

## BEYOND THE ETHNIC GROUP: ETHNIC GROUPS, NATION-STATE AND DEMOCRACY IN MADAGASCAR

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### Translator's Historical Introduction

*The people, places and events described briefly here are all analysed in the essay which follows. Nonetheless, for South African readers unfamiliar with the history of Madagascar, this introduction may prove an easy reference. In addition, the translator has added explanatory comments in the text, denoted by square brackets.*

*DT Rakotondrabe refers in the middle of this essay to the Lord Desired by the Merina, Andrianampoinimerina. This ruler unified the petty chiefdoms of Imerina in the Central Plateau of Madagascar at the end of the eighteenth century and established a capital at Antananarivo (Tananarive), already a city before colonial conquest and still the capital of the modern Malagasy Republic. His successor, Radama I, a contemporary of Chaka, proceeded to conquer most of this huge island. Later yet, in the late nineteenth century, the Merina monarchs (of whom four of the last five were in fact queens) secured diplomatic recognition as sovereigns of Madagascar. Rakotondrabe argues, however, that while a conquest state was established, it could not be described as a nation. Imerina was no Prussia and the long-serving Prime Minister Rainilaiarivony, married successively to the last three queens, was no Bismarck.*

*This article does refer to two previous phases of state-formation in the century before Andrianampoinimerina. On the west coast, Sakalava rulers established control over a large swathe of territory before they were ultimately defeated by Imerina. In the twentieth century, migrants from other parts of the island have enormously diluted the numerical importance of the Sakalava on the West Coast. The Betsimisaraka Federation, on the east coast, for a time created common policies for a plethora of separated clans. Rakotondrabe thinks that it was not a state-in-formation at all, let alone a nation. In Betsimisaraka country lies the city of Toamasina, the biggest port of Madagascar, which now attracts a very diversified population. All the Malagasy speak dialects of the same language; there are differences of custom and history between different parts of the island but ethnicity and state formation did not really go together as an historic process in the past. When states, including the Merina monarchy, did form, they had much to do with the availability of arms and the prevalence of slaving (the Sakalava ports provided much of the slave population of the Cape) and as the article mentions, the stigma of slave origins still remains amongst many Malagasy people today (Mainty, Makoo).*

*The French conquered Madagascar in 1895 and got rid of the Merina monarchy, not without support from those who had been its subjects. They practised the 'politique des races' which involved appointing chiefs identified with specific territories and carefully defined ethnic groups into the administration. In fact, the new class of Malagasy state employees involved a mix of representatives of the old ruling class, Merina and otherwise, and those from other social strata. Despite this, the administration was highly centralised at least until the end when some kind of federalism began to be envisioned as a ploy against the rising nationalist movement. As a result, nationalists were generally unitarists. As in continental Africa, the exigencies of the colonial economy as well as demographic pressures brought about much labour migration which disrupted the nice ethnographic order of French imperialism.*

*Independence came in 1960 and has unfortunately brought declining economic growth and little success in the nation-building process. Until recently, all regimes were self-proclaimed socialists but this varied from the conservative and pro-French Tsirinana government (1960-72) which favoured dialogue with South Africa to the scientific socialism of the salad days of Didier Ratsiraka (1975-93), which was inflexibly anti-South African. Despite gestures towards decentralisation in the constitutions, in fact, the regimes remained very centralised indeed.*

*Madagascar has so far experienced two major periods of convulsions, marked by urban uprisings and leading to the collapse of the existing government. One with a variety of phases between 1972 and 1975 overthrew Tsirinana and ended in the emergence of a radical military government. The second coincided with the threat of aid being withdrawn from France, the USA and elsewhere unless a process of democratisation was allowed to take its course and Zafy Albert, a liberal academic, was recently elected president. The main insurrectionary thrust was encapsulated in the Live Forces, the Forces Vives, but it was increasingly forced to compromise with 'federalism', an idea which belongs to the international democratisation package but was supported by much of the old military regime of Ratsiraka for their own reasons. This is the context in which Rakotondrabe is writing.*

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## Summary

The two principal current political discourses in Madagascar, apparently at odds, are actually the same in their method of reasoning. They anchor themselves in a mythified history which permits the political ruling class to mask what is really at stake in the political debate. Both federalist and unitarist discourses find their points of reference and their legitimation in the Malagasy past: on the one side in a primordial idealised ethnicity and on the other through the image of the Nation, presented as a natural given, beyond discussion.

