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## MULTIPLE NARRATIVES, GENDERED VOICES: REMEMBERING THE PAST IN HIGHLAND CENTRAL MADAGASCAR\*

*By Pier M. Larson*

This article is born of a paradox. For more than a year during which I conducted historical research<sup>1</sup> in the Vakinankaratra region of southwestern Imerina (see Map 1), informants, friends, and acquaintances seldom incorporated stories from the famous *Tantara ny Andriana*—a compendium of historical traditions which underpins most print renditions of highland<sup>2</sup> Malagasy history—in their historical narratives. Compiled and published during the early 1870s by French Jesuit priest

\*This article is dedicated to the memory of Dieudonné Pascal Rasolonjatovo, religious practitioner, healer, spirit medium, and *mofo gasy* (rice bun) seller at the Betafo-bound *taxi-be* stand in Antsirabe. Donné, as friends and family knew him, befriended me out of pure kindness and taught me more about cultural life in the Vakinankaratra than I learned from anyone I worked with. After I left Madagascar he died like so many others, young and old, from whom I learned, with whom I debated, and whom I recorded during 1989 and 1990. He could not obtain basic biomedical health care and his own medicines proved ineffectual against malaria.

The following abbreviations are used in this article: LFC/SR/100 = Larson Fieldwork Collection, Sound Recording 100; LFC/VR/10 = Larson Fieldwork Collection, Video Recording 10. I would like to express my gratitude to Sheryl McCurdy, Amy Stambach, David Graeber, and to the anonymous reviewers of this article for comments on earlier versions.

<sup>1</sup>Doctoral dissertation research conducted from August 1989 through July 1990 funded by the Social Science Research Council and the Fulbright-Hayes Doctoral Fellowship Program; and post-doctoral research conducted in September, October, and November 1992 funded by a grant from the Social Science Research Council. During both research periods I lived in Betafo (see maps) and conducted in total 128 recorded interviews in the Malagasy language which will be made available to researchers in the United States and Madagascar when publication based upon them is completed. Those seeking further information about the interviews should contact the author directly.

<sup>2</sup>Throughout this article I employ "the highlands" and "highlanders" to designate Imerina and its inhabitants, respectively. My usage is a translation of the French phrase which designates Imerina as "les hauts plateaux de Madagascar." I also employ the term "central Madagascar" interchangeably with "Imerina" and "the highlands." Although technically speaking highland central Madagascar might also include the Betsileo (the ethnic group residing to the south of the Merina), I refer in this article only to Imerina and its people.

Map 1.  
Central Madagascar (Imernia) and its Districts



François Callet, the *Tantara ny Andriana* (hereafter *Tantara*)<sup>3</sup> are a 1,200-page collection of indigenous manuscripts treating the history and culture of the people of central Madagascar who are today commonly known as the Merina.<sup>4</sup> *Tantara* texts provide detailed descriptions of highland cultural practice as well as accounts of the genealogies and deeds of chiefs, kings, and queens in the line of the founder-king of the Merina kingdom, Andrianampoinimerina.<sup>5</sup> Because most *Tantara* narratives concern the ruling families of the kingdom and detail the achievements of courts at Ambohimanga and Antananarivo,<sup>6</sup> they can accurately be classified as royal histories. The compendium title after all reads "history of sovereigns," from the words *tantara* (history, story) and *andriana* (king, queen, royal, noble, sovereign).<sup>7</sup>

Since their first publication in Malagasy during the second half of the nineteenth century and their translation into French during the first half of the twentieth, the *Tantara* have emerged as the single most utilized source for highland cultural and political history prior to 1815. The texts have been widely employed by literate historians of central Madagascar, professional and amateur, official and

<sup>3</sup>The Malagasy language version currently in print and from which I cite is R.P. Callet, ed., *Tantara ny Andriana eto Madagascar: Documents historiques d'après les manuscrits malgaches* 2nd ed. (Antananarivo, 1981), 2 vols. (successively paginated, so I do not provide volume numbers in any of my citations). Throughout this article I frequently employ *Tantara* as a plural noun to emphasize the multiplicity of texts which comprise it.

<sup>4</sup>The ethnonym "Merina" did not emerge to designate the people of highland Madagascar until the nineteenth century and was not extensively utilized until the twentieth. Because being Merina is a comparatively new, and in many ways now waning ethnic identity, I have minimized my use of the term when referring to people of highland Madagascar before the mid-nineteenth century. For details concerning the history of Merina ethnic identity consult my forthcoming article: Pier M. Larson, "Desperately Seeking 'the Merina' (Central Madagascar): Ethnonyms and their Semantic Fields in African Identity Histories."

<sup>5</sup>Rule, ca. 1785-1810. For histories of the early Merina kingdom and the role of founder-king Andrianampoinimerina see Jean Valette, "Pour une histoire du règne d'Andrianampoinimerina (1787-1810)," *Revue Française d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer* 52, 2 (1965), No. 187, 277-85; Hubert Deschamps, "Andrianampoinimerina, ou la raison d'état au service de l'unité malgache," in Charles-André Julien, ed., *Les Africains*, II (Paris, 1977), 77-97; Hubert Deschamps, "Tradition and Change in Madagascar, 1790-1870," in John E. Flint, ed., *The Cambridge History of Africa* 5 (Cambridge, 1976), 393-417; Gerald Berg, "Sacred Acquisition: Andrianampoinimerina at Ambohimanga, 1777-1790," *Journal of African History* 29, 2 (1988), 191-211.

<sup>6</sup>Ambohimanga was the capital of a mini-kingdom over which Andrianampoinimerina originally seized power. He later vastly expanded his kingdom and moved its capital to Antananarivo, which lies some fifteen kilometers to the southeast.

<sup>7</sup>*Andriana* is more correctly a status group in highland society, as it is possible to move from one of the three main status groups (*andriana*, *hova*, *mainy*) into another. Equating *andriana* with European concepts of nobility and royalty is dubious but is sufficient for the restricted purposes of this article.

informal; they inform a variety of constructions of the highland Malagasy past, from academic histories to nationalist treatises, to primary and secondary educational curricula. A consequence of their intellectual hegemony in the world of print, *Tantara* versions of highland history and culture have been performed and reperformed in diverse literary media over more than a century with few critical analyses or juxtapositions with alternative views supplied by other historical sources, especially oral ones.<sup>8</sup> This article encourages critical interpretation of the *Tantara* by asking where the texts fit within a rich array of highland narratives of the past. Here I examine what kinds of documents the *Tantara* are composed of and suggest the importance of local historical narratives for the reconstruction of highland Malagasy histories. My findings are informed by experience primarily in the Vakinankaratra, but they apply to other areas of the Malagasy highlands as well.

Interpreting the histories, uses, and purposes of historical narratives is not a problem unique to Malagasy historiography. Since the boom of oral historical methodologies in African studies during the 1960s, the intimate connections between historical consciousness and political power have been often repeated.<sup>9</sup> That court historians spun tales designed to authorize and justify centralized political power and the triumph of certain political groups over others is rarely a disputed generalization. Yet the intricate relationships between power and historical memory are seldom fleshed out in historical monographs based upon substantial oral fieldwork, despite the fact that historians working in Africa have tended to collect narratives of state and royalty fraught with implications of political superiority and social subordination.

<sup>8</sup>Particularly illustrative examples of this problem are William Ellis, ed., *History of Madagascar* 2 vols. (London, 1838); James Sibree, *The Great African Island* (London, 1880); Abinal and de la Vaissière, *Vingt ans à Madagascar: colonisation, traditions historiques, mœurs et croyances* (Paris, 1885); Victorien Malzac, *Histoire du royaume hova depuis ses origines jusqu'à sa fin* (Tananarive, 1930); Raintovo, *Tantaran'ny Malagasy Manontolo* (Tananarive, 1930); Guillaume Grandidier, *De la découverte de Madagascar à la fin du règne de Ranaivalona Ire* (1861) (Paris, 1942); M. Randria, *Tantaran'i Madagascar sy ny Malagasy* (Tananarive, 1942); Hubert Deschamps, *Histoire de Madagascar* (Paris, 1960); Edouard Ralaimihoatra, *Histoire de Madagascar* Deuxième Edition (Tananarive, 1969). A partial exception to the uncritical use of the *Tantara* is Alain Delivré, *L'Histoire des rois d'Imerina: interprétation d'une tradition orale* (Paris, 1974), which is discussed below.

<sup>9</sup>Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, 1985), Ch. 4; David P. Henige, *The Chronology of Oral Tradition: Quest for a Chimera* (Oxford, 1974), 96; David Henige, *Oral Historiography* (London, 1982), 78-79; Joseph C. Miller, "Introduction: Listening for the African Past," in Joseph C. Miller, ed., *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History* (Folkstone, 1980), 40-43.

