

**BARA PASTORAL KINGDOMS  
(19TH CENTURY)**



by

Richard HUNTINGTON

*1 PROBLEMS WITH BARA HISTORY.*

All of the published oral traditions from the Bara stress a south eastern origin for the Bara, followed by a westward expansion. Raymond Kent's prominent historical studies (1968a, 1971) depart from these sources and stress western Malgasy and African origins for the Bara. In this paper, I shall review the standard interpretation as found in the published accounts, and explain why I think Kent's reinterpretation obscured and confused the picture of Bara political development.

There seem to be two broad and interrelated reasons for Kent's different interpretation :

First, Kent is concerned with documenting the historical connections between Africa and Madagascar. Because the Bara are so often cited as the "most African" of the Malgasy peoples, Kent is led to search for African connections. If the study of Madagascar in general has suffered from an underestimation of its African heritage vis-a-vis the Indonesian aspects, the study of the Bara has suffered from too strong an emphasis on their Africanness.

Second, Kent is concerned with origins, with earliest connections to Africa and earliest political configurations. He specializes in that most difficult, undocumented and misty realm of early history. In this, he follows the trend set

by Vansina which stresses oral traditions as historical sources. Kent tends to look at nineteenth century Bara events through fifteenth century spectacles which magnify events in the west and focus upon older rather than more recent evidence. Finding evidence for reconstructing the ancient events of non-literate societies is never an easy task, especially in regions of long term political disruption and instability, and where little archaeological remains have been analysed. Kent is forced to rely heavily on the slippery evidence of language, a sort of doctrine of Bantu linguistic survivals. He rightly criticizes earlier writers who naively relied on unsystematic comparisons of Bantu and Malagasy word lists, but his own use of linguistic evidence is not much better. This leads him into trouble such as where he provides a belabored proof that a certain phrase for "mercenaries" (*karama lataka*) is a Bantu loan word with various historical implications (Kent 1971, 142). Those who do not need to rely on missionaries' dictionaries recognize an earthy malagasy expression, "hired penises".

My concern is with the more richly documented recent history of the Bara which allows us to reconstruct, working backwards, the last two centuries of history. For the last century, there are eyewitness accounts of the Bara at roughly twenty years intervals, from c. 1970 (myself), c. 1950 (Michel), c. 1935 (Faublée), c. 1915 (Le Barbier), c. 1900 (Bastard, Bénévent, Boin, Du Bois de la Villeralabel, Elle), and finally from the 1870s (Cowan, Richardson). These accounts directly document Bara history back to 1870, and provide a view from that vantage point back to the birth of the Zafimanely political order at the eighteenth century. Kent's stressing of African connections (which as I said may be quite valid and important in the fifteenth century) obscures the dynamic creation of a political federation of pastoral and semi-nomadic "kingdoms" that expanded out of the Ranotsara plain early in the nineteenth century. This Bara federation was loosely organized and primitive compared to the kingdoms found elsewhere and earlier in Madagascar, but it effectively held its own against the Merina military juggernaut and was the last part of Madagascar subdued by the French colonial forces.

No doubt there were earlier political configurations in southern and western Madagascar, and Kent has definitely established their ancient multiple ties to Africa. But his difficult search for African roots cannot be allowed to distort the better documented picture of the more recent internal malgasy political dynamics of state formation. I will summarize the largely agreed upon outlines of Bara dynastic history as we find it in the published sources and then discuss in more detail some of the problems with Kent's reasoning on Bara political history, particularly the history of the eastern Bara.

#### *SUMMARY OF BARA POLITICAL HISTORY.*

By the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Bara were divided into three large and loosely organized kingdoms: the Iantsantsa in the Ranotsara plain, the Bara-be in the Horombe plateau, and the Imamono west of the Isalo mountains. Additionally there were two large semi-autonomous units in the south: the TeVondro in the southeast and the TeVinda in the southern part of

Horombe. One must also note a dozen small units whose relationships with the larger political entities varied from subjugation to clientship to temporary and permanent alliance. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, political stability of the entire Bara area was at best very shaky.