In these discourses, the theme of nation-building holds a crucial place. The state is reduced to an instrument of political domination by an extremely splintered ruling class which leans on it for perpetuating its own social reproduction. The construction and instrumentalisation of the state by these dominant forces does not in fact allow for the emergence of a nation to which the Malagasy people in their ethnic diversity deeply aspire.

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## Introduction

Analysts of political discourse within the social movements of 1991-92<sup>1</sup> in Madagascar can easily discern, as the political lexicon has swelled, the recurrent use of the following notions: democracy, regional development (*fam-pandrosoam-paritany*), regional autonomy (*faritra mizaka tena*), effective decentralisation (*fanapariaham-pahefana*), federalism (*fanjakana mizaka tena*), national unity (*firaisam-pirenena*), tribalism (*adim-poko*), liberalisation (*fanalalahana*). Debased in usage, these emotionally charged notions become ambiguous through the multiple meanings of the words. They flood both the 'democracy squares', rebaptised by the *Forces Vives*, in revolt against the Ratsiraka regime as well as the diverse federalist tribunes of the provinces. The intention here is not to throw myself into sterile polemics searching for 'good sense' amongst one party or another; the mouthing of these phrases raises more than the question of dictionary meaning. It sends us back to a gallery of representations, a stack of ghosts all too vivid in the historical and political consciousness of Madagascar. These representations are not always easy to read if one isolates them from their total context - geographic, sociological, economic and anthropological.

Often, the use of words in political discourse serves to hide what is really at stake in social conflicts. It is therefore necessary to analyse the reappropriation and usage of these different notions by actors and social groups on the political field because their enunciation is never neutral. The approach I propose to take starts from the demystification of those themes that structure political discourse (ethnic group, nation, democratisation, regionalisation, decentralisation) in order to reach an analysis of the norms and realities that lie beneath, and are hidden behind, the phrases.

## On Ethnic/Regionalist Mystification

In putting ethnic/regional reflexes into play, federalism constructs around them a whole mystique which lies at the heart of its ideological formation. This

mystique of mobilisation rests on the following axes. First, the rediscovery of a primordial ethnicity which relies on repeatedly advancing distinguishing ethnographic characteristics (*fady, joro, tangalamena, ampanjaka*);<sup>2</sup> this idealisation of original ethnicity, allows its holders to then brandish forth the spectre as a threat to national unity in favour of its (feared) opposite, vulgarly put, tribalism. From this follows a confusion, deliberately sustained, between ethnic group (a historic category) and region (a geographic concept). Thus Antananarivo equals the Merina, Toamasina equals the Betsimisaraka, etc. Elsewhere I have tried to lay down the specious character, indeed, the ideological manipulations, that lie behind this return to ethnic characteristics which serve to congeal ethnic groups into a mythic past. Here I wish rather to emphasize the second point.

If since the seventeenth century, contact between different Malagasy political formations often took the form of wars of conquest or reciprocal raids aimed at enlarging their demographic or economic (pastoral and commercial) base, the exact correlation of territory to ethnic groups dates mainly from colonial conquest. The different forms of the protectorate and the establishment of administrative chiefdoms on a 'racial basis' (the '*politique des races*' of Gallieni<sup>3</sup>) contributed in a decisive manner to spatially fix ethnic groups according to the coloniser's representations. This native administration rested on the revival and use of existing social hierarchies in order to serve the needs of the colonial power. The dominant status groups integrated themselves rapidly into the structures of administrative chiefdoms. Thus, for example, shortly after annexation, Tsiarasso I was named *gouverneur principal* of Sambirano, territory of the Sakalava-Bemazava which corresponded administratively to the district of Ambanja; he combined this administrative and territorial function with the title given to a reigning sovereign of the Bemazava ethnic group. This territorial assimilation of ethnic groups can also be illustrated by the integration of the Sakalava-Bemihisatra *ampanjaka* (nobles) of the Ampasimena peninsula on Nosy Be island into the native administration. In this last case, the Zafindramahavita, high status commoners (*vohitsy*), true king-makers and guardians of the dynastic tradition of the Bemihisatra, became one of the pillars of the colonial chiefly structure (Baré, 1980). In the southern part of Betsileo country, the local nobility (*Hova*), reduced to vassalage by the Merina conquests of the nineteenth century, were rehabilitated into key posts in native administration by the French (Ralaikoa, nd). Where there was no class of people who were obvious candidates for this sort of role, as in Tsimihety or Bezanozano country, the colonial administration created a native administrative chiefly class anyway.