Critical inquiry of historical narratives is too frequently limited to assessments of style and content rather than analyses of the politics of memory and the role of remembering and forgetting in history. A classic example of this problem is found in the work of Thomas Q. Reef, who briefly noted in reference to oral work he conducted among the Luba of Zaire that

A man of memory's oral testimony about the Luba royal dynasty can vary in length from fifteen to sixty minutes. It is shaped like an hourglass: a dynastic history begins with a lengthy account of the Luba genesis myth, the neck of the glass is a list of royal males believed to be descended from the heroes of the myth, and the base of the hourglass is a broad account of the events of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that this man of memory either witnessed himself or heard about from members of a preceding generation.<sup>10</sup>

Reefe's emphasis on the overt structure of historical knowledge in his short assessment of Luba traditions of royalty is characteristic of oral narrative studies that employ a sociology of knowledge examining how historical stories are structured and who knew them at the time of their collection. Textual criticisms of this sort operate largely *within* the documents themselves rather than moving *outside* the narratives to discern the role historical memory played in shaping them. Although by definition oral traditions consist of narratives that span several generations, we often fail to consider the role these memories played in history or to juxtapose them with various other forms of memory. I suggest, therefore, we transform the old adage "oral tradition *as* history," into "oral tradition *in* history" and employ a more nuanced model of the history and politics of memory.<sup>11</sup> This article attempts to do so with respect to the historiography of central Madagascar.

### Authors and Authorization, Narrative and Power

Unlike the word "history," the Malagasy term *tantara* (denoted by a small "t" to distinguish it from the *Tantara ny Andriana* spelled with a capital "T") makes no

<sup>10</sup>Thomas Q. Reefe, *The Rainbow and the Kings: A History of the Luba Empire to 1891* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1981), 11.

<sup>11</sup>By calling for new approaches to the analysis of historical narratives, especially those collected informally by scholars in the field but also as texts located in archives and libraries, I join a growing number of scholars. See, for example, Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, Ch. 4; and David William Cohen, *The Combining of History* (Chicago, 1994).

distinction between the separate English-language concepts of history and story.<sup>12</sup> Richardson's Malagasy-English dictionary, for example, glosses *tantara* as "a history; a tale; a legend, a fabulous narration."<sup>13</sup> The dual meanings of the Malagasy *tantara* parallel a highland cultural reality: the art of the storyteller and the detailed interpretation of the historian are both valued and valid. The separation between storytellers and professional historians so esteemed in recent Western experience is blurred in highland society. Historical authority derives more from the spoken word made public and from the gender, age, linguistic skill, and social standing of the speaker than from the precise form in which words come.<sup>14</sup> Whatever their form, accounts of the past can never be dismissed with the common English criticism—"those are just stories!" Such an understanding of historical narrative has insured that stories, storytellers, and local historians have retained considerable importance and influence in highland life and politics over the last two centuries. If a woman or a man dared tell stories publicly, or even voice them away from official ears, he or she could influence history. By uttering *tantara* one created it.<sup>15</sup> In central Madagascar historical narratives passed in various forms from one generation to the next are both a crucible of identity and an intellectual arena of local politics.

Among highlanders historical traditions are a particular form of *tantara* called *lovan-tsofina*, "inheritance of the ears." When a researcher inquires after *lovan-tsofina* among the literate, the Western-educated, and the urban-dwelling, she or he is usually referred to the *Tantara* texts and to their accompanying narratives rather than to memories in other forms. Accounts in the *Tantara* are the most prestigious, most public, and most widely—but also most shallowly—known highland historical traditions. As authoritative historical memories, the *Tantara* are

<sup>12</sup>In his Malagasy-English dictionary published in 1835, David Johns defines *tantara* as "A history, a legend, a fabulous narration." David Johns, *Dikisionary Malagasy, Mizara Roa: Ny Faharoa'ny, Malagasy sy English* (Antananarivo, 1835), entry for *tantara*, 235.

<sup>13</sup>James Richardson, *A New Malagasy-English Dictionary* (Antananarivo, 1885), entry for *tantara*, 622. In a much smaller but more recent Malagasy-English dictionary Hollinger defines *tantara* as "a story, a tale; history." Hollinger, *Dikisionera Malagasy-Englisy* (Antananarivo, 1973), entry for *tantara*, 90. The most recent Malagasy dictionary also defines the term in this dual sense: Régis Rajemisa-Raolison, ed., *Rakibolana Malagasy* (Fianarantsoa, 1985), entry for *tantara*, 926.

<sup>14</sup>There are, however, a wide range of forms (proverbs, poetry, formal speeches, call and response oratory) through which Malagasy oral literature is expressed. Lee Haring, *Verbal Arts in Madagascar: Performance in Historical Perspective* (Philadelphia, 1992).

<sup>15</sup>The best illustration of this is perhaps the politics of rumor, which became an effective method by which highlanders expressed disapproval of their government in the nineteenth century. Rumors that dead King Radama II remained alive after his assassination in 1863, for example, nearly toppled the government of his assassins.

fraught with a history of power and politics. The accounts first became known throughout the Merina kingdom during the nineteenth century, a sort of ethno-national history superimposed over a dense network of intersecting local histories.<sup>16</sup> An invaluable mine of memories in their own right, the *Tantara* therefore pose formidable interpretive problems, particularly with respect to the details of highland political history and chronology, on the one hand, and a royal, *rova* (court), Antananarivo/Ambohimanga bias on the other.

Collected and published during the late nineteenth century—and consistent with their status as historical traditions—most *Tantara* narratives offer a history of the period of the formation of the Merina kingdom, treating an era nearly a full century before their publication.<sup>17</sup> What is problematic about the compendium is thus the history, use, and politics of *Tantara* narratives before they were collected and published in the late nineteenth century. Most of the narratives come to us through at least two centuries of a highly complex trajectory. The texts consist largely of narratives spun by those who emerged political victors in central Madagascar during the late eighteenth century. They are hence but a thin slice of highland memory. Because Andrianampoinimerina emerged successful in forging a highland-wide kingdom, however, his historical narratives emerged as a common heritage of highland peoples, a story of central power and its wielders, a shared transcript of Merina ethnicity. Some narratives concerning Andrianampoinimerina's forerunners were doubtless in existence by 1780, the time of his political victory in central Madagascar. Many others, however, must have originated as royal histories narrated by court-appointed historians in the king's entourage.<sup>18</sup> The process of creating and authorizing historical memories as officially accepted *tantara*—hence entering the *Tantara*—is heavily documented in the compendium itself and demonstrates the central role of Andrianampoinimerina as enshriner of peoples and deeds in official historiography. A classic example is the following passage in

<sup>16</sup>Networks of local histories have been reported by other scholars working on central Madagascar. Claude Vogel, *Lovan-tsofina sy tantaran'i Vakiniadiana—Chroniques du Vakiniadiana* (Antananarivo, 1975); Stephen Ellis, *The Rising of the Red Shawls: A Revolt in Madagascar, 1895-1899* (Cambridge, 1985), 60-61; David Graeber, personal communication. How these relate to the *Tantara* is discussed below.

<sup>17</sup>The *Tantara* are compiled in rough chronological order. Pages 1-421 refer to the period anterior to the rule of Andrianampoinimerina; pages 421-1061 to the rule of the founder-king; and pages 1062-1217 to the reign of sovereigns after Andrianampoinimerina.

<sup>18</sup>Many of these stories were doubtlessly fabricated to legitimize Andrianampoinimerina's usurpation of power in central Madagascar. See, for example, my discussion of the narratives of Andriamasinavalona in Pier M. Larson, "Making Ethnic Tradition in a Pre-Colonial Society: Culture, Gender, and Protest in the Early Merina Kingdom, 1750-1822" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin—Madison, 1992), University Microfilms Number AAC-9238559, Ch. 1.



which Andrianampoinimerina addresses the men who supported his successful usurpation of power at Ambohimanga in about 1783:

And Andrianampoinimerina answered them: Yes you twelve men, your words are sweet. You bore troubles with me. I, now, am the sovereign and will respond to you with sweetness: you shall never lose *tantara*. You never slept during the day or the night to make me king; my love for the twelve women [i.e. their wives] is mediated by my love for you twelve men, said Andrianampoinimerina, for you have made me king.<sup>19</sup>

In other passages Andrianampoinimerina pronounces the following upon his supporters and those who submit to him: "I will make you have *tantara*,"<sup>20</sup> "I will make you *tantara* in my government,"<sup>21</sup> and "*tantara* is what I give to you."<sup>22</sup> The role of memory in fashioning the content of royal histories is explicitly invoked in a passage in which Andrianampoinimerina proclaims "I shall make you remembered forever."<sup>23</sup> The texts are replete with such authorizations which, as one scholar has noted, are akin to the granting of official privilege.<sup>24</sup> *Tantara* thus largely consist of royally authorized narratives, a sort of national canon.

The canon underwent a profound transformation in social purpose during the first half of the nineteenth century, but appears not to have changed a great deal in content. When Father Callet collected the narratives as manuscripts after 1867, he found their authors not in Antananarivo about the court, but rather across the highland countryside.<sup>25</sup> The stories had become geographically and politically decentered during the course of the nineteenth century. From a set of texts

<sup>19</sup>The important passage is "atao ko tsy very tantara mandrakizay hianareo." *Tantara*, 433.

<sup>20</sup> "Atao ko manan-ko tantaraina hianareo," *Tantara*, 434.

<sup>21</sup> "Atao ko tantara hianareo amy ny fanjaka'ko," *Tantara*, 497.

<sup>22</sup> "Tantara no omeko anareo kosa," *Tantara*, 591.

<sup>23</sup> "Atao ko tadidy mandrakizay," *Tantara*, 546.