The Bara are one of the few groups in Madagascar not subdued by the Merina whose military garrison was maintained at Ihosy after 1877, and another such post at Ivohibe had to be quickly abandoned. Even after the French defeated the Merina in 1895, it took General Gallieni's forces another ten years to establish their control over the Bara. Throughout the period of French colonial control, a large military presence was maintained at Ihosy, at the crossroads between the Ranotsara plain to the east, and the Horombe plateau to the south and west.

Oral traditions collected from the different areas of Bara land are somewhat contradictory since each king views his family history as a charter for his authority. However, there is general agreement on the basic outlines of the development of these political divisions of the Bara. According to all accounts recorded shortly, before and after the turn of this century, the Zafimanelly clan, who eventually rule all the major Bara political units, came from the southeast of the Bara region. Most accounts refer to a "white" ancestor in either the male or female line who is supposed to have played an important role in early Zafimanelly military successes. During the eighteenth century, they settled on the Ionaivo river in the Ranotsara plain. According to Zafimanelly traditions, they arrived from a place called Ranotsara and brought with them a calabash of this "good water" which was ritually poured into the Ionaivo. The new village was then named Ranotsara-Avaratra. In this fertile valley, the Bara king Andriamanelly consolidated his position in much the same way his contemporary the great Andrianampoinimerina was then consolidating his position near Antananarivo. In the years following Andriamanelly's death, the Zafimanelly expanded to the north and west, subjugating the inhabitants of these areas.

It is at this point that the various versions of the history differ most markedly. These differences revolve around the question of which branch split off first, since each ruler seems to be claiming seniority in relation to the founding line of Andriamanelly. In spite of these quibbles, the major outline of Zafimanelly expansion remain clear. The Zafimanelly came from the south, established and consolidated their position at Ranotsara-Avaratra, then expanded north and west in the early nineteenth century at the expense of the Betsileo and Sakalava rulers in these areas. This Bara expansion was contemporaneous with the Merina western and southern expansion which was also at the expense of the Sakalava and Betsileo. The Merina and Bara then spent the second half of the century in a military stalemate, with the Bara forcing the Merina well north of Ivohibe in the east and the Merina forcing the Bara to retreat from the strategic post at Ihosy.

*BARA-BE AND BARA-LAIHY (IANTSANTSA).*

Although Kent notes that most writers imply that the Iantsantsa in the east were the parent unit for subsequent Bara kingdoms, he maintains that it was the Bara-be of the central region who formed the original Bara kingdom.

Kent's interpretation is based largely on his reading of the "linguistic" evidence. In particular, he is disturbed by the term "Iantsantsa" for the supposed parent kingdom. There are two conflicting etymologies for this term, one meaning "shark" and the other "lizard". He finds these etymological reconstructions to be absurd since sharks do not inhabit this inland area and lizards, he says, are found only in the western parts of Bara land. As yet, a third meaning, Kent quotes Webber's dictionary (1855) which defines "antsantsa" as a curse which is transmitted from generation to generation. This, according to Kent, definitely shows that the Bara-Iantsantsa are descended from a Zafimanely line which was disinherited and cursed because its founder murdered a kinsman (1968a, 399-401).

Kent's documentation for this is confusing mainly because this thesis is essentially illogical with regard to chronology. Although, he finds it "incredible that the Bara-be, or the Great Bara, would develop as a mere branch of the "sharks" (Iantsantsa), his proposition suffers from the same logical flaw. Both interpretations claim that one of two coeval "successor states" was also the parent to them both. The historian has fallen into the trap laid by the rulers of the Bara kingdoms, stressing the superiority and legitimacy of a certain line.

Bara-be traditions report that kingdom had to have been founded when one of Andriamanely's sons migrated with his followers to Ihosy and then to the Horombe (Boin 1897). The Bara Imamono claim to have migrated from Ranotsara to the west of Isalo at the same time (Du Bois de la Villerabel 1900 ; Le Barbier 1916). The only published Iantsantsa version of Zafimanely history is that provided by Boin (1897), an account which is not cited by any of the writers on Bara history (Michel, Faublée, Kent). This account, based on an earlier memoir by a certain Dr. Besson who was residing in Ivohibe before the beginning of the French occupation, is particularly illuminating in that it relates not only the traditions of the ruling Zafimanely, but those of all the clans who occupied the Ranotsara plain during the nineteenth century. Much of the information in this account is independently correlated by other early published accounts (Cowan 1881 ; Bénévent 1905 ; Elle 1905) as well as by histories I collected from elderly residents of Ranotsara, Anosibe and Ivohibe.

