# Political Claims and the Legacies of Slavery in Madagascar: An Interview and Some Notes

*Marco Gardini*

# Shadows of Slavery

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in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology (ERC GRANT 313737)

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**Abstract:**

This working paper explores how the legacies of slavery inform the social and political landscape of contemporary Madagascar. In particular, it investigates how impoverished people of noble descent have invested statutory distinctions with new political values linked to the colonial and postcolonial political trajectories of the country. I will argue that, far from being a simple reproduction of the pre-colonial past, the contemporary use of statutory distinctions can only be fully understood if we take into account the role they have played historically in the local and national political struggle.

## Introduction

In recent decades historians and anthropologists have demonstrated the importance of collecting, analyzing and publishing the oral and written accounts of the life histories of African slaves and their descendants[1]. These accounts are not only important elements in the analysis of how social hierarchies and statutory distinctions have structured the political and economic life of African societies, they are also crucial sources for the understanding of how enslaved people thought about, renegotiated and remembered their conditions before and after abolition. Following this perspective, scholars have also shown how crucial it is to consider the voices and ideologies of the masters, since these ideologies often survived abolition and have, more or less implicitly, permeated the relations between their own descendants and those of the slaves. These were not easy tasks, since in many African contexts the topic of slavery and its legacies has often been surrounded by a thick wall of silence that made it difficult for the researchers to reconstruct the life trajectories of former slaves and their descendants and to understand the hidden forms of discrimination that they still experience (Klein 2005; Rossi 2009; Araujo 2010; Bellagamba, Greene, Klein 2013).

The highland region of Madagascar is no exception: here the legacy of slavery is not an easy topic. The descendants of slaves have generally tried to conceal their origins in order to avoid the stigma attached to a servile ancestry and the discriminations that this stigma implies. They do not want to speak about something they are trying to forget (and - more importantly – that they are trying to make others forget). To be addressed as a descendant of slaves (andevo) is one of the worst insults and, as

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[1] See, for example, Lovejoy 1981; Robertson, Klein 1983; Wright 1993; Greene 2011; Bellagamba, Greene, Klein 2013.

*Shadows of Slavery*
*Shadows of Slavery*

*in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology (ERC GRANT 313737)*

I was quickly warned, the reaction to this offence could be quite violent[2]. People of free or noble descent never use this word in public and when they use it in private conversations they whisper it. They are often ashamed to admit that several of their own everyday practices and attitudes often marginalize the descendants of slaves, and prefer to avoid the topic with embarrassed smiles (Freeman 2013). Many of them view the descendants of slaves (or those they consider as such)[3] with a clear sense of superiority, describing them as noisy, potentially violent, uncivilized, and unclean. Even when they have friendly relations with descendants of slaves and they are on a similar economic level, free and noble descendants do everything they can to avoid their sons and daughters marrying people who are believed to have slave ancestry. They often justify this behaviour by saying that the ancestors would not accept a slave's descendant in the family tomb and would punish the family members with accidents or disease. If they agreed to a slave's descendant marrying into their family, they would immediately lose social status and no other free or noble family would intermarry with them.

Given people's unwillingness to talk about these issues, the interviews I conducted during my periods of fieldwork[4] in Antananarivo, Ambositra and Vohidahy in 2013, 2014 and 2015 often went off on long detours before arriving at the point. However, I soon discovered that questions related to the political trajectory of the country could be useful in speeding up the process, particularly when the topic of the assassination of President Richard Ratsimandrava in 1975 was addressed. Ratsimandrava was said to be of slave descent and was killed a few days after he took office. Many of my interlocutors thought this was no coincidence, and the debate generated by mentioning these events was often a good entry point to a discussion of the current marginalization of descendants of slaves. Very occasionally the topic of slavery did come up quite easily, particularly with those who were of noble origin and who used statutory groups – which divide people according to their ancestry: noble, common or slave – as a framework by which to read the political history of the country. In this paper I will present and discuss one of these interviews. The interviewee, Rakoto (pseudonym), was

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[2] My interlocutors reported many cases of brawls started by this kind of offence. They also stressed that the courts impose heavy fines on anyone calling someone else *andevo*.

[3] When ancestry cannot be known with certainty (particularly in urban contexts), people base an attribution of slave ancestry on a varied range of criteria, from skin colour to type of hair, from poverty to place of birth. See Gardini 2015(a).

[4] This research has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013)/ERC Grant agreement n° 313737. Fieldwork has been carried out in 2013, 2014, and 2015 for a total of 8 months.