<sup>24</sup> For additional examples (by no means exhaustive ) see *Tantara*, 378, 384, 402, 409, 492, 498, 500, 506, 541, 557, 562, 590, 592, 609, 877. For *tantara* and privilege see Berg, "Sacred Acquisition," 197.

<sup>25</sup>We have identified many of the localities from which the *Tantara* were collected due to the work of Alain Delivré, who utilized Malagasy pronouns of place in the texts to localize the narrators. For a discussion of pronouns of place, called *mpisolo toerana* in Malagasy grammars, see Seth Andriamanatsilavo and William Ratrema, *Ny Fitsipi-Pitenenantsika: Boky Faharoa* (Antananarivo, 1981), 135-42. Employing his ingenious method, Delivré constructed a map showing the highland villages from which texts had been collected: Delivré, *L'histoire des rois d'Imerina*, 66.

legitimizing the dominance of Andrianampoinimerina in the late eighteenth century, the narratives were appropriated in the early nineteenth century by rural communities as a critique of royalty for failing to live up to their political and ritual duties as stipulated in canonical narratives. The banning of the *Tantara* by Prime Minister Rainilaiarivony shortly after their publication on the presses of the Catholic Mission in Antananarivo (early 1870s) underscores the politicization of the canon and the shifting geography and sociology of highland memories of the past.<sup>26</sup> In a curious twist to the politics of discourse, it was not so much what was said that generated political conflict, but who said it.<sup>27</sup> Those interested in the details of this decentering process should consult my forthcoming book.<sup>28</sup>

Since Callet first published the *Tantara*, few new collections of highland historical narratives have been produced in print.<sup>29</sup> New work with popular narratives has been seriously neglected by scholars of highland history, perhaps because the *Tantara* have been thought sufficient to provide an indigenous perspective of past events. Such reasoning is based on the premise that a "Merina" view of the past can be identified and extracted from the compendium.<sup>30</sup> Yet as we have seen, even as shared transcripts the *Tantara* represent only a fraction of highland historical knowledge. Because historians have not appreciated the existence of a multi-layered field of historical knowledge in central Madagascar, they have tended to treat the voluminous and culturally rich *Tantara* as a complete, representative, literal, and neutral recounting of the highland past. An incident reported by Jean-Pierre Domenichini and Bakoly Domenichini-Ramiaramanana illustrates the unproblematic manner in which the *Tantara* are usually viewed. During a faculty seminar at the Department of History at the University of Madagascar in 1977, the *Tantara* were being discussed when one of the participants

<sup>26</sup>Anthony Tacchi, "King Andrianampoinimerina and the Early History of Antananarivo and Ambohimanga" *Antananarivo Annual* No. 16 (1892), 496; *Firaketana ny Fiteny sy ny Zavatra Malagasy*, entry for "Callet" (1947), 410; Delivré, *L'Histoire des rois d'Imerina*, 64.

<sup>27</sup> Consult similar cases in Bruce Lincoln, *Authority, Construction, and Corrosion* (Chicago, 1994).

<sup>28</sup>A revision of Larson, "Making Ethnic Tradition."

<sup>29</sup>One notable exception is a collection of narratives that focus on the regional history of the Vakiniadiana, a region east of Antananarivo: Claude Vogel, *Lovan-tsofina sy tantaran'i Vakiniadiana*. See also David Rasamuel, *Traditions orales et archéologie de la basse Sahatrendrika: étude de sources concernant le peuplement* (Mémoire de maîtrise soutenu devant l'UER d'Histoire de l'Etablissement d'Enseignement Supérieur des Lettres d'Antananarivo, 1979). The latter lacks the breadth of collection that characterizes Vogel's work.

<sup>30</sup>A good example of this is the two-volume work of Louis Molet: *La conception malgache du monde, du surnaturel et de l'homme en Imerina*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1979).

suddenly exclaimed to the surprise of his colleagues that "We speak endlessly of the *Tantara ny Andriana* (History of Sovereigns/Royalty), when shall he have a *Tantara ny Andevo* (History of Slaves)?"<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, professional scholars have played a key role in maintaining the singular authority of *Tantara* narratives. The prestige accorded to literacy within highland society of the nineteenth century has led some to postulate that oral historical consciousness has now been reduced to a mere caricature of its past glory. Gerald Berg, for example, has argued that "western education dominates and has assured that what is left of old oral history comes from primary school textbooks and mission-school literature. . . . Oral history, then, is an artifact."<sup>32</sup> Françoise Raison-Jourde advocates a similar position, arguing that with a nearly 200-year tradition of literacy in central Madagascar, oral culture is no longer privileged and not very reliable. Her rich analysis of how British missionaries transformed the Malagasy language during the early nineteenth century by reducing it to grammatical rules and allowing only certain words and forms of expression into their vocabularies and dictionaries is of great value. The oral, she argues, has been dominated and subordinated by the written.<sup>33</sup> When considering the variety of sources available to the historian of precolonial Madagascar, however, Raison-Jourde writes skeptically of "l'utilité discutable de l'enquête orale."<sup>34</sup>

Such unfortunate conclusions confuse subordination and devaluation of oral communication by certain foreigners and highland elite in the Malagasy past with actual cultural, literary, and historical poverty—which was never the case.<sup>35</sup> Devaluing oral narratives as valid and useful sources of the past ignores the richness, texture, and multiplicity of popular historical memories and denies non-elite, and especially rural highlanders, the opportunity to provide historians with their own points of view concerning the lives and times of their ancestors.

<sup>31</sup>Bakoly Domenichini-Ramiamanana et Jean-Pierre Domenichini, "Aspects de l'esclavage sous la monarchie merina d'après les textes législatifs et réglementaires," *Omaly sy Anio* 15 (1982), 53.

<sup>32</sup>Gerald Berg, "The Myth of Racial Strife and Merina Kinglists: The Transformation of Texts," *History in Africa* 4 (1972), 2.

<sup>33</sup>Françoise Raison-Jourde, "L'Échange inégal de la langue: la pénétration des techniques linguistiques dans une civilisation de l'oral (Imerina, début du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle)," *Annales ESC* 32,4 (1977), 639-69; Françoise Raison-Jourde, "Le Travail missionnaire sur les formes de la culture orale à Madagascar," *Omaly sy Anio* No. 15 (1982), 33-52.

<sup>34</sup>Françoise Raison-Jourde, *Bible et pouvoir à Madagascar au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle: invention d'une identité chrétienne et construction de l'état* (Paris, 1991), 13-15.

<sup>35</sup>See, for example, Haring, *Verbal Arts in Madagascar*.

The perils of research in the city are particularly salient here. Highlanders who are likely to come into contact with foreigners in larger urban centers or who are rural intellectuals in the Western tradition, such as pastors, priests, school teachers, or extension workers, are often reluctant to freely discuss the content of local belief and social practice. These tendencies stem from the lasting influence of the devaluation of highland cultural practice through missionary concepts of proper religiosity (most highlanders are Christians). There are, on the other hand, a large number of highlanders who are proud of their beliefs, history, and religious practices regardless of the opinions of foreigners or the constraints of imported theologies. It is usually a matter of finding them among the lower classes, sometimes the very poor, among ritual experts, and throughout the countryside—especially away from Antananarivo.

The singular influence of the *Tantara* and its cultural ethos in highland historiography cannot be understood without shifting our attention from historical methodology to academic representations of the highland past. We must begin with the seminal work of Alain Delivré. In a critical study of the *Tantara* published in 1967, Delivré explored the content and significance of important cultural concepts that appear frequently on *Tantara* pages.<sup>36</sup> Delivré refined and elaborated upon *Tantara* interpretations of royal authority (internal textual criticism) to reinforce the compendium's partial vision of highland history. Delivré's skillful analysis of the highland notion of *hasina* (virtue, force, sacredness, efficacy, blessing, fertility)<sup>37</sup> developed in *Tantara* texts, for example, while a fascinating exploration of highland cultural concepts of power, laid the foundation for an influential yet narrow interpretive paradigm that has profoundly informed recent historical and anthropological scholarship concerning central Madagascar.

<sup>36</sup>Delivré, *L'Histoire des rois d'Imerina*.

<sup>37</sup>*Hasina* is a word of multiple meanings. The first Malagasy-English dictionary published by British missionaries entirely missed the manifold nuances of the word, glossing it merely as "money presented chiefly to the sovereign in token of submission or respect: money presented by an inferior to a superior when the latter can by law accept a *hasina*." David Johns, *Diksionary Malagasy*, entry for *hasina*, 99. As Europeans increased their knowledge of highland culture, they expanded their definition, understanding that *hasina* is an unseen force that is channeled from ancestors, through superiors, and to inferiors, in counter-circulation against silver money offered up the chain. Malagasy-English dictionaries published during the second half of the nineteenth century all include expanded definitions. While the concepts of blessing and fertility are not normally tied to the term *hasina*, I employ them as glosses here because *hasina* brings both blessing and fertility (human and agricultural) and can therefore be conceptualized as an embodiment of both. (Paradoxically, the Malagasy employ no single word for the English "fertility," although the idea is one of everyday relevance in highland society.)

