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Forever Slaves? Inequality, Uncleanliness and Vigilance about Origins in the Southern Highlands of Madagascar

Denis Regnier

Université de la Polynésie Française, Faa'a, French Polynesia

Abstract: In the southern highlands of Madagascar, Betsileo free descendants strictly avoid marrying descendants of slaves, whom they regard as “unclean people.” A close examination of the history of a slave descent group shows that the most serious difficulty faced by former slaves after abolition was not access to land but ritual uncleanliness, which prevented intermarriage with free people and led to the essentialisation of the now pervasive hierarchical distinction between clean and unclean people. Today, free descendants actively maintain a social memory of “origins” and remain extremely vigilant about not marrying the slave descendants, who are “locked” into an unequal and unclean status that they cannot easily escape.

Keywords: Inequality; Hierarchy; Slavery; Essentialism; Madagascar

In August 2009, I attended a funerary ceremony in a small Betsileo village in the southern highlands of Madagascar.¹ I had walked to this village from Beparasy, the region where I was conducting fieldwork, and had been accompanied by my friend Andry and other teenage boys for the 20km hike through the mountains.² During the three-day-long ceremony my young companions spent most of their time in search of a girlfriend, since such large gatherings provide opportunities for Betsileo youth to find a casual partner who might someday, if the relationship is maintained, become a spouse. Andry eventually found a girl, Nivo, from the village hosting the ceremony, who was willing to entertain such a relationship with him. As I observed this affair take its course, I noted that the relationship between Andry and Nivo was unlikely to lead to marriage. Nivo's village had been founded by former slaves and she was of slave descent. Even if the two wanted to pursue their relationship, I knew that Andry's family would never accept such a marriage, because Betsileo free descendants forbid their children to marry descendants of slaves.

Such a marriage ban had surprised me at first because the small peasant community of Beparasy was composed of families of free and of slave descent; their relationships seemed rather cordial, sometimes even quite intimate. I could see that most slave descent households had "fictive kinship" links with free descendants. Relationships of enduring friendship, neighbourliness, and mutual help with funeral events or agricultural tasks were also common. And, as the case of Andry and Nivo shows, free descendants engaged in love affairs and sexual relationships with slave descendants – this seemed to be frequent and happened for young, old, married, and unmarried people alike. And yet, in spite of the apparent "normality" of their social relations, free descendants strictly enforced a prohibition against marrying slave descendants.

Slavery and its legacy are very important issues in Madagascar. Slaves were traded along the East African coast and on the island long before European contact (Randrianja & Ellis 2009), but from the early 16th century onwards European mercantile capitalism developed global slave-trading networks across the Indian Ocean, and Madagascar became a regional hub connected to the East Asian and North American markets (Allen 2014). A number of Malagasy polities supplied slaves or took an active part in the trade (Campbell 2005). The Merina kingdom, in particular, relied heavily on slave trade, on the enslavement and selling of war captives, and on both slave and *corvée* labor for its development and expansion (Larson 2000). The Merina had conquered about two thirds of the island when the French took it over in 1895, abolishing slavery one year later. That an estimated 500,000 slaves were liberated (Deschamps 1972, 221), in a total population of about 3 million Malagasy (Campbell 2005, 136), provides a sense of the magnitude of the enslavement phenomenon in 19th century Madagascar.

Anthropologists have investigated slavery's protracted consequences in contemporary Malagasy societies, most notably among the Merina (e.g. Bloch 1979; 1980; Razafindralambo

¹ Participant observation fieldwork was conducted in Malagasy and French in the Ambalavao district (Matsiatra Ambony) during 25 months in 2008-2010 and subsequent visits in 2012-2015, with funding from the London School of Economics, the University of London, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, and the European Research Council (grant no. 269616). Field experiments were implemented during my 2013-14 visits. I am grateful to Rita Astuti, Maurice Bloch, Michael Lambek, Jonathan Parry and Dominique Somda for their comments at various stages of the development of my argument.

² Personal, descent group and place names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

2003; Graeber 2007), the Betsileo (Evers 2002; Regnier 2012; Forthcoming; Freeman 2013), the Betsimisaraka (Brown 2004), the Zafimaniry (Bloch 1979; 1980), the Tanala (Beaujard 1998), and the Tanôsy (Somda 2009). These accounts show that the legacies of slavery in Madagascar are manifold, ranging from almost invisible traces to major imprints on social groups. In some places, slavery never comes up as an issue in book-length ethnographies (e.g. Wilson 1992; Astuti 1995), and thus seems relatively unimportant to understanding the nuts and bolts of local social relations. In others, on the contrary, it is a core issue that it is constantly discussed, albeit secretly, reflecting a local “obsession with slavery” (Somda 2009, 13). Elsewhere, still, slave ancestry is openly acknowledged and can be casually discussed, and marriages with slave descendants pose few problems, if any (Brown 2003; see Regnier and Somda forthcoming for an overview of these issues).

In the southern Betsileo highlands, two consequences of slavery stand out: people continue to carefully avoid marrying slave descendants, and they consider these descendants to be “unclean people” (*olo tsy madio*). This stigmatisation may lead to harsh exploitation, as in the case of the migrants of alleged slave descent described by Evers (2002). Such situations call for a precise account of the problems faced by Betsileo slave descendants, which in my opinion have not yet been properly analysed. Only a clear understanding of their predicament might help policy makers, activists, educators, NGOs, and local communities to address prejudice, discrimination, and stigmatisation. In the southern highlands, the persistence of a strong social hierarchy seems to be predicated first and foremost on the view, widely shared among free descendants, that slave descendants inherit a kind of uncleanliness from their putative slave ancestors, and that they are doomed to retain their inferior status forever. In this article, I focus on exploring this view and its social implications.