This eastern area was populated by numerous competing "clans" of diverse origins. Those groups originally from the east were referred to in the 1890's as Tanala although they were neither related to the Tanala of Ikongo or to each other. The rest of the groups were called Bara.

The largest and oldest of these polities was situated at Ivohibe and was referred to as Iantsantsa or TeVohibe. By the eighteen nineties (1890's) this

group is synonymous with the Zafimanelo to whom all groups in the area, "Bara" and "Tanala", were more or less subservient. However, this group seems to have been originally formed by peoples of diverse origins, immigrants from the east and south and refugees from the Betsileo kingdom of Lalangina toward the end of the eighteenth century. According to one of my informants from Ivohibe, an eighteenth century queen (of Betsileo origin) was named RaAntsantsa, a folk etymology no more or less reliable than those provided in other traditions.

It seems that the leaders of this independent Iantsantsa kingdom were allies and affines of the Zafimanelo of Ranotsara since early in the nineteenth century. At about the same time that the kingdoms of Bara-be and Imamono were founded in the west, the Zafimanelo of Ranotsara absorbed this strong ally at Ivohibe and became known as the Bara-Iantsantsa or Bara-lahy. Until the twentieth century, both Ranotsara and Ivohibe served as official residences for the Zafimanelo kings. Cowan describes in detail his 1878 visit to the Zafimanelo king of Iantsantsa, Raibaha, who was at that moment at his Ranotsara residence. As military pressure from the Merina and then the French to the north increased, Ivohibe, because of its strategic location, eclipsed Ranotsara as an important political center. Today the immediate vicinity of Ranotsara is populated largely by TeVondro and immigrant Tesaka from the east, with only a handful of Bara-Iantsantsa remaining.

### CONCLUSION

The label "Iantsantsa" originally referred to a small but powerful eighteenth century polity in the region of Ivohibe. There is some suggestion that this unit was allied with the Betsileo kingdom of Lalangina. In the nineteenth century, as this polity became absorbed by the expanding Zafimanelo of Ranotsara, the label "Bara-Iantsantsa" was used to distinguish this eastern Bara kingdom from those developing simultaneously in the west. In the eighteenth century, the people called "Iantsantsa" were not a Bara group. This does not imply, however, that the Bara-Iantsantsa are in some way less purely Bara than the Bara-be or the Bara-Imamono. Nobody, not even the Zafimanelo themselves, can be said to have been Bara in the eighteenth century, since the term "Bara" did not come into use until the early nineteenth century (Kent, 1968a).

All of the Zafimanelo kingdoms were formed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries through the absorption of other peoples. The word "Bara" came to refer to all these peoples who came under this Zafimanelo hegemony. The people of Ivohibe and the Ranotsara plain were absorbed into the very heart of the Zafimanelo system at a very early date, almost as soon as there was a Zafimanelo system into which to be absorbed. Today all of the peoples in the Iantsantsa region refer to themselves as Bara-lahy, male Bara are in some sense superior to the Bara-be whose name is said to mean not "great Bara", but to be derived from "be tambatra" meaning "many came together".

All the Bara kingdoms were constructed out of a melange of peoples, and lay claims to ethnic purity.

I am not an historian by training and so I hesitate to pronounce on methodological issues. However, when working in an area as sparsely documented as south central Madagascar, it seems logical to pay close attention to the eye-witness accounts available and to the most reliable written versions of the oral traditions, to arrange these accounts chronologically, and to consolidate the recent history which is relatively well known before embarking upon the voyage into the uncharted waters of the distant past and overseas connections.

