

**LA GROSSESSE, LA NAISSANCE**  
***PREGNANCY AND BIRTH***

## ROYAL AFFAIRS AND THE POWER OF (FICTIVE) KIN : MEDIUMSHIP, MATERNITY, AND THE CONTEMPORARY POLITICS OF BEMAZAVA IDENTITY

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### Introduction : The problems of migrant status

This article addresses the problematics of identity in the context of migration. The setting is Ambanja, a booming migrant town in the northwest, which is the commercial center for the Sambirano Valley, a lush and prosperous plantation region<sup>1</sup>. Over the past seventy years the Sambirano has experienced a steady influx of migrants from other regions of the island. Here insiders, who are the indigenous Bemazava-Sakalava, and outsiders, or other Malagasy speakers, vie for access to local resources and power structures. To accomplish this goal, migrants seek to become enmeshed in local networks and, ultimately, accepted as insiders (*tera-tany*) by local Bemazava. The Bemazava,

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<sup>1</sup> The data reported here were collected primarily throughout 1987, when I conducted dissertation field research in the Sambirano Valley. Funding for this project was provided by a Fulbright-Hayes DDRA Fellowship (No. G00864345), the Lowie Fund of the University of California, Berkeley, the Sigma Xi Foundation, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. This work focused primarily on the dynamics of tromba possession. It is complemented in part by additional data collected more recently during three briefer seasons of research in 1993, 1994, and 1995. This additional work has been made possible through generous support from the American Philosophical Society, a Butler University Academic Grant, as well as the Joint Committee on African Studies of the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Ford Foundation. I would also like to thank Ramamonjisoa Suzy, Rakotoarisoa Jean-Aimé, and Fanony Fulgence for their guidance at different stages of these various projects, as well as Maman'i'F., the R. family, and the many informants within and beyond the Sambirano Valley for their patience and interest. This piece is dedicated to the memory of Rakotovololona Hilarion, a gifted demographer and a very dear friend. If it were not for him, I might never have ventured to Ambanja in 1987.

however, are wary of strangers (*vahiny*)<sup>1</sup>. As with other Malagasy, Bemazava concepts of insider status are defined through symbolic ties to local land and kinship, and this enables them to exclude outsiders. Thus, friendship and even marriage provide weak social links. There are, however, two Bemazava cultural institutions which have experienced significant changes in the latter part of this century, and they now facilitate the incorporation of outsiders into the local community: these are *tromba* spirit possession and post-partum practices. Complex forms of fictive kinship associated with each enable migrants to transform their identities. Both possession and post-partum practices are almost exclusively female domains, and, interestingly, there are no comparable institutions for men. As a result, it is migrant women who may more readily experience the advantages of insider status, gaining access to land and other resources. Ultimately, they may become involved in important local institutions dominated by Bemazava. In this article I will elaborate on this dynamic involving women, migration, and power.

The Sambirano reveals patterns characteristic of other areas of Franco- and Anglophone Africa, where, since the turn of the century, colonial policies led to the forced relocation of indigenous peoples and the subsequent migration of others to foreign-owned plantations and industries. The analysis of the effects of forced relocation and labor migration has a long history in the anthropology of Africa. Classics include research conducted in central Africa during the 1940s and 1950s (Colson, 1971 ; Richards, 1951 ; Epstein, 1958 ; Powdermaker, 1962). More recent studies from southern African, for example, continue to explore the effects of urbanization, the difficulties of shantytown life, and the status of the migrant back home (Bozzoli, 1991; Comaroff, 1985; Hansen, 1989; Mayer, 1971; Meillassoux, 1968, 1982; Murray, 1981).

Recurrent themes appear in the literature on migration. First, most notably they emphasize migration's disruptive effects, exploring how it undermines cultural institutions such as social organization, and threatens economic well-being and self-sufficiency. In these contexts migrants are portrayed as vulnerable, marginal, and victimized. In this same vein, in anthropology we give greater attention and weight to material concerns than we do to the resilient aspects of culture. Kinship studies in particular have fallen to the wayside. As I will show here, fictive kinship in northern Madagascar has surprising integrative effects on social relations in a seemingly fragmented community. Second, although we may make note of symbolic institutions, we repeatedly overlook their potential, long-lasting effects.

Finally, women are often left out of the picture entirely: their absence in much of the literature leads us to assume that they do not

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<sup>1</sup> The reasons for this are complicated and will be explained below.

define a significant portion of migrants, or, if they are mentioned, they appear because they have accompanied their migrating spouses (for notable exceptions see Bozzoli, 1991 ; Hansen, 1989). More often, women are described as those left behind or as those active in what is assumed to be the less significant informal economic sector. In the last two decades, studies from Latin America and Asia reveal that women now form a significant proportion of the world's industrial labor force (cf. Nash and Fernandez-Kelly, eds., 1983 ; Ong, 1987). Still, we know little about their experiences in the migration process. Generally, women and their children are portrayed as the most vulnerable of the vulnerable, for they are seen as dependent on men for their well-being ; K. Little (1973) and B. Bozzoli (1991) are among the few who have written on the liberating effects of migration for African women. In this same vein, many Malagasy migrants are in fact women who have relocated on their own to towns throughout the island. In Ambanja, women do indeed arrive alone, and they are often more likely to settle permanently than are men, who generally bear the burden of supporting extended networks of kin who live elsewhere<sup>1</sup>.

Given these limitations that characterize anthropological writings, how might we begin to explore in greater depth the elasticity and resiliency of culture rather than its destruction ? What specifically does Madagascar have to offer to a scholarly understanding of migration ? How might we delve into the politics of culture and its empowering qualities ? As the Comaroffs have argued, in order to understand the dynamics of power we must grant legitimacy to the force of local determination (J. Comaroff, 1988 ; J. and J. Comaroff, 1993). Thus, where might we find evidence of an indigenous understanding of the dynamics of migration and the ability to cope with polyculturalism ? Can these processes be understood through symbolic systems ? Through kinship ? How might these factors have long-lasting effects on identity ? In what ways do they affect particular ethnic groups ? or women versus men ?

