

The Ethnicity and Identity of the Malagasy People: Reflections on the Afro-Indonesian Origins

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ABSTRACT: Every people group is distinguished through specific traits that reflect both its identity and ethnicity. While identity refers to the process of 'becoming' a people throughout history, and it represents its current dominant image, ethnicity refers to the roots of a people, the particular elements within it that make some say, 'us' or 'them' (People and Bailey 2009, 383). These features of ethnicity and identity are given by several elements that contribute to the formation of a people: anthropological aspects, linguistic elements, the history of a people and contextual framework. The anthropological aspects refer to a people and the origin of different ethnic groups located in the same geographical area. The linguistic elements point to the origins of the populations set together, characterized by specific vocabulary. The historical framework shows the process by which populations found in the same geographical area, due to specific circumstances, managed to preserve their ethnicity, but also to form a new common identity. The contextual framework refers to the social, cultural, and religious aspects specific to certain groups or mixed in the process of forming a new identity. In this article we aim for two things. First, we would like to make several observations on the ethnicity of the Malagasy people, located in the geographical territory of Madagascar, in the Indian Ocean, in the light of the above-mentioned elements, and then to look at the identity of the Malagasy people today, following the process of homogenization of the different populations and cultures that form it. Although we could not comprehensively cover all these elements that reflect ethnicity and identity, we sketched a picture of the Malagasy people including some of the four elements mentioned above: the genesis of the Malagasy people, the linguistic elements, and a brief historical, cultural, and religious framework reflected in the social life of the Malagasy people.

KEYWORDS: ethnicity, identity, Malagasy, Malagasy people, Madagascar, taboo

Introduction

The identity and ethnicity of the Malagasy people, found southeast of Africa, in the Indian Ocean basin, is set by the four elements: anthropological aspects, linguistic aspects, and two millennia of history and contextual framework. The anthropological aspects refer to the genesis of the Malagasy people, settled in the current territory, in the Indian Ocean basin, a mixture of populations from the Indonesian area and the east coast of Africa. The linguistic elements indicate the origin of the populations. The historical framework shows the process by which populations in the same geographical area, due to specific circumstances, managed to preserve their ethnicity, but also to form a new people, with a new identity, where the strongest elements were mixed and perpetuated over time. The contextual framework refers to the social, cultural, and religious aspects specific to certain groups or mixed in the process of forming a new identity. In this article we intend to do two things. First, we would like to make several observations on the ethnicity of the Malagasy people in the light of the above-mentioned elements, and then to look at the identity of the Malagasy people now, following the process of homogenization of different populations and cultures that form it. Although we could not comprehensively cover all these elements that reflect ethnicity and identity, in this article we sketch a picture of the Malagasy people including some of the four elements mentioned above: the genesis of the Malagasy people, linguistic elements, and a brief historical, cultural, and religious framework reflected in the social life of the Malagasy people.

1.2. The genesis of the Malagasy people: different ethnicities in a common setting

The origin of the Malagasy people has been a long-discussed topic, due to the two great migrations of populations that took place in the first and second millennium to this virgin and

unknown territory for ancient civilizations. The first migration was represented by about twenty ethnic groups who discovered the uninhabited shores of the island around 400 AD, and settled mainly in the north, northwest and southeast, according to historians Aidan W. Southall and Maureen A. Covell (Southall & All 2021). They describe the tribes of the first migration as Negroid, very well adapted to warm climates. Madagascar was ideal for them, suitable for settling their rudimentary homes, rich in fertile shores, conducive to light agriculture, with tropical forests where various fruits grew, adaptable to varieties brought from other countries, and with shores easy to be traversed in light canoes (Southall & All 2021).

Regarding the origin of these inhabitants, there were two very well-argued hypotheses, according to Jean-Pierre Domenichini, French historian of Malagasy origin, who was interested in the subject of the ethnicity of the Malagasy people (Domenichini 1993, 15-17). The two hypotheses are supported by Alfred Grandidier and Gabriel Ferrand, both researchers of the Malagasy people and their origins. Grandidier, French explorer and naturalist, claims that the first inhabitants of Madagascar were Austronesian people coming from the southern shores of Asia in double-hulled canoes, which were resistant to the waves of the Indian Ocean (Grandidier 1901, In-4). Gwyn Campbell researches this idea and develops it. He claims that the Austronesians left their territories in Indonesia due to their gradual sinking and ventured onto the warm currents of the Indian Ocean heading southwest for several months a year, advancing westwards in several stages. Initially, these populations reached the eastern shores of India and Sri Lanka, some then arrived on the east coast of Africa and some in Madagascar. Finding these territories uninhabited, they settled in them, making them their home, especially since they were very similar to the habitat of Indonesia that they had left in Southeast Asia (Campbell 2005, 872-73). Peter Forster confirms the first migration of the Austronesians to the east in a detailed analysis in the article "The cryptic past of Madagascar". He only analyzes the migrations of the Austronesians towards Southeast Africa, linking one of them to Madagascar. He sees two massive migrations of Austronesians from southern Asia over the last 2,000 years: a migration to Africa about 1,500-2,000 years ago, when the migrant population that managed to survive the long journey settled in East Africa, and some managed to reach Madagascar; and a more recent migration from the south of Borneo to the east, in the opposite direction, about 1,000 years ago, with the Austronesian migrant population settling in the Pacific archipelagos of Micronesia and Polynesia (Forster 2005, The Cryptic Past).

A second very popular hypothesis was covered by Orientalist researcher Gabriel Ferrand in the 1970s. Although he agrees that a Malayo-Indonesian people settled in Madagascar, he believes that before the Asian-origin ethnic groups touched the shores of the great island, Bantu tribes from East Africa had arrived there and established well-structured communities. He even states that these tribes found other populations on their arrival on the island, which he calls *pre-Bantu populations* (Ferrand 1909, 33).

There are various opinions that try to balance the hypotheses of the two modern researchers, Grandidier and Ferrand. Phillip M. Allen and Maureen Covell suggest early dates for the settlement of the first inhabitants on the island, 400 AD, linking it to the maritime trade route between South Asia and Northeast Africa, the Aden Gulf, and also the Comoros Islands, northwest of Madagascar (Allen & Covell 2005, xxvii). The populations came from both Indonesia and Bantu Swahili tribes on the east African coast, and even a fusion of Indonesian-African populations, formed in areas of present day Kenya, Tanzania and Mozambique.

With the development of genetic research, the study of the origins of the population settled on the island was once again considered. They considered the DNA of present-day Malagasy people, to confirm or disprove their southern Asian or eastern African ethnicity. The genetic study of samples from the current Malagasy population on the territory of Madagascar has confirmed both their origins on the remote island of Borneo, 6,400 km away,

and the sub-Saharan coast of East Africa, about 400 km of Madagascar (Forster 2005, *The Cryptic Past*).

1.2. Linguistic elements and the ethnicity of the Malagasy people

The second thing that confirms pieces of the Malagasy people ethnicity is related to the linguistic elements found in the current Malagasy language in different parts of the island. The first researcher to use this argument was Norwegian missionary Otto C. Dahl, who became a linguistics specialist (Dahl 1991). He visited Madagascar for the first time in 1929, being attracted to the culture and ethnic groups of the island, and he dedicated himself to the study of Austronesian languages, a field of study in which he became a specialist (Mack 1993, 417).

In “*Malgache et maanjan: une comparaison linguistique*”, published in 1951, Dahl notes the similarities between the two languages, one spoken in Madagascar (Malagasy) and the other spoken on Kalimantan Island (Maanjan), with Malaysian influences from the Sriwijaya Empire, as he was struck by the resemblance even more so as the geographical distance between the two territories is over 6,000 km (Verin 1992, 199). Alexander Adelaar, researcher of Malagasy-Malaysian linguistics, analyzes Dahl’s *Malgache et Maanyan* thesis, seeing it as a systematic study of the morphological, lexical, and phonological correspondences between the two languages (Adelaar 1995, 326). Thus, the ethnicity of Madagascar’s linguistic background is found in Malayo-Polynesian origins, with the addition of some Sanskrit, Bantu, and Swahili vocabulary, and later enriched with French and English words (Randriamasimanana 1999, 28). Considering the words borrowed from Sanskrit, at a time when Indian influence was wielding power over Indonesian societies, Dahl suggests the Malaysian migration from Borneo to East Africa was around the 5th century (Adelaar 1995, 327). Dr. Matthew Hurler of the *Welcome Trust Sanger Institute*, leader of the genetic research project, confirms what Dahl had previously said, that their Borneo origins are also proved by language, because “the origins of the language spoken in Madagascar, Malagasy, suggests Indonesian connections, the closest being the Maanjan language, spoken in the southern island of Borneo” (Forster 2005, *The Cryptic Past*).

Because Dahl also noticed the influences of the Bantu tribes from Africa, later, in 1954, he did a linguistic study on that as well. His research revealed that the Bantu tribes, especially those from the Comoros Islands, had considerable influence on the Malagasy languages of Madagascar. He believes that after the Indonesian migration to Madagascar, a fact visible in the language of Malagasy society, there was another substrate that brought significant changes to Malagasy phonology, which is the phonology of the Bantu languages in the Comoros. This is visible in the fricativization of several stops and semivowels, and whispered vowels in final position, called vocalic endings (Adelaar 1995, 327). Emil Birkeli and Harry Johnston reinforce this argument, stating that the linguistic Bantu origins are found mainly in the western part of the country, in the Merina, Tanala, Betsileo, Antakarana, Tsimihety and Sakalava ethnic groups, and especially in the languages spoken by communities in the islands of Mayotte and Comoros, north of Madagascar. Animal names: horse (*farasi*), donkey (*ampondra*), cow (*anghombe*, *umbi*, *anombi*), pig (*truzun dambu*), goat (*mbuzi – osy*), sheep, dog, cat, turkey, chicken, and others, come from Bantu (Blench 2008, 18-43). Not only do the names come from different Swahili or Bantu dialects, but also the animals in Madagascar, such as the humped cattle (*zebu*), spread across the vast western plains, have their origins across the Mozambique Channel in the East Africa (Campbell 2005, 873).