*Shadows of Slavery*

in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology (ERC GRANT 313737)

a man in his seventies who was a descendant of a noble local family. I met him the 4th of July 2014 in Ambositra, a town on the highlands of Madagascar mainly inhabited by the Betsileo[5] people. Although Rakoto was uncommonly explicit in explaining his ideas about the position that the descendants of slaves should have in Madagascar, I found during my fieldwork that some of his ideas were widely shared among other descendants of nobles and free men[6].

After a brief introduction to the history of slavery and emancipation in Madagascar, I will show that this interview is an interesting example of how the topic of slavery still informs the life and discourses of individuals of noble descent in contemporary Madagascar. First, it sheds light on the attitudes - silent, though no less discriminatory for that - that those regarded as descendants of slaves must face in their everyday life. Secondly it shows how impoverished people of noble descent have invested statutory distinctions with new political values linked to the colonial and postcolonial political trajectories of the country. I will argue that, far from being a simple reproduction of the pre-colonial past, the contemporary use of statutory distinctions can only be fully understood if we take into account the role they have played historically in the local and national political struggle.

## The context

Slavery in Madagascar has been at the centre of many historical and anthropological studies[7]. For centuries the island was a point of arrival for slaves acquired along the coasts of East Africa and a point of departure for slaves exported to the Arabian Peninsula, Reunion, Mauritius, South Africa and America. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the kingdoms and the political confederations of the east

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[5] The Betsileo live in the southern part of the highlands and represent the third most populous group of Madagascar, after the Merina and the Betsimisaraka. As Kottak (1977) has shown, the idea that the Betsileo represent an 'ethic unit' was a product of the Merina conquest in 1815. This idea was reinforced by colonial processes of ethnogenesis. For others studies on the Betsileo see, for example, Dubois 1938; Kottak 1988; Evers 2002.

[6] However, it would be a mistake to think that Rakoto's ideas are equally shared among all *andriana* and *hova* of Merina and Betsileo origin. Although many of my interlocutors were prepared to agree to some of his opinions, I also met some noble or free descendants who did not think of the descendants of slaves as inferior beings. They neither lumped together descendants of slaves with *côtiers* nor thought that the descendants of slaves had taken power in Madagascar. Some of them, generally those who had shared some experience of political activism with the descendants of slaves, were profoundly critical of the discriminations that they experienced in their everyday life. During our interviews and discussions, they declared that they do not care whom their children will marry and that statutory groups are 'traditions that must be left behind'. Explaining the reasons for that is beyond the scope of this working paper. See Gardini 2015 (b).

[7] See for example: Medard, Derat, Vernet, Ballarin 2013; Armstrong 1984; Campbell 1981, 2003, 2005 Larson 1977, 1999, 2000, 2005, 2009; Mosca 1997; Rakoto 1997, 2000; Rantoandro 1993.

and west coasts (the Sakalava and the Betsimisaraka, for example) played an important role in the interconnected networks that characterized the Indian Ocean's slave trade, raiding the interior of the island for slaves and selling them to Swahili, Arab and European merchants in exchange for weapons. The slave trade contributed to the local processes of political centralization both on the coasts and in the interior. At the end of the eighteenth century, the small political entities of a highland region called Imerina were reunited under the rule of the king Andrianampoinimerina, who then extended his control over the Betsileo regions at the beginning of the nineteenth century and was able to control a substantial part of the slave trade towards the eastern coast. During the nineteenth century, the Merina kingdom became the privileged interlocutor of the British, who in 1817 and again in 1820 signed agreements to end the slave trade with king Radama I (the son of Andrianampoinimerina), whose title of King of Madagascar they recognized, despite the fact that he had neither conquered nor taken control of the whole island. Radama I opened up the country to the influx of protestant missionaries and forced the Merina elite to send their children to schools run by missionaries.

The weapons provided by the British allowed the Merina rulers to extend their hegemony over a large part of the island. The wars conducted by the Merina brought considerable numbers of slaves to Antananarivo, the capital of the kingdom, and to the surrounding regions. It has been estimated that in 1869 slaves constituted two-third of the population of Antananarivo, while the general proportion for the Imerina region at the end of the nineteenth century was between 20 and 26% (Campbell 1988). Endogamy and political centralization reinforced local hierarchies, characterized by the distinction between *andriana* (the so called 'nobles', people belonging to kinship groups related in different degrees to the kings)[8], *hova* (common people), *mainty* ('black people', servants of the kings), and *andevo* (slaves)[9]. People could be reduced to slavery by raids and in wars, but also for debts and crimes. Slave status was inheritable and manumission depended only on the will of the master. Slaves were the exclusive property of their master, they were not recognized as the legal

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[8] As Maurice Bloch has pointed out, the translation of the word *andriana* as 'nobles' could cause misunderstandings. Whereas in medieval Europe nobles were a minority with considerable lands and political power, in many villages of the highlands of Madagascar the *andriana* could be one third of the population and did not necessarily own more land than the common people (*hova*). However my interlocutors used the word 'noble' as the equivalent of *andriana* in order to stress the kinship relations that linked them with past rulers and kings. See Bloch 1971; 1977.

[9] See for example: Ellis, Freeman 1838; Andre 1899; Bloch 1977; Domenichini-Ramiaramanana, Domenichini 1980; Domenichini-Ramiaramanana, Domenichini 1982; Ramiandrasoa 1977; Ratsivalaka 1999.

Shadows of Slavery

*in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology (ERC GRANT 313737)*

parents of their children, they could be sold and inherited, and were employed in domestic and agricultural tasks (Rakoto 1977). They had no right to construct family tombs for themselves or to reclaim an ancestry. In many cases they were just buried near their masters' family tombs (Bloch 1977). Not being recognized as full persons, they were not obliged to perform forced labours for the king, as common people normally were (Campbell 1988). Despite the agreement between Radama I and the British, slaves coming from Africa (called *Makoa* or *Masombika*) continued to be sold in Madagascar throughout the nineteenth century (Campbell 1981).

After the rupture in diplomatic relations between the European powers and the Merina kingdom during the reign of Ranavalona I (1828-1861), new legal measures were introduced to put an end to the slave trade, such as the new agreement to stop the trade in *Makoa* in 1865 and the emancipation of all slaves of African origin (but not of all the *andevo*) in 1877 (Domenichini, Ramiaramanana 1997; Rakotondrabe 1997; Rakotomalala, Razafimbelo 1985). The institution of slavery was legally abolished in 1896, a few months after the French conquest of Antananarivo. The Merina kingdom was dismantled and the Queen and her Prime Minister sent into exile.

The French colonial power maintained an ambiguous position towards the so called "traditional authorities". Despite their modernizing and centralizing rhetoric, colonial administrators made use of local kings and chiefs in extending and maintaining their control over the island. The Merina hegemony was severely reduced, but large numbers of the Merina elite, which had had a considerable advantage in terms of schooling since the time of Radama I, were recruited to work for the administration. Although the Merina elite had lost their political power, many of them (*andriana* and rich *hova*) managed to hold on to their privileged economic position. The French colonial administrators could not afford a reduction in agricultural production and they needed legal and administrative instruments with which to exploit - at best - the labour force of the newly conquered colony. The formal abolition of slavery was immediately followed by forced labour, laws against vagrancy, and the colonial taxation system.

As many historians and anthropologists have shown (Bloch 1979; Kottak 1980; Rakoto 1997; Evers 1999, 2002, 2006; Freeman 2013; Graeber 2007; Rakoto, Urfer 2014; Razafindralambo 2005, 2014; Regnier 2012, 2015; Razafiarivony 2005; Somda 2009), former slaves and their descendants renegotiated their position with former masters in different ways. Some profited from abolition by

# Shadows of Slavery

## in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology (ERC GRANT 313737)

leaving their masters and occupying new lands where they could build family tombs and try to hide their slave origins, others preferred the economic security of staying with their former masters, working their fields as sharecroppers. Some of the former slaves who still remembered where they came from tried to go back there and to reintegrate themselves in their families. Some others found a means of emancipation in the new opportunities that the colonial system offered, enrolling themselves in the army, sending their sons to mission schools, working for commercial companies or trying to gain access to employment in the administration. These different trajectories explain the great variety of economic conditions experienced by the descendants of slaves. In some rural contexts they have been able to acquire land and emancipate themselves from former masters (Graeber 2007). In others, they still work as sharecroppers or have access only to the less fertile lands (Evers 2006, Freeman 2013). In Antananarivo, the distinction between the descendants of families of high rank and the *andevo* is inscribed in the organization of the urban space (Fournet-Guerin 2007, 2008; Nativel 2005; Wachsberger 2009; Roubaud 1997; Rajaonah 2003). The tops of the hills are inhabited mostly by descendants of the ancient Merina nobility, while migrants and slave descendants live in the surrounding poor neighborhoods (*bas quartiers*).
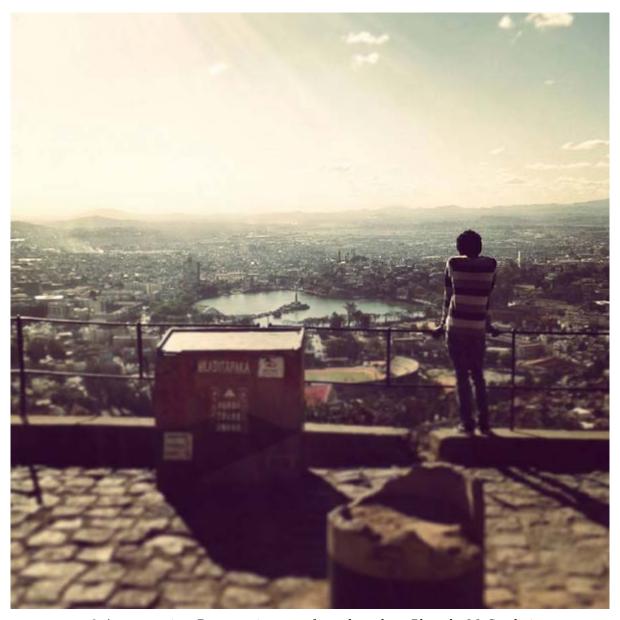


*1. Antananarivo: Palace of Merina rulers and hauts quartiers. Photo by M. Gardini*

*2. Antananarivo: Bas quartiers seen from the palace. Photo by M. Gardini*

Despite the variety of economic conditions experienced by the descendants of slaves, a strong stigma still attaches to servile ancestry in several regions of Madagascar[10]. Marriage is generally forbidden between the descendants of slaves and those of free and noble men, and those who do not respect this rule are often excluded from the family and from access to the family tombs. As in many

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[10] For exceptions see M.L. Brown, "Reclaiming Lost Ancestors and Acknowledging Slave Descent: Insights from Madagascar", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 46, 3, 2004, pp. 616-645.

Shadows of Slavery

*in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology (ERC GRANT 313737)*

other African contexts, these social distinctions have been often racialized, particularly among the Merina. After the abolition of slavery, the dichotomy between *fotsy* / *mainty* ("white" / "blacks") overlapped with the dichotomy between free people and *andevo*, establishing a racialization of social categories that in the past had very little to do with skin color or hair type (Razafindralambo 2014). In the Betsileo regions the distinction between free and slave descendants is generally not as racialized as among the Merina. Descendants of slaves are often referred as *olona maloto* "dirty" people, in contrast with the "clean" people (*olona madio*): the free descendants. However, as the case of Rakoto will show, the idea has also gained currency in some Betsileo contexts that the descendants of slaves are of African origin, while the ancestors of free people came from south-east Asia.

After the Second World War, these social distinctions became fertile ground for political struggles. As Mervyin Brown (1995) has shown, the fiftieth anniversary of the annexation of Madagascar as a colony (1896 - 1946) was read differently by the emerging Malagasy political parties. The MDRM (*Mouvement Démocratique de la Rénovation Malgache,* whose leadership was composed mainly of Merina intellectuals of *andriana* and *hova* origin who wanted the immediate independence of the country) regarded the event as nothing more than the celebration of a military occupation that put an end to the political independence of Malagasy societies. On the contrary, the PADESM (*Parti des Déshérites de Madagascar*, a party ruled by people from the coastal regions and descendants of slaves from the highlands)[11] celebrated the day as symbolising of the end of slavery and of the Merina hegemony. PADESM believed that the nationalistic and anti-colonialists discourse of the MDRM was hiding the political agenda of the Merina nobility, who were suspected of trying to regain the political power they had lost at the end of the 19th century, while the MDRM accused the PADESM activists of being traitors to the anticolonial movement, having profited from French colonial power to obtain abolition (in the case of slaves) and political strength against the Merina (in the case of the coastal populations). Of course, the French colonial power profited from this opposition, explicitly supporting the PADESM. Although coastal societies were themselves internally differentiated between nobles, common people and slaves, the political alliance between descendants of slaves from the Imerina region and the "côtiers" (the term of colonial origin that is often used to refer to all those

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[11] See Randriamaro 1997.

*Shadows of Slavery*

*Shadows of Slavery*

*in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology (ERC GRANT 313737)*

who are not from the highlands) gave the Merina nobility the opportunity to lump these two categories together and to portray them as having being "privileged" by French colonial rule.

The distinction between Merina and "côtiers" is still part of the common framework through which the political trajectory of the country is read. This distinction has been politically instrumentalized on a number of occasions. In 1972 for example, facing growing protests in Antananarivo that were threatening his pro-French regime, President Tsiranana (who was a "côtier") spread the word that his resignation would cause a "civil war between the Merina and the côtiers": this strategy was not successful and some weeks later popular demonstrations obliged him to resign. The protestors were mainly city dwellers who felt the Tsiranana regime was too close to the former colonial power, university students fighting for the introduction of the Malagasy language in schools and young people of slave origin who were attracted by the Marxist, anti-imperialist struggle and who allied themselves with young migrants from the coastal regions living in the poor neighborhoods of the capital (Althabe 1978, 1980; Blum 2011; Randriamaro 1997, 2009, 2011)[12].

More recently, as Cole (2006) has shown, during the election of 2002 Didier Ratsiraka[13] (a "côtier") tried to use these same divisions to gain the votes of the coastal people against Marc Ravalomanana[14] (a *hova* Merina). His failure was a clear sign that, as Jean Pierre Raison (1993) had already remarked about the presidential election of 1992, the electoral geography of Madagascar could not be reduced to a simple opposition between Merina and "côtiers" or between statutory groups.

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[12] This does not mean that there were no tensions between Merina and "côtiers". In December 1972, a riot against the Merina started in the coastal town of Tamatave. People criticized the politics of malgachisation of schooling promulgated after the fall of Tsiranana, which involved the imposition of the Merina dialect over the whole island. During the riots, gangs of young people burned Merina houses, looted their stores and raped their daughters. See Cole 2006.

[13] Born in the province of Tamatave, Didier Ratsiraka became President of the Republic for the first time in 1975. He established an authoritarian regime characterized by strong communist rhetoric. In 1993 he lost the elections against Albert Zafy. He was elected again in 1997 and stayed until 2002, when Marc Ravalomanana won the election. On the Ratsiraka regime and its end, see, for example, Gow 1997; Raison-Jourde 1993; Raison-Jourde et J.-P. Raison (dir.) 2002; Rabenirainy 2002, p. 86- 101; Randrianja 2003.

[14] The head and founder of one of the most important industrial companies in Madagascar, Marc Ravalomanana became President of the Republic in 2002, after a disputed election that led to the defeat of Ratsiraka (see Randrianja 2003). Ravalomanana remained in power until 2009, when a coup organized by Andry Rajoelina, another young entrepreneur, triggered a political crisis and the period of "transition" that ended in 2014 with the election of Hery Rajaonarimampianina. For an analysis of the confrontation between Marc Ravalomanana and Andry Rajoelina, see Galibert 2009.

However, these oppositions did often emerge during my interviews as popular narratives that are used to make sense of the national political situation. Some of my noble interlocutors, such as Rakoto, regarded the fact that no President of the Republic has belonged to the Merina nobility as proof that the descendants of slaves and the "côtiers" have managed to monopolize political power by selling themselves to external powers - colonial or neo-colonial - in order to rule the "peoples of the highlands". Obviously, the descendants of slaves and the "côtiers" I met in the poor neighborhoods of the capital had a very different point of view: they believed that the Merina nobility pulled the strings of those in power, in order to avoid direct criticism and to maintain their privileged position in the administration and in the most important sectors of Malagasy economy. By adding new political values to old categories, these contrasting narratives show not only how statutory and "ethnic" distinctions are interwoven in local political discourses, but also how they reproduce these same distinctions as pertinent categories by which to read local and national political struggles (and, eventually, to take part in them).

## The interview

Rakoto's house had definitely seen better days. It was a typical Betsileo house of two floors, situated in the crowded neighborhood surrounding one of the main market places of Ambositra. To reach the small courtyard in front of the entrance, you need to pick your way through a maze of narrow streets filled with waste. Rakoto was introduced to me as a *panandro*, usually translated as "astrologer", the ritual figure whom people consult in order to learn which days are auspicious for particular activities (funerals, circumcisions, trips, weddings, and house construction). The *panandro* plays an important role during these ceremonies, asking the blessing of the ancestors. The people who had suggested that I meet Rakoto called him "The Professor". They believed that he was one of the most important experts on the history of Ambositra. The room in which Rakoto and his wife lived was relatively large. The walls were full of images of Jesus and Mary and photographs of John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis I, and many of the books filling the shelves were on religious topics. Rakoto was a fervent Catholic, as were his father and grandfather. After welcoming my assistant/translator and myself, Rakoto chose to answer my questions in French. I started the interview with a general question

Shadows of Slavery

in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology (ERC GRANT 313737)

on the history of Ambositra and I expected a long account of the first comers, the kings, the wars and the genealogies. Rakoto was not interested in all that, and he immediately launched into his criticism of the recent political situation.

«[...] we were taught that Madagascar was a country considered as a first wonder of the world, but after colonization, it degraded, degraded up to now. [...] The traditional structure in Madagascar is paramount; parents educated their children, their descendants. The children listened to them before, but now they don't, since there is a lot of change [...] because of money [...] and that's why foreigners and politicians dominate the population [ ... ] that's why they take advantage of weak people. And every year, every year it goes worse and worse ».

