

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF KINSHIP IN SAKALAVA MONARCHY

by

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The following paper is an analysis of the significance of kinship in Sakalava monarchy as it existed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries before it was dismantled in the colonial period.

The Sakalava case

The Sakalava dynasty seems to have originated in southwest Madagascar in the late 1500's or early 1600's (Deschamps 1960 : 97-99 ; Kent 1970 : 163-204). Sakalava monarchs gradually conquered their way northwards, raiding for cattle and captives that they sold to Arab traders in the port-towns along the coast in exchange for slaves, guns, cloth, alcohol and other luxury goods. They had established themselves in the Majunga area by the early 1700's, from which they sent forth expeditions to subdue more northerly populations (Deschamps 1960 : 100-101).

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From the early 1800's, however, their history is mainly one of flight, first from the highland Merina, a rival monarchy, then from the French, from whom they sought aid against the Merina and who in turn conquered them. Their king fled to Zanzibar in 1826. He was succeeded in Madagascar by a sister, then a sister's child, who fled from the Merina to the island of Nosy Be off the northwest coast. The French, who had already been circling the island, agreed to help her provided she signed the island and part of the mainland over to them. She did so. They occupied the island in 1841 and almost immediately established sugar plantations and abolished slavery (Deschamps 1960 : 160, 171, 194). It seems fairly clear that besides undermining the monarchy, they needed the labor that freed slaves could supply.

Sakalava leaders, interpreting their political and economic intent, abducted the queen's infant son and fled with him, slaves and commoners, to the mainland. They went south to the region of Analalava where they had been established for four generations when I did my fieldwork there in the early 1970's.

The Basic Pattern

We do not need to go into the arguments of how all this started – whether monarchy in Madagascar was brought in from outside or whether it was an indigenous development. The important point is that Sakalava monarchy was a case of one lineage attempting to impose itself on others permanently instead of merely temporarily, as in the case of ordinary lineage politics in Madagascar.

Owing to rivalries within the royal clan, aspirants to sovereignty would break off in every generation and go on to form their own monarchies tied more or less closely to the old ones depending on the changing fortunes of war and trade. Thus, they gradually established the principles and practices of Sakalava monarchy among peoples of different dialects, customs, economies, who had never experienced them before.

Despite the advantages that Sakalava now attribute to centralized authority, we cannot assume that people welcomed these raiders and would be rulers with open arms. Presumably the dynasty was imposed through some combination of force involving numbers, then guns, and persuasion. Wealth deriving from trade and warfare was clearly one factor. Royal relics were another than can be documented very early. Slaves were a third very important means of imposing political control, not simply because of the booty they represented but because of the larger-scale and more predatory political organizations they made possible.

However, neither force nor persuasion ensured absolute domination. Sakalava viewed politics as a constant struggle not of freedom versus enslavement or autonomy versus dependency, as we might see it, but of common versus royal lineages. The different kinds of power and authority that might be mediated through different sorts of lineage organization were the central issue. Therefore, in outlining the struggle I am going to concentrate on the language of lineage membership in which it was carried out.

The Language of Lineages

Sakalava were organized into named patrilineal clans of which there were three kinds: the sovereign clan from which the ruler was selected, noble clans, and common clans. There was no ideology relating the founders of any of these clans to one another genealogically. All of them, royal and common, considered themselves and were considered by others, as autonomous, having their own particular origins, skills, ritual privileges and taboos.

Lineage membership was the single most significant fact in an individual's existence. It determined his position in society, gave him unassailable rights to land and water, and assured him of access to the supernatural, principally his own ancestors, on whom his fate in life largely depended. Since kin were the only reliable source of assistance in labor, warfare, ritual or social endeavor, a person's influence in the community – his power and authority – was reckoned according to their numbers as measured ancestrally. The genealogy of the sovereign clan could be – and is in Sakalava histories – traced back 27 generations to the mid-16th century, when the Maroseranana (their clan name) first landed in southwest Madagascar. Noble clans might be some 9–15 generations deep, depending on where they received official recognition of their royalist fervor. Common clans were 3–5 generations deep. Slaves had no kin by definition.