To understand these issues in Ambanja, it is necessary to explore, first, Bemazava notions of identity to see how these then affect migrants and the dynamic of polyculturalism. As Nigerian poet Wole Soyinka has stressed, the Yoruba have three worlds, that of the living, the dead, and the unborn (public address, 1994). Similarly, Bemazava collective identity is defined by a continuum consisting of the ancestors, the living, and their young progeny. These three "generational" groups are in turn linked to local notions of time and

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<sup>1</sup> Women who do forward remittances elsewhere are generally single mothers, who send funds regularly to their aging, widowed mothers in other towns or villages. These older women bear the responsibility of raising their own grandchildren. Young mothers migrate to larger towns to find lucrative work; unfortunately, this necessitates that they live apart from their children.

space specifically in reference to the local territory of the Sambirano, where Bemazava and their rulers (*ampanjakabe*) are or will be entombed. Spirit possession and post-partum practices define the poles of this continuum: *tromba* possession, on the one hand, involves the spirits of dead Bemazava (and, more generally, Sakalava) royalty, and this links the living to the ancestors and the land; post-partum practices, on the other hand, tie the living and their offspring to the future use of the land. To illustrate the manner in which these two institutions operate symbolically to incorporate migrants, we must explore three levels of this world: the community and its territory; *tromba* possession; and post-partum practices. As will be shown, fictive kinship is a key mechanism that defines the dynamic of that process.

### **I. *Ny olo sy ny tany* : The people and the land**

Before we can begin to explore the relationship between gender and social integration, we must first examine local conceptions of territory, and how these shape identity. The territory of the Sambirano Valley most certainly has a problematic – and thus contradictory – status, for it is simultaneously a prosperous plantation region and a Bemazava kingdom. As the northernmost territory of Madagascar's numerous Sakalava dynasties, the Sambirano has been the sacred ancestral land or *tanindrazana* for the Bemazava since their arrival in the area in 1820, the kingdom established by their founding ruler Andriantompomeniarivo who died a year later. As a plantation region, it is also home to a wide variety of other more recent settlers.

The exploitation and development of the Sambirano into a site of large scale economic production has its roots in colonial policy. Following conquest in 1895-6, French soldiers were given substantial plots of land as rewards for their service; when their attempts at farming failed, other foreign-born planters (particularly from the Mascarenes) quickly moved in and bought up soldiers' holdings. As Pailiard (1983-4 : 366) has argued, "la vallée du Sambirano était la région la plus menacée par l'intrusion de la colonisation agricole", for between 1894 and 1904, over 600 000 hectares were alienated from the Bemazava (Koerner 1968:168, as cited in Baré, 1980 : 72). Within the first decade of this century, much of the Valley was planted in pepper, manioc and sugar cane, crops which more recently have given way to coffee, cocoa, and perfume plants such as ylang-ylang. The claims of these planters were rendered permanent through systematic activities of professional surveyors. To facilitate foreign controlled economic development, the Bemazava were forced to live on indigenous reserves (*reserves indigènes*) that were located inland within the cramped, steep, hilly regions of the upper Sambirano. Bemazava royalty, on the other hand, were at first isolated in villages near the seacoast; later in the century, however, they were forced to

relocate to the newly formed town of Ambanja, where colonial officers could keep a close watch on the royal residence (*zomba*) from a neighbouring hilltop. Today the early plantations have grown into massive holdings generally referred to as *entreprises* that spatially dominate much of the Valley's terrain (for more details on the history of the Sambirano and neighbouring Sakalava territory see Baré, 1980 ; Dalmond, 1840 ; Duruy, 1897 ; Gueunier, 1991-2 ; Mellis, 1938 ; Noël, 1843-4 ; Paillard, 1983-4, 1991-2 ; Poirier, 1939 ; and Raison-Jourde, ed. 1983)<sup>1</sup>.

As was the case throughout Madagascar and, more generally, colonized Africa, the French colonial government relied on taxation and *corvée* work to produce ready sources of surplus labour. Ironically, however, as a result of local colonial policies, the Bemazava were able to retain access to some arable land, and thus avoid working for despised foreign planters. To pay taxes, for example, they resorted to selling their prized cattle and turned to cash cropping, both of which proved successful strategies for generating income. As a result, planters had to seek labor elsewhere: by the early 1920s Antandroy prisoners were shipped from the south to work these northern fields. The colonial government also began an aggressive recruitment campaign, encouraging young men from less fertile and prosperous areas to migrate north. Among the first migrants to arrive on their own were Antaimoro and Betsileo. Since then this fertile Valley has attracted ever-increasing numbers of migrants. Today Ambanja has a population of just under 30,000, and its size has doubled every ten years since 1950 (Andriamihamina et al., 1987:21), making it in many ways a social microcosm of Madagascar as a whole. Migrants come here to "seek their fortunes" (*hitady harena*), some travelling on foot for 1000 kilometers or more. These non-Bemazava migrants comprise approximately 50 % of the town's population, and today nearly every ethnic group (including Malagasy- and non-Malagasy speakers) are represented here, each having carved out areas of economic specialization for themselves. If grossly generalized, Antandroy, for example, often work as guardians, cattle herders, and vegetable merchants; Betsileo and Vakinankaratra are travelling merchants (*mpivarotra-mandeha*); Tsimihety are seasonal laborers; educated Betsileo and Merina dominate the positions as directors of enterprises and local banks; and Comoreans, Chinese, Yemenis, and Indians make up the bulk of the town's merchants. Nevertheless, when groups are distinguished individually by ethnic origin they are far outnumbered by the Bemazava, who define the other 50 % of the town's population.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1987, when the bulk of the data reported here were collected, the *entreprises* (or, as I will write this in English, "enterprises") were state-run farms, as was characteristic of the Deuxième République under former President Ratsiraka. Under President Zafy Albert, many, once again, became privatized.

Bemazava continue to dominate access to private land holdings; the Firaïsaïa and Fivondronana; and, through royal prerogative, they shape the direction of any further development of much coveted lands that lie within the borders of this kingdom (Sharp, 1993 : 165 ff).