I quickly changed direction and started to ask Rakoto to be more explicit about the role of the so-called traditional authorities in Madagascar and on the meanings he attached to the word "tradition".

«You see, we have already held a meeting in Tana. We have already gathered all the traditional authorities of Madagascar. We were in Tana and we discussed [...]. So, according to what we did there: there will be no advancements for the population in Madagascar, because it (the situation) still degrades more; so we said 'What should we do?' Especially us, the traditional authorities, since we were 100 from all the provinces. We made all kinds of custom. It was said that Madagascar will not advance if tradition and traditional authorities will not be in power, as parents, but politicians (said) 'None of that!' [...]. Politicians, the rich slaves, some foreigners like the French, the Chinese, and the Indians dominate Madagascar».

It was the first time anyone, five minutes into a conversation with me, had explicitly and unhesitatingly used the term «slave», not as a metaphor for the current forms of the exploitation of labor, but to refer to those who are called *andevo*, the descendants of slaves. After having made sure that he really was referring to them, I asked him to explain his point of view. What follows are the most important parts of our discussion.

«[...] the second municipal election is coming. We must seek candidates from royal families, for a start. From there, we can go up. We, the *andriana*. Since the rich slaves, in those years of transition ... there are many who have become rich. So they speak with their money: there is no more *andriana*, there are no more traditional authorities, but it is money that counts. Above all, they have foreign friends from China, from India, it's easy for them to rise ».
«The Malagasy peoples of today do not know their history. Here, there is a saying: *'Ny vola no maha rangahy'* (It's the money that makes the man) [...] Families disagree over marriages between *andriana* and *andevo*. Children say that's all gone, it's from long ago, it's ancient history, but they still know it ... Even I… I have a daughter; I keep the nobility, since I am noble. I do not accept that my daughter will marry an *andevo*. We have already seen some experiments. The Malagasy people of Ambositra, the Betsileo, especially do not want it, since the Betsileo know

# Shadows of Slavery

in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology (ERC GRANT 313737)

history: *andevo* are *andevo* and will always be *andevo*, that's for sure [...]. We can say that ... one third of the population is *andevo* in Ambositra. Most Malagasy in Madagascar, especially the *andriana* but even the *hova*, do not respect the slaves, because for them, for us, the *andevo* will always be *andevo*; even from an intellectual point of view».

For Rakoto, as for all my Malagasy interlocutors of free descent, being an *andevo* (or a *hova*, or an *andriana*) was an inherited status that cannot be changed by economic conditions or by laws. Although it was sometimes not easy to understand "who was who", he declared that the *andevo* could be recognized by their behaviors, which he linked to a supposed "inferiority complex" that descendants of slaves had *vis à vis* free and noble descendants. This "inferiority complex" was related to the fact that, according to him, descendants of slaves were not really Malagasy but Africans, and therefore less "civilized" and less entitled to claim political and social rights on the island.

«Sometimes *andevo* marry with other people, we don't recognize them anymore, they are mixed. Currently, there are many people of mixed origin, there is much similarity, it is difficult to say *andriana, hova* ... The only way we can get it back is this municipal election, then we can find everything, all the royal family, during this election. Because anyway, even if the rich slaves have their money, they still have a complex, with the *andriana*, an inferiority complex, they feel they are really slaves. The *andriana* …only the *andriana* must lead the country. We see this complex in their behavior, in their way of speaking. For example, if I am an *andevo* and you are an *andriana*, I am still ashamed of you, I am still afraid. Remember that you are *andevo*! There is that here [...] You see, there are many differences between the work done by the *andevo* and the work done by the *andriana*. The *andriana* work much better, but the *andevo*… There are, nevertheless ... there are a lot of differences. [...]

In Madagascar, (even if) the *andriana* and the *andevo* are in the same class, in the same work, we see the difference; we feel it in their education, in their level of education. As I told you before, the *andevo* still have their inferiority complex, because they know they are not native of Madagascar, by history they are not Malagasy, they are imported from Africa and they know that. That's why they understand that they are not true ... Malagasy, but now, after two hundred, three hundred years, we are all Malagasy, but still ... my ancestors ... I cannot destroy them [...]

Among the *andriana*, it decreases honor if we stay with them, the slaves. We can eat together, work together. But if an *andriana* and an *andevo* eat together, their way of eating is not the same. There is much difference in the behavior. Even if the *andevo* are intellectuals, functionaries, you can see it, even when they talk ... particularly when they talk: they talk drivel. They are not careful, in almost everything they do with people [...] Here, if the children marry the *andevo*, the family gets rid of them entirely. They are no more of the royal family. Especially [they cannot go] into the family tomb ».

