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Land as foundation of the Malagasy nation seen through Randria's "Kabary"

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Madagascar, called the continent-island, includes 18 ethnic groups which are united by one national language: Malagasy. Since its independence in 1960, Madagascar has experienced 3 republics and up to 3 state-overthrows led by the mass. Land has always been a central issue to Malagasy everyday life. Land is both a reality and a myth upon which the creation of the nation is based. It indicates the place in which the community is living and at the same time suggests a haven for peace for the ancestors. More than that it stands as one of the pillars of nation building in the Malagasy context.

For Malagasy people, speech holds a very important place, a fact which accounts for a strong oral tradition. This is perceived in the persistence of the various genres of oral civilization such as proverbs, tales, poetic genres made of metaphors called *hainteny* and ritual discourse or *kabary* from the ancient days to the present times. Paradoxically the intrusion of writing that could have broken the supremacy of the ritual discourse on the contrary asserted its power. Joseph Randria was an orator of the second half of the twentieth century and he published many collections of ritual discourse mainly about marriage and death. This one entitled *Kabary* was published in 1963, that is soon after independence. Ritual discourse has been considered as a powerful means of

communication and it encapsulates the myths of nation-foundation of Madagascar.

At the time of King Andrianampoinimerina in 1789, ritual discourse was used to communicate royal and administrative decisions such as chores and days-off. After colonization and till now, it is performed at every social, political or domestic event such as deaths, births, meetings, investitures of presidents or marriages. Marriage discourse is one of the richest in metaphors and it is what we will mostly be referring to here. It is generally divided into four parts: the preamble, the preliminary apologies and the greetings and presentations of the sanctity attributed to every authority. Only the fourth part addresses the real objectives of the discourse. The discourse itself presents the Malagasy conception of a nation and the myths that have contributed to the creation of this nation. Moreover it contributes to the establishment and remembrance of the myths through its use of proverbs that encapsulate the creation of the nation.

This paper aims at showing how traditional ritual discourse contains the most crucial elements of the Malagasy nation-foundation such as the land, the *hasina* or sanctity and the *Fihavanana* or kinship.

Land and *Fihavanana*: pillars of nation-foundation

Before going further, it is important to define what we mean by myth and how it contributes to the founding of a nation. Myths are what explain fundamental questions in people's lives and communities, such as: how was a society built? What is the meaning of such an institution? Why such a taboo? Where does the legitimacy of a power or an authority come from? Myths are often used as explanations of origins of an institution or nation; and they are often related to what is sacred, as Claude Rivière explains:

Being a founding story, the myth expresses in a language full of imagery the basis of the credo of a people as his gods, as for the origin of some confusing facts in the world such as life, death, as for man and his relation with the sacred (Rivière 122).

In the Malagasy lexicon, *tany* or land has about 11 equivalents in English varying from land to earth, country, soil, field, place or environment, world, native land, estate, ground or life.

The myth of the land is one of the most essential in the establishment of the Malagasy nation. It goes back to the famous king of Madagascar: King Andrianampoinimerina who worked for the unification of the Merina kingdom and predicted the total unification of all 18 ethnic groups into one nation. He uttered the famous saying: “*ny ranomasina no valamparihiko*” or “the sea is the limit of my rice-field” (Joubert 17) from which was inspired the political and geographical fusion giving birth to the current Malagasy nation.

Land in the Malagasy mentality is synonymous of identity and to own land is to be wealthy and alive. Land means life and the myth of the land as Mother Earth is very strong. Indeed, *tany* means field, giving food and at the same time refers to a place or living area as in the popular saying: “*ny tany nalehany*” meaning “where he is.”

This conception of land joins the old Malagasy myth which reflects the symbiosis of man, peace and his nation or homeland. The use of proverbs such as the “earth is the first wife of the Creator. She amasses the living people and wraps the dead ones” (Jaovelo-Dzao 15) illustrates this perfectly. But the myth of land is always compounded with the myth of kinship. *Fihavanana* or kinship is the intimate relation between the members of a family, extended to a deeper friendship between people of the same community and lastly with people of the same land. Characterized by a will to help, respect and care for one another, the conception of kinship has become a myth upon which the unity of the nation is set. In any discourse, proverb and ritual discourse, there is always a stress on the importance of this kinship. “The numerous ones are like guns,” says an old Malagasy proverb and indeed, without the belief in kinship which cemented unity, Madagascar island would not have become a nation: the Republic of Madagascar when all Malagasy people voted “yes” for independence. Instances of this recurred during the successive state-overthrows of 1972-1991 and recently in 2002 which was led by the entire population. In this regard, Randria’s use of proverbs such as “alive in one house and

dead in one tomb.” (Rajemisa-Raolison 24) strengthens the presence of the myth of land and kinship. This has contributed to the solidarity of all Malagasy people during the fight for independence. In the same trend of thought, the recurrence of “*malagasy tsy vaky volo*” or “all Malagasy” translated literally as “Malagasy united as the hair on the head” is a sign of the unity of all citizens. However this term suggests an old stereotype when Malagasy people were divided by colonizers. Applying the “divide and rule policy” they pretended that the Malagasy people were composed of the noble castes and the *mainity* referring to black, curly-haired people. Fortunately, all the prejudice failed and kinship won over ethnic and colonizing divisions. Indeed, the saying “one man cannot build a house” testifies that for the Malagasy population, unity through kinship is a means, an unailing myth which helped in the building of their home: the Malagasy nation. As Sibusio Madondo says, “a nation is a reflection of cultural plurality and political unity” (*Alizés* n°18: 69) and motivated by one strong value. Eriksen sums it up as follows:

Nations are usually constituted on the basis of ethnicity. Weak nations fail to convince their members of their common destiny ... strong nations conversely have succeeded in persuading their members that they are indeed “the same kind of people”—they identify as the nation-state. Like modern ethnic groups, nations depend on ideologies which, like kinship ideologies, stress horizontal solidarity between members, justified with reference to common descent and blood ties (Eriksen 42-43).