Slave Descendants in Beparasy

Beparasy is the name of a plateau and its neighbouring valleys, located at the southern end of Betsileo country and on the northern foothills of the Andringitra mountain range in highland Madagascar. This remote plateau was still unoccupied when a small number of Betsileo settlers arrived from the north in the second half of the 19th century. They first established fortified villages on hilltops; then, in order to cultivate rice, they deforested the banks of the river meandering through the plateau. At a later stage they built *vala*, which are typical Betsileo hamlets constructed around a stone cattle pen (*valan'omby*) and surrounded by a fence made of thorny plants (see Dubois 1938, 75-6). The descendants of this first group of settlers form the largest part of the population of the now completely deforested plateau. They comprise a few thousand rice-growing peasants residing in more than one hundred hamlets and villages. Among them, a few hundred people are considered to be slave descendants. They are called, and call themselves, Berosaiña.³

During the precolonial era, Betsileo society comprised three main status groups: *hova* (which can be loosely translated as “nobles”), *olompotsy* (“commoners”), and *andevo* (“slaves”). Each

³ The number of slave descendants in Beparasy ranges in accordance with Kottak’s estimate between 5% and 15% of the Betsileo population (Kottak 1980, 105).

status group was further divided into different categories, but in present-day Beparasy these subcategories are no longer significant (Regnier 2014b). Apart from the Berosaiña, all Beparasy families are said to be descended from commoners; the noble families of the region live a few kilometres outside Beparasy. The Berosaiña own the land they cultivate, and their vast wetlands are reputed to be excellent for riziculture. As far as land is concerned, the Berosaiña are thus on an equal footing with the free descent families of Beparasy; in fact, they are even among the most privileged. This situation contrasts sharply with the case of the descendants of the slaves who stayed on their former masters' estates after abolition, as reported in other parts of Betsileo country (Kottak 1980, 133-5; Freeman 2013, 612). Relations of dependency have in this case continued in a new guise, mainly because the descendants of these slaves have since then sharecropped their former masters' land and have had little access to land property. Unlike them, the Berosaiña make a living as subsistence farmers and do not depend on their free descent neighbours.

The Berosaiña live either in small hamlets close to their rice fields, or in larger villages with a few families of free descent. No particular phenotypical traits or behaviours distinguish them from the other villagers. They perform the same rituals and hold the same ceremonies as any free descent family. The houses and ancestral tombs (*fasandrazana*) they have built resemble those of any other resident of Beparasy; in no way are they set apart in peripheral or reputedly inferior locations. Some of the Berosaiña are wealthy according to local standards and possess dozens of zebus, by far the most valued prestige good and the most important property besides rice land. Their relative wealth, land possession, and tombs are particularly significant, since it has been argued that “slave” (*andevo*) status among the Betsileo is primarily defined by a lack of land and tombs. Former slaves who were successful in acquiring both could become legitimised as “masters of the land” (*tompontany*) and definitively escape slave status (Evers 2002, 30). This argument does not hold for the Berosaiña, whose slave status coexists with *tompontany* status.⁴

The Berosaiña are *tompontany* not only because they possess a lot of land, but also, perhaps more importantly, because they were among the first people who settled permanently on the plateau. Oral histories (*tantara*) recall that Rakamisy, the “great ancestor” (*razambe*) of the Berosaiña, was among the first settlers of Beparasy. Founders are important figures everywhere in Madagascar, including for the Betsileo, yet it was intriguing to hear that “historians” (*mpitantara*) among free descendants readily acknowledge the role of a Berosaiña in the settlement history of the region.

The Story of Rakamisy

Rakamisy was one of the four men who arrived in Beparasy in the last quarter of the 19th century, most probably between 1880 and 1890. These men were “looking for spacious land” (*nitady tany malalaka*) where they could raise cattle and cultivate rice. At this time, the economy of the southern highlands, traditionally dominated by cattle herding and swidden

⁴ Sandra Evers' account (2002) has brought scholars' attention to the stigmatisation of slave descent in the southern highlands, but I remain unconvinced by some of her arguments (see Regnier 2012, Chapter 8; 2014a).

cultivation, had been shifting to intensive wet rice agriculture, partly in response to fiscal pressure from the Merina royalty (Ralaikoa 1981; Kottak 1980, 107), who had conquered the region in the 1810-20s (Deschamps 1972, 151). With the blessing of the ruler of the local polity, the four men decided to try to establish a new settlement in the polity's mountainous southern fringes. In return, the ruler would make them his representatives (*andevohova*) for the new settlement area.⁵ At first, the four men only had to take charge of the kinsmen and dependents they had brought with them, but as small groups of new settlers arrived in Beparasy, each of them was placed under the patronage of one of the *andevohova*, who allocated them land in the plateau's subdivision that was under his responsibility.