*3. Ancient* **andriana** *tombs near Ambositra. Photo by M. Gardini*

What Rakoto knew, but was systematically forgetting in order to essentialize the category of *andevo*, was that many of the slaves were not of African origins but people enslaved on the island during the frequent raids that characterized the centuries of the slave trade or who became slaves as punishment for crimes and debts. The "great sin" that he imputed to the *andevo* was of being ready to ally themselves with external powers: in other words, to be traitors. His nostalgic view of the pre-colonial past made him say that slavery was a good thing, that the power of the Merina nobles was benign and was a source of stability and social union for the country, and that all Madagascar's problems resulted from the rise to power of those he called "slaves" who then sold the country to colonial or neo-colonial powers.

«It's hard to sort things out between different castes, especially for the *andevo*, because foreigners are always at their side. For example, the *andevo*, because of the complex I explained to you, always ask for help from foreign people who are against the kings in order to dominate *andriana*. For example if an *andevo* wants land and he pays directly the *andriana*, it could work, but because of their inferiority complex, they always seek the help of foreign people [...] (During the meetings in Tana) we said that *andriana* must take power. This does not mean we do not want the *andevo*,

we can work with them if they accept the laws of the *andriana*. The laws provided by *andriana* are many. For example, Madagascar has been led before by kings, it worked well, there were negroes to be exported here ... Yes, slavery was a good thing for me ... Currently, we are in the 21st century, it would certainly be good to get together, but it is always difficult, it is the politicians, leaders and some foreigners, who do not want the Malagasy people to unite. The *andriana* were always in union, unity is strength [...]. In the history of Madagascar, when the *andevo* lived in Tana, they had many problems with the *andriana* of the Merina. So they made a decision to go to the countryside. And they asked the *andriana* of the provinces: "Could we settle there? We can help you". They accepted, the ancestors agreed, but after some time, the politicians, the leaders came... That's why it is difficult to come together today. The mistake of the *andevo* is that they listen much more to the foreigners than to the *andriana* [...] According to history, our Queen Ranavalona I made a constitution, saying that foreigners should not sabotage the throne of the queen. Yet the French did not accept that. She also kept the Malagasy honor, their pride. She was alone; the Malagasy peoples have not followed. If the *andevo* remain as they were, it makes no difference, but as I told you, they do not stay like that, because of their complex… they always ask for help here and there, that's why Malagasy are still fighting [...] The French, before leaving Madagascar, supported a political party called PADESM "Party of the disinherited people of Madagascar" and they have this PADESM, they work, they teach the slave descendants, as the French said, "If you want to prevent *andriana* from returning to their throne, you must work well". So now, look at the transition period of these past five years. Almost all of them are *andevo* and former followers of PADESM. Lately, the presidents are not *andevo*, but Rajoelina was much on the side of the *andevo*. He loves the *andevo* more than the *andriana* [...]».

Rakoto complained that the meeting of the *andriana* at Antananarivo had yielded no results, as the current political power did not accept their political agenda. The failure of this initiative, which could be read as a sort of rapprochement of the "traditional" elites that were looking for political visibility and a new form of legitimization, made his criticisms against democracy all the harsher.

«You see, we have been doing it (the meeting) for five days and after ... at the end we did not win…we should meet again…. you see, we must find an accord with them (the politicians), but they have not accepted. The counselors of the President are not of the royal family, most of them. You see, there is already a barrier. That's why it's hard for this President to do that. You see, Roger Kolo, the Prime Minister, is from the Menabe royal family. Yet the President [of the Republic] Hery Rajaonarimampianina is *hova*, you see the difference; so it can't work like that [...] Democracy is not good for the Malagasy. That is also a problem for Madagascar. If you are not in a political party, you will not succeed in competitions, examinations, scholarships in foreign country... If we want the best, that Madagascar takes its place, not to mention *andriana, hova, andevo*, we should call on the traditional authorities, so that they have their place, as presidential advisers. Traditional authorities do not profit from their position to make money, since they are elected by the people... Elected traditionally not politically. In order to elect a king traditionally he must be chosen by the population of the region, the "foko". Traditional authorities know the life of the population, much better than the

president, ministers, and deputies. And people also trust them more than deputies, ministers. A foko will not choose an *andevo* as king. Anyway, here, the foko has no *andevo*, for *andevo* are foreigners in Madagascar, and not direct descendants. Until now, that is the case. Traditional authorities are much more aware of the life of the population. That is why we must call on them, or designate these traditional authorities as presidential advisers».