Kinship and land have been crucial founding myths of the Malagasy nation, source of unity and bringing together the whole population. Yet it should be remembered that the Malagasy people are profoundly spiritual and that the sacred has played a decisive role in the setting up of authorities which were to be the pillars of the nation.

Land and authority: sanctity as a tool

The foundation of a nation requires a precise knowledge and definition of specific national and popular characteristics constituting what is called identity. Indeed, an issue frequently at

stake lately has been the concept of “Ivory” or the national identity of the Ivory Coast. In the case of Madagascar, the myth of the *Zanahary* and *razana* is inseparable from his identity, for the former is his Creator, source of life and the latter his ancestors or origin. Ancestors are all those who have died old and have been endowed with a certain social status when alive. They still retain such considerable importance that in any discourse whether it be family or political there is always the evocation of the Creator and the ancestors, asking for their protection and blessings. The ancestors and the Creator are the supreme and direct authority. Yet these authorities are attached to the idea of land. Actually nation in the Malagasy language means literally “land of the ancestors.”

The land and the ancestors are believed to sustain life and give blessings, which account for the respect and sanctity attributed to these entities. The ancestors are sacred because they are the symbols of wisdom and guarantors of blessings and all earthly graces. The sanctity attributed to the synthesis of the myths of land and ancestors together is still very powerful in Malagasy life today. This is illustrated by a custom which consists in pouring a small quantity of alcohol in the Northern-East corner of the house symbolizing the ancestor’s share and his powerful presence in the world of living. More than that there is still the persistence of a custom which involves giving a handful of the native-land soil to any member of the family going abroad for a long time. This is considered as an embodiment of the support and blessing from the whole family dead or alive and a protection from the ancestors as well as a hint of their presence. Land is as sacred as the ancestors and the Creator because it is a symbol of life.

Yet one must remember that sanctity is inherent to the foundation of the Malagasy nation. In the ancient days, sanctity was a silver piastre given to the King as an oath of allegiance. *Hasina* is commonly known as sanctity or sacredness, but also considered as a virtue, a supernatural power attributed at first to the Creator and the ancestors through different sacred cults. Yet as the old tales report it, this Creator seemed to have been disinterested by his creation and therefore gave free power to govern to his representative on earth: the political or social authorities. This is the genesis of the belief that power is a gift from the Creator and to

respect the authority is to respect the Creator. Even the national anthem refers to the Creator as the basis of the status and credo of Madagascar as follows:

Our dear nation
We wish you will be blessed
And that the Creator of all this world
Will be the basis of your status (Rahajason- Raharisoa).

However, any authority, president or leader cannot govern unless he acquires the sanctity that distinguishes him from others. In ritual discourse the attribution of sanctity and greetings are essential for they convey the Malagasy submission to authority. In Randria's ritual discourse for instance, the introduction of all the political, social and divine authorities works as an assertion of the current authority. Often it begins with the evocation of the divine authorities, then with the president of the republic, the ministers, the military officers who are the "horns of the nation" and finally ends with the population. Very often, the president of the nation is associated with elements of nature such as the stars, the moon, the sun as in "so first of all I am greeting the president of the island, moonlight illuminating the darkness of the earth. I am greeting you like the sun." Here Randria's evocation of the country as an island goes back to the old thinking that the Creator deliberately surrounded the country with the sea for protection. Land in the Malagasy conception of life is considered as the world, the duality of the universe as sky and earth. For the Malagasy mentality which is religiously animist, Randria's enumeration of the elements of nature such as the moon, the earth and the sun suggests the island is another element of nature. Therefore the sacredness attributed to these elements is transferred to the president as well. The Creator gives power but authority is stable only when the leader is believed to possess the appropriate sanctity which is most often judged by the love and submission of his subjects. Nation and power in the Malagasy context are based on the sacred. Rivière explains it quite clearly when he writes:

The sacred... is also used to reinforce, by means of myths, the structures of authority by explaining them historically and justifying them morally... While widening the distance between the sovereign and the people, myth reminds us of the sacred origin of power and the

renewal of the support of the power on the sacred by symbolically going back to its origins (Rivière 102).

Indeed in Madagascar, a president must have the approval of the Union of Churches to be fully accepted by the population. And even the motto of the new Malagasy republic now is based on this concept of sacredness since it is: “Nation-Sanctity-Justice.”

Sanctity, authority and land are intimately linked, in fact land and sanctity are the tools used to enhance power and to claim authority. In the old days and even today, especially in the country, the possession of land is a sign of wealth and implies authority. It procures the assurance of having a say in any communitarian decision and even in a social conflict. On a larger scale, we are in a way witnessing a use of the sacred for the legitimizing of the leading elite. Actually, in Madagascar the president of the republic is called the *raiamandreny* or the parents of all Malagasy citizens. This term is full of respect and sanctity but on the other hand is dictatorial. This is so because if we take the Malagasy mentality, then a democratic change-over of political power is practically impossible for a *raiamandreny* is always right and wants nothing else than the common good of his children, which may explain why change-over of power and any political change in Madagascar is always operated through mass state-overthrow.

We must conclude that land has a crucial role in the foundation of the Malagasy nation. It does not only stand for the nation itself literally but its concept and its sanctity is deeply anchored in the Malagasy mentality especially through the use of metaphors and proverbs in ritual discourses. Having shaped their conception of the world and life itself, land has become mythified as have the reverence for the ancestors, the divine authorities, benefactors and keepers of this land. Sanctity works as a tool for asserting authority as an acknowledgement of the origin of a nation.

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