The oral histories made it clear that Rakamisy was a free subject of the local polity who had achieved high status during his life by becoming a founder and *andevohova* in Beparasy. How can this story be reconciled with the current slave status of the Berosaiña? I received an explanation from a free descent elder who had, as a young man, contracted a blood bond (*vakirà*) with a Berosaiña, and thus come to know their family history well.⁶ He was at first a bit reluctant to explain why the descendants of the powerful Rakamisy were considered “slaves” (*andevo*). Overcoming his difficulties, he then explained that when he arrived in Beparasy, Rakamisy was a former slave who had previously bought his freedom from his master, a noble from a village close to Anjoma, near Ambalavao, who owned a great number of slaves.⁷

Had people in Beparasy learned that Rakamisy had been a slave before becoming an *andevohova*? Had they thought that his enslavement had left him tainted, and applied this reasoning to the Berosaiña group as a whole, since he was their founding ancestor? This hypothetical scenario seemed to fit well with the expressions of “unclean people” (*olo tsy madio*) and “dirty people” (*olo maloto*) that Beparasy villagers commonly used to talk about the Berosaiña or other slave descendants. But it was not confirmed by the elder, who insisted that Rakamisy was free (*afaka*) and clean (*madio*) – since he had bought himself back – and “he was really a commoner” (*tena olompotsy izy*) when he arrived in Beparasy.

What actually happened is that shortly after Rakamisy's arrival in Beparasy, world history changed his destiny: France took over Madagascar (1895), and the French colonial administration rapidly abolished slavery (1896). For him, the consequences of abolition were immediate. Rakamisy's mother and two of his brothers, who were still slaves, were liberated. They found their way to Beparasy, and Rakamisy, as one of the four *andevohova*, allocated them land – and very good land at that. Rakamisy's two brothers built hamlets near their rice fields, and their mother stayed with Rakamisy in his village, where they lived with a few free

⁵ *Andevohova* were free men of high influence chosen by polity rulers to help them administer their subjects. If a man desired to be an *andevohova*, he had to see the ruler and offer him an ox (Rajaonarimanana 1996, 25-7). The ruler would then indicate a region where he could go to form a village with a group of migrants, for which he would become the *andevohova*.

⁶ *Vakirà* are blood bonds that are contracted through a ritual in which people swear life-long mutual support (Kottak 1980, 186-90). In precolonial times, slaves could make such blood bonds with free men. In Beparasy, many free descendants had contracted blood bonds with the Berosaiña in order to make them kin (*havana*), albeit sometimes with ulterior motives (Regnier forthcoming, Chapter 5).

⁷ Slaves could work in addition to their duties and could keep as much as two thirds of their earnings (Campbell 1998, 268).

descent families. Together, Rakamisy and his kinsmen started to recreate a Betsileo descent group organisation, keeping the name “Berosaiña,” which was the group name (*anarampoko*) they had borne when they were slaves.⁸ Unlike Rakamisy, however, his kinsmen had been liberated by the white foreigners (*vazaha*). They had not been freed in the traditional Betsileo way, which involved a cleansing ritual performed either by the noble who freed the slaves or by the head of the free descent group who reintegrated them.

When Rakamisy’s uncleansed kinsmen arrived in Beparasy in the aftermath of abolition, the villagers looked suspiciously at them and, by extension, at Rakamisy himself. According to my elder friend, people said about Rakamisy: “Ha! He is still their friend!” (*Ha! Mbola namany izy!*), meaning that by helping his relatives he was somehow reverting to being what they were – slaves who had been inadequately freed and had thus remained unclean. In other words, upon his arrival in Beparasy, Rakamisy had the prospect of living the life of a free man and a powerful *andevohova*, but the arrival of his liberated kinsmen severely undermined his possibilities. In spite of Rakamisy’s high status, people started to gossip about the Berosaiña being “slaves” (*andevo*) and “dirty” (*maloto*), widely damaging their local reputation. From then on, it became very difficult for Rakamisy, his kinsmen, and their descendants not to be considered the “unclean people” (*olo tsy madio*) of Beparasy.

Marriage Avoidance

Asking questions about slave descent and the Berosaiña as slave descendants was quite challenging in Beparasy. It has been suggested that the widespread “silence about slavery” in Madagascar is purposely maintained by both free and slave descendants because it creates a liveable “fiction of equality” (Somda 2009; Freeman 2013). In Beparasy, I found such a fiction. Free descendants carefully avoid saying or implying that someone is of slave descent because they could be fined a zebu by the village council (*fokonolona*) for doing so. The Berosaiña, on their end, have no interest in bringing up the issue of their slave reputation in public discussions, even if to deny it. Moreover, in daily life, the relations between the free descendants and the Berosaiña appear to be rather egalitarian: they are never considered inferior partners when they till the fields with their free descent friends or help them to organise a funeral. Yet there is one issue that regularly disrupts the fiction of equality and brings social inequality and hierarchy back to full light: marriage.

The Berosaiña’s wealth and *tompontany* status were apparently never sufficient for them to be judged “marriageable” by free descent families. The analysis of 97 Berosaiña marriages across four generations shows that none of the partners originated from a free descent family of Beparasy. Although incomplete, these data seem to indicate that the Berosaiña did not have marital alliances with local free descent groups during the four or five generations that followed the arrival of Rakamisy and his brothers in Beparasy. My free descent informants denied that there had ever been any marriage between a free descent family of Beparasy and the Berosaiña. The absence of local marriages for the Berosaiña sharply contrasts with the situation of free descent families. The free descendants’ repeated local alliances have resulted in their view that

⁸ Slaves who belonged in large numbers to Betsileo nobles were called by group names (Rainihifina 1975, 29).

all people in Beparasy are kinsmen sharing common ancestors – all people, that is, except the Berosaiña.