The principle theme developed through Delivré's work—the persistence of highland cultural practices and ideologies over centuries of social and political change—is quintessentially the vision of the *Tantara*.<sup>38</sup> Throughout its pages, the *Tantara* demonstrate how highland kings acquired *hasina* to become *masina* (powerful, efficacious, sacred, blessed, imbued with fertile life force) and thereby increased their popularity and political power in the eyes of the highland population. Delivré described the relationship between *hasina* and kingship in the following terms:

le *hasina* s'applique à tout être, *mais plus spécialement au roi*, à ses ancêtres et aux talismans royaux et autres. Le *hasina* est tout à la fois le fondement d'une cosmologie et celui d'un idéal politique. En effet, loin d'être immuable, le *hasina* est soumis au temps [i.e., it is lost with time], et les coutumes les plus remarquables n'on guère pour but que de l'augmenter, *chez le roi surtout*.<sup>39</sup>

While a king possessed the power to manipulate ritual in order to increase his *hasina*, Delivré postulated, the common understanding of *hasina* itself was undisputed in highland society and remained relatively unchanged over time. Delivré's interpretation of the *Tantara* oriented the study of highland history toward a preoccupation with *hasina* and a king's acquisition of it. Building upon Delivré's work on *hasina*, scholars began to write about highland history and culture in a way that focused upon the king and the *rova*. They placed a version of divine kingship at the center of their historical analysis and focused Merina cultural studies firmly upon a king's accumulation of *hasina* through grand royal ritual.

Gerald Berg draws heavily from Delivré's interpretation of *hasina* for his analysis of the origins of the Merina kingdom. Berg argues that Andrianampoinimerina cleverly played on the highland notion that accumulation of wealth represented a sacred blessing (*hasina*) from the ancestors. The richer Andrianampoinimerina managed to become, the more *masina*, sacred, he appeared, and therefore the more honored, respected, and obeyed he was by rural folk in the

<sup>38</sup>It can also be traced to the work of G. Lejambé, who was writing about highland Malagasy history at nearly the same time as Alain Delivré. Lejambé argued that royal power was based upon the development of a "royal culture," enduring over centuries and expressed through royal ritual. The royal culture was manipulated by each successive sovereign to sustain royal power. G. Lejambé, "Les fondements du pouvoir royal en Imerina," *Bulletin de Madagascar* 311 (1972), 349-67.

<sup>39</sup>Delivré, *L'histoire des rois d'Imerina*, 140. The emphasis is mine.

central highlands.<sup>40</sup> For Berg, the concept of *hasina* and Andrianampoinimerina's accumulation of it in proportion to his acquisition of wealth was "widely accepted"<sup>41</sup> throughout central Madagascar—it was a commonly held "ideology" that Andrianampoinimerina manipulated to personal benefit. Like the *Tantara*, Berg's interpretation of the making of the Merina kingdom is elite-centered.<sup>42</sup> Kingdoms might rise and fall, an economy might be transformed, but an ancestral order based upon *hasina* endured as a uniformly accepted ideology for elite to manipulate in pursuit of political power.

For Maurice Bloch the contradiction between historical transformation and ideological continuity has remained an explicit interest from his earliest research on highland tombs and burial practices. Bloch explains his continuing concern with historical change and cultural permanence by stating that one of his primary goals is

understanding the way in which human beings can create representations of seemingly permanent institutions, such as what Morgan called the clan or the gens [i.e., descent groups] against the lived experience of their own mortality and the discontinuous biological processes of human life.<sup>43</sup>

Bloch's first research on central Madagascar explored this question by studying the ritual and cognitive means through which highland descent groups created an image of themselves as permanent, lasting, and unchanging corporate entities in the face of the disorganizing activities of life and the statebuilding politics of the last few centuries.<sup>44</sup> Bloch expands this concern in a later book on Madagascar by asking how it is that although the highland ritual of male circumcision (*famorana*) has undergone dramatic changes in scale and in relation to national and local Malagasy politics, the central symbolism of the ceremony has remained relatively constant over some two centuries.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup>Berg, "Sacred Acquisition," 193, 203; see also Gerald Berg, "The Sacred Musket: Tactics, Technology, and Power in Eighteenth-Century Madagascar," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 27, 2 (1985), 261-79.

<sup>41</sup>Berg, "Sacred Acquisition," 193.

<sup>42</sup>Berg states this explicitly: *Ibid.*, 193, 194.

<sup>43</sup>Maurice Bloch, *Prey into Hunter: The Politics of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, 1992), 7.

<sup>44</sup>Maurice Bloch, *Placing the Dead: Tombs, Ancestral Villages, and Kinship Organization in Madagascar* (London, 1971).

<sup>45</sup>Maurice Bloch, *From Blessing to Violence: History and Ideology in the Circumcision Ritual of the Merina of Madagascar* (Cambridge, 1986), Ch. 1.

In this work Bloch explores what he terms a "timeless ancestral order" that highland rituals seem to "impose" upon the living. He has seen in these rituals the creation of a transcendent, symbolically unchanging, and unmanipulable ideology that continues to recreate and maintain authority structures within central Madagascar.<sup>46</sup> In the following passage Bloch summarizes how he sees a transcendent ideology emerging from the enduring symbolism of highland rituals performed in a constantly changing political context:

One characteristic of ideology is that it can persist, almost totally independently of historical and geographical variation. [Bloch then summarizes sweeping political and social changes in central Madagascar over the last 200 years.] Yet in spite of all this change, the kind of ideological picture which emerges from the rituals practised by people during this whole period is by and large the same. It is a vague representation of the world in which fertility, that is the power to create people, plants, wealth, is seen as the result of a blessing from the ancestors via the elders, a blessing which is achieved by containing the vitality of nature symbolized by water and the unknown owners of the land, in a container fashioned by men of authority, elders or kings. The circumcision ceremony and marriage ceremonies which have lasted throughout this period, by and large unchanged, express this message particularly clearly.<sup>47</sup>

Although according to Bloch no one can consciously manipulate the symbolism and essential meaning of the highland ideology centered upon a "cult of blessing," kings, chiefs, and elders can benefit from it by positioning themselves in a strategic position as mediators, channels of blessing—*hasina*—flowing from the ancestors through social superiors to the common people.<sup>48</sup>

The historiography of the Merina kingdom represented through these related works, all of which derive their historical vision and politico-cultural discourse directly from the *Tantara*, and similar dominant explanations of highland culture, is markedly Antananarivo-, *rova*-, and *hasina*-centric. It focuses on grand ritual and portrays a unity, coherence, and continuity of highland cultural thought. The postulated constancy of certain fundamental cultural concepts—based primarily upon a single collection of historical traditions published in the 1870s—is assumed to constitute evidence of an enduring and widely accepted Merina ideology, and by

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., especially Ch. 8.

<sup>47</sup>Maurice Bloch, "From Cognition to Ideology," in Maurice Bloch, *Ritual, History and Power: Selected Papers in Anthropology* (London, 1989), 131-32.

<sup>48</sup>Bloch, *From Blessing to Violence*, 189.

implication, an ancient Merina ethnicity. Throughout this paradigm of the highland past, as in the *Tantara*, the voices, historical narratives, motivations, and actions of highland Madagascar's many peoples remain conspicuously absent.

### Alternative Historical Visions:

#### Firenena and Their Traditions in the Vakinankaratra

An indispensable starting point for identifying the various sorts of historical consciousness that exist in central Madagascar today is the observation that historical narratives vary in form and substance according to the social collectivities to which they refer. Local traditions, for example, seldom relate to the Merina kingdom and to the highland people as a unified ethnic or political whole, but to locally based cognatic descent groups which during the nineteenth century and earlier highlanders called *firenena*.<sup>49</sup> The linguistic root of *firenena* is *reny*, mother. The grammatical construction of *firenena* imparts the sense of the English word "motherhood."<sup>50</sup> Although ideally conceptualized as local groups of biologically related individuals, *firenena* were in fact not homogeneous collectivities at all. During both the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries *firenena* were political and jural groups organized around a male or female chief or patron and bound together through a discourse of kinship and descent.<sup>51</sup> Hardly anyone claiming to belong to a particular descent group in the Vakinankaratra, for example, can today unequivocally trace ancestry to the group's reputed founder.<sup>52</sup> In this way, descent groups in highland Madagascar might better be understood, at least in their origins, as political or place<sup>53</sup> groups.

<sup>49</sup>Collected during the mid-nineteenth century, the *Tantara* employ the term to designate highland descent groups. See, for example, *Tantara*, 7, 52, 163, 401, 485, 796, 1066. *Firenena* is also the most common word used to denote descent groups in nineteenth-century official documents. For an example see Rajoel to Rainilaiarivony, Betafo, 19 Febroary, 16 Alakarabo 1866: Archives of the Democratic Republic of Madagascar, Records of the Merina Kingdom, Série IIICC, liasse 112, 56r.

<sup>50</sup>Or "the quality of being a mother." Naming local descent groups "motherhoods" is the earliest evidence of a long-standing tradition of ritual and political discourse in central Madagascar whereby political power is represented as the female capacity to reproduce, as a fertile, life-giving force. This political tradition has been most extensively studied by Maurice Bloch and is detailed in his book, *From Blessing to Violence*.

<sup>51</sup>Larson, "Making Ethnic Tradition," 22-25, 98-100, 134-39.

<sup>52</sup>Larson field notes, Vakinankaratra, 1989-1990.

<sup>53</sup>This term (place groups) was suggested to me by Gillian Feeley-Harnik in comments on an earlier version of this article.