As Charles Keyes (1981) has noted, ethnic identity is often defined in reference to a shared historical past and the occupation of common territory, and this is true for the Bemazava. The Sambirano is the *tanindrazana* for the northern Bemazava, a claim legitimated by the placement of royal ancestral tombs on the smaller offshore island of Nosy Faly. From a Bemazava point of view, the local enterprises and ever-increasing influx of migrants are a growing threat to this sacred territory and ultimately to Bemazava collective identity. As both a fertile plantation region and ancestral territory, the Valley's land is the most valuable resource both in economic and symbolic terms. Whereas national policy enables Bemazava to maintain control over remaining cultivable plots through ancestral claims, land continues to be a source of great conflict: in the local courts, for instance, approximately 75 percent of all cases filed each year involve land disputes.

Thus, there is considerable tension between different social groups. As the Bemazava of the Sambirano often state, in contrast to migrants, they are "people who do not move" (*oly tsy mandeha*)<sup>1</sup>. Although one's ethnicity, region of origin, and religion serve as important markers of difference, far more important is the distinction drawn between insiders (*tera-tany*) and outsiders (*valiny*), or indigenous Bemazava and non-Bemazava migrants. To be Bemazava in this community is important, since, as mentioned above, it is Bemazava who control access to remaining land and the better (non-enterprise) jobs; they also hold sway in the local government and courts. Migrants struggle for access to these power structures and their associated local services and resources. Typical of the migrant experience worldwide, in order to accomplish these goals they must become enmeshed in strong and extensive local networks.

Land provides the idiom for distinguishing insiders from outsiders. The term *tera-tany* specifies insider status; it, along with its other local equivalents (including *tompon-tany*, *tsaiky ny tany*, *tsaiky ny Sambirano*), designate that one is a "master", "possessor", or "child of the soil". In the strictest sense, these terms refer exclusively to indigenous Bemazava. As is true throughout Madagascar, the term "*valiny*" means "guest", or "visitor"; in the northwest, though, it is applied more specifically to migrants. As Cohen (1969) has argued in

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to stress that this definition appears to be a localized one regarding what it means to be Bemazava (and, more broadly, Sakalava). As Feeley-Harnik (1991 : 231ff.) reports, the Sakalava of Analalava, in contrast, describe themselves as people who *do* move.

his study of the Hausa of northern Nigeria, migrants may have different statuses depending on their length of stay and sentimental ties to their new home. In the Sambirano, to some extent length of stay and material wealth may affect one's position in local arenas of influence, yet, ultimately, indigenous Bemazava notions of power require that one be symbolically rooted to the land. Thus, here in Ambanja, the category of *vahiny* is applied equally to short-term migrants, permanent settlers, and migrants' children who were born in the region. The label of "*vahiny*" frustrates many long-term migrants or settlers, for even someone whose kin have been established in the Sambirano for as much as three generations (and who have chosen to build their tombs locally, thus claiming the Sambirano as their *tanindrazana*) are still unable to shake the label of "*vahiny*". From a Bemazava point of view, all *vahiny* remain temporary visitors who have no legitimate claim to the land, since their original ancestors are located in tombs in other parts of the island.

Bemazava identity also hinges on kinship: in the past, affinal and consanguinal ties guaranteed the continuance of Bemazava culture. As Bloch (1994 [1971]) has illustrated for the Merina, ethnic endogamy is the rule, and the same may be said for the Bemazava. Thus, contrary to what Lévi-Strauss (1969) has argued in reference to alliance theory, for the Bemazava, to marry out is to die out. Today, the process of reckoning Bemazava identity through kinship has become increasingly problematic. The constant influx of migrants, paired with sexual liaisons and marriages with non-Bemazava result in what Bemazava themselves label as métisization, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish *tera-tany* from *vahiny*. Nevertheless, two indigenous institutions – *tromba* possession and post-partum practices – provide ingenious ways to assert the dominant position of Bemazava culture while simultaneously integrating outsiders into local power structures.

## II. *Ny razana* / The ancestors

For the Bemazava, as with other Malagasy, ancestors play a central role in defining collective identity. Bemazava differ from other Malagasy, however, in that they focus not so much on personal ancestors, but on their royal dead, or the *tromba* spirits (also referred to as *razambe*, *dady*, and *tromba maventibe*). As I have argued in detail elsewhere (Sharp, 1993), possession by these royal spirits is the defining principle of Bemazava identity. *Tromba* marks the progression of Sakalava history over time, the spirits themselves being documented personalities whose genealogies extend at least as far back as the sixteenth century (Kent, 1968, 1979; Ramamonjisoa, 1984). If phrased in the extreme, without *tromba*, Bemazava culture would cease to exist. As such, participation in *tromba* possession



activities signifies Bemazava status (for other studies on Sakalava *tromba* see Estrade, 1977 ; Jaovelo-Dzao, 1983 ; Ottino, 1965)<sup>1</sup>. In addition, it is through the honouring of the *tromba* spirits that indigenous Bemazava can lay legitimate claims to the local kingdom of the Sambirano, which is their *tanindrazana*.

*Tromba* spirits address the living through mediums, the majority of whom are female. In pre-colonial times there was only a handful of mediums who served as counselors to members of the local royal lineage. Within the last twenty to thirty years, however, there has been a virtual explosion in the incidence of *tromba* possession. From data collected in 1987 I have estimated that approximately 50 percent of all women in this town are possessed by *tromba* spirits. Out of nearly one hundred mediums I interviewed, approximately half were migrants, participating in what is viewed as an essential Bemazava institution. The questions of course, are why and how ? To uncover the answers we must look more carefully at Bemazava ideas about relationships defined by ancestors, kinship, and identity.