This situation is not the result of the Berosaiña's preferences and choices. They would not avoid marriage with the free descendants of Beparasy if it were possible, and unlike the free descendants, they do not tell their children that there is a kind of people (*karazan'olo*) that they should not marry. Relations between free descent and Berosaiña teenagers are frequent, but free descent parents turn a blind eye to them as long as they do not last.⁹ If, however, the relationship becomes serious and the teenagers say that they would like to proceed with the marriage process, the free descent parents then have recourse to various strategies, including the threat of heavy sanctions, to deter their child from continuing the relationship and to prevent the first formal stages of customary marriage from being undertaken.

Analysing the data I collected among the Berosaiña, I discovered that at least five of their marriage partners (out of 97) were people of free descent. After verification, however, I learned that these unions had been considered inappropriate by the free descent kinsmen of these partners. In other words, these marriages had not been voluntarily contracted between free and slave descent families, and in most cases these unions did not proceed far into formal marriage exchanges. The spouses received blessings from Berosaiña elders, but not from the free descent elders. For this reason, I call these unions “unilateral marriages,” as opposed to the “bilateral marriages” of the free descendants, in which the couple receives blessings from both sides (Regnier forthcoming, Chapter 5). My use of “unilateral” and “bilateral” to describe Betsileo marriages differs much from the usual meaning of these terms in kinship theory (cf. “unilateral cross-cousin marriage”). I use “unilateral marriage” to highlight the fact that a marriage can occur without the consent of one side, just like we speak of “unilateral divorce” when one spouse decides to terminate the marriage without the consent of the other. When free descendants enter unilateral marriages with slave descendants, the former are sanctioned by their families, who usually sever all relations with them and exclude them from ancestral tombs. As a result of this strong opposition, unilaterally married couples reside either neolocally or with their slave descent relatives.

When I first asked free descendants why they did not want to marry the Berosaiña, they told me that one should only marry “people of the same ancestry” (*olo mitovy raza*) (Rainihifina 1975, 29-30), or “people of the same rank” (*olo mitovy saranga*) – the “same ancestry” means marrying people from the same status group (i.e. *hova*, *olompotsy*, or *andevo*), whereas the term *saranga* (“rank”) refers more explicitly to the ranking system that existed for nobles and commoners during the precolonial era (Dubois 1938, 578-9). In both cases, the idea is that people should marry equals or, in anthropological terms, that they should marry isogamously.

Beparasy commoners' preference for an isogamous marriage is real, but is it what leads them to avoid marrying the Berosaiña so strictly? If that were the case, they should also avoid marrying nobles. Nowadays, however, “bilateral” marriages between descendants of nobles and commoners do occur, even though both noble and commoner descent groups disapprove

⁹ When a Betsileo girl has children outside a marriage, the child is raised by the girl's family until she marries. If a girl of free descent gets pregnant and the presumed father is of slave descent, the girl's family pretends not to know who the father is.

of them. If a couple insists, in spite of their respective families' attempts to discourage them, the partners will be allowed to proceed with a customary marriage and their union will be blessed by elders on both sides. By contrast, such tolerance is totally absent in Beparasy when a marriage with the Berosaiña was at stake. Furthermore, the strict pattern of avoidance I observed in Beparasy was striking, given the aforementioned fiction of equality.

A strong preference for isogamy is thus not sufficient to explain why free descendants did not, and still do not, marry the Berosaiña. A further reason provided by free descendants was that “if we marry them, we will become slaves too” (*lasa andevo koa anay raha manambady azy*). My first understanding of this statement was that their group's local reputation as clean people would be damaged by such a marriage, as was the case with Rakamisy, whose association with his uncleansed kinsmen pushed him back to slave status. This interpretation is correct (and I will come back to it later), but the phrase also carries two less obvious meanings, which follow from the way Beparasy villagers think about the mixing (*mifangaraho*) of ancestries (*raza*).

Mixing Ancestries

The first case of “ancestries mixing” I was told about is procreation, which is important because it concerns the production of descendants (*taranaka*), so valued in Madagascar (Keller 2008). I asked free descendants: What would happen if commoners (*olompotsy*) and slaves (*andevo*) had children together? What would be the children's ancestry (*raza*)?

Beparasy villagers only describe the procreation process in vague terms, but their views seemed very similar to that of their immediate southern neighbours, the Bara, as reported by Huntington (1973, 79). In short, the mother contributes the raw material – blood (*rà*) – and the father provides the semen, which “builds” (*manamboatra*) the fetus out of the mother's blood. My interlocutors had sometimes told me that the Berosaiña were unclean (*tsy madio*) because they had dirty blood (*rà maloto*), I therefore wondered whether a child's status depends on which parent is of slave descent.¹⁰

People explained that children born from unions between commoners and slaves are called *lambo tapaka* (“split wild boar”) (Rainihifina 1975, 29). This term evokes some kind of mestizo status because of its implicit reference to two halves – the children being, I was told, half *lambo* (wild boar, i.e. *andevo*) and half *omby* (zebu, i.e. *olompotsy*). They stressed that the children would be *lambo tapaka* irrespective of whether the mother or the father was of slave descent. This is consistent with the Betsileo kinship system, which is cognatic despite a strong patrilineal bias (Kottak 1980, 172). The cognatic system, however, does not mean that *lambo tapaka* children could – like the descendants of former slaves among the Sakalava – “assert social identity derived from non-slave ancestors” and “be absorbed into the social order” (Lambek 2004, 109). To the contrary, my interlocutors explained that *lambo tapaka* children were of slave status and unambiguously considered as unclean persons. Thus, *lambo tapaka* is

¹⁰ Evers also reports that her informants viewed the uncleanliness of slave descendants as an uncleanliness of blood (Evers 2002, 70). Scholars have sometimes linked the uncleanliness of low-status groups in Madagascar to a hypothetical influence of Hinduism via the Austronesian side of the ancestors of the Malagasy (Randrianja and Ellis 2009, 41).

not a mestizo status, since the children are not mixed as far as their social status is concerned. Beparasy free descendants apply here a rule of hypodescent: the children of an *andevo-olompotsy* couple are ascribed the social status of the parent of the inferior ancestry (*raza*). The term “hypodescent” was coined by Harris and Kottak (1963) to discuss racial categorisation in Brazil and has been used to analyse other cases, the most well-known example being the one-drop rule in the United States. It also applies to the way in which Beparasy free descendants think about children born from unions with slave descendants. The phrase “if we marry them, we will become slaves too” implies that all the descendants born from such marriages will be ascribed the slave status, despite having one commoner parent and many other commoners among their ancestors.

The second case of “ancestries mixing” is the mixing that would occur in the free descendants’ ancestral tombs if they had to bury *lambo tapaka* children. In an attempt to explain why the corpse of an “unclean” slave descendant should never be placed inside a free descent tomb, one of my friends quoted the proverb “*Fandoto iray tandroka mahaloto rano iray sinibe*” (“the dirtiness of a horn [used to pour water] makes the water of a jar [used to store water] dirty”), to mean that such a corpse would taint (*maloto*) the entire tomb. Others, following the same rationale, told me that if such a person were to be placed in the tomb, the ancestors would become dirty (*maloto*) as well, and therefore “the ancestors [would] become slaves too” (*lasa andevo koa ny razana*). This is particularly significant because in southern Betsileo tombs, the dead are placed close to one another on beds or, if the beds are already full, piled upon one another, so that when corpses decompose the bones intermix. In this process, individual corpses progressively lose their identity and become a single entity of ancestors. The phrase “if we marry them, we will become slaves too” thus refers to this kind of mixing in which free descent ancestors in the tomb could become unclean as well. In Beparasy, people strongly felt that placing a *lambo tapaka* child in the tomb would have serious negative consequences, and they feared the “ancestral violence” (Graeber 1995) that could be unleashed on them.¹¹

“If we were to marry the Berosaiña,” an elderly woman once asked me in response to my questioning, “where would we bury the children, then?” In the eventuality of a marriage with the Berosaiña, there would be no obligation, for the free descent side, to bury the *lambo tapaka* children in their tombs: they could simply leave the corpses to the Berosaiña, who would bury them in their own tombs. But this idea is very difficult to accept for free descendants, not only because it goes against the local practice of sharing the dead between descent groups (see Parker Pearson and Regnier 2018), but also because relinquishing the children means that “the descendants are lost” (*very ny taranaka*), that none of the descendants of the couple will ever be buried in a free descent tomb, and therefore that the contact with their free ancestors will be lost forever. Future generations of the couple will never receive the blessings of their free descent ancestors. For free descendants, this would be too high a price to pay.¹²

¹¹ Interestingly, the mixing of different ancestries is the main reason why the communal ordeal described by Graeber (2007) in western Imerina was considered so disastrous. In this case, it is the earth of noble and slave descent tombs that had been mixed in the ritual.

¹² Another possible option open to the free descent side would be to claim the corpses of *lambo tapaka* children and bury them in the ground outside of the ancestral tomb, but this compromise is considered unsatisfactory by free descendants.

Essentialising Clean and Unclean People

In Beparasy, the most important social divide was between clean and unclean people. At least since Durkheim and Mauss' pioneering work (1903), anthropologists have been interested in categorisation and classification. While classification refers to the way categories are related to each other, categorisation is the process of sorting "things" into groups (categories) based on similar characteristics. Both are evidence of what Ellen aptly calls the "categorical impulse," namely, the human mind's impulsive capacity to create and manipulate categories that are "asserting absolutely" (Ellen 2006, 1). The way Beparasy commoners thought of slave descendants aroused my interest in the fact that some categories can be essentialised.

Psychological essentialism is a pervasive cognitive bias that leads people to view members of a category as sharing deep, underlying, inherent nature (a category "essence"), which causes them to be fundamentally similar to one another in both obvious and non-obvious ways (Gelman 2003). Since Allport's pioneer work (1954) it has often been suggested that essentialist biases about social categories (gender, ethnicity, race, etc.) facilitate social stereotyping and prejudice (e.g. Hirschfeld 1996; Prentice and Miller 2007).

Psychological essentialism is notoriously difficult to study directly. First because in most cases people do not have firm ideas about what constitutes the "essence" of the category they essentialise (Medin and Ortony 1989, 184-5). Second, because essentialism is an intuitive theory about which people are not necessarily able to be explicit (Rhodes and Mandalaywala 2017). Given these difficulties, researchers focus instead on essentialism's cognitive implications. In Beparasy, I observed several implications of psychological essentialism in the way commoners spoke and thought of slave descendants. The discussion on *lambo tapaka* children, for example, illustrates the fact that the boundaries of the categories "clean" and "unclean" are discrete: an individual can be a member of one category or another, but not both. Beparasy commoners, moreover, seem to implicitly view the difference between clean and unclean people as a real, objective and "natural" distinction in the world, and not as the result of conventions that vary across individuals and contexts.