In 1835 British missionaries newly arrived in central Madagascar defined *firenena* as "a clan, a race, a nation, a tribe," revealing how the term was commonly used to describe political and social groups within Madagascar and internal subdivisions of the highland people. By the early twentieth century, however, the spatial and political boundaries of *firenena* had become inflated from designating locally based descent groups to signifying the island as a whole, the imagined community created and validated through French colonization. The reason for this inflation of meaning was the selection of *firenena* by British missionaries to gloss the English "nation." The London Missionary Society employed the term in the geography curricula it adopted for its schools established across central Madagascar after 1820.<sup>54</sup>

Appropriated to a new meaning first by the island's foreign visitors, and later by its indigenous elite and colonial rulers, *firenena* no longer signifies what it once did. In contemporary Malagasy usage *firenena* designates the English "nation" in the sense of a nation state.<sup>55</sup> Although no one today employs *firenena* to refer to local descent groups, I retain the nineteenth century highland use of the term here for two reasons: first, it denotes a continuity with the past; and second, highlanders have not replaced *firenena* by any single, unambiguous word, and therefore it maintains an analytical precision in referring to local descent groups that is altogether lacking in the array of words sometimes employed to designate descent groups in contemporary highland society and scholarship.<sup>56</sup> Throughout this article I employ "descent group" interchangeably with *firenena*.

Among the historical narratives I collected in the Vakinankaratra, *firenena* and their founders are a central concern, an organizing principle. Descent groups in central Madagascar are geographically tied to specific homelands, *tanindrazana*, by the stone tombs that members build and maintain on the land and in which all members are theoretically interred.<sup>57</sup> For this reason it is possible to draw territorial

<sup>54</sup>The only gloss for "nation," in J.J. Freeman's 1835 English-Malagasy dictionary is *firenena*. J.J. Freeman, *A Dictionary of the Malagasy Language in Two Parts: Part I. English and Malagasy* (Antananarivo, 1835), entry for "nation," 263.

<sup>55</sup>The standard Malagasy dictionary defines *firenena* in this way: "Vahoaka iray tany, teny sy fomba, ka miray monina amin'ny fanjakana iray: Ny firenena Malagasy" (People of one land, speech and customs who live under the same government, e.g., "The Malagasy *firenena*"). Rajemisa-Raolison, *Rakibolana Malagasy*, entry for *firenena*, 330.

<sup>56</sup>*Foko*, *teraky*, *karazana*, *demes*, *clans*.

<sup>57</sup>These days the exceptions are nearly as many as the rules. Although highland *firenena* are theoretically endogamous, marriage across *firenena* lines is common (even when it meets with stiff disapproval by the older generation), and individuals in this cognatic society must execute decisions about which tomb they will be buried in. Decisions about tomb of burial usually decide

maps localizing the homelands of *firenena*. Map 2 situates the *firenena* I identified in the central Vakinankaratra during fieldwork in 1989-90 and 1992.<sup>58</sup>

*Firenena* maps are useful historical tools because today in highland Madagascar descent groups powerfully structure historical narratives recited by their members. An historian in the Vakinankaratra who identifies himself as a Zanamasy, for example, does not relate narratives about the Andriamboromanga, except under extraordinary circumstances and never at a public gathering. Referring to specific *firenena*, traditions are tied to particular *tanindrazana* homelands. *Firenena* maps thus provide a glimpse of the geographical distribution of local historical narratives and supply clues to local identities and historical consciousness.

the *firenena* identity of a "mixed-*firenena*" couple and their children, the family assuming the *firenena* title of the homeland where their tomb is located. Even within a single *firenena* it is unlikely that both wife and husband would originate from the same tomb group, and hence decisions even on this local scale must be made about place of burial. See, for example, Claude Vogel, *Les quatre-mères d'Ambohibaho*, and Georges Augustins, *Parenté, résidence et régime foncier dans un village d'Imamo (hauts plateaux de Madagascar)* (Thèse de Troisième cycle en ethnologie, Université de Paris X, 1973). While the ideal as expressed in the Vakinankaratra is that a married woman who has borne children should be buried in the same tomb as her husband, this ideal is disregarded as many times as it is upheld. Larson field notes, Vakinankaratra, 1989-1990, 1992.

<sup>58</sup>The map includes the *tanindrazana* placement of decent groups which I identified primarily in the area west of Antsirabe. I am currently in the process of producing a similar map for regions east of Antsirabe. The methodology I employed is described in Larson, "Making Ethnic Tradition," 22-25. The geography of *firenena* near Antananarivo has been known for many years. By contrast, however, there has been little work on the periphery of the old Merina kingdom. For maps of the central areas of the kingdom see Bloch, *Placing the Dead*, 48; and Stephen Ellis, *The Rising of the Red Shawls: A Revolt in Madagascar, 1895-1899* (Cambridge, 1985), 44-45.



In the Vakinankaratra memories of the past are today preserved in several media. In most communities there are elders—usually but not exclusively men<sup>59</sup>—who maintain *boky manga* (historical notebooks: literally, "blue books," blue in the highland cultural system denotes sacredness, religious efficacy, power)<sup>60</sup> in which local traditions, particularly those relating to *firenena*, have been systematized and copied.<sup>61</sup> Other men and women recite stories from memory without direct written aids, although they too may keep documents in private. The way in which Vakinankaratra memories of the past are sustained by a patchwork of notebook pages and memorized narratives defies facile distinctions between oral and written historical documentation. The contents of multiple *boky manga* and memorized narratives from among the same descent group seldom agree in detail and can sometimes relate entirely different tales. Divergences in the stories are significant for what they reveal about internal relationships in the groups that maintain them. Most times considered embarrassing, divergences are relished in ritual settings for their variety and the legitimate public expression of partisanship which they convey. An important element of any large ritual gathering of descent group members, for example, is to hear contradictory versions of group history competitively and publicly performed by men.<sup>62</sup> This takes place especially in the public fora of *famadihana* ceremonies.

Described by Maurice Bloch and David Graeber, the *famadihana* is a locally performed ritual in which ancestral bodies are removed from the family tomb and rewrapped with new burial shrouds.<sup>63</sup> One way highlanders characterize the ritual

<sup>59</sup>Some exceptions from my work include LFC/SR/62, Rajoeliarivelo Honorine, Ambohiponana, 21 June 1990; LFC/SR/75, Rasoandalana Ramarceline, Antoabe, 3 July 1990; LFC/SR/76, Raharisoa Jacqueline, Ambondrona, 3 July 1990; LFC/SR/119, Razanadrasoa Julienne (Razily), Tsarasaotra, 30 October 1992.

<sup>60</sup>Lars Vig, "Symbolikken i den madagassiske Gudsdyrkelse," *Nordisk Missionstidsskrift* Ny Række, 4, 5 (1902), 217. It is also possible that *manga* refers to the blue covers which often grace notebooks in Madagascar.

<sup>61</sup>In his critical study of the *Tantara*, Delivré refers to private histories of the nineteenth century as *bokim-pianakaviana* (family notebooks). Delivré, *L'histoire des rois d'Imerina*, 75. This term functions well as a generic reference to the *cahiers*, but it should be noted that, as in the Vakinankaratra where the term *boky manga* is extensively employed, the notebooks are usually designated by a more specific name.

<sup>62</sup>I witnessed this several times at *famadihana* in the Vakinankaratra. There is a parallel in the competitive recitation of histories and in the competitive song and dance troupes (the *hira gasy*) who perform on these occasions.

<sup>63</sup>Bloch, *Placing the Dead*; David Graeber, "Dancing with Corpses Reconsidered: An Interpretation of Famadihana (in Arivonimamo, Madagascar)," *American Ethnologist* 22, 2 (1995), 258-78.

is as an act of love toward the ancestors and a process through which ancestors in turn bestow powerful blessings of human and agricultural fertility upon the living.<sup>64</sup> Performed during the dry, agricultural off-season, *famadihana* draw immediate family and *firenena* relatives together and provide important public occasions for descent-group storytelling. This is true for small-scale *famadihana* performed at a local family tomb,<sup>65</sup> but is particularly characteristic of *famadihana* performed at the tombs of descent group leaders and notables. During the latter occasions, thousands of people may gather and competitive, conflictual storytelling by the assembled keepers of history is a key feature of the ritual performance. At the *famadihana* of Rainitsarafiavy, a descent group founder in the area of Soanindrariny (ca. 30 km due east of Antsirabe), an entire day of the three-day mid-July 1990 ritual was allocated to the raucous, disorderly, yet neatly choreographed recitation of multiple and entirely conflictual histories of the descent group and its related family branches.<sup>66</sup>

Such *firenena* narratives usually assume a stereotypical form whose content in virtually all cases centers upon the life and migrations of a single reputed founder of the *firenena*, usually but not always a man. Most traditions trace group origins to the southward migration of their founders and heterogeneous followings of kin, hangers on, clients, and slaves from the Antananarivo area during political upheaval datable by genealogical depth and coincidence of events to the mid- and late eighteenth century.<sup>67</sup> By this means most Vakinankaratra descent groups trace themselves to the heartland of what is today the Merina ethnic group. Other Vakinankaratra populations, however, claim to have originated from among the

<sup>64</sup>LFC/SR/103, Razafinjoelina Emile, Ihadilana-Ambalavory, 23 July 1990; LFC/SR/121, Group Interview, Atsipilo, 31 October 1992.