This sorting out of the king lists, clan relations, and speculations on origins is only part, and the least interesting part, of the task. With the eyewitness accounts available, backed by future archaeological studies, it should be possible to reconstruct a socio-technical-ecological history of the Bara for settlements, agricultural practices, the density of the cattle population, the shifts in weaponry, the mobilization of resources, and the expansion of trade (and banditry, for which the Bara were famous). Within such a framework, names such as Raibaha, mpanjakany Bara lantsantsa, may well emerge as real historical figures who were active and important to their time and place, and who, collectively and individually, left a legacy in south central Madagascar.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BASTARD (E.J.), "Mémoires d'un roi Bara", in *Revue de Madagascar*, n° 6, 1904, p. 385-508 ; n° 7, p. 232-246, 321-354.
- BENEVENT (C.), - "Notes sur les Kimosy", in *Bulletin de l'Académie Malgache*, 1905 n° 4, p. 101-103.
- BOIN (M.), "Les Baras et les Tanalas des districts d'Ivohibe et d'Ihosy", in *Notes, Reconnaissances et Explorations*, n° 2, 1897, p. 446-456.
- COWAN (W.), *The Bara Land*, Tananarive, London Missionary Society, 1881.
- DUBOIS DE LA VILLERABEL, "La tradition chez les Bara", in *Notes, Reconnaissances et Explorations*, n° 6, 1900, p. 263-274.
- ELLE (B.), "Notes sur les tribus de la province de Farafangana", in *Bulletin de l'Académie Malgache*, n° 4, 1905, p. 116-123.
- FAGERENG (E.), - *Une famille de dynasties malgaches : Zafindravola, Maroserana, Zafimbolamena, Andrevola, Zafimanely*, Oslo, Bergen, Tromso, Universitetsforlaget, 1971.
- KENT (R.), - "Madagascar and Africa" : The problem of the Bara", in *Journal of African History* 9 (3), 1908, p. 387-408.  
"Madagascar and Africa : The Sakalava, Maroserana, Dady and tromba before 1700", in *Journal of African History* 9 (54), 1968, P. 517-546.  
*Early kingdoms in Madagascar*, New York, Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1971.
- LE BARBIER (C.) - "Notes sur les pays des Bara Imamono", in *B.A.M.* 3, 1916.
- MICHEL (L.), *Mœurs et coutumes des Baras*, Tananarive, Académie Malgache, 1957.

## FAMINTINANA

Soritan'i Raymond Kent fa nisy fifandraisan'ny Bara sy ny Bantou tao Afrika nandritra ny taonjato faha-XV. Nefa raha ny lovan-tsofina sy ny filazan'ireo izay nanatri-maso no arahina dia ny mikasika ny tantaran'ny Bara teo anelanelan'ny taona 1870 sy 1970 no tena azo antoka ankehitriny, ary bebe kokoa ny fanazavana azo momban'ny taonjato faha-XIX noho ny momban'ny taonjato faha-XVIII. Tamin'ny faraparan'io taonjato io no nipoiran'ny toko telo ara-pifehezana nanjakan'ny taranaky ny Zafimanely, dia ny Bara Imamono, ny Bara Be, ary ny Bara lantsantsa. Tokony ho avy tany amin'ny lemak'i Ranotsara any antsinanana any ny Bara. Marihina fa teo amin'ny voalohandohan'ny taonjato faha-XIX no niforonan'io anarana hoe Bara io. Koa diso ny hevitr'i Raymond Kent mikasika ny fiavian'ny fianakaviana nanjaka tany amin'ny Bara Be.

## SUMMARY

Raymond Kent a insisté sur les liens entre les Bara et l'Afrique bantoue à une époque ancienne (XV<sup>e</sup> siècle). Cependant les seules sources actuellement sûres sur les Bara, recueils de traditions orales et témoignages oculaires, s'échelonnent entre 1870 et 1970 et documentent valablement le XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle et partiellement le XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. A la fin de ce siècle, la dynastie Zafimanely donne naissance à trois entités politiques : Bara Imamono, Bara-Be et Bara-lantsantsa de l'ouest à l'est. Contrairement à R. Kent qui situe la dynastie originelle chez les Bara-Be, il faut plutôt insister sur le rôle de la plaine de Ranotsara à l'est à l'origine des Bara en relevant que ce mot lui-même n'apparaît qu'au début du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle.