility between in-marrying women always has the potential to move in other, less appropriate directions, sometimes coming between a man and his agnates, and on occasion spilling over into physical or metaphysical violence. Let me begin with a case where an in-marrying woman's *hasia* threatened the valued bond between a man and his agnates.

Following the path to Lavapoty early one morning, I met Taratasy looking very tense. She had been accused by Soatabiry, she told me in a whisper, of planting medicines in Soatabiry's manioc field. She vehemently denied the allegation. Soatabiry had persisted with the charge, however, so that in the end to demonstrate her innocence Taratasy had agreed to undergo an ordeal. One of her brothers had supplied the goat for the ordeal, while Lahiboto. Soatabiry's husband, had provided another to feed all the people who had gathered to witness this serious event. The goat's feet had been tied together, its head turned to the east, and Iavimasy had struck it with a stick, calling on *Ndrifahannahare* to give power to the oath he pronounced. If in a week Taratasy was still alive, she would be proved innocent. If, however, she was guilty, then Iavimasy called down all kinds of dire punishments.

Let me explain a little of the background to this incident, to show how it is related to loinwashing. Soatabiry, a woman from Ivane, is married to Lahiboto. She is of the same clan as Lahiboto but of a different lineage and local hamlet. Taratasy, by contrast, is Lahiboto's actual FBD, that is, a 'sister-wife'; indeed, her younger sister was once married to Lahiboto and bore him four children. He had divorced her in order to marry Soatabiry, amidst many bitter recriminations from his agnates. This, according to villagers, had left a history of enduring

The feeling between the two women, of which the sorcery accusation was the latest manifestation. A key element in this narrative was that some years before, Soatabiry had persuaded Lahiboto to wash their loins of Taratasy¹. I had been told about this incident very early in the book by a number of informants, long before I knew what it meant; no-one bothered to explain it because they assumed that I would know how shocking it is to turn a man against his agnates. Then, when the accusation of sorcery surfaced, the loin-washing incident was again remembered by everyone in the village as a way of emphasising how *masiake* Soatabiry was, *masiake* in this instance denoting excessive spite².

An in-marrying wife often resents the long-standing, culturally validated intimacy that exists between her husband and his sister-wives; but even with her own agnates' backing she will not find it easy to persuade her husband to wash her loins of them. The fact that Lahiboto had gone along with his wife's wishes was seen as part of a long-standing pattern in which Lahiboto 'neglected his agnates in favour of his wife' (*ty valy avao ty hay*). The gist of their narratives was that Lahiboto was weak (*maleme*) and Soatabiry strong (*mahery*). He was characterised as a man who 'followed the wife' (*mañorike amp'ia*, i.e., like an uxorilocal man), overly under her control.

By turning to accusations of sorcery, Soatabiry had sought to transform public perceptions of herself. Her complaint was no longer that she wanted to wash her husband's loins of a FBD; but rather that Taetasy had sought to kill her, a brother's wife. No longer the spiteful sorcerer coming between agnates, Soatabiry now portrayed herself as the victim of Taratasy's unbridled hostility. She had phrased her complaint fully with local perceptions of unrelated women as people who are most likely to practice sorcery on one another because of their rivalry. If she could make the charge stick, she would be entitled to claim at least part of the customary blood-wealth of thirty cattle because sorcery counts as culpable homicide. Where Soatabiry misjudged the matter was in persuading Lahiboto, rather than her own agnates, to take up her complaint. That Lahiboto again agreed to take his wife's part against his 'sister' only confirmed in everyone's opinion how closely he followed his wife.

¹ The loin-washing incident ran parallel with Lahiboto's refusal to submit to the authority of those senior agnates who should have 'inherited' him after his own father's death, showing just how strongly women's rivalry figures as an idiom for kinship and ancestry.

² The problem of deciding the boundary between kin and strangers is especially acute for women like Volazaise and Taheza who stem from different hamlets but are of one clan. Given their tangled connections, it is no wonder that how women negotiate their personal relationships provides the subject for countless narratives.