<sup>65</sup>LFC/SR/3, Famadihana Proceedings, Ambohimilemaka, 16 September 1989; LFC/SR/5, *fitokanam-pasana*, Beromalaza, 1 October 1989; LFC/SR/7, Famadihana proceedings, Manolotrony, 23 September 1989; LFC/SR/104, Famadihana Proceedings, Ihadilana, 23 July 1990.

<sup>66</sup>LFC/VR/13: Famadihana proceedings, tomb of Rainitsarafiavy, Soanindrariny, 14 July 1990; LFC/SR/89: Famadihana Proceedings, Soanindrariny, 14 July 1990.

<sup>67</sup>Most of these groups are remembered as passing through Andramasina. LFC/SR/18, Ramarijoela, Betafo, 29 October 1989 (*firenena* Andrianambohimena); LFC/SR/39, Rakotondrainibe Emile, Mahazina, 30 May 1990 (*firenena* Andriamanazanazato); LFC/SR/82, Rabetsilaozana, Antsahamalaza, 9 July 1990 (*firenena* Tsarahasina); LFC/SR/95, Group Interview, Miandrarivo, 17 July 1990 (*firenena* Andriamiloha); LFC/SR/120, Rajosefa Emile, Amboromahery, 31 October 1992 (*firenena* Andriamboromanga); LFC/SR/122, Ralaivatra Jean-Baptiste, Filahoana, 3 November 1992 (*firenena* Zanamasy); LFC/SR/124, Rakotonarivo Emmanuel, Ankabahaba-Ambarizato, 6 November 1992 (*firenena* Andriamanaritany). Analysis of the content of these and other *firenena* narratives is the subject of a forthcoming publication.

Betsileo to the south.<sup>68</sup> Archaeological evidence supports the heterogeneous origins of the Vakinankaratra's population and points to a rapidly increasing population beginning in about the mid-eighteenth century, a finding consistent with *firenena* narratives.<sup>69</sup>

A remarkable characteristic of Vakinankaratra *firenena* as portrayed in local narratives, then, is their varied and heterogeneous origins. That *firenena* have historically identifiable origins at all is highly significant for highland history. When directly queried, highlanders invariably claim that *firenena* are ever-enduring descent structures. The *Tantara* in particular tend to support such an interpretation because the texts represent *firenena* as an ancient feature of highland social structure, existing well before the creation of the Merina kingdom in the late eighteenth century.<sup>70</sup> Contrary to *firenena* traditions, the *Tantara* espouse an historical vision that portrays certain *firenena* at the center of the kingdom, such as the Tsimiamboholahy, Tsimahafotsy, and Mandiavato, as long-enduring structures rather than as eighteenth century phenomena in order to legitimize their dominance in the administrative apparatus of the Merina state. Adopting this vision of continuity, scholars of Madagascar have argued that the process of creating the Merina kingdom was one of sovereigns politically and militarily dominating long-established *firenena*, which in turn protected peasants from external, royal exactions.<sup>71</sup> This scholarly perspective clashes with popular *firenena* historical

<sup>68</sup>LFC/SR/23, Ralaivoavy Gilbert, Mahamavo (Manandona Valley), 4 November 1989; LFC/SR/38, Fanja Andriamampionona, Ambohimasina, 29 May 1990. See also Jacques Dez, "Le Vakinankaratra: esquisse d'une histoire régionale," *Bulletin de Madagascar* 256 (1967), 658.

<sup>69</sup>Victor Raharijaona, *Etude du peuplement de l'espace d'une vallée des hautes terres centrales de Madagascar: archéologie de la Manandona (XV<sup>e</sup> - XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle)* (Antananarivo, 1990).

<sup>70</sup>This is nowhere stated as an explicit proposition, as might be expected in historical tradition. Rather, the names of several *firenena* are woven into the historical narrative for times stretching as far back as to the ancient mythical figure of Ralambo. Some examples: 146 (Mamiomby); 306 (Antehiroka); 379 (Tsimiamboholahy); 384 (Tsimahafotsy). The narrative then demonstrates how Andrianampoinimerina managed to consolidate his rule at Ambohimanga and surrounding areas by obtaining the allegiance of three existing *firenena* of the area: Tsimahafotsy, Tsimiamboholahy, Mandiavato (*Tantara*, 421-42).

<sup>71</sup>Maurice Bloch, "Notes sur l'organisation sociale de l'Imerina avant le règne de Radama I<sup>er</sup>," *Annales de l'Université de Madagascar, Série Sciences Humaines* 7 (s.d.) [1967], 122; Maurice Bloch, "The Changing Relationship Between Rural Communities and the State in Central Madagascar during the 19th and 20th Centuries," in *Les Communautés Rurales, Recueils de la Société Jean Bodin* 40 (1983), 233-47; Jean-Pierre Raison, *Les hautes terres de Madagascar*, 98-99; Robert Cabanes, "Evolution des formes sociales de la production agricole dans la plaine de Tananarive," *Cahiers du Centre d'Etudes des Coutumes* 10 (1974), 51. Françoise Raison-Jourde, on the other hand, is the only scholar who has hinted that *firenena* might have been recent creations

narratives. The narratives—especially those from the Vakinankaratra but also from the Antananarivo area—stress the crystallization of socially variegated groups around political leaders during the eighteenth century.<sup>72</sup> According to the traditions, successful kings, queens, and chiefs attracted heterogeneous entourages and migrated in search of geographical and political space within which to rule, an historical process that helps to explain the wide variation in *firenena* structures today. *Firenena* are by no means uniform in size, structure, history, historical consciousness, or ritual life, nor can everyone in central Madagascar be neatly categorized as members of particular *firenena*. In fact *firenena* are far less important to the everyday social, political and ritual lives of highlanders today than they were during the nineteenth century, but they do significantly continue to structure human action and historical consciousness.

Erstwhile political leaders, the "founders" of highland *firenena*, emerge in highland histories today as the ancestors at the genealogical apex of descent groups, the progenitors from whom all descent group members sprang. By transforming kings and queens from their political roles as patrons and leaders (*mpanjaka*) into ancient ancestors (*razam-be*), *firenena* histories designate collective political groups through a language of kinship and descent. This was a creative intellectual process fundamental to the creation of the Merina kingdom<sup>73</sup> and one that continues to characterize rural politics in highland Madagascar today.<sup>74</sup> *Firenena* narratives of the highland past thus present a dramatically different view of state formation in central Madagascar than do the *Tantara*.

### Situating the *Tantara* Among Narratives of the Past

If there are significant differences in substance and historical vision between the *Tantara* and local histories, how can we situate the *Tantara* within the complex matrix of highland historical knowledge? The dominance of *firenena* histories in the repertoire of rural highlanders today, and the local view that such traditions

resulting from marriage practices in the late eighteenth century, but she does not develop her suggestion. *Raison-Jourde, Bible et pouvoir à Madagascar*, 41.

<sup>72</sup>The late eighteenth century was a period of intense political competition, social upheaval, and physical mobility set off by the participation of central Madagascar in the export slave trade to the Indian Ocean islands of Ile de France (Mauritius) and Bourbon (Réunion). During this era many individuals were spun off from old corporate entities and regrouped to form new ones. See Larson, "Making Ethnic Tradition," Ch. 4.

<sup>73</sup>Berg, "Sacred Acquisition," 191-211; Larson, "Making Ethnic Tradition," Chs. 3-5.

<sup>74</sup>For similar arguments in other places see Jan Vansina, "Lignage, idéologie et histoire en Afrique équatoriale," *Enquêtes et Documents d'Histoire Africaine* 4 (1980), 133-55; Georges Dupré, *Un Ordre et sa destruction* (Paris, 1982).

espouse, suggest the declining importance across central Madagascar of master (i.e. collective) narratives similar to the published *Tantara*. Since the end of the nineteenth century, when French colonization destroyed the Merina kingdom and with it many of the social and political functions of *Tantara* narratives, *firenena* histories have been performed by historians in an increasingly public manner.

The *Tantara* have not, however, uniformly receded in highland consciousness, especially among educated Merina elite living and working in urban centers, who continue to see in the documents proof of a cohesive, powerful, enduring ethnicity and evidence of long-standing political competence that qualifies them to dominate in the postcolonial state. This new tide of post-independence ethnic nationalism based upon the *Tantara* is one of the reasons why it has been so difficult for scholars to question the *Tantara* as a political mythology. In Antananarivo, deconstructing the *Tantara* can elicit the same resistance that questioning the myth of George Washington and the cherry tree does in Washington, D.C.

The local dominance of *firenena* histories, however, has not prevented a complex interplay of local and royal narratives. Across the highland countryside rural folk are generally familiar with the central tenets of the *Tantara*, especially with the exploits of founder-king Andrianampoinimerina. The *Tantara* serve as the basis for Malagasy history curricula adopted in public and private schools across the country. Outward-looking *firenena* historians, especially those who have taught in public or parochial schools, often attempt to connect local histories to the "national" narrative.<sup>75</sup> On the other hand, *firenena* histories comprise a small component of the manuscripts that Father Callet incorporated into the *Tantara*.<sup>76</sup> The contents of other local narratives were published separately during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>77</sup> But most of this local knowledge today remains in the memory and on

<sup>75</sup>See the historical notebooks of Ratsimbazafy Philippe de Néri, retired Catholic school teacher, Iavomalaza (Vakinankaratra); and Rakotovelofy, retired Lutheran school teacher, Soavina (Vakinankaratra). Linking of local narratives to national/ethnic histories is particularly characteristic of the historical consciousness of African literary elite. For a similar process in Zambia see Wim van Binsbergen, *Tears of Rain: Ethnicity and History in Central Western Zambia* (London, 1992), Ch. 2, esp. 62-63.