Gabriel Ferrand, another Oriental language researcher who, in the 1970s, was looking into the origins of Muslims who settled in Madagascar, suggests the second perspective on the settlement of populations in Madagascar, also starting from a linguistic analysis (Ferrand 1909, 33). He sets the origins of the population in Madagascar in three layers, different from the views of Grandidier and Dahl. The first layer is a pre-Bantu population, settled in Madagascar before Christ. Then, over the first layer, is the influence of the Bantu population,

originally from West Africa. Only after that follows a third layer consisting of Malayo-Indonesian tribes, intentionally migrating from east towards southwest and settling in Madagascar (Ferrand 1909, 27). He brings linguistic and anthropological arguments that the native people on the west coast of Madagascar speak Bantu, they are black with curly hair, while in other parts of the island people are mulattoes with straight hair and mulattoes with light skin who speak the ‘buki language’, meaning Malagasy, of Malayo-Polynesian origin (Ferrand 1909, 27).

So, we are dealing with different ethnicities in Madagascar, regardless of the order in which these populations settled in this territory in the Indian Ocean, which is reflected in the cultural uniqueness of certain regions. However, forced to live together in the same geographical space, interacting and communicating in various peaceful and violent forms, these people groups began to create a unique mix in this part of Africa, the Malagasy culture, which we can call Malagasy identity.

2.3. The historical-geographical framework: different ethnicities fighting for supremacy

To better understand the history of this people and how they settled and evolved in Madagascar, it is necessary to recreate a map of this territory. Campbell sketches some elements of geography and climate, imagining Madagascar as the sole of a foot, lying along the southeast coast of Africa. Over a length of more than 1,600 km from north to south, there is a high and rocky plateau, with mountains of over 3,000 meters high in several places, dividing the island into two parts from a climatic point of view. To the east lies a tropical and humid area, along a narrow coastline with small hills, mostly covered by tropical rainforest and low vegetation. The Indian Ocean feeds this area with abundant rainfall, keeping it green all year round. On the other side of the plateau, in the west of the country, the semitropical climate generated mountain forests, long plains covered with bushes and grass, and to the south a large desert area (Campbell 2005, 873).

The first people settled on the big island inhabited the coastline, because it was easier to survive from what they were already doing: fishing, trade, and in some cases, agriculture. It appears that they were Austronesian, which stems from several elements. The staple food of the Malagasy is rice, not corn, as it is in East Africa. Rice was grown both in flooded fields, in swamps and lowlands, as well as in pluvial form, or on terraces, which collected water from springs or rainwater during the wet season and drained it from one terrace to another, until it reached a river (Domenichini 1993, 16). With their arrival on the island, the Austronesians brought plants that they adapted to Madagascar (cassava, sweet potato, ginger, sugar cane, bananas), and trees (coconut trees, breadfruit, lemon, and orange trees) [Domenichini 1993, 16]. At the same time, the technique of building houses, rectangular in shape and not round, specific to Africa, proves their South Asian origins. On the Indian Ocean shores, single canoes or double hulled canoes, stabilized by an outer frame, which makes it withstand strong waves on the sea, without overturning (Dresch 2021, Great Red Island).

But with the migrations of the 12th-14th centuries, these populations of Austronesian origin were forced to climb the mountain plateau and exploit it, so as not to get in conflict with the populations later settled on the island. These groups formed tribal communities, led by heads of families, called kings (*mpanjaka*) [Campbell 2005, 873]. In this second migration, Arab and Islamic tribes, as well as Swahili traders from the East African coast, arrived on the shores of Madagascar. From the west coast of India, the current India-Pakistan border, Gujarati Indians, known as *Karany*, began to come, initially as traders of spices, beloved Indian hot peppers, cotton, and pepper fabrics, and then settled in the northern area of the country where they formed closed communities (Wikipedia 2021, Gujarati People). This migration was encouraged by the development of the trade route by the Islamic caliphates, who began to dominate not only the commercial market in the Indian Ocean, from the Indonesian Archipelago to the Aden Gulf, but also the land market in East and Northeast Africa (Shukri, 1990, Arab contact).

The Arab groups integrated into already established coastal communities, and brought their traditions and culture with them, especially the Arabic writing and sacred *sorabe*, protected by a small group of Islamic priests called *ombiasy*, who were integrated into Malagasy tribal cultures (Campbell 2005: 873-74). They also introduced the idea of royalty in coastal communities, which led to the existence of kingdoms by uniting communities with the same ethnicity in the 14th-17th centuries. We notice the Betsileo kingdom in the 14th century, in the southeast of the island, and in the 16th century the Sakalava kingdom rises in the western part, and the Amongo and Iboina kingdoms in the northern part (Campbell 2005: 874). Along the west coast, where two large ports developed (Toamasina and Nosy Boraha), the tribes were united in the 17th century, forming the Betsimisaraka kingdom (Ellis 2007, 442). But the Imerina¹ kingdom, the largest of these kingdoms, rose around the Central Plateau in the 18th century. Gwen Campbell, in *Bondage and the Environment in the Indian Ocean World*, mentions several elements that favored the accelerated development of this kingdom as one of the strongest on the Great Island. They became the main rice supplier on the island, thanks to the development of crop improvement techniques, planting rice both pluvial and on terraces (Campbell 2018, 55-56). They started the first factories, where they had both slaves working, as well as a system of forced labor, called *fanompoana*, mandatory for the free citizens of the kingdom (Campbell 1988, 463-486). They also collaborated with the Great Powers, who had already reached the Indian Ocean in search of territory and laborers, with the Merina kingdom becoming one of the strongest suppliers of slaves in the 15th and 16th centuries (Campbell 2005, 875). Collaboration with the British Empire also included exchanges on various levels, being an open door for English Protestant Christian missionaries from the London Missionary Society (LMS) to settle in Madagascar, who helped culturally, educationally as well as spiritually, by introducing the Latin alphabet into Malagasy and translating the Bible (Cherry 2003, 612). On the other hand, this favor given to the British Empire was accompanied by British military equipment and military training from officers of the great empire brought to the capital Antananarivo to create a permanent army of the imperial Merina state (Campbell 2005, 875).

It was noticed that during that period, the kings of the Merina kingdom expressed their desire to dominate over all the other ethnic groups, aspiring to make the kingdom an imperial state. The first Merina prince to declare this intention was Ramboasalama, who changed his name into *Andrianampoinimerina* (meaning “Prince desired by Imerina”), aiming to conquer the entire island. His statement remained in the written documents of his time: “Ny ranomasina no valamparihiko”, which literally means “The sea is the limit of my rice field” (2001, L’Histoire de l’Aristocratie Merina). Then, his goal was embraced by the other kings and queens who succeeded to the Malagasy imperial throne: Radama I (1810-1828), Ranavalona I (1828-1861), Radama II, and Prime Minister Rainilaiarivony (Razakanaivo 2016, 61-63), who exercised his power in the imperial state of Merina for a period of 31 years (1864-1895). Although more than two thirds of the Malagasy territory and most of the ethnic groups became subject to the Merina aristocracy (Ellis 1990, 17), they retained their ethnicity, manifesting it in community organization, language preservation, rituals, and culture, even though in a much more blurred form, due to strong pressure from the imperial state, which behaved despotically with other ethnic groups, according to historian Campbell (Campbell 2005, 875-876).

In the following period, when Madagascar became a French colony for almost 70 years (1895-1960), the Merina ethnic group remained privileged, although they were oppressed by the colonial authority, and were accused of rebellion and disobedience, and some of the country’s leaders were executed, such as Prince Ratsimamanga and Interior Minister

¹ The Merina ethnic group in the Central Plateau is also called *Imerina*. For that reason, both terms are used to refer to the same Malagasy tribe. They are also called *hova*, people of the highlands, meaning people who live on the high plateau, in the mountains of the island.

Rabezandrina Rainandriamampandry (Ellis 1998, 157). The French colonial authority used the already existing structure created by the Merina imperial state, placing only key people in certain strategic and leadership positions, but keeping the Merina initially. General Gallieni, who became governor of Madagascar, tried to impose the colonial program called “race politics” to destroy the sovereignty of the Merina group over the island and to make all ethnic groups equal, under the autonomous leadership of natural leaders, under the authority of civilian or military representatives of the French government (Gallieni 1900, 201-202). On a cultural level, this offered the possibility of preserving the ethnicity of the various groups, which delayed the formation of a Malagasy national spirit for half a century, although on a political level, Gallieni’s idea was considered by *Histoires Crépues* historians to be racist and destructive, based on the saying: “Divide to rule more easily” (YouTube 2020, Gallieni et la “Politique des races”).