The economic development of the country, accompanied by the appropriation of native labour within the logic of a colonial mode of production (however archaic and weak from the perspective of capitalism), breached the supposed

territorial identity of ethnic groups. Colonisation created new poles of economic activities (plantations, agro-industry, mines, towns and ports) and encouraged labour migration to support those activities. In different ways, Merina, Betsileo, Antandroy, migrants from the south-east (*mpamanga*), Tsimihety, left their places of origin in search of wage work or farmland to share-crop. The dynamic of migration induced new inter-ethnic relationships; once taking the form of conquest and submission, they now were shaped by exterior forces and were strongly impregnated with ethnic consciousness. Such migrations responded more to the economic logic of colonialism than to one within the communities to which migrants came to live.

In some cases, these migrations modified considerably the ethnic and demographic map fixed in the representations of the coloniser. Thus entire colonies of Betsirebaka<sup>4</sup> settled in the Betsiboko river delta and around Morondava, while strings of Betsileo, Antandroy and Antemoro villages were established in the north and the Tsimihety made slow but irresistible progress as migrants in the Mahajanga basin and in Betsimisaraka country. In the towns, migrations often led to the specific ethnic association with particular neighbourhoods (Saint-Mariens in the Lazaret quarter of Antsiranana, Antesaka and Antefasy in the Morarano quarter in Toamasina, the Betsirebaka quarter in Mahajanga, for example).

Ethnic mobility, in the form of [labour] migrations, weakens the legitimacy of those arguments based on primordial occupation often suggested implicitly in federalist discourse but derived from colonial ethnographic perceptions; in fact colonisation itself actually stimulated migrations. To those factors linked to colonial economic history must be added others, notably the demographic, from within Malagasy societies. These are in large part the cause of Merina, Betsileo, Antesaka and Tsimihety migrations. Thus regions once dominated by a particular ethnic group are no longer so in fact. Majunga province is an example. The 'conquest' of the province by the Tsimihety can be explained in large part by their demographic dynamism by contrast with the demographic decline of the Sakalava who conquered western Madagascar in the eighteenth century. The more and more marked settlement of Betsileo and Antandroy into the *baiboho* (Mampikony-Port Bergé) has been a factor in diminishing the demographic weight of the Sakalava. These migrations inevitably have been accompanied by economic competition and more generally by inter-ethnic tensions which elites can manipulate for demographic ends.

In this way, where the land of Boina [in north-western Madagascar] could be equated in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries with the Sakalava, this is no longer the case in 1993. In feeding arguments that turn history into myths centred on primordial occupation, federalist discourse contributes to confusing

present-day realities and muddying inter-communal relationships. Its historical and ideological references<sup>5</sup> crystallise around ethnicist<sup>6</sup> themes romanticising the past in such a way as to sublimate the historical reality in which an ethnicity keeps evolving in character. Young Betsirebaka in Mahajanga, often second or third generation inhabitants, cannot connect with these points of reference but that does not prevent them from considering themselves natives of Boina, where they were born, where they work and form families.

Such historical reference points lend themselves as departure points for discussion because of their mystification. To affirm, as do some spokesmen for federalism that the Betsimisaraka were the first 'federalists' in Madagascar, through referring to the [eighteenth century] Betsimisaraka Federation, a term used by Hubert Deschamps to designate the ephemeral political unity created amongst the different independent Betsimisaraka clans under the auspices of Ratsimilaho [the son of an English pirate], is really to chance one's arm! (Deschamps, 1960). In fact, Deschamps' terminology is just abused in this way; the independent clans were not real states in any real sense, even though their social inter-relationships and how they constructed power may be deemed political.

This crystallisation around epic themes of the past leads to blotting out the actual historic processes which occurred in remembered time and which are no less important. Thus Toamasina city may well have started out as a Betsimisaraka settlement but it cannot be said to be one still. The structuring of Toamasina as a city began [in the nineteenth century] under Merina domination and continued under colonisation around the activities of the port that has in large part shaped its present ethnic composition. Those originating in south-eastern Madagascar who have lived in the Morarano quarter (*Antesaka, Antefasy, Zafisoro...*) for several generations are as much Tamatavians as are the Betsimisaraka or any other ethnic groups represented in the city