<sup>76</sup>For example, *Tantara*, 306-310.

<sup>77</sup>Examples of published *firenena* histories, each assuming a unique form do to the collector or author's purpose and the particular structure and sociology of the *firenena* itself include Z.J. Andriamanantsoa, *Tantaran'Andrianamboninolona* (Tananarive, 1975); Andriamifidy, *Tantaran' Ambohitrarahaba* (Tananarive, 1950); Louis Michel Andriantompokoindrindra (Paris, 1956); Rabeson, *Tantaran'ny Tsimiamboholahy (Ilafy)* (Tananarive, 1950); R. Ravoavahy, *Andrianamboninolona* (Tananarive, 1959); J. Razafindratovo, *Hiérarchie et tradition chez les Tsimahafotsy (Imerina)* (Université de Paris, Thèse de troisième cycle, 1971); Adolphe Razafintsalama, *Les*



the handwritten pages of old, worn, tattered *cahiers* scrupulously preserved by farmers and townspeople throughout central Madagascar.

Another way to situate the *Tantara* within a broader matrix of historical consciousness in central Madagascar is to highlight the observation of Alain Delivré that the *Tantara* are not themselves a homogeneous set of accounts.<sup>78</sup> There are three primary sorts of texts that comprise the collection. The first are stories about ancient "Merina" sovereigns: the rise and demise of Andriamasinavalona's kingdom, the years of competing kingdoms, the reunification of highland societies by Andrianampoinimerina, and details of the reigns of several of Andrianampoinimerina's nineteenth-century successors. Second, historical accounts in the *Tantara* are interspersed with ethnographic-like descriptions of highland cosmology and cultural practice.<sup>79</sup> This second type of text represents an indigenous effort to systematize and organize highland culture and present it to foreigners. The extent to which these and related ethnographic descriptions in the *Tantara* represent dominant understandings of highland culture prepared specifically for foreigners, to which there are alternatives, has been greatly underestimated by scholars who have worked with the texts. A third yet relatively minor sort of text contained within the *Tantara* is the descent group or *firenena* history.<sup>80</sup> The inclusion of some *firenena* histories within the *Tantara* can be explained by the fact that Father Callet acquired manuscripts treating local history from the historians among whom he lived and worked.

Although texts in the *Tantara* can be classified into three distinct types, they represent, as we have seen, only one subset of a much broader, more elaborate field of highland historical knowledge. The relationships among several forms of present-day historical narratives can be simplified into a model of three interlocking circles (Figure 1).<sup>81</sup> Each circle represents a unique type of highland historical

*Tsimahafotsy d'Ambohimanga*; and Adolphe Razafintsalama, "Histoire et tradition chez les Tsimahafotsy," *Asie du Sud-Est et Monde Insulindien* 4 (1973), 17-35.

<sup>78</sup>Delivré, *L'histoire des Rois d'Imerina*, 69-72.

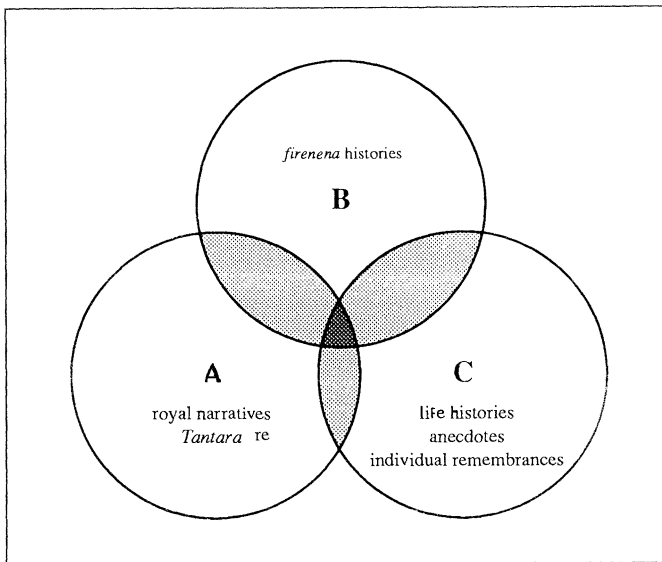
<sup>79</sup>Some examples: *Tantara*, 20-61, 160-73, 248-74, 361-74, 390-94, 411-18, 831-53.

<sup>80</sup>For example, *Tantara*, 306-310 (Antehiroka).

<sup>81</sup>David Cohen has argued that attempts to formalize definitions of oral tradition have rigidified rather than broadened our understanding of memories of the past. He suggests, rather, that we "see individuals making and holding historical knowledge in all their complexity and individuality—considerably concerned with interests, objectives, recreation, and esteem, and rather less concerned with performing history according to some given cultural design." David William Cohen, "The Undefined of Oral Tradition," *Ethnohistory* 36, 1 (1989), 16. While Cohen's formulation is congruent with the spirit of this article, it is equally dangerous to ignore the

consciousness characterized by its subject matter and its overall coherence: (A) *Tantara* and *Tantara*-like traditions, i.e., royal/court traditions, (B) descent group, or *firenena* histories, and (C) personal perspectives, anecdotes, and life histories that are largely individual. These distinct types of historical knowledge all overlap, although there is greater shared material between fields A and B (represented by some *firenena* histories in the *Tantara* and some attempts by local *firenena* historians to link their narratives to those in the *Tantara*), and between fields B and C (the existence of personal narratives in *firenena* histories and vice versa), than there is between fields A and C (there are very few personal reminiscences in royal traditions such as the *Tantara*, although some can be found).<sup>82</sup>

Figure 1.  
Types of Highland Historical Knowledge and their Shared Fields



consistent patterns in which memories of the past are produced in particular societies. Identifying these patterns for central Madagascar is the purpose of this typology.

<sup>82</sup> Take, for example, the musing of one historian that his mother was frequently possessed by *anakandriana* spirits: *Tantara*, 82.

When the characteristics and performative contexts of these three domains of highland historical consciousness are analyzed, they can be classified in relationship to one another through the model of a continuum (Table 1 below). The continuum identifies progressions and tendencies within traditions; it does not stipulate absolute characterizations of their content, format, delivery style, or performer's gender. Today royal traditions of the *Tantara* type are usually recited in public performance and through public speeches delivered by men. It is more common, however, for descent group histories and especially for local traditions to be performed and remembered by women and to be provided to more restricted audiences of kin and friends. Whereas the common characteristic of royal/court traditions during the time of their collection was their appeal to the moral aspect of unity within the kingdom, local traditions were more easily disputable and more frequently disputed.<sup>83</sup> Women seldom perform public speeches or recitations of group histories in Imerina, though they may know histories in greater detail and nuance than men. Women's accounts are generally more detailed and revealing of conflict and confrontation than are men's narratives.<sup>84</sup>

My experience one afternoon in a small village of the western Vakinankaratra vividly depicts how gender informs speech, and by extension storytelling, in central Madagascar.<sup>85</sup> As part of my project to map descent groups in the Vakinankaratra and collect local traditions, I had been interviewing people in the environs of Alakamisy-Andrianovona for a full week. During my work there, and for reasons still unknown to me, I noticed that people were much more uneasy with me than they had been in any other area I worked in the Vakinankaratra. I contemplated requesting a letter of introduction from the president of the *Fivondronana* (ex-*préfecture*) of Betafo, but also doubted if that would reassure potential informants. Arriving unannounced outside the village of Maneva, I walked carefully through the gate, a lip of land bridging a once-deep moat (*hady*) now filled with trees. My presence soon attracted a great deal of attention and a number of men approached and greeted me. I introduced myself, but after speaking with the men for nearly fifteen minutes, they emphasized cordially that there was no one in the village who knew anything about the region's history. It was clear by the way they

<sup>83</sup>Larson, "Making Ethnic Tradition," Ch. 2.

<sup>84</sup>This was the experience of both myself and David Graeber (personal communication), who conducted research in the Arivonimamo area west of Antananarivo during 1989 and 1990.

<sup>85</sup>Maneva, 2 kilometers northwest of Alakamisy-Andrianovona: 18 July 1990.

**Table 1**  
**Characteristics of Highland Historical Traditions**

<u>Royal (Tantara)</u>	<u>Firenena</u>	<u>Personal</u>
formalized narratives	transitional	life histories, anecdotes, various remembrances
male performance	transitional	female narratives
public, prestigious	transitional	private, counter-hegemonic
emphasize community unity	transitional	reveal schism and contention
recorded, written, published	transitional	remains in personal, collective memory, scattered private papers

continued asking me polite but oblique questions about what my purpose was that they were exceedingly uncomfortable with my presence. Reluctantly I relented, carefully thanked them, and we exchanged courteous goodbyes. As I was crossing the bridge out of the village a woman's voice suddenly, angrily rebounded from the second-floor window of a house behind me: "Get out of here *vazaha* (European)," she called, "and never come back. We don't want you here!" As I negotiated the rock-strewn road home to Betafo on my motorcycle that evening I contrasted the men's roundabout, courteous refusal to work with me to their kinswoman's direct insult.

This was one of only three incidents in which I encountered hostility or in which people refused to speak with me during my research in the Vakinankaratra. While the personal, embarrassing, and conflict-ridden experiences of researchers are not normally the subject of articles published in academic journals, this incident poignantly illustrates how gender structures both speech and social encounters within central Madagascar. I still do not understand all the circumstances that

conditioned this unfortunate episode.<sup>86</sup> The event, however, tellingly illustrates how women in highland Madagascar are much less likely than men to suppress evidence of conflict through their speech, a practice that applies also to the recitation of historical narratives. Let us turn, then, to gender and historical memory in central Madagascar.

### Gender and Memory

If the geography and sociology of highland historical consciousness is complex and variegated, historical traditions themselves are characterized by differences in emphasis and style (refer again to Table 1). The style of the *Tantara*, for example, leaves little doubt that most of the material was collected from men and represents men's historical consciousness. The common characteristic of public histories like stories in the *Tantara* is that they were performed "onstage." They were stories usually recited at public gatherings by men who represented the government or a collective social group. The public histories take a particular speech form which in Malagasy is called *kabary*. *Kabary* are formalized speeches delivered during ritual and public occasions in which the speakers attempt to demonstrate a mastery over subtleties in language and a range of linguistic devices such as proverbs (*ohabolana*) and short, witty poetry (*hainteny*).<sup>87</sup> A feature woven throughout all public performances by highland men is that rhetorical emphasis is normally placed upon community solidarity and unity of purpose (*firaisana*). When men speak publicly of unity and solidarity, they tend to gloss over the complex, textured, and often conflict-ridden relationships within communities and among individuals and corporate groups.

This is, of course, a generalization. Men do sometimes come to open, public disagreement outside of a ritual context, although they do so much less frequently than do women. Within a ritual context, on the other hand, disagreement

<sup>86</sup>The risk of such encounters is, of course, greatly increased by conducting the sort of extensive collection I was then engaged in, passing through new areas faster than one can reasonably get to know people or establish a reputation as a trustworthy researcher.

<sup>87</sup>Elinor Keenan, who has studied speech in the Vakinankaratra of southwest Imerina, defines *kabary* in the following manner: "kabary is associated with formal, focused social gatherings. For example, kabary is used in speaking to an audience gathered for political or ritual purposes. The term kabary is actually ambiguous. At times, it is used to mean the mode of speaking employed by a speaker; and, at times, it is used to mean the formal performance itself. That is, kabary refers to both a speech event and a speech variety. The former meaning is implied in such expressions as *Mahafinaritra ny kabary vody ondry* ("The marriage request kabary is pleasant"). The other meaning is intended in the comment *Mahay mikabary izy* ("He is able in kabary")." Elinor Ochs Keenan, "Conversation and Oratory in Vakinankaratra, Madagascar" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Pennsylvania, Department of Anthropology, 1974), 54.

is patently manifest. I witnessed men compete in telling different versions of history at several large ritual gatherings. In every case, however, the competing histories were presented in the classical *kabary* style and disagreement was treated as a "gentlemanly dispute" rather than a serious breach of social relationships.

The use of *kabary* in public political life has considerably decreased since the time of Andrianampoinimerina. But even today men prefer to revert to the fixed structure of *kabary* discourse when they speak publicly. Women, on the other hand, usually speak more plainly, openly, and directly, a type of conversation highlanders designate as *resaka*.<sup>88</sup> In her study of conversation and oratory in the Vakinankaratra, Elinor Keenan demonstrates how women and men employ gendered forms of discourse on ceremonial and everyday occasions. *Kabary* is thought by both men and women to be a form of speech uniquely suited to men. Women, on the other hand, rarely speak at public occasions because their speech, unpretentious and publicly devalued, is thought to be more direct and less circuitous than that of men. Because men's public *kabary* is more valued in the dominant culture, Keenan has hypothesized that while men can be considered "norm-makers" in the use of speech, women are "norm-breakers" who continually use uncere-monious and direct speech and are less hesitant to provoke confrontation when they speak.<sup>89</sup> Despite the unfortunately negative definition of women's discourse in this formulation, Keenan's work confirms how communication in central Madagascar is structured by gender.

The significance of gendered forms of speech to highland historical methodologies derives from the fact that the public, "onstage" historical traditions of the *Tantara* with their emphasis on *kabary* and community unity in the face of obvious conflict and dissension, represent a uniquely male discursive style and historical consciousness. Indeed, it is easily arguable that studies of highland historical traditions, including my own, have so far been exclusively concerned with the way in which men reconstruct and interpret the past. It is unlikely, for example, that any of Father Callet's informants—those who supplied him with manuscripts—were women. Researchers in the field of Malagasy historical

<sup>88</sup>According to Keenan, "*Resaka* is considered by villagers as *teny an-davanandro*, 'everyday talk.' It is *teny tsotra*, 'simple talk.' *Resaka* is associated with informal social interaction. It is characteristic of speech among close kinsmen and neighbors in the course of day-to-day activities. It is, then, an extremely broad category." Ibid., 53.

<sup>89</sup>Elinor Keenan, "Norm-Breakers and Norm-Makers: Uses of Speech by Men and Women in a Malagasy Community," in Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer, eds., *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking* (Cambridge, 1974), 125-43; and Keenan, "Conversation and Oratory," 207-216.

traditions have narrowed the field of relevant information in such a way as to ignore women's historical consciousness.<sup>90</sup>

When highland *lovan-tsofina* are defined by researchers as stories of kings, as genealogies, or as histories of corporate groups, it is likely that historical consciousness is being defined as limited to the things that men, speaking publicly and formally, commonly recite about the past. Geographically extensive collection of *lovan-tsofina* remains tremendously important to elucidating the highland past, but it exposes only one piece of a larger puzzle and it is attended by manifold practical difficulties. With very few exceptions, for example, I was referred to men as informants—even when I asked women separately in private conversation for the names of women who were conversant in the *lovan-tsofina* of an area. During the course of my work I realized that men's names were consistently provided to me because in highland society history concerning group identities is normally considered something about which only men speak *publicly* or with a foreign researcher, especially a male one. According to prevailing gender values and generational deference, it was thought proper and polite to direct a foreign researcher passing through a village to the oldest men in a community rather than to those who might provide an embarrassing variety of interpretations about the past.

Several times during my research, I encountered concerted attempts by older men to coordinate divergent stories. Outside of a ritual context, deviation among accounts was routinely considered an embarrassment by my male informants.<sup>91</sup> In one area (*firenena*), for example, I confirmed appointments with several potential male informants only to be notified later that one unified recitation of the *firenena*'s history would be granted. I was formally invited at a specified time and stipulated place, where representatives of the entire descent group were assembled—women, men, and children. The *firenena* history was recited in a minutely choreographed session by a young man with a secondary education who had been appointed by descent group elders. The performance was dramatically read from a single *boky manga*. *Firenena* history was being performed for me in the *kabary* style of the *Tantara*.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>90</sup>A notable exception is the work of anthropologist David Graeber, who is soon to complete his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago.

<sup>91</sup>In the same spirit, Callet's preface (*famelaran-kevitra*) to the *Tantara* contains an appeal for readers who find factual mistakes to bring them to his attention so that he might "correct" them in future editions. *Tantara*, 5 (not paginated).

<sup>92</sup>LFC/SR/54, History of the Andriamanananazato read by Raberadson, Ambohinomenanahary, 15 June 1990.

Beyond the public histories formally recited by prestigious men lies a wealth of individual knowledge and private representations of the past maintained by less publicly influential individuals. Private recollections include "offstage" histories or "hidden transcripts" of rituals, recountings of village and regional events, remembrance of specific public performances, and interpretations of the past that often do not jibe with public, dominant, "onstage" performances.<sup>93</sup> The historical consciousness of women is of prime importance to unlocking this knowledge. Gender-conscious approaches to historical research in central Madagascar must move beyond "polite" male oratory to the study of how our understanding of the highland past has been influenced by an androcentric production of historical texts. To do this we must reach beyond the *Tantara* and search for divergences as well as convergences in highland cultural thought and historical vision.

### Conclusions

Historical research in central Madagascar ought not to reject the *Tantara* outright—far from it. The *Tantara* are far too rich and valuable a set of indigenous historical sources, ones which, like so few others, date to the previous century. Rather, juxtaposed with alternative narratives, we should contextualize *Tantara* accounts and explore the interwoven threads of gender and political power in highland historical memory. We must approach the *Tantara* with fresh intellectual paradigms by adopting the method of Natalie Zemon Davis who, when considering how to employ historical sources for a history of Europe's everyday *menu peuple*, asked not only "where these sources were but *what* they were."<sup>94</sup> Once we know what the *Tantara* are, what role the stories played and continue to play in the history and politics of central Madagascar, and where they fit within the larger matrix of historical consciousness, we can effectively utilize the documents as one valuable set of indigenous sources among several others. This method is sure to lead to new perspectives concerning history, ethnicity, gender, and politics in highland Madagascar.

<sup>93</sup>The terminology I employ here is adapted from James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985); and James Scott *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, 1990).

<sup>94</sup>Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1965), xvi; emphasis mine.