The process of national unification and an interest in the ethnic groups to this idea began rather as a political act, not as a cultural one, once the country was preparing for the process of decolonization. One of the parties that encouraged national unity was the MDRM (Democratic Movement for Malagasy Renewal), and eventually became involved in the bloody uprising in 1947, which was suppressed by the French colonial authority, with more than 11,000 deaths (Covell and All 2021, Madagascar). This huge price paid in human lives opened the pacifying process of gradually decolonizing the country in the collaboration between France and the parties in Madagascar, and it allowed the formation of the idea of Malagasy national unity over the next six decades. On October 14, 1958, the Congress of Provincial Assemblies officially proclaimed *the Republic of Madagascar (The First Republic)*. The new state had its own flag, its own national anthem, and a constitution (April 29, 1959). Philibert Tsiranana was elected the first president of the new nation. On June 26, 1960, Madagascar officially gained independence (Rajaonah 2005, 882).

2.4. Religious and cultural-social framework: from ethnicity to common identity

The last element that we analyze is the religious and cultural-social framework of Madagascar. This is relevant because it highlights some characteristics of the Malagasy people, which complement the elements we have listed above, in light of genesis, language and history. In this section, however, we would like to change direction, and to head towards the common elements of the Malagasy people, not towards those that separate them. If so far we have demonstrated the ethnicity of the Malagasy people and their different roots, we would like to look at the elements that make them identify as a “Malagasy people” among the other peoples of the world.

2.4.1. Ethnic groups within the geographical setting of Madagascar

An overview of the Malagasy people reveals the existence of 18 ethnic groups, to which communities of Indians, Arabs or Somalis are added, who have long settled on the island and have been assimilated into local communities. It was not until the colonial period and after that European and Chinese immigrants settled on the Big Island, forming communities in various cities (Wikipedia 2022, Demographics of Madagascar). *Joshua Project* researchers, specialized in the study of ethnic groups, distinguish 40 different groups in Madagascar, including foreigners who are more than 43,000 among the total of 29,085,000 (Joshua Project 2022). The most numerous group in the country is Merina in the central part, followed by Betsileo. Other major groups are Betsimisaraka in the east, Antandroy in the south and Tsimihety in the north. Smaller groups include Sihanaka, Bara, Antaisaka, Sakalava, Bezanozano, Antanosy, Antaimoro, Tanala, Antambahoaka and Mahafaly (CultureGrams 2014, 2). While *Joshua Project* researchers certify that the Malagasy speak at least 18 different languages or dialects, in addition to eight other languages spoken in Madagascar (Joshua Project 2022), and Roger Blench, linguist, distinguishes 19 dialects of which only 10 are similar, and the other 9 are very different (Blench 2008, 25), Sennen Andriamirado, Malagasy journalist and sociologist from the Central Plateau, supports the

idea of a single language that has several dialects that are not based on any racial or ethnic criteria, but on geographical locations and historical facts, which is refuted by the above mentioned research (Andriamirado 1981, 29).

2.4.2. *A rural population and a strong migration to urban areas*

There are only a few cities in Madagascar, seven, most of which are located on the shores towards the Indian Ocean and the Mozambique Sea, a coastline more than 5,000 km long (IOM Madagascar Annual Report 2020, 10).

The capital is Antananarivo, and the next largest cities are Toamasina, Antsirabe, Mahajanga, Fianarantsoa and Toliara (Wikipedia 2022, Demographics of Madagascar). The majority of the population lives in the country, making the country distinctively rural (62.8%), with the remaining 37.2% live in the cities (Wikipedia 2022, Demographics of Madagascar).

Due to the rather infertile soil in some places and due to lack of work, there has been an accentuated migration of the population from villages to cities in the last ten years. It is easier to look at the capital, Antananarivo, where more than 100,000 people arrive each year, according to the IOM Madagascar Annual Report (IOM Madagascar Annual Report 2020, 10-11).

2.4.3. *Various religious traditions in Madagascar*

The religious report on the population census in Madagascar in 1993 shows the following picture on the religious situation: 52% traditional religions (animism), 41% Christianity and 10-15% Islam (Wikipedia 2022, Religion à Madagascar), although the percentage is increasing continuously as Madagascar became open to the Islamic countries of the Arabian Peninsula (Chalvon-Fioriti 2017).

One of the most known studies on religions and churches in Madagascar was done by Sébastien Fath, historian and sociologist at the Sorbonne University. In the article “Madagascar: Eglises et religions en 2019” (Fath 2019), he gives the following statistics on a religious level related to a population of 26 million inhabitants. Overall, 68% are Christians, 12% are Muslims, and 20% represent other religions, most of which are of the ancestral animist faith, and to a lesser extent Mormons or Hindus (Fath 2019).

2.4.4. *From different ethnicity to a common identity of the Malagasy people*

Although they are so different, when Malagasy people meet abroad, they recognize each other very easily, thanks to common elements that everyone recognizes as part of the ancestral tradition of the Malagasy people. Although Christianity has spread very strongly in Madagascar, these elements have remained as fundamental principles passed down from generation to generation, elements that are especially related to spirituality – animism, which is closely linked to the religious fiber of the Malagasy ethnic groups.

2.4.4.1. *Fundamental animist beliefs that make up the Malagasy religious culture*

Sennen Andriamirado, journalist and sociologist, argues that the Malagasy people share a few fundamental beliefs that have built a unified culture and have given all ethnic groups in this territory a strong unitary identity, eventually leading to Malagasy nationalism (Andriamirado 1981, 41). These beliefs include, on one hand, the belief in *Zanahary* (the Creator, in the traditional view of Malagasy animists) or *Andriamanitra* (Randrianarisoa 1959, 21), and the worship of the *razana* (ancestors) [McElroy 1999, 165], supplemented by the animistic tradition of those who believe in spirits, spirits that would exist in every object or phenomenon (trees, rivers, stones, lightning, thunder) or other spiritual forces that can influence life, such as ghosts, shadows, monsters, giants or butterflies, in thousands of villages of the 40,000 villages in Madagascar (Dubois 2002, 130). If someone is ill, they can be healed by witchcraft, amulets, fetishes, divination, or spiritual possession, called *tromba*. Also, in order to cause someone to be

ill, people go to witchdoctors and pay them to cast spells against enemies (Randrianarisoa 1959, 27-33). Because the Malagasy believe that *Zanahary* cannot communicate with people directly, they use intermediaries, i.e., the ancestors (*razana*), who have risen to a higher level of living after death (Andriamirado 1981, 41). Because of this, *razana* are more important to the Malagasy people than *Zanahary*, because they cannot communicate directly with *Zanahary*, while they can constantly communicate with their ancestors (Dubois 2002, 129).

2.4.4.2. *Taboos – a significant part of everyday life*

One of the specific features in Africa and widespread in Madagascar, is the sacred prohibition, called *taboo* (Jarosz 1994, 439-50). One definition of taboo refers to a sacred prohibition in certain societies considered primitive, the violation of which automatically attracts severe sanctions from both humans and the spirit world. It also refers to objects that are forbidden to be touched. It also refers to people: a person or a problem that is not discussed out of superstition or modesty. It can also be a ritual prohibition that is not discussed (Coteanu and All 2010).

In Madagascar, there are taboos related to all the important events in a someone's life. Lucy A. Jarosz dedicates her research "Taboo and Time-Work Experience in Madagascar" to understanding the multiple taboos of every ethnic group in Madagascar, trying to see them in context, closely connected to the important events in Malagasy life (Jarosz 1994, 439-50). A taboo related to the Malagasy agricultural year is the slaughter of geese at the beginning of the agricultural year, on the outskirts of the village or in the rice fields, and impaling the heads on sticks, which are placed around large stones, known as altars. These sacrifices are like a request addressed to the ancestors to intercede before *Zanahary* for a prosperous agricultural year (Jarosz 1994, 440).

Rice is the staple food of the Malagasy people. It is important as a means of daily subsistence, but also as a means of becoming wealthy. Rice represents the link between the Creator and humans, according to oral tradition (Ottino 1986, 372). There are different taboos in all the ethnic groups related to rice. For example, in the village of Anororo, in the northwest of the Alaotra region, the week is divided into good days and bad days. Days 1, 4 and 7 of each 12-day cycle are bad. During these taboo days, work in the rice fields is forbidden, as well as the entry of foreigners, outsiders, or money into a certain village. Some villages have taboos concerning irrigation days, when entering the swampy rice fields is strictly forbidden. Therefore, no less than 3-4 days a week can be taboo for certain individuals or families, affecting their work, behavior or eating habits (Jarosz 1994, 443-44). Some of them are individual, others are related to family or ethnic groups. Some individuals or families or villages are forbidden to eat certain things around them, such as wild birds, pork, or to cut down certain trees. Other families do not eat fruit and eggs. Villages have their own taboos (Jarosz 1994, 441).

2.4.4.3. *Faith in the superstitious and destiny*

Another visible feature of the Malagasy people is the belief in the superstitious: witchdoctors, magic amulets, destiny that is difficult to change, cursed days, blessed days. Superstition is widespread in all regions and ethnic groups. Malagasy people believe in a destiny that is difficult to change, called *vintana*, which is influenced by the good or bad days in which they were born, according to ancestral calendars (CultureGrams 2014, 3). For example, if someone was born in a time of cursed days, such as *Adaoro* (meaning "hated by light"), their destiny will have to do with fire, as they are dangerous people who can bring disaster upon their family or community (Ruud 1970, 41).

The destiny of a human being can only be changed by special people, with magical power, diviners and healers, witchdoctors in the community, called *ombiasy*, who use "white magic", and who make charms and incantations, using various materials and herbs, to change the destiny of a person (CultureGrams 2014, 3). People who want to get married and do not

know the right day would consult an astrologer (*mpanandro*), who would help them not only with the wedding day, but also with the best day to build a house or for *famadihana*, the turning of the ancestral bones, seven years after their burial (CultureGrams 2014, 3).

2.4.4.4. *Rituals in everyday life*

There are many rules and rituals related to the building and inside and outside spatial organization of a house in Madagascar. If someone builds a house, they must place an amulet or something received from the witchdoctors in the foundation, in order for that house to be blessed (Randriamanantsoa 2019). If they are Christians, they ask for the blessing of a pastor or priest, who would both speak prayers over that house and be the first to strike the foundation ground with a pickaxe, for that house to be blessed (Ratsara 2018).

The foundation of the house is not laid randomly. The house must face westward, so that the sweetest sun, the evening sun, enters the house. The windows are built towards the north, so that the house has sunlight all day, and the wall to the east, where the sun rises, is always without windows and doors (Ratsara 2018). Following the same spatial tradition, the parents' bed is placed in a north-south direction, and their heads should rest on the pillow towards the north. There is a belief that the energies that bring blessings and curses flow through the house, so everything inside must be arranged in such a way as to allow only positive energies to manifest (Randriamanantsoa 2019). To the north, holiness and power meet, and their meeting results in happiness and wealth, according to Malagasy belief. The south is linked to production, and the west is for doors, through which anything worn and destroyed must be thrown out (Ratsara 2018).

There are traditions related to serving food. In Malagasy society, it is very important to respect the elderly, especially in rural areas, where the rules are still very strict. Once the table is set, no one dares to touch the cutlery until the oldest person in the house, a father, a grandfather, or a grandmother begins. Once they have lifted their spoon and started eating, the rest of the family can start eating as well (Ratsara 2018). Traditional food includes rice (*vary*), which is accompanied by various sauces, some with meat, and others consisting only of greens, especially cassava leaves, called *ravitoto* (Le Nohaic 2016). Usually, there is also water from having boiled the rice, called “rice water” (*ranon'ampango*), very tasty for the Malagasy (Madagas'Care 2017). Also, because we mentioned the elders in the family, they are the bearers of the blessing for the family, and after their death they will be among the “ancestors”.

The Malagasy people believe in the power of blessing. Therefore, before an exam, before an important project or a trip for a longer period of time, it is important for the youngest to receive blessings from older family members. This blessing is known as “Ny tso-drano zava-mahery”, which literally means “blessings are strong”. Malagasy people believe that family blessings – especially from parents and grandparents – would help them succeed in everything they do and would keep curses away from them (Ratsara 2018). Equally, before a couple gets married, they need the blessing of the older members of both families, as much as possible, in order to do well in their lives.

2.4.4.5. *Life-cycle rituals: marriage, birth, burial*

Regarding the rites of passage and the cycle of life, we would like to mention some traditions related to marriage, birth, the rite of integration into Malagasy society, rules related to funerals and one of the unique customs in Malagasy culture, *famadihana* or “dancing with the dead”.

Before any marriage ceremony, the couple must be engaged traditionally (Smith 2017). Even foreigners in mixed marriages need to follow these Malagasy customs as a sign of respect for the elder parents. The first step is known locally as *vodiondry*. This is the formal commitment of a Malagasy couple, where the groom offers a gift to the bride's parents, consisting of lamb sirloin, cut from the back of the lamb's leg, considered the most tender

meat, as a comfort for the loss of their daughter and gratitude for having raised her (Kristan 2011). This consists of inviting the groom before the bride's family to formally ask for her hand in marriage, with all family members present. Of course, this formal request is accompanied by a celebration. It is mandatory for the groom to bring gifts for the bride's parents and siblings (Ratsara 2018).

In addition to these gifts, in certain parts of the country, in different ethnic groups, either a certain number of goats or a certain number of cows are paid for the bride (Andrianasolo 2013, 41). In the southern parts of Madagascar, most marriages are arranged. Girls are considered gifts from the ancestors, and they are very important for their ability to give birth to children, which ensures the perpetuation of the family. Therefore, they are considered very valuable and when they reach puberty, around the age of 11-12, before getting into accidental sexual intercourse, their parents give them in arranged marriages. The parents, through a contract called *moletry*, ask for material benefits consisting in goats, cows, or a certain amount of money, for the parents to survive (Andrianasolo 2013, 39-40). Thus, girls become a means of exchange and protection and a valuable resource for their parents. As many as 33% of young girls thus married and interviewed by Nadèche Andrianasolo, accompanied by UN (United Nations) reporters, said they agreed with such arranged marriages, as they protected not only their parents but also themselves, with the promise to be buried in the family tomb (very important in the Malagasy tradition) [Andrianasolo 2013, 40].

After marriage, there are other specific Malagasy customs related to the birth of children. The umbilical cord of the newborn and the placenta in which the baby stayed during pregnancy are given by the midwife to the baby's father. Traditionally, it is his responsibility to bury it under a flat stone at the entrance of his ancestral or childhood home. In the city, it is buried somewhere around the house, in a place where it would not be dug out or polluted. This burial symbolizes generational perpetuation in Malagasy tradition, and the child whose umbilical cord is lost or not buried in the traditional way would grow up as a forgotten child (Ratsara 2018). When the child is three months old, the parents arrange a rite for the child's integration into Malagasy society. This is done by cutting the little one's hair, in a ceremony called *ala-volo*. A person in the family with the most beautiful hair – *tso-bolo*, is invited to cut the child's hair, which is then placed on a large plate or in a bowl, mixed with honey, tubers – like sweet potatoes, and this mixture is then eaten by the family members (Ratsara 2018).

Funerals are not done randomly or at any time. Each day is conducive to a particular purpose, according to Malagasy ancestral beliefs. Thursday is the first day in the Malagasy calendar, so it is the best day to start something that would last a long time, such as building a house. That is why it is not recommended to have a funeral on a Thursday, as it can become a starting point for continuous family deaths, a lasting thing. In general, Malagasy people never hold a funeral on this day (Ratsara 2018).

Related to burials, one of the most well-known customs in Madagascar is *famandihana*, which literally means "turning the bones of a deceased person". According to this custom, every seven years or more, the bodies of loved ones in a family, placed in family tombs, are exhumed, after consulting with a witchdoctor or astrologer, and after receiving the approval of local authorities. The ritual requires that the deceased be removed from the family tomb and taken home – to the place where they lived, then placed on a table dedicated to this event and kept inside for a few days. During this period, the bones are removed from the old cloth in which they were wrapped, they are washed and then wrapped in new cloth (Deschamps 1961, 23). The family event is considered a great celebration and it involves music, dancing, eating and drinking, and the bones of the dead wrapped in new cloth are carried by young people, like a dance of the living with their dead ancestor. After those days when the deceased 'enjoyed' their family, the bones are taken back to the family tomb, with a great celebration. *Famandihana* is one way of maintaining contact between the living and the dead, based on the belief that the dead do not join the afterlife until their bodies are completely decomposed and they are able to communicate with the living in the meantime (Armitage 2016).

2.4.4.6. Madagascar: the “mora-mora” country

One more thing worth mentioning about Madagascar is related to the circular time and the idea of *mora-mora* (slowly) for the Malagasy people. The *mora-mora* lifestyle (slowly) caused them to be called lazy by the French colonizers, although the Malagasy people work hard to support themselves. The French characterized the Sihanaka Malagasy as superstitious, ostentatious, and lazy (Sibree 1880, 131).

Based on the perspective of Richard D. Lewis, cultural researcher, Malagasy culture refers to a future that comes from behind and it is unknown, a lack of planning and creativity in general, a cyclical time. In Madagascar, buses do not follow a set schedule. They leave the station when they are full. The situation triggers the event. The Malagasy consider it a matter of common sense: the best time for a bus to leave is when it is full, not only for economic reasons, but because it coincides with the departure time chosen by most passengers (Lewis 2005, 58-59). Therefore, in Madagascar, supply is only done when the shelves are empty, gas stations order fuel only when the reserve runs out, and the crowd of passengers at the airport find that, although their tickets are in order, in reality, they are all on the waiting list. Seats are allocated between the opening of the check-in desk and departure (Lewis 2005, 59).

Various ethnicities set in a common identity pattern throughout history

Therefore, the Malagasy people manage to show a common identity, although ethnically they are very different, both geographically and religiously. The ethnic groups have undergone multiple transformations throughout their history of about two thousand years to show their current identity.

Having come as migrant peoples from Southeast Asia, the Austronesian area, or as Bantu migrants from East Africa, they settled in the same territory in different strata, forcing one another to move from coastal areas and plains to the mountainous areas of the Central Plateau. Having later become kingdoms composed of similar ethnic families, they wanted to show their cultural and religious superiority over other kingdoms, and the struggles for territorial domination, as well as trade, was what brought them to common ground.

The great imperial powers and colonial domination eventually forced them to get closer to each other and make efforts to create the idea of a Malagasy nation or nationalism. Then, after the liberation from French colonial authority, they began a process of Malagasization, when everyone had to enjoy everything, to fight together for the welfare of their own nation, regardless of the geographical area where they were.

We cannot say that there is complete symbiosis, but nevertheless, there is a common fiber, an idea of identity, a common pattern that is found in every ethnic group to a greater or lesser extent, which makes the Malagasy people from all over the world proud of finding their identity in the Indian Ocean, in Madagascar.

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