To further explore these issues among Beparasy commoners, I conducted field experiments that probed the possibility for an unclean (or clean) person to become clean (or unclean), and used three different scenarios: an adoption story, a cleansing ritual and a blood transfusion (Regnier 2015). The results show that the respondents viewed membership to the categories of "clean" or "unclean" as intrinsic (i.e. determined by intrinsic processes before birth) and stable across transformations (i.e. once determined, it is impossible to change). Such cognitive implications provide evidence that Beparasy commoners strongly essentialise the categories of clean and unclean people.¹³ They also hold a number of negative stereotypes about the Berosaiña, saying for example that they are bad-tempered and incapable of holding high-status positions because they are *andevu*, "slaves". In similar fashion, Kottak's free descent Betsileo

¹³ Given the sensitivity of the issues, it was impossible to conduct similar field experiments among the Berosaiña. The views they expressed in interviews suggest however that, unlike commoners, slave descendants do not essentialise the difference between clean and unclean people.

informants told him that it is easy to identify *andevo* because “they lack a certain finesse; they don’t know how to behave properly. Besides, they have ugly feet” (Kottak 1980, 105).

One might wonder when Betsileo commoners started to essentialise “slaves” (*andevo*). During the 19th century, every free Betsileo, irrespective of status, was continuously at risk of being enslaved during the frequent raids, wars, and kidnappings that plagued the highlands (Larson 2000). This makes it very likely that people regarded slave status as being contingent. Slaves, on the other hand, could work in addition to their duties and buy themselves back from their masters, like Rakamisy, or they could be bought back by their families. Therefore, people must have formerly conceived of enslavement as a shameful yet reversible condition. In other words, the slave status was probably not viewed as immutable and irredeemable, but must have been much more fluid than it is in the present day. The description of a 19th century cleansing ritual found in missionary archives provides evidence for this claim (Gueunier et al. 2005; see Regnier 2012, Chapter 7). According to this account, the Betsileo considered former slaves to be suitable marriage partners as soon as the former slaves had performed the cleansing ritual and had been reintegrated into their descent group. Like Rakamisy upon his arrival in Beparasy, they were completely redeemed.

Essentialism in historical perspective

This raises the question of why and how essentialism developed after the colonial abolition of 1896. Many of the freed slaves left their masters within hours of hearing the news of their liberation. Those who had been recently enslaved could go back to their region of origin and reintegrate into their descent groups, whereas those who had been enslaved for several generations were unable to return to a kin group. Two options remained: either stay with their former masters and sharecrop their land or, like the Berosaiña, find unoccupied lands to restart a free, independent life from scratch. In 1896, land suitable for cultivation must still have been relatively easy to find in the Betsileo region because the Malagasy highlands are one of the most productive regions in Sub-Saharan Africa and can sustain relatively high population densities (Campbell 2005, 135). In addition, the population of Madagascar seems to have remained constant during most of the 19th century, remaining stagnant at between 2 million and 3 million people, while the population of Imerina and the capital Antananarivo grew (Campbell 2005, 137). As missionary James Sibree observed in 1870,

the country is so sparsely populated that the land is, comparatively [compared to Europe], of little value, so that almost everyone possesses some piece of ground which he can cultivate; even the slaves have their rice-patch. (...) Except in the near vicinity of Malagasy towns, a good deal of the land appears open to anyone living in the neighborhood to cultivate and enclose at pleasure, so that no one need want at least the bare necessities of life. (Sibree 1870, 223)

It thus seems that, as long as they moved away from towns and the most densely populated areas, the freed slaves who settled in the southern highlands after 1896 must have easily found new lands to clear and cultivate.

Their main problem was thus not land, but ritual uncleanness. As the description of the cleansing ritual mentioned above shows, the 19th-century Betsileo viewed enslavement as a highly polluting condition.¹⁴ Slaves were viewed as strongly “diminished persons,” having to obey their masters’ orders and perform the most dirty and inferior tasks. They could not follow the customs of their ancestors (*fombandrazana*) or obey their ancestral taboos (*fady*) (Regnier 2014b). Betsileo rulers and nobles, on the other hand, were considered “sacred” (*masina*) persons and revered “almost like gods” (Dubois 1938, 567). Having the highest “ritual efficacy” (*hasina*), they had the power to cleanse the slaves they freed. Though less powerful than rulers and nobles, the heads of commoner descent groups had enough ritual power to cleanse their kinsmen who had been freed and needed to be reintegrated. The French colonial government, however, did not have the legitimate ritual power to properly free the slaves. Thus, after the abolition decree of 1896, Betsileo commoners put much effort into avoiding any marriage with the former slaves who had been freed but not properly cleansed. I have already described the slave status into which the Berosaiña were “locked” in Beparasy after the arrival of Rakamisy’s uncleansed family. Because free descendants avoided marrying them, they had no other choice than to marry other former slaves. In so doing, they have reinforced the commoners’ prejudice against them, further preventing intermarriage and fueling their essentialisation.

A Social Memory of Origins

The account would be incomplete without examining how free descendants obtain reliable knowledge about the social status of their marriage partners. All of the villagers in Beparasy know the slave status of the Berosaiña, but what and how do they know of the ancestry of a person who is not from Beparasy? If free descendants had no way of knowing this, their self-confident assertion that they never marry slave descendants would be nothing more than wishful thinking. Given that today’s young Betsileo had a large number of forebears living in 1896, how could one check all of these possibilities? Moreover, during the 20th century both free and slave descendants moved continuously within and outside the Betsileo area in search of land or paid labour, and the Betsileo population increased from about 408,000 in 1900 (Kottak 1980, 54) to more than two million today. I therefore assumed that it would be much more difficult today than in the early 20th century to ascertain whether someone had slave status or not. My informants, however, told me that it was still fairly easy because “we Betsileo all know each other” (*anay Betsileo mifankafankatse aby*).

The reason the Betsileo feel they all know each other, despite their mobility and population growth, is in large part due to their keeping of a certain kind of social memory. Social memory in Madagascar has been studied by several authors (e.g. Cole 2001; Feeley-Harnik 1991; Graeber 1997; Larson 1999; Osterhoudt 2016). What interests me here is how knowledge about status differences, and especially about the cleanliness or uncleanness of families, is passed on and maintained through generations. In Madagascar, the most common way to approach the social memory of inequality is through its inscription in geography (e.g. Thomas 2006; Evers

¹⁴ Among the Betsileo a person or a group can become unclean as a result of misconduct (Regnier forthcoming, Chapter 6).

2002; Freeman 2013; Somda 2014). Anyone familiar with a particular place can often “read” social hierarchy in the landscape or in village organisation. Among the Betsileo, for example, slave descendants who live close to their former masters usually reside in poor dwellings to the west of free descent villages, in the least favourable location according to the Malagasy astrological system (Kottak 1980, 137-8; Freeman 2013, 600). In Beparasy, such analysis is of limited relevance because the Berosaiña do not live peripherally or in locations considered to be inferior. Yet, even if it cannot be deciphered in the landscape, a geography of inequality permeates the cultural practices that produce and reproduce the vast amount of memorial knowledge about status differences that I call the Betsileo “memory of origins.” Two practices in particular play a crucial role in facilitating the retrieval, learning, and remembering of people’s “origins” (*fototse*, which could be equally translated by “roots” – see Thomas 2006, 32-3): premarital inquiries and genealogical speeches.

The Betsileo undertake extensive investigations of potential marriage partners (Rainihifina 1975, 29; Kottak 1980, 205). Although such premarital inquiries seem common throughout Madagascar, in Beparasy they are taken particularly seriously. When children inform their families that they would like to marry, parents or other senior group members set off, often on foot and sometimes journeying over 100 km, to visit relatives living close to the native village of the potential future spouse. This information-gathering can last for weeks. Family members are predominantly concerned with one question: “what is the ancestry” (*inona no raza*) of these people? My informants stressed that, when undertaking such an inquiry, it is important to question relatives, even very distant ones, since they will be serious and committed contributors in the process of gathering information, as they, too, are concerned with excluding unclean people from their family. Relatives living close to the village of the family under investigation are most likely to know whether the family is of slave descent, just like everyone in Beparasy knows the slave status of the Berosaiña. If they don’t, they may know someone who has a relationship with this family and has attended their funerals. At these funerals, this person may have listened to a kind of speech called *tetiharana*.

Tetiharana speeches constitute the other cultural practice that is key to the social memory of origins. All Malagasy peoples highly value oratorical performance, and speeches (*kabary*) are pronounced on many occasions, especially (albeit not only) in the highlands. In Beparasy, *tetiharana* are speeches delivered at the end of funerals to resituate the deceased person in descent groups. A *tetiharana* starts with a male ancestor of the deceased, usually a founding ancestor, and alludes only briefly to previous forebears. The name of this first ancestor is mentioned, in addition to his village of origin and his descent group name. Then, his wife is named, as well as her descent group and her native village. The name of the village they founded or their original place of settlement is recalled, followed by the names of their children. The speech continues to name the descendants of the couple over the generations, providing similar information until reaching the deceased. Once the *tetiharana* of the patrilineal founding ancestor has been completed, another *tetiharana* that includes the deceased’s mother follows. Two *tetiharana* speeches are thus typically provided, but occasionally other *tetiharana* are added, for example for the sides of the deceased’s father’s mother or mother’s mother. The *tetiharana* recall not only the names of the descendants of two ancestral couples, but also their geographical dispersion, mentioning migration, hiving off and residence. Importantly, they also

provide information about the marriages of the apical ancestors' descendants, since they name their spouses, their descent group, and their native villages. The *tetiharana* is therefore much more than just a genealogical recounting of the dead person's local descent groups: it offers a mapping of the marital alliances that these two local descent groups have contracted with other groups. Since a *tetiharana* should recall the names of all the cognatic descendants of the couple it starts with as well as their spouses, only a small number of generations (usually four or five above the deceased) are considered, for reasons of time and complexity. To prepare for their speeches, the *mpikabary* who are in charge of the *tetiharana* often consult the family history manuscripts that are kept and regularly updated by the heads of descent groups. In addition to the manuscripts and genealogical knowledge kept within families, both *tetiharana* speeches and premarital investigations thus preserve a distributed memory of origins among the people who live and regularly attend funerals in a particular region.

Vigilance about Origins and Its Consequences

While attending funerals in Beparasy I was sometimes told that *tetiharana* speeches provide the best opportunities to learn about someone's slave ancestry, or at least to develop suspicions about the origins of some families. It is remarkable that vigilance about origins is not only present when free descendants conduct lengthy investigations about marriage partners or listen to *tetiharana* speeches at funerals. It also pervades everyday forms of communication. One of my friends told me how, when he introduces himself to people who live outside Beparasy and announces the name of his village, he is frequently asked to specify the exact area of the village. In such cases, his interlocutors know that in his village in Beparasy there is a Berosaiña family, and they are subtly inquiring about whether he is one of them. My friend knows very well why his interlocutors are asking these questions and takes care to convince them that he belongs to one of the free descent families and has no kinship links with the Berosaiña, in spite of living in the same village.

Slave descendants are well aware that free descendants are extremely vigilant about origins. This explains their frequent elusiveness about family history. Keenan notes that in Betafo, central Vakinankaratra (highland Madagascar), slave descent households do not usually possess family history manuscripts, unlike nobles or commoners, and “prefer not to refer to their familial histories” (Keenan 1974, 219). Although she does not explain why, it is easy to guess that it is because slave descent households are aware that publicly recalling their family history would provide reason to free descendants to confirm the slave status they have already ascribed to them. For slave descendants, public disclosures of family history would contradict their hope of someday shedding their slave status. It is tempting to see, in their reluctance to talk about family history, a spontaneous strategy of resistance to being categorised as “slaves” (*andevo*). This strategy, however, is doomed to remain unsuccessful because by not disclosing their familial history or by omitting certain details, a family quickly becomes suspicious.

When Beparasy free descendants conduct premarital investigations, they might fail, despite their efforts, to obtain reliable information on someone's ancestry. The person's origins will be then judged as “unclear” (*tsy mazava*). This is the case when, for various reasons, the parents were unable to ascertain clean origins or when serious doubts were raised about a family's

cleanliness. In this case, as with families clearly identified as being unclean, parents typically refuse the marriage for fear of discovering the slave ancestry of their affines at a later stage. Thus, in practice, a family who is considered to have unclear origins faces almost the same difficulties as a family with a publicly recognised slave ancestry and unclean origins. This makes it even more important for free descent families to take every precaution to preserve their clean reputation – this is the third meaning of the phrase “if we marry them, we will become slaves too” mentioned earlier. For slave descendants, the fact that free descendants prefer to avoid people with unclear origins makes it almost impossible to escape slave status by hiding or remaining elusive about one’s family history. It is possible for free descendants to make mistakes and wrongly judge a family’s origins to be clean. Such mistakes, however, can only be short term, since in the long run the widely distributed social memory of origins inexorably catches up with people. Indeed, in Beparasy I heard several stories about bilateral marriages that free descendants had started “by mistake” with slave descent people from outside Beparasy, because they had not been vigilant enough in their premarital investigations. In such cases, free descent families would step back, stop the formal exchanges of the marriage process, and cut all relations with the couple and the now unwelcome affines.¹⁵

Because of their role in the settlement of Beparasy, their relative wealth, and their rooting in a *tanindrazana*, the Berosaiña are more fortunate than the slave descendants mentioned by Keenan (1974). Like free descendants, they have family history manuscripts. Their main orator (*mpikabary*), who is regarded by all Beparasy villagers as an excellent one, also acts as the *andevohova* representative of the Berosaiña group and frequently speaks in public. In his long and elaborate speeches, he never misses an occasion to refer to the arrival of Rakamisy on the land of Beparasy and to stress that all the descendants of the four men are relatives (*havana*), since their ancestors once lived together in the same fortified hilltop village (*iray tanana*). Thanks to the role of Rakamisy, the Berosaiña have a locally prestigious family history to tell, and they can speak proudly about it in public. However, this is a double-edged sword, especially when it comes to *tetiharana* speeches. When they mention the names of the places where several generations of Berosaiña have married, the free descendants who attend the funeral recognise the names of villages exclusively inhabited by slave descendants, or those notorious for having some slave descent families living there. This is because, as I have explained, most Berosaiña have married other slave descendants in the regions neighboring Beparasy. By not shying away from mentioning these marriages, the Berosaiña thus provide precious information to free descendants about the marriage networks of slave descendants in the region. The village I mentioned at the beginning of this article – the one where Andry had found a girlfriend named Nivo – is one of these slave descent villages outside Beparasy where the Berosaiña have found a number of spouses over several generations.

Conclusion

Because their neighbours and even their closest friends of free descent avoid marrying them, the Berosaiña are stigmatised within their own community. During the rare opportunities when

¹⁵ These investigations only concern potential marriage partners who are Betsileo. People do not scrutinise the descent status of non-Betsileo families.

I could touch upon this issue, I saw that the Berosaiña felt rejected and resented their exclusion bitterly, despite the fiction of equality that smooths their condition in daily life. One might wonder what could be done to help change this situation, and to fight discriminatory practices against slave descendants in the southern Betsileo highlands more generally.

If access to land were their most crucial problem, then policy makers, activists, educators, NGOs and local communities could make a case for land redistribution. But, as I have shown, it is marriage, not land, that still poses the greatest problem to people who, like the Berosaiña, were ascribed slave status in the aftermath of abolition. This makes it particularly difficult to fight their exclusion. One cannot force free descendants to change their marriage preferences and abandon their premarital inquiries or genealogical speeches. Yet one aspect of the problem could be engaged with: free descendants' essentialised view that the Berosaiña are irredeemably unclean and will stay so forever since their descendants will all be "slaves." Because this essentialism plays a significant role in free descendants' reluctance to marry slave descendants and in the perpetuation of a dual hierarchy (i.e. clean vs. unclean people), the battle against stigmatisation could start with addressing people's views on this matter and promoting non-essentialist thinking. Paradoxically, one of the main obstacles to such an emancipatory educational program is the silence about slavery and the fiction of equality it creates.

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