One week later I met Taratasy again. 'You see, I was innocent,' she told me, 'the day has returned, I'm still living, my crops are still standing, my children are unharmed.' To make amends, her *poahy* noted, the *mpizaka* would make Lahiboto 'surrender' a good sized goat to Taheza and another to feed the people of Lavapoty who were 'salivating, eager to feast'. We can be sure, however, that this would not be the end of the women's rivalry. For the whole point about loin-washing is that it is but one of many strategies upon which female-rivals seize. What began as a loin-washing and then moved into sorcery, or alleged sorcery, would sooner or later find another path. Even when they have pushed their relationship into the most negative types of reciprocity (ordeals, sorcery), where nothing is shared, all is taboo, skirmishes between Soatabiry and Taratasy will continue to dominate the narratives people of Lavapoty tell about themselves, the jealousy of women in this instance acting as counterfoil to the agnatic ideal. As Brown (1979) observes, blows as much as gifts take the form of symmetrical partnerships.

I shall subsequently document a case where rivalry between two women resident in one hamlet moved into actual physical violence. First, however, I want to pick up on Brown's point about blows turning into gifts by showing how acts of negative reciprocity generate women's wealth.

Jealous in the Belly, Cattle in the Pens

As Pengelina told me of her battles with the unnamed stranger who had 'stolen' her husband, her words conveyed the great anger she had felt. She would willingly have killed this other woman, she confessed. The point of Pengelina's narrative, however, was to stress the speed with which this negative emotion had dissipated when her elders found in her favour: upon obtaining cattle in the *zaka*, she had been happy, freed of anger at last (*le nahazo anombe, le afahe losy ha aminzay*).

Karembola narratives always emphasise the emotional satisfaction to be derived from material compensation. Like grease upon a burn, the act of obtaining cattle, or simply of eating meat, is said to soothe the pain and anguish, restoring a sense of worth to hurt or, like transforming excessive anger into calm. Whenever we talked about quarrels, Karembola found it difficult to understand the great value my own culture placed on the verbal apology¹. How easy foreigners are, they protested, to say sorry and be done (*mifona ambava avana*, (the phrase *mora fomba vazaha* means both 'easy' and 'cheap'), 'well, you realize that people do not always mean what they say' (Geme-

¹ At least before American styles of litigation began to permeate this culture during the 1980s.

sighed deeply or put their fists to their mouths to express dumbfoundment. With us, the only way to make people regret their actions is to make them 'cough up wealth'. A person is truly sorry when made to 'surrender' what is dear.

Ethnographers (e.g., Decary, 1933; Guérin, 1977; Heurtebize, 1986) have long noted the importance of cattle to the Tandroy and Mahafale peoples both in religious contexts and as a determinant of honour and worth. They say little, though, about how the ownership of cattle relates to the articulation of individual and lineage, and even less about gendered access to cattle-wealth. Partly because they do not trace out the complex web of rights that generally exist in livestock and partly because cattle are herded on a daily basis by men, they have tended to assume that cattle are essentially men's property and have failed to recognise the possibility of female property rights in livestock. Indeed, on occasion, they have implied that in this region women are themselves a kind of property, albeit inferior to cattle, that is owned by men.

For Karembola, cattle are the visible embodiment of *hasy*, a term encompassing ancestral blessing, power, and prestige, and the ownership of cattle is said to make a person *masiñe*, 'efficacious', 'blessed', 'powerful'. As kindred people, Karembola women are able to own cattle. Indeed, as 'masters of the household' (*tompon-traño*)¹, their rights in the property of the house established by their marriage, partly in the form of endowment by their kin, are recognised and protected by customary law. These rights can be seen most sharply in the structure of polygynous households, when each house is generally established as a separate entity, whose property (fields and cattle) cannot be appropriated by the husband, or by a co-wife, but devolves on the children of that house alone².

In many ways, what I am describing bears a strong resemblance to the 'house-property complex' of African ethnography (cf. Gluckman, 1950; Kuper, 1982). Concerned with the implications of this institution for the position of women, Oboler argues that a frequently overlooked aspect is that it distributes to women well defined rights in the property designated as their house property (1994 : 342). It is clearly beyond the scope of this paper to describe the Karembola 'house-property' complex in detail, or to explore its relationship to

¹ I signal in passing the close overlap Karembola see between the woman's body and her house. As 'master of the house', a woman may receive almost any man there without it mattering, so long as the relationship is not incestuous in Karembola terms. If, however, Manjo had admitted his lover to Pengelina's dwelling, he would had to make an additional sacrifice to purify her house as well as her thighs.

² Thus, a man cannot 'apologize' (*mitaha*) with cattle taken from the wife's own stock or with money that she holds as 'master' of the house.

Karembola social organization more generally. What we can say, however, is that the cattle women win in the course of disputes with other women are theirs to keep and use as they please, and, moreover, that the kind of 'sexual politics' I have been describing constitutes one way in which Karembola women build upon their endowment, thereby constituting themselves as 'persons of worth' (*ondate fanonjeheñe*).

To underscore the significance of the wealth transacted during women's 'sexual politics', it is worth noting that this is an arid region prone to frequent drought where cattle-herding requires a heavy investment of male labour, especially in the austral winter but more so in times of drought, when men must take the herds to pasture and water, and grill cactus cladodes on skewers over fires to feed the stock. In these circumstances, the material gains to be made through negative, extractive plaints of adultery, bodily pollution, and sorcery are by no means insignificant. Indeed, litigation constitutes an attractive, if risky, short-cut to augmenting a herd. More crucially, because of the gender asymmetries in the politico-jural process I outlined earlier, Karembola women are peculiarly well-placed to benefit materially, because while a woman can sue for compensation (in the case of a husband's adultery, or an attempt at sorcery), she cannot herself be sued.

Astuti (n.d.) describes the pleasure Vezo women take in the market, setting risk against gain as they trade in fish. What Pengelina's narrative about tracking down her errant husband, bringing him before the elders, making him taboo his lover, and obtaining a handsome apology, makes clear is that for Karembola women litigation can generate an equal satisfaction. Certainly, as for the Vezo women traders, this activity carries risk: there are bad days when a plaint against a stranger fails, or when a woman cannot persuade her agnates to support her case. This is balanced by the sense of achievement, however, when a woman manages to secure a loin-washing and another cow or goat stands in the pen. At the same time, the data underscore the key cultural difference between Vezo and Karembola: for the arena in which Karembola women seek self-

fulfillment is structured by idioms of kindedness, expressed as rights in kinded people and as kinded bodies hostile to foreign substance¹.

In this section, I have shown how the wealth generated in the course of negative reciprocity is an important aspect of women's hostility. Sometimes, this sexual politics generates acts of extreme violence and substantial wealth settlements, as I shall now show.

Taheza's Bloodwealth

In the second spring of fieldwork, a murder took place in Marotsifa, a Tetsiatreke-Karembola village to the north. Within the day, people following the paths that criss-cross the Karembola plateau had carried the news to almost every village of how Taheza, a woman from Ivane who had married into Marotsifa, had been killed by her sister-in-law. By all accounts, the latter, a woman of Marotsifa who had married endogamously, had been unable to withstand the practice of sharing husbands that went with being brothers' wives. Having tried at one point to wash her and her husband's loins of Taheza, the anger had grown 'within her belly' until one day she had stabbed her 'co-wife' many times over, mutilating her face and mouth.

The accused had been arrested soon after by the police from Beloha, and sent for trial at Fort-Dauphin where she eventually received a prison sentence. To this extent, the event was removed from local management into the hands of the Malagasy state. What interested me, however, was the way Karembola drew on 'ancestral custom', as they put it, to keep the event in their own parallel domain, managing and shaping it according to local cultural meanings. According to local cultural practice, the murder of one Karembola by another puts their two families in a state of feud. Thus, soon after news of the murder had reached Ivane, the deceased's natal village, runners had been sent out to every other Lavaheloke village, with the result that in a short while hundreds of Lavaheloke men had massed to the west of Marotsifa. Saotse laughed as he recounted how the men of Marotsifa, including one who prided himself on being a great orator,

¹ The fact that Vezo put kindedness in the tomb while Karembola (try to) put it into the living person creates more than a formal difference between the two cultures. Placed in the tomb, kindedness is for Vezo little other than 'a shadow [cast] over the living person' (Astuti, 1995: 92); it is woven only tangentially into the texture of everyday life. For Karembola, by contrast, because kind is placed in living person, everyday social interactions, including bodily acts and gift exchanges, are read as though they bear on the construction of kind. As this paper shows, Karembola social life has dense, complex texture because they have to negotiate a balance between kindedness and unkindedness in life. It is much simpler to resolve the clash between kindedness and unkindedness as the Vezo do by locating them in different worlds (the living and the dead).

had cowered in their houses at this show of strength. The men of Marotsifa soon agreed to enter negotiations during which over subsequent weeks they were forced to pay the customary blood-wealth (*tafara* or *vilin-dio*, 'the price of blood') of thirty head of cattle to the dead woman's agnates. (The payment is identical for both sexes.)

What happened helps explain why women's complaints are taken seriously by Karembola communities, and why people say adultery disputes between strangers can easily lead to bloodshed. It also underscores some of the paradoxes in how Karembola experience kind. On the one hand, the ability to mobilize the eight Lavaheloke lineages underscores the contemporary strength of agnatic idioms in the Karembola, and their capacity to cut across cognatic kinship. Indeed, as Peters (1967) points out, the possibility of feud depends upon there being clear-cut families. And yet the whole point of the subsequent *zaka* was to settle the matter by 'ancestral custom', i.e., the payment of blood wealth, so that the various Karembola ancestries could be reconciled. As one man put it, how can those who intermarry, between whose hamlets women walk, be unable to share water and food? Thus, again we witness a to-and-fro movement in Karembola imagery of themselves: female rivalry divides Karembola into kinds yet the payment of blood-wealth makes them 'one people' again¹.

I should add that the blood-wealth which the dead woman's agnates obtained was not theirs to keep. It was Tahcza's blood-money, compensation for her death. Like *fandofo*, the meat of livestock killed in funerals, wergild is taboo to those who are related to the deceased. Its horns belong on the tomb, and its meat must be given away. For Karembola, as for other southern Malagasy peoples, cattle are especially important in funerals, where the ideal is 'to bury with wealth' (*mandevñe an-panañe*). Burying with wealth means slaughtering cattle to provide horns to decorate the great, stone tomb and to supply meat to feed the crowds who come to 'witness the death'. The show of wealth is supposed to appease the *lolo*'s grief and anger, again, like grease upon a burn. On the whole, rather less is spent on the funerals of Karembola women than of men, however, once more highlighting differences between people of one kind. A woman's tomb is generally smaller, and the number of horns is proportionately less. In this instance, however, there were thirty head of cattle to be spent in honouring the dead woman, in building her tomb, and in feeding the crowds. Consequently, over the coming weeks as all the cattle produced by this act of female violence were slaughtered or expended

¹ The contrast here is with the Tankitre, their traditional enemies among the 'Mahafale', with whom no bloodwealth is payable and with whom Karembola are in perpetual feud. Yet the payment also underscores their division into kinds since blood-wealth is also not payable between agnates: homicide among people of one kind counts as 'the clay-pot breaking as millet cooks' (*valañe vakiañe an'ampemba*).

on the funeral, the *lolo* could look on with pride. She had become *milaza* ('celebrated') in the Karembola in the course of rivalry with a woman of another kind.

Fierce, jealous women

In this paper, I have sought to explain the contradictory nature of Karembola representations of loin-washing by showing how it is embedded in a broader social dialectic: between kind and cognatic kinship, between hostility and peacemaking, between sameness and difference in women and men. Taken together, the case-studies I have presented show how closely loin-washing is bound to other kinds of negative reciprocities (sorcery, murder, ordeals), and how together they constitute a repertoire of behaviours by which Karembola women (and men) seek to manage their relationships, define their identities, exercise power, and accumulate wealth in the context of fluid, dialectical political processes.

The constant oscillation between kindedness and unkindedness, inclusion and exclusion explains why Karembola models of gendered agency in the 'flow of social life' are ambivalent. Women fight because they are kinded; and as such their hostility is an expression of ancestral values. With the help of their agnates, they translate their fights into wealth for themselves. If, however, their rivalry moves into sorcery, or spills over into physical violence, or simply comes between agnates, it becomes gendered as women's spite. Men of authority (*ondate be*) must then make the peace between communities, transforming women's violence into bloodwealth payments with words. As blows turn into gifts and gifts into blows, so kindedness moves into gender and back into kind.

One consequence of a conflicted order is the strength it gives to the individual field. Or as Comaroff and Roberts put it for a rather similar culture in southern Africa, 'since the construction of Tshidi society made relations inherently ambiguous and contradictory, Tshidi could not but act on their world, and so appear as social managers' (1981: 53). The case-studies I have presented show not only that Karembola women seek to negotiate the highly fluid, overlapping linkages to their own advantage; but that the way they manage these

linkages are in an important sense constitutive of the flow of Karembola political life¹. Although I have focused on women's hostility in this essay, Karembola models of female personhood also stress the potential of women for friendship and compassion. This is of course implicit in the argument I have been making: the decision to taboo another women is also the possibility of deciding to share husbands and be friends. Running the full gamut from sociality to enmity, the hostile and extortionate behaviour of female rivals contrasts with the solidary bonds that form the basis for extensive wealth exchange networks (known as *fikambañe*) between those who define themselves as kinswomen (Middleton, n.d.).

I should like to end this paper by noting that powerful beings or political superiors in Madagascar - notably, *mpanjaka* and ancestors - are often represented as *masiake*, and that their *hasia* is also ambivalent, typically having both negative and positive aspects (Délivré, 1974; Feeley-Harnik, 1982; Graeber, 1995). Constitutive of the social order, their fierceness also has a greedy, antisocial element that can as easily undermine it. Significantly, the term *mitete razañe* ('to count', 'to reorder ancestries') also has close historical associations with *mpanjaka* because in many parts of Madagascar, it is they who were pictured as giving out ancestries; in effect, they constituted society by dividing their subjects into kinds². Would it be farfetched to see certain parallels between the *hasia* of *mpanjaka* and the practices of loin-washing I have described? Certainly, as this paper shows, Karembola view women's *hasia* as having the power both to order the world by kinding it and to overturn it in its violent form.

The category *ampela masiake*, 'fierce, jealous women', sums up the irresolvable tensions that attend loin-washing as a political act. As its meaning shifts from a righteous anger sanctioned by the ancestors to an antisocial malice that fractures ancestral bonds, it expresses the negative and positive roles women play in the creation of social bonds. Either way, the critical role *masiake* women play in the Karembola imaginary makes them 'people who count'.

¹ One of the challenges in Karembola ethnography lies in understanding how a local cultural discourse that presents descent identity as an ascriptive, essential attribute of the person coexists with the evident fact that the 'kindness' of people is in no small part continuously constituted and deconstituted through the practice of social relations (cf. Sahlins, 1985). This point is discussed at length in my forthcoming monograph.

² As 'maîtres des ancêtres de leurs sujets et gardiens vivants de la loi', writes Raison-Jourde, 'ils peuvent en chaque début de règne parcourir les généalogies (*mitety razana*) et réorganiser, s'ils le jugent nécessaire, la position de tel ou tel groupe de descendants au sein de l'ordonnement complexe de la société' (Raison-Jourde, 1983 : 39).

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ABSTRACT

Among the Karembola of southern Madagascar, a woman is entitled to demand a sacrifice to purify her body when her husband sleeps with a 'stranger', a woman unrelated to the wife. This paper explores the significance of 'loin-washing' (*sasa valahañe*) for local cultural practice around gender, body, and ancestry. It argues that many of the contradictions in Karembola representations of women's role in loin-washing make sense when read against broader dialectical processes at play in the Karembola political community, and that women's management of their exchange relationships with other women, both friendly and hostile, is in an important sense constitutive of the flow of Karembola political life.

RESUME

Chez les Karembola de l'Extrême Sud de Madagascar, une femme a le droit de demander un sacrifice pour purifier son corps lorsque son mari a dormi avec une "étrangère", c'est-à-dire une femme qui n'a aucune relation de parenté avec la sienne. Cet article décrit des valeurs culturelles sous-jacentes à cette pratique de "lavage des reins" (*sasa valahañe*) et analyse la signification pour les constructions intellectuelles karembola du genre, du corps et de l'ancestralité.

Cet article montre que les femmes karembola sont, comme des hommes, marquées par l'ancestralité : si elles exigent ce sacrifice, c'est parce que des substances corporelles des femmes d'autres groupes agnatiques leur sont pernicieuses. Dans cette perspective, on voit que le "lavage des reins" est pour les Karembola l'une des façons de vivre la conviction profonde que le monde est constitué de groupes de descendance agnatiques distinctes. Pourtant, en même temps, cette image positive des femmes est niée quand les Karembola disent que la pratique du "lavage des reins" est le résultat de la malveillance des femmes.

L'article examine les raisons de ces deux représentations du "lavage des reins", et trouve que les contradictions sont compréhensibles si l'on prend en

compte des processus dialectiques plus étendus des communautés villageoises *karembola*. Le lavage des reins a ces deux connotations négative et positive parce que la vie vécue *karembola* elle-même fluctue entre une identité fondée sur la différence de filiation ("kindness") et une autre qui ignore ces différences ("unkindness"), entre l'hostilité et la paix, et entre les différences et les ressemblances des hommes et des femmes.

En examinant un certain nombre d'études de cas, l'article montre que la décision d'une femme de partager son mari avec d'autres femmes, ou bien d'insister pour qu'il fasse le lavage des reins, fait partie d'un système plus large de la réciprocité. Je suggère que la manière dans laquelle des femmes *karembola* gèrent leurs relations échangistes avec d'autres femmes, qu'elles soient paisibles ou hostiles, constitue une part importante du flux de la vie politique *karembola*.

Cette étude de la catégorie d'*ampela masiake* - une catégorie qui comprend une variété de significations et d'évaluations, qui va de la colère justifiée sanctionnée par les ancêtres jusqu'à la malveillance antisociale débridée - montre bien les contradictions qui entourent la pratique *karembola* du lavage des reins, et aussi la capacité d'agir que les femmes *karembola* sont censées posséder.

FAMINTINANA

Any amin'ny Karembola, monina any amin'ny faritra farany atsimon'ny Nosy, dia afaka mangataka sorona handiovany ny vatany ny vehivavy rehefa nanana firaisana tamin'ny vehivavy hafa (tsy manana rohim-pihavanana aminy) ny vadiny.

Manoritsoritra ny soa toavina hita ao amin'izany fomba "fanasana valahana" izany ity lahatsoratra ity, ary manadihady ihany koa ny momba ny fiheveran'ny Karembola mikasika ny lahy sy vavy, ny vatana ary ny firazanana. Mampiseho ity lahatsoratra ity fa ireo vehivavy Karembola ireo, tahaka ireo lehilahy ihany koa, dia voafaritry ny firazanana. Raha mitaky io sorona io izy dia satria ireo tsirim-batan'ny vehivavy avy amin'ny fokon-dray hafa dia misoko ohatra ny rongisa ihany. Araka izany dia azo heverina fa ny "fanasana valahana" dia fomba iray ahafahan'izy ireo mino marina fa izao tontolo izao dia ivondronan'ny tarika avy amin'ny fokon-dray samy hafa. Voafafa anefa izany sary tsara izany rehefa mihevitra ry zareo fa ny "fanasana valahana" dia vokatry ny haratsiam-panahin'ny vehivavy.

Mandinika ihany koa ny mahatonga ireo fiheverana roa momba ny "fanasana valahana" ireo ity lahatsoratra ity. Hitany ary mihamazava ireo fifanoherana roa ireo, raha toa raisina ny fivoatran'ny fiaraha-monina manontolo. Mivoy lafin-kevitra ratsy sy tsara ny "fanasana valahana" satria ny fiainana iainan'ny Karembola mihitsy no mivezivezy eo anelanelan'ny maha-izy azy ary mifototra amin'ny fahasamihafan'ny fihavanana sy ny maha-izy azy iray izay tsy mahalala izany fahasamihafana izany, eo anelanelan'ny fifandrafiana sy ny

fandriampahalemana, eo anelanelan'ireo fahasamihafana sy fitovian'ireo lehilahy sy ireo vehivavy.

Vokatry ny fandalinana ohatra vitsivitsy, dia asehon'ity lahatsoratra ity fa ny fanapahan-kevitra ny vehivavy iray hizara ny vadiny amin'ireo vehivavy hafa, na koa ny fanantitranterany ny tokony hanaovan'izy ireo "fanasana valahana" dia tafiditra ao anatin'ny rafi-pifanakalozana atero ka alao malaladalaka kokoa. Heveriko fa ny fomba hitantanan'ireo vehivavy Karembola ny fifandraisam-panakalozana amin'ireo vehivavy hafa, na milamina na mikorontana dia ampahany iray lehibe eo amin'ny fizotran'ny fiainana politika Karembola.

Ity fandinihana ireo karazam-behivavy atao hoe *ampela masiaka*, izay mitory hevitra sy fijery maro samy hafa, hatramin'ny hatezerana mitombina voasazin'ireo razana ka hatramin'ny akasomparana fanoheram-piaraha-monina goragora dia mampiseho ireo fifanoherana misy ao amin'ny "fanasana valahana" ary ny fahefa-manapaka heverina fa ananan'ireo vehivavy Karembola.