Whereas ancestors (that is, the dead) establish ties between the living and the land, by extension kinship is the operating principle that links the living to one another. This is an issue that is especially pertinent for the migrant: new arrivals in Ambanja often find themselves in desperate pursuit of close or distant kin. In a polycultural community like Ambanja, ethnic identity is of utmost importance, yet to ask outright what is one's ethnic group (ethnic, *karazana*) is considered rude. Thus, the question "*aia ny tanindrazanao* ?" ("where is your ancestral land ?") serves as a polite yet roundabout way to inquire about the ethnic identity of strangers. Ultimately, the goal is to trace a link to other living persons through the dead, or commonly shared ancestors. In terms of ideas about social obligations and reciprocity, one owes nothing to strangers, but must give potentially everything to kin when they are in need. As a result, migrants may find themselves in precarious positions when they are far from home: if one has no kin, one is nothing or no one. Once migrants become members of established local networks they can begin to find housing, work, etc.

As non-Bemazava, however, many are frustrated by their inability to break into, essentially, the Bemazava power structures that are dominated by locally-rooted royalty, government officials, and legal authorities. A generation ago in Ambanja an institutionalized form of fictive kinship allowed for the incorporation of such outsiders into the Bemazava community. This was the practice of blood siblingship

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<sup>1</sup> The centrality of *tromba* possession to Bemazava culture runs contrary to well-known theories about possession and marginality (Sharp 1993). For more details on cross-cultural reevaluations of this idea see Giles (1987) and Lewis, al-Fafi, and Hurreiz, eds, (1991).

(*fatidra*); through the ceremonial exchange of blood, men and women became "brothers" and "sisters" to one another, and this tie carried with it the obligations of kinship. Although this practice continues in other parts of Madagascar, it has essentially ceased in Ambanja within the last decade or two<sup>1</sup>.

Fictive kinship does appear, however, in another form : it is a significant aspect of *tromba* possession, providing, as a result, a creative solution for the social incorporation of migrants. In the context of *tromba*, the majority of mediums are female, whereas the spirits are generally male royalty. Marriage provides the idiom through which this relationship is defined: that is, medium and spirit are said to be married (*manambady*) or spouses (*vady*) of one another. When a married woman becomes a *tromba* medium, her living spouse is redefined as her "little husband" (*vady kely*), the spirit assuming the role of the "big" or dominate spouse (*vady mavenity*, *vadibe*). In addition, one spirit may possess more than one medium (but the spirit can only appear in one at a time). Since all of a spirit's mediums are his wives, these mediums in turn are defined in relationship to one another as co-wives or sisters (*miravavy*; also *mpiravavy*). Finally, spirits are organized into genealogical hierarchies, and so mediums possessed by related spirits become linked to one another as, for example, mothers and daughters. Marriage as an idiom for describing the relationship between a medium and her spirits is not unique to Madagascar: parallels exist in a multitude of cultures that are of African origin (see, for example, Bastide, 1978 ; Boddy, 1989 ; Brown, 1991 ; Crapanzano, 1983 ; Deren 1970 ; Rasmussen, 1995 ; Wafer, 1991). The Bemazava case is unusual, however, in that its effects are permanent. These structural principles of *tromba* help to create special bonds between mediums, turning friends into fictive kin. In other words, a tenuous relationship is strengthened into one with more significant obligations, defined by a variety of institutionalized forms of reciprocity and mutual aid.

Thus, women who form networks of mediums may often, over time, relocate in order to live close to one another, occupying houses in the same neighbourhood or even close enough to appear as if they inhabit a distinct compound. They rely upon one another for daily support: one may allow her spiritual sisters to draw from her private well; and each may take turns caring for one another's children, or guarding each others' houses so they may go to market. They may

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<sup>1</sup> Of the hundreds of informants I have interviewed over the past eight years, I have only encountered two who had blood brothers or sisters; both cases involved Bemazava who had offered this institution as a way to demonstrate a permanent relationship with someone of migrant status. Reasons given by a multitude of informants for not practicing *fatidra* are that it is too expensive, or that they simply do not know how to do it.

share cooking and housekeeping responsibilities; take turns running a market stall; and, most importantly, lend money to one another in times of financial hardship. These supportive networks are often essential to the survival of single women who have no blood kin living nearby. When they fall ill, they care for one another; when one is faced with the sudden and unexpected death of a loved one, her spiritual sisters will assist with funeral arrangements and mourn the death with her as if they, too, were close kin of the deceased.

Since *tromba* is a key defining principle of Bemazava culture, participation in *tromba* possession confirms *tera-tany* status. Put another way, since it is ancestors that are pivotal to defining Bemazava (and, more generally, Malagasy) identity, it is through *tromba* that outsiders eventually may be recognized structurally as Bemazava. For those who have only recently arrived in Ambanja, *tromba* is an exclusive and unfamiliar institution. Over time, however, it is possible for migrants to become integrated, this being determined by their length of stay; desire to join the local Bemazava community; their compatibility with Bemazava; economic constraints; and their ability to build strong social networks. Becoming involved in *tromba* possession is a long-term process that involves much investment of time and, often, economic sacrifice. Participants often begin as observers or musicians (men typically play the accordion and *valiha*, whereas women take turns with bamboo seed rattles or *faray*). Migrant women slowly become familiar with the sequence of events that typify a *tromba* ceremony (*romba ny tromba*). As they develop friendships with mediums, they may be called upon to assist these friends as they fall into trance, or they may work as interpreters (*rangahy*) for spirits when they converse with clients. If a woman develops the symptoms of the serious ailments associated with *tromba* possession, she must invest much of her income into hosting elaborate ceremonies designed to instate a spirit permanently within her. She must also have a large enough network of friends who are mediums who can help her arrange and run her instatement ceremonies. As an established medium, a woman may occupy the elevated status of the healer, possibly receiving a substantial number of clients in the privacy of her home.

Thus, *tromba* creates a sense of belonging, a social cohesiveness that is unmatched by other local cultural institutions. In essence, a medium joins an "old girls" network that enables her to strengthen and enhance her local social ties. If she is a migrant, her ethnic identity is altered by her participation in *tromba*. Ultimately, she will be recognized by her fellow mediums as being Bemazava because she honours and, while in trance, embodies Bemazava ancestors. A medium also fills an important community role, for, as a healer, she assists both *vahiny* and *tera-tany* clients in their efforts to cope with and control the events in their lives. Furthermore, she might even play

a significant role in maintaining the stability of the kingdom. During Madagascar's socialist era of the 1970s and 1980s, the national policy of malagasization, for example, emphasized the importance of stressing local customs over national or foreign beliefs and practices. In the Sambirano, this served to elevate local royalty--and mediums for the most powerful *tromba* spirits--to a new level. Women who are mediums for important spirits can even become the advisors to living rulers; under malagasization, they often wielded considerable power over decisions involving the additional use and development of local ancestral land (again, see Sharp, 1990, 1993 : 165 ff, in press).

### III. *Tsaiky ny vahiny* / Migrants' children<sup>1</sup>

I would now like to turn to a discussion of post-partum practices, an institution which provides yet another ingenious way for female migrants to become incorporated into the local Bemazava community.

The process of determining ethnic identity in Ambanja has become increasingly complex throughout this century as a result of the paired forces of immigration by non-Bemazava and subsequent marriages across ethnic lines (and, thus, métisization). Today, by national, semi-legal (and what I will call bureaucratic) rules of affiliation of colonial origin, a father's identity determines the "official" ethnic label that is applied to offspring. Individual kin groups, however, may have different ways of defining who they are, based on their sentimental ties to a region. For example, as noted earlier, long-term migrants who settle permanently in the Sambirano generally prefer to think of themselves as *tera-tany*; their children as well, who were born in the area, identify more strongly with local Bemazava culture than with that of their migrant parents (and thus they are labeled as "*tsaiky ny Sambirano*", or "children of the Sambirano", for example). Matrilineally vs. patrilineally-biased systems of different Malagasy groups also confound understandings of ethnic affiliation. In the past, these forms of social organization determined clan membership. Today, their significance has been forgotten, and so newer innovations have sprung forth to cope with the confusion associated with determining identity. For example, within one kin group whose members I know well, all daughters are given a surname derived from their mother's female Bemazava kin, whereas sons carry a different surname which they share with paternal non-Bemazava relatives. This is a creative embellishment on a bureaucratically-defined rule, since many Bemazava do not have more

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<sup>1</sup> Much of what is described in this section is a brief summary and update of a more detailed analysis that appears elsewhere : see Sharp (1993 : chapter 4, especially pp. 108-112).

than one name. This system helps to define sentimental ties to female versus male kin ; it also shapes patterns of inheritance.

It is often difficult to determine the ethnic identity of a child born of a mixed union, an issue that deeply troubles Bemazava, who are concerned that ever increasing rates of métisization herald the ultimate demise of their own culture. According to rules instituted by the French, children share their father's ethnic identity. As a result, census and voting records, neighbourhood residence logs, identity cards, and school rosters label children exclusively in accordance with this bureaucratic rule of paternal affiliation. Nevertheless, many inhabitants of the Sambirano offer different answers when asked who or what they are. As I slowly learned during the course of my initial year of fieldwork in 1987, post-partum practices offer a method to alter one's sense of identity, working in such a way as to incorporate outsiders--particularly women and their children--into the Bemazava community. In other words, post-partum practices that are distinctly Bemazava help insure that children born of mixed unions are clearly designated as Bemazava. This shapes local perceptions of their identity in daily life as well as their future rights to inheritance. In turn, migrant women who bear children by Bemazava men also, at least temporarily and symbolically, become Bemazava through post-partum practices.

The manner in which this process operates is relatively complex, and is linked to localized notions of well-being and healing. As the Bemazava explain, they are unlike other Malagasy groups, nearly all of whom observe "hot" post-partum practices (*mafana* being the term used elsewhere on the island)<sup>1</sup>. Following the birth of a child, the new mother and her infant are confined indoors for approximately forty days or six weeks. If the mother practices *mifana* (or *mafana*), she must keep herself and her infant warm, so that she will heal quickly and the baby will remain healthy and strong<sup>2</sup>. The afterbirth and umbilical cord are placed in a warm location (in a container under the bed, for example) to further insure the child's safety from harm. The mother must take care to bathe herself and her infant several times a day, using only hot water, and she must eat only warm or hot food.

Among the northern Bemazava of the Sambirano, post-partum practices are very much the same as described above, yet they are significantly different in one respect: Bemazava say that they alone are

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<sup>1</sup> Specifically in Sakalava one says *manao mifana* (that is, that one "does [or practices] *mifana*") or *mifana izy / izaho mifana* ("she is / I am *mifana*"). The same constructions are used with *rangimato* (see below).

<sup>2</sup> This practice reveals Madagascar's link to southeast Asian cultures, several of which practice what is commonly referred to as "mother roasting" (see Hart, Rajadhon, and Coghlin, 1965).

*ranginalo*<sup>1</sup>. In other words, they follow post-partum restrictions that emphasize cold over hot. Thus, the umbilical cord is put in a cool place, along with the placenta, both of which are eventually buried in a cool, shaded spot in the household courtyard. Furthermore, the mother and child must be bathed throughout the day using cold water; and the mother may eat only cold food.

A union that produces offspring between two people of similar origin (and who follow the same post-partum practice) poses no problems to a new mother. Unions involving Bemazava and non-Bemazava are another story entirely, however. Bemazava stress that *ranginalo* or "cold" is stronger (*mahery*) than and thus outweighs *mifana* or "hot" practices of all other groups<sup>2</sup>. A mother who disregards the importance of *ranginalo* risks placing herself and her newborn in great danger. More generally, this notion of "cold" or "coolness" (where *manintsy* is the word employed in daily discourse) is associated with health in Bemazava culture, where another Bemazava word for "sick" is *mamay*, which also means "hot". Coolness promotes healing, a concept represented by the water and white kaolin (*tany malandy*) that are pervasive in *tromba* healing rituals, both of which possess cooling properties. Coolness and heat are also dominant idioms that express well-being and danger in such royal rituals as the bathing of royal relics (*fitampoha*), and at funerals (*fanompoaña*), whereby work associated with the latter is considered dangerous because the earth is "hot" (*mafana*) from death (see Chazan-Gillic, 1983 ; Dandouau, 1911 ; Decary, 1962; Feeley-Harnik, 1991 ; Jiel,

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, throughout Sakalava territory one finds individuals and groups who are "hot" versus "cold." I have also been told by some Antankarana informants that they, too, practice *ranginalo*. Finally, not all Sakalava speakers are *ranginalo*.

<sup>2</sup> Bemazava contrast themselves to all other Malagasy speakers, as well as people of foreign origin. Comoreans, Indians, Chinese, and Europeans are all assumed to be *mifana*.

1995 ; Nérine Botokely, 1983 ; Raharijaona and Valette, 1959 ; Sharp, 1997)<sup>1</sup>.

Over the course of the past eight years I have conducted over fifty interviews with women of assorted backgrounds who have borne children from mixed unions: all but three chose to practice hot over cold. In two of these cases the women felt more secure in doing what their mothers had done. One had had a child by a Bemazava man but she was living in her mother's home when she gave birth, and together they felt safer practicing what was familiar to them. The second was a Tsimihety woman who followed the advice of her sister. The third was a Bemazava woman whose husband was of foreign (Comorean-Arab) descent: not wishing to offend her mother-in-law, she practiced *mifana* at first. All three women told similar stories: they soon fell ill; following the advice of kin or friends, they switched to *ranginalo*, after which their health improved. As one informant explained, "if you have to make a choice, go with cold [*ranginalo*], because it is the stronger of the two".

The choice to observe *ranginalo* over *mifana* bears with it interesting and long-term structural repercussions. From the point of view of a male Bemazava parent, its effects are fairly clear. If the child's mother follows *ranginalo*, this practice works to assert the man's paternal rights, since it symbolically illustrates that the child is both his and is Bemazava (thus falling in line with bureaucratic rules of ethnic affiliation). As the mother practices *ranginalo*, she assists in marking her children (and future generations as well) as Bemazava. She, too, shows her respect for Bemazava custom by altering her own behaviour to assure the well being of her child.

If it is the mother who is Bemazava, however, and the father is not, the effect is quite different. In such cases, *ranginalo* again marks the child as Bemazava, but in a way that runs contrary to the bureaucratic rule of affiliation. As a result, here *ranginalo* asserts the maternal link to the child over that of the father. In other words, it distinguishes the child from its father. When such children mature and have children of their own, they, too, will be expected to insist that *ranginalo* be practiced since their stronger Bemazava side wins out.

Thus, the post-partum practice of *ranginalo* affects mothers in ways that it does not affect fathers. In unions between Bemazava men and migrant women, *ranginalo* provides yet another way to incorporate *vahiny* women into the Bemazava community. This

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<sup>1</sup> Bloch, in his treatments of Merina mortuary (1982) and circumcision (1986) rituals, also speaks of this opposition between hot and cold. Hot is associated with women, who are polluting and disruptive to the harmony of the collective or deme; cold is associated with harmony, collectivity, and the tomb. Although Bloch acknowledges that heat is associated with childbirth for the Merina, he overlooks the healing powers of heat that characterize post-partum practices.

happens each time a migrant woman has a child by a Bemazava man. At these moments in her life she participates in an important Bemazava institution, generally under the guidance of other better informed Bemazava women. Interestingly, *ranginalo* may work to exclude men; nevertheless, for women, it always works to incorporate them into the Bemazava community, since as they take action to protect the health of their children, they, too, must follow the same restrictions, marking their bodies--through bathing and the ingestion of food -- as those of *Bemazava* women.

This in turn affects a woman's access to local resources. Whereas first generation male migrants will never be considered Bemazava, migrant women can become incorporated as insiders following the births of any children whose fathers are *tera-tany*. The children of these mixed unions are endowed for life with a quality that is distinctly Bemazava. Taken a step further, even after post-partum practices have been terminated, a child's own identity can have a lasting effect on that of its mother. A child's uterine origins are important for Bemazava as they sort out individual identities (siblings, for example, are often asked if they are offspring of the "same belly" or *kibo iraiky*). As a result, the mother of a Bemazava child is herself often assumed to be Bemazava as well. Thus, qualities that define what it means to be Bemazava are not altogether lost through the effects of polyculturalism and métisization, as *ranginalo* can affect the identity of a multitude of generations. The offspring of mixed *tera-tany* and *vahiny* unions become embedded in local Bemazava networks; as they grow older, they may gain access to land and other important resources from their *tera-tany* kin.

#### **IV. *Fomba ny ampanjaka* / Royal affairs**

At times, post-partum practices mark the first step in allowing a child to have future access to the most significant local power structures. This occurs when a child's mother, for example, is *vahiny* but the father is of royal descent or an *ampanjaka*. In such cases the mother must not only practice *ranginalo*, but she must also make sure that her child undergoes a series of other rituals reserved exclusively for royal children. Among the most significant are the first hair cutting, and, for boys, circumcision (collectively these ceremonies are referred to as *jama*; when they occur, they include performances of the graceful *rebiky* dance that celebrates -- and marks the presence of -- royal power). Equivalents of these two are practiced by Bemazava commoners, but for royalty they are far more elaborate celebrations that serve to mark this child's high status. If the mother wishes to assert her child's paternal origins, it is essential that she become well-versed in the customs of royalty. As such, she becomes an authority on royal ritual. Over time, this opens up new opportunities for both her and her



offspring, who stand to gain access to the resources that are the exclusive privilege of royalty.

## Conclusion

To return to the beginning of this article, in anthropology we have become well versed in the disruptive effects of migration. Yet we need to delve further into local understandings of its associated problems. As shown for the Sambirano, on the one hand, Bemazava express concern for and even alarm in their responses to polyculturalism and, more specifically, *métisization*. Migrants, on the other hand, struggle to feel content (*tamana*) in a community whose members insist that, regardless of how rooted they may feel, they are forever regarded as unwelcome strangers. How are these problems and sentiments confronted--and even permanently altered--through symbolic expressions of identity?

My purpose here has been to emphasize the symbolic mechanisms that allow for a breakdown of boundaries between *tera-tany* and *vahiny* that, ironically, also work to preserve Bemazava identity over time. This brief discussion has outlined a few of the creative strategies employed by resettled people, exploring how symbolic systems might permanently empower the vulnerable. The Sambirano Valley provides a setting in which to explore the dynamics and politics of this issue. In this setting, identity is at stake, confounded and complicated by polyculturalism. The two institutions I have discussed here--*tromba* possession and post-partum practices--allow indigenous Bemazava to assert their cultural supremacy in this region while simultaneously facilitating the incorporation of migrants into an indigenous community. This occurs in several ways. First, both possession and post-partum practices link the ancestors, the living, and their progeny in a continuum of time and space, insuring the resiliency of Bemazava culture amid social change. Second, it is important to recognize that both temporary as well as permanent changes occur, affecting Bemazava as well as non-Bemazava. *Tromba* possession converts outsiders into insiders, allowing these new mediums to join networks of Bemazava women. They thus can become respected healers and important spokeswomen on economic and political issues of local import. Post-partum practices, on the other hand, assert the supremacy of Bemazava culture: because these practices endow new mothers and children with Bemazava traits, they insure the continuation of Bemazava identity. Finally, these shifts in identity are empowering because they link living *tera-tany* and *vahiny* alike to the ancestors and the territory of this local *tanindrazana*. By converting outsiders into insiders, *tromba* possession and post-partum practices enable mediums, mothers, and their children to gain access to local living and dead royalty, as well as to others who control the

power structures in the Valley. Through them, they acquire rights over the most valuable resource: arable land.

In the contexts framed by spirit possession and post-partum practices, fictive kinship is pivotal to these redefinitions of identity. Institutionalized forms of fictive kinship expose possibilities for structural flexibility over potential constraint. Fictive kinship is flexible because it allows for the inclusion of non-Bemazava; on the other hand, it is constraining because shifts in identity can occur only under very particular circumstances. Not all migrants can be involved, for example. Furthermore, both *tromba* possession and maternity favor the participation of women over men. Thus, fictive kinship mediates or regulates the incorporation of outsiders into the Bemazava community. To use A. F. Robertson's expression, segments of this "community of strangers" (1978) establish sub-communities of kin. Since these two Bemazava institutions solely affect women's lives, it is not migrant women who remain marginal and dependent; instead, it is they who, ultimately, must assist their male counterparts. In the Sambirano, such is the story of women, migration, and power.

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the dynamic of gender, migration, and power. More specifically, it addresses how institutions which typify contemporary Bemazava-Sakalava culture in a northwestern urban region favor the integration of migrant women over men. In a community where polyculturalism and subsequent métisization confound local understandings of identity, fictive kinship operates in *specific contexts to preserve a cohesive sense of what it means to be Bemazava*. These contexts include *tromba* spirit possession and the post-partum practice of *ranginalo*. In each case, forms of fictive kinship work to incorporate migrant women in innovative ways while simultaneously preserving--by reshaping--notions of Bemazava identity. As a result, these two social institutions incorporate migrant *vahiny* women (and, at times, their children) more readily than men into the local community of Bemazava *tera-tany*.

## RESUME

La vallée du Sambirano est une région fertile et prospère du Nord-Ouest Malgache. Cette vallée est aussi le *tanindrazana* du groupe Bemazava, la branche la plus au Nord des royaumes sakalava qui s'étendent sur toute la côte ouest de l'île. Depuis le début du siècle, ce paysage sacré a été dominé par les concessions, grandes et petites, établies lors de la colonisation française. A partir des années 1920, ces concessions faisaient appel à une main d'oeuvre à grande échelle, et des immigrés sont venus en grand nombre pour des séjours courts ou longs. Quant aux autochtones sakalava, les propriétaires originaux de la région de Sambirano, dits "enfants de la terre" (*tera-tany*), ils ont toujours refusé de s'engager aux concessions. En conséquence, presque la moitié de la population de la ville d'Ambanja est constituée des immigrés non-sakalava, dit "*vahiny*", qui y sont venus chercher fortune (*hitady harena*). A cause de cette "invasion" de leur territoire, des sakalava urbains se méfient des étrangers. Pourtant, ils ont une longue tradition historique d'assimiler des nombreux groupes - malgaches aussi bien qu'étrangers - qui s'installent chez eux et prennent leurs filles comme épouses. Etant donné ce contexte, trois questions se posent: par quels moyens ces immigrés sont-ils assimilés dans les communautés sakalava ? Comment l'identité autochtone sakalava, garde-t-elle son intégrité face à cette "invasion" au lieu de se fragmenter ? Quels sont les facteurs en dehors de l'ethnicité - tel l'âge et le genre - qui médient l'incorporation ?

Cet article examine les dynamiques du genre, de la migration, et du pouvoir dans cette région pluri-culturelle. D'après mon analyse, les femmes immigrées arrivent à accéder au statut de *tera-tany* plus facilement que les hommes. Dans cette communauté, où le pluri-culturalisme et le métissage confondent des

définitions locales de l'identité, la parenté fictive se présente comme un moyen important de préserver un sens cohésif de ce que c'est d'être Bemazava *tera-tany*. Deux institutions sont particulièrement intéressantes à cet égard : la première est le *tromba*, la possession par des ancêtres royaux sakalava. On peut compter dans ce culte quelques médiums mâles, mais la plupart sont des femmes. Dans la ville-même d'Ambanja, le *tromba* est très répandu et la plupart des femmes y participent (comme je l'ai témoigné en 1987, voir Sharp 1993). Mais pour participer au *tromba*, il faut un accès aux réseaux des médiums les plus établis : donc ce n'est pas à la portée des nouveaux venus. C'est intéressant de noter que quand une femme de statut "*vahiny*" est inaugurée comme médium, elle est transformée en *tera-tany*; en incarnant des ancêtres royaux, elle devient sakalava.

Une deuxième institution qui favorise les femmes sur les hommes est le domaine des pratiques post-partum. Les sakalava du Nord sont uniques dans l'ethnographie malgache dans le sens où ils pratiquent le *ranginalo*, des pratiques post-partum "froides". Dans le Nord, on croit que tous les autres groupes malgaches (et étrangers) suivent les traditions du *mifana/mafana* "chaudes". Quand un enfant est né d'une union mixte sakalava et non-sakalava, c'est à la mère de choisir entre les deux traditions, le "chaud" ou le "froid". Comme le disent les Sakalava, le *ranginalo* est plus fort (*mahery*) que le *mifana/mafana*. Donc pour mieux protéger la santé de l'enfant, des mères optent souvent pour le *ranginalo*. En le choisissant, une femme devient momentanément sakalava; son enfant par contre, est marqué comme sakalava pour la vie, du fait que sa mère a suivi le *ranginalo* après sa naissance. En conclusion, ces deux institutions aident à une intégration plus facile pour des femmes immigrées *vahiny* (et aussi leurs enfants) dans des communautés Bemazava *tera-tany* que pour les hommes. Il en résulte que des femmes ont plus de possibilités de se transformer en sakalava, tandis que les hommes tendent à rester des "étrangers" dans le Sambirano.

## FAMINTINANA

Faritra iray manan-karena sy mamokatra tokoa ao avaratra andrefan'i Madagasikara ny faritry Sambirano. Ao ny tanindrazan'ny foko Bemazava, tarika farany avaratra amin'ny fanjakana Sakalava izay monina amin'ny faritra andrefana. Hatramin'ny fiantombohan'ny taon-jato faha-roapolo, io faritra "masina" io dia nanjakan'ny tanim-boanjo - lehibe na kely - nataon'ny mpanjana-tany frantsay. Nanomboka tamin'ny taona 1920 tany ho any, dia nitady mpiasa maro ireny voanjo ireny, ary betsaka ny mpifindra-monina niavy mba hipetraka na ela na vetivety ihany. Ny *tera-tany* Sakalava, tompon'ny tany ao Sambirano dia tsy nanaiky mihitsy ny hiasa tamin'ireny tanim-boanjo ireny. Noho izany, ny antsaiky ny mponina ao an-tanànan'Ambanja dia mpiavy - tsy Sakalava - vahiny, mitady harena. Noho io fiboseschana ao amin'ny faritra misy azy io, dia tsy dia matoky loatra ny vahiny ireo Sakalava mponina an-tanàn-dhibe. Fantatra



anefa fa eo amin'ny lafiny ara-tantara dia nanana fomba fandraisana sy fampiraisam-bolo ireo mpiavy - na Malagasy na vahiny - izay tonga nonina tao aminy ka naka ny zanaka vavin'izy ireo ho vady, ny Sakalava. Eo anoloan'izany zava-misy izany, fanontaniana telo no mipetraka : ahoana no fomba ahafahana'ireo mpiavy ireo miditra amin'ny fiaraha-monina Sakalava ? Ahoana no fomba hitazonan'ny Sakalava ny maha-izy azy, anoloan'ny fiboseshana ary ahoana no tsy hiparitahany ? Inona ireo toe-javatra ankoatra ny fifokoana - ohatra ny taona, ny maha-lahy na vavy - izay tsy ahafahana miditra eo amin'ny fiaraha-monina.

Manadihady ny fivoarana anatin'ny fifindra-monina, ny fahefana ary ny maha-lahy na vavy amin'ity faritra hivelaran'ny kolon-tsaina maromaro ity lahatsoratra ity. Araka ny fandinihana nataoko, mora kokoa ho an'ny vehivavy mpiavy ny miditra ho tera-tany noho ny lehilahy. Ao anatin'io fiaraha-monina io, ny fahamaroan'ny kolon-tsaina sy ny fisian'ny zafindrany dia manafangaro ny famaritana eo an-toerana momba ny maha-izy azy ny tena. Ny fihavanana namboarina dia hevitra iray lehibe ahafahana mitana ny maha-Bemazava tera-tany. Fomba roa no ahitana io : ny tromba, izay ahitana ny fipetrahan'ireo razana mpanjaka Sakalava amin'ny olona. Mety ahitana saha lehilahy amin'io fomba io, fa ny ankamaroany dia vehivavy. Ao an-tanànan'Ambanja dia mihanaka tokoa ny tromba, ary ny ankabeazan'ny vehivavy dia mandray anjara amin'io (araka ny hitako tamin'ny 1987, jereo Sharp 1993). Mba ahafahana mandray anjara amin'ny tromba anefa, dia tsy maintsy mahafantatra ireo tromba efa maty hanina, izany hoe tsy ho an'ny mpiavy vao haingana ny tromba. Tsara ny manamarika fa rehefa vehivavy "vahiny" iray no lasa tromba, dia raisina ho tera-tany izy; lasa Sakalava izy rehefa mihanjaka aminy ny razana mpanjaka Sakalava.

Ny fomba faharoa izay manampy bebe kokoa ny vehivavy noho ny lehilahy dia rehefa avy miteraka. Ny Sakalava avy any avaratra ihany no fantatra eo amin'ny kolontsaina gasy amin'ny ranginalo, izany hoe fampiasana ny hatsiaka rehefa avy miteraka. Any avaratra, ny fokona olona hafa - na gasy na vahiny - dia manaraka ny fomba mifana/mafana. Raha misy zaza iray teraky ny ray aman-dreny Sakalava sy tsy Sakalava, dia ny reniny no manapa-kevitra na hanaraka ny fomba mafana na ny fomba "mangatsiaka". Araka ny filazan'ny Sakalava, dia mahery kokoa ny ranginalo noho ny mifana/mafana. Mba hahasalama kokoa ny zaza, alcon'ny reny matetika mifidy ny ranginalo. Raha mifidy io ny reny, dia lasa Sakalava vevivety izy, ny zanany kosa anefa dia Sakalava tanteraka mandra-pahafatiny satria nanao ny ranginalo ny reniny teo ampiterahana azy. Ho fehin'izany, ireo fomba roa ireo dia manampy bebe kokoa ny mpiavy vahiny vehivavy (sy ny zanany) ho tafiditra moramora kokoa eo amin'ny fiaraha-monina Bemazava noho ny lehilahy. Ny vehivavy izany dia mety ho Sakalava, fa ny lehilahy dia mijanona ho "vahiny" ao amin'ny faritra Sambirano.