The lineage principle was likewise fundamental to the organization of government. A monarch ruled by virtue of his Maroseranana descent, as proven by the fact that he possessed – and displayed periodically – the relics of his predecessors in office: their nails, teeth, hair and bits of knee bone. Common lineages were represented administratively in a variety of other ways. Specific lineages were charged with the care of the relics (*Razan'olo*), with the care of anything relating to water (*Antandrano*): and with the office of chief minister (*Zafindramahavita*). All the others were represented as *ragnitry*, the king's councillors. The *ragnitry*, in their view, were the real rulers of the country. The monarch, who was not privy to their deliberations, merely followed their orders. Indeed, they argued, it would not be appropriate to royalty to be implicated in petty, local disputes.

Commoners were so convinced of the significance of lineage principles in the organization of the monarchy that it was only by comparison with other Malagasy groups, in which the lineage principle is also valued, that one becomes most aware of the subtle ways in which it was constrained among the Sakalava in relation to monarchy.

First there is the fact that Sakalava did not exhume and rebury their own relatives, as many other Malagasy groups do. They exhumed and reburied only their dead sovereigns – annually, in the case of their relics, generationally, in the case of their corpses, buried on an island just off the coast.

It is further noticeable that they were never possessed by their own dead as, for example, among the neighboring Tsimihety, who were famed for having

actively repudiated the idea of monarchy. Sakalava were possessed only by sovereign dead and occasionally malicious spirits from the big port-towns far to the north and south of the region.

Finally, there is the fact that when commoners were recruited for royal service, they were not chosen as members of lineages, subordinate to *ragnitry*, but rather as individuals, subordinate to the monarchy, through the *fehitany*, local administrative officials. Individuals were selected for royal service, not families. Indeed, one of the fundamental purposes of royal service seems to have been to cut people off from their own kin, relocate them in royal villages or work camps organized on the plan of royal villages, and foster – under the aegis of government – relationship among them based on their acquaintance as *persons*, not as kinsmen.

Royal Kinship

This doctoring of lineage membership was even more apparent in the case of royalty. I can perhaps best illustrate this by citing one of the verses with which sovereignty was associated :

Adabara tokana – ankoay
Mamba tsy roy an-drano
Moasy tsy roy an-tanàna
Tsisy bebe tsy izaho.

Father of the country, solitary as the sea-eagle
Crocodile without rival in water
Diviner without equal on land
No one is greater than I.

In contrast to every other person and thing in Sakalava monarchy, which had to be paired – associated with some likeness – Sakalava sovereigns were unique in their history and destiny. They were not native to Madagascar. Like the sea-eagle, they were believed to have come from across the water, from Arabia, an image fostered by the number of foreign words in the royal vocabulary and the number of foreign persons, especially Muslims – Arabian, Comorian and East African – in the royal entourage.

Nor were they native to the region. Commoner clans were dispersed, but regionally. The royal clan, having landed in southwest Madagascar and conquered its way north, encompassed the whole west coast before finally coming to rest in the Analalava region in 1849.

Sakalava sovereigns were not supposed to have any kin ties with the local population, nor were they permitted to marry locally. Like many monarchs elsewhere, they were expected to marry endogamously, that is, within the clan, an incestuous sexual union by Sakalava standards. Only concubines, the «ruler's animals» (*biby ny ampanjaka*), could be commoners.

The singularity of royalty was marked in many other ways. Sakalava sovereigns lived separately from their own kin and from commoners. Both the royal residence (*doany*), located on the mainland, and the royal tomb (*mahabo*), located on a nearby island, were elevated on hilltops and surrounded by fences. The *doany* was surrounded by one fence, the *mahabo*, situated in a grove of trees, by two. These fences isolated royalty from the rest of the population – their guardians and surrounding villages – for fences were taboo to both commoners and *ana-doany* the royal relatives prevented from living in the *doany* itself.

Sakalava bowed down when addressing royalty, lowering their eyes and balancing their bodies on one knee. No one was permitted to touch the royal person except *Sambarivo*.