Rakoto's criticisms were directed not only at the national political contexts, but also against the forms of labour exploitation that noble, but impoverished, people must cope with in their everyday life, particularly when they found themselves obliged to work as domestics for rich slave descendants. This fact represented for him an immoral inversion of the social order.

«You see, now, there are *andriana* descendants working as domestics in Tana or in other regions. Among these people there are those who work for rich *andevo*. We find a difference in the behaviors of *andevo*. They maybe…Sometimes they take revenge.... "Yours ancestors did this and that to us...well..." That's the difference of action. Yes, there are also a lot of *andevo* working for the *andriana* everywhere, but we see that *andriana* can not say to the *andevo*: "You are an *andevo*, you are an *andevo*, you are, at home, an *andevo*". On the contrary, the *andevo* currently say, "You're with me, I'm your master". This should no longer exist [...]».

Returning home after the interview, my research assistant, a man of *hova* origin in his fifties, commented sarcastically on this last part of our interview: "Nobles justify exploitation more easily when they are the exploiters, don't they?". Moreover, the fact that Rakoto boasted so much about his noble origin seemed suspicious to him: "A real noble does not need to do that". With a hint of malice, he added that Rakoto was going to a lot of trouble to emphasise his nobility, possibly to hide the ambiguous origins of some of his ancestors.

## A Discussion and Some Research Paths

It is easy to demonstrate how partial and ideologically informed is Rakoto's historical and sociological account. It draws a nostalgic picture of the pre-colonial past that systematically hides every reference to the violence and conflicts that characterized Malagasy societies during the centuries of the slave trade. It reshapes the history of slavery in Madagascar in order to reproduce racialized and essentialized assumptions on the supposed intellectual inferiority of the descendants of slaves and it links this inferiority to an African origin regarded as proof of savagery and incivility. It articulates a discriminatory discourse in order to reaffirm the political claims of that part of the

Shadows of Slavery

in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology (ERC GRANT 313737)

Malagasy nobility which, although it believes itself to be naturally entitled to rule, has found itself more and more marginalized from political power and, having nothing else to cling to, is trying to reaffirm its status via a reinvented tradition and a nationalistic discourse. The fact that some descendants of slaves have been able to improve their economic conditions is stressed emphatically in order to hide the fact that so many others are still economically dependent on their former masters.

It is exactly this partiality that makes Rakoto's interview interesting for the analysis of how a part of the (impoverished) nobility reshaped and read the history of slavery and emancipation after independence. Rakoto's interview opens some research trajectories that must be considered for the analysis of the legacies of slavery in Madagascar and, in particular, of the political, ideological, economic and social reasons why discrimination against slave descendants continues to play a crucial role in contemporary Madagascar. Of course, the abolition of slavery imposed by colonial rule froze the relative fluidity and historicity of statutory groups (Regnier 2015) and, in many rural contexts, these statutory groups still represent the ideological framework by which the exclusion of (those who are considered as) descendants of slave from access to resources is legitimized (Evers 2002). The honorable status of noble descent, and the privileges attached to it, could be reproduced only if it is systematically denied to others. These distinctions are the corollary of the idea that the very essence and identity of a person is related to his/her birth and that this cannot be changed by other circumstances. By bitterly commenting that today it is the "money that makes men", Rakoto was not criticizing class inequalities from an egalitarian perspective: on the contrary, he believed that the difference between noble and slave descent is inscribed in people's very "nature". For him the emergence of new forms of inequalities were immoral only because they violated this natural principle.

Rakoto's interview also sheds lights on another set of explanations of how these social distinctions have been reproduced. Statutory distinctions, as constitutive elements of the local processes of the construction of individual and collective identities, have survived the formal abolition of slavery because they have been invested with new political values. The fact that abolition was enacted by the French colonial power played an essential role in the processes of essentialization of these categories, which became a sort of cultural marker of Malagasy identity, usable by some of the Merina nobility in building a nationalistic discourse against the hegemonic power of the West (or, more recently, of

Shadows of Slavery

in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology (ERC GRANT 313737)

China). Nationalistic rhetoric needed not only external enemies, but also internal ones. Descendants of slaves – supposed to have profited from abolition - and the coastal populations – supposed to have profited from colonialism - were the best candidates to assume these roles. The post-colonial trajectory of the country, the inability of the government to deal with the growing poverty faced by many sectors of Malagasy society, and the increasing skepticism towards a democratic system that seems unable to deliver what it promised have all helped to re-establish statutory groups as pertinent categories for reading local political struggles and elaborating political claims.

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