The spatial and physical isolation of Sakalava sovereignty was reinforced linguistically. A special vocabulary, distinguished, as I mentioned, by the number of foreign loan words it contained, had to be used in addressing or referring to the ruler or anything associated with him, especially his body, his physical movements, and those persons and things immediately surrounding him. When he died, his personal name was expurged from the language, together with any other words from ordinary language that even remotely resembled it.

The very emblem of kingship – the long-handled knife known as the *Vy Lava* (long iron) – was conceived as the instrument by which the sovereign was shorn of conventional associations with persons, including his own kin. Its full name, which echoed the verses cited above, was «the unrivalled long iron that rules alone» (*ny vy lava tsy roy manjaka tokana*). Sakalava explain that it was the sharp edge of the *Vy Lava*, an *aody tsy maro*, a «medicine of fewness,» that prevented Maroseranana from having numerous descendants like ordinary people.

Childbirth, like death, was tabooed from the royal enclosure. Royal infants were born outside and given to *Sambarivo* to nurse and rear. Royal kinship terminology was altered to transform their relationship to their royal parent into that of younger to older sibling (i.e., nonheirs), linguistically denying the fact of childbirth.

Sakalava attributed their political problems not to outsiders, to whom they believed themselves in every way superior, but to rivalries within the royal clan. It was the battles among kin (*ady milongo*) that accounted for their ignoble position in the nineteenth century, not the greater strength or guile of the French or other Malagasy groups.

Their reasoning reflects problems that were of equal concern to commoners. Kin were one's greatest source of support in life, but they were also one's greatest rivals for scarce resources – land, water, and ultimately women, through the cattle, limited in numbers, required for bridewealth that legitimates marriage. Only legitimate children could assure one the status of an ancestor which was the ultimate source of power.



Matrilateral ties were strategically very significant in these circumstances for the leverage they gave a person in his dealings with patrilineal kin. Blood brotherhood was another alternative. Sovereignty offered similar advantages as a potential source of support independent of lineage demands.

Conversely, all these features of royal lineage membership that I have described were clearly intended to rid the ambitious of troublesome royal relatives and secure them followers. At the same time that they divested royalty of the features of lineage membership that normally defined a person among the Sakalava, they established him as a stranger supported by strangers.

Sambarivo

These strangers were the *Sambarivo* that surrounded royalty. *Sambarivo* – except for runaways – were found only at the *doany* and *mahabo*. They constituted the sole permanent populations of these places, except for the monarchs themselves, including the spirit mediums at the *mahabo*, for whom they were the guardians (*olo ampiambigny*).

The most striking feature of the *Sambarivo* was that they were strangers and that they had no kinsmen. The category included commoners who had transgressed royal custom or inadvertently stumbled into space restricted to *Sambarivo*. But the vast majority were people from outside, primarily prisoners of war, persons taken by force from other Malagasy groups, or Africans and Comorians purchased from Arab traders.

Although commoners had to be relinquished willingly by their kin with no hard feelings, force seems to have been fundamental to the enslavement of outsiders. Malagasy spoke of those sold into slavery as «lost» (*very*), implying a kind of living death. Brutality (*siaka*) was one of the foremost of royal characteristics. Much royal ritual was concerned with assuaging royal anger (*heloko*).

Sambarivo had no ancestors, nor were they permitted to recognize ancestors even after they had accumulated some generations of dead. Commoners did not rebury their dead, nor were they possessed by them. But they did communicate with them periodically through ritual. *Sambarivo* were not permitted even that ritual. The royal ancestors were their ancestors, even as the living ruler was, in a fundamental sense, their kinsman.

The close, kin-like association of *Sambarivo* with royalty was reflected in customs relating to marriage that controverted the normal rules. Marriage between the two, even when royalty was represented by spirit mediums, was incestuous. Although they were not tabooed from marrying outsiders, *Sambarivo*, like monarchs, married primarily among themselves. The monarch, like a parent, received the bridewealth, even when the parents were known, and the bridewealth was called by a royal name (*vodiefa*), not the common name (*didin-karena*).

A woman who married outside the group did not go to live with her husband, as was normally the case. He had to take up residence with his wife, so she

could continue to carry out her royal work. Their children did not all become members of his lineage. At least one – the second if not the first – had to remain (or be returned to) the *doany* or *mahabo* to replace his/her mother in the next generation. Outsiders were reluctant to marry *Sambarivo* for these reasons and they tended, therefore, to be as closed a group, in terms of kinship, as the commoners and royalty on either side of them.

In contrast to these other groups, however, *Sambarivo* neither represented nor constituted a clan. They married among themselves, but they were not differentiated internally according to lineage membership, but rather according to their work. They were further distinguished according to whether they were guardians of the living sovereign or guardians of the dead, that is, as Antidoany or Antimahabo respectively. When a sovereign died, representatives of the *Sambarivo* were selected by *Sambarivo* and *ragnitry* together to be sent over to the royal cemetery with the corpse to live there permanently. For this reason, Antimahabo were also known as *hava'k'-aomby*, «cattle severed from the herd.»

It was labor, not kinship and affinity, that was intended to draw this diverse group of strangers together and focus them on royalty. *Sambarivo* were not merely obligated to perform certain tasks, they were prohibited from performing or even knowing about the tasks of others, so that to accomplish even the simplest of royal duties required the cooperation of them all.

Sambarivo were the *andevo ny ampanjaka* (females being *andevo kely*), a body of utterly subservient vassals expressive of his power, wealth and prestige. They were tokens of a thousand others just like them, *Sambarivo* – the name means «every one a thousand» – in stark contrast to Ndramane tsiarivo («the king who made thousands swarm together»), Ndramamahanarivo («the king who nourished thousands»), Tsimisarakarivo («the queen who kept thousands from splitting apart»), the sovereign himself, an individual personality, sole ruler of those infinite thousands.

Sambarivo were so totally subject to the royal will that they were, in a sense, his very limbs, a second skin (another Malagasy group, the Merina, actually refers to royal slaves as «body sweat,» cf. Molet 1974 : 58). Only *Sambarivo* could enter, like the ruler, through the east door of the royal residence. They took on all the same taboos in royal rites of passage. They died – at least some of them – when he died.

Nevertheless, the most interesting aspect of this imagery is that it was reciprocal. *Sambarivo* were the sovereign's junior kin, his children, his cattle, his wealth. But the monarch was also viewed as their great bull, their wild, unruly child. *Sambarivo* had imaginary fences around them, but royalty was constrained by real fences. The king or queen (female rulers were referred to in male terms) was frequently represented in royal praise songs as a great bull, the greatest among the herd, in one sense, but also the herdsman's prize beast. *Sambarivo* were thought to *mitarimy* the sovereign, to care for him, nurture him, even as he cared for and nurtured them.

But *Sambarivo* had more than the power that came to personal servants of long standing. It was they (*ampangataka-mahabo*) who conferred the royal praise name at death that summarized the contribution of their master in the histories for all time. It was they — the *havak'aomby* of each dead sovereign — who judged the legitimacy of the spirit mediums who would continue to represent him in important political debate after his death. No spirit medium was considered real without having been authorized by the king's men.

The strength of the *Sambarivo* was expressed equally clearly in the ways they bought their subservience, using — significantly — the weapon of kinship. *Sambarivo* as a whole were often called *Makoa*, a word that was meant to emphasize their lowly origins. But among themselves, they distinguished between *Makoa* and *Sambarivo* of Malagasy descent. *Sambarivo* were not supposed to have patrilineages, but in fact the larger and consequently stronger groups among them did recognize their ancestors and committed them to writing, an act otherwise associated only with royalty and nobility.

Sambarivo and Commoners

This heterogeneous group of foreigners, forcibly cut off from their own ancestors and required to respect the ancestors of others, was in a very ambiguous position in Sakalava society. Kin were what located a person in the social order. Persons without kin, like the anomalous infants abandoned at birth far from settled habitation, were *very*, a word which means both «lost,» in the literal sense, and «mixed,» as of colors or substances. Yet they were also potentially very powerful particularly if they were associated with royalty. Sakalava ordinarily attempt to incorporate every stranger into the kinship network as a way of controlling them, neutralizing their strange effect. But these *Sambarivo* were persons whom they could not incorporate without becoming deeply involved in the monarchy itself. *Sambarivo* expressed as well as mediated a complex and highly ambiguous relationship between Sakalava and sovereignty, ruler and ruled, in which it was never altogether clear who was master and who was slave.

Commoners were represented as patrilineages by *ragnitry*. Yet *ragnitry* was the name of the royal cattle mark. Commoners were not prohibited, like *Sambarivo*, from calling on their own dead. But all the people had to assume to some extent the taboos associated with royal rites of passage. The very rhythm of domestic labor was regulated according to the royal death days commemorated in every week by mourning taboos on work, washing, and the maintenance of personal appearance.

The sovereign did not allocate land to commoners, as he did to *Sambarivo*, but all people were dependent upon the sovereign for their livelihood in that he, as the supreme master of the land and all it contained, was also the supreme source of well-being. As a consequence, commoners were required to labor on the royal rice fields scattered throughout the domain and to produce other kinds of agricultural tribute.

Yet commoners, if they did not like the way they were living, could and did move. Royalty could only move with the help of all the people. Among this branch of Sakalava royalty, the Southern Bemihisatra, living sovereigns were tabooed from the royal services of others and from their own *mahabo*. A substitute or *jadono* was chosen to represent them there. The sovereign had a voice in choosing his substitute, but the *ragnitry* had the last word, and it is significant that the person chosen – although of royal blood – was not a mature man, but a youth, whose outstanding feature was his ability to take direction. The dead were more totally at the mercy of the masses. They could not move anywhere outside their tombs except through the medium of commoners legitimated by slaves.

Summary

Monarchy among the Sakalava was not supported by vast plantations, as in parts of Africa, but by the capture of cattle and slaves in raids and warfare and their sale to Arab traders in exchange for luxury goods. Slaves undoubtedly played a part in this process as warriors, but their principal use seems to have been to extend the arm of government.

Lineage politics among the Sakalava depended on the ability of an individual to build up the numerical strength of his local group through marriage, procreation, clientship and other such means. Would-be rulers, bent on increasing political scale beyond the level of lineage politics (or bent on self-aggrandizement, however one chooses to see it), who therefore divested themselves of their rivals within the lineage, forfeited this means of support. One of their alternatives was to marry the Arab traders on whom they depended economically and incorporate them into government. The enslavement of outsiders was another solution.

People make outsiders into slaves, it is argued, because it takes more force or persuasion than most kings or chiefs possess to enslave a member of the local community. Nevertheless, the ultimate purpose of Sakalava slavery always seems to have been the subordination or «enslavement,» as Sakalava saw it, of insiders in a way that the politics of kinship did not normally permit. They were not the end but the means of more extensive subordination.

Sambarivo did not merely, or perhaps even primarily, supplement for royal kin. They enlarged the body of the monarch in a very literal way. They were, in a very real sense, his body, his head, his limbs and feet, an important solution to the problem of rule in a pedestrain state. In this, they were like the coins, the engraved images, the portraits and pageants that European monarchs used to multiply and intensify their presence, like the officers of the Privy Chamber in Tudor and Stuart England whom Starkey (1977) describes as «agent-symbols.» They were the means of divesting this particular individual of his particular origins and generalizing or universalizing him in such a way that he truly covered the body politic and related to all its diverse parts (cf. Beidelman 1963).

But they were more than that. The enslavement of outsiders was both the model for and the means of subordinating insiders, the process by which the entire body politic was transformed into the body royal. Declared kinless by definition, in fact violently deprived of their kin by force and transformed into a kind of human *tabula rasa*, *Sambarivo* were the ideal instruments with which to manipulate the idiom of kinship that Sakalava used to defend the ideal of lineage autonomy, the ideal means of transforming Sakalava into kinless adherents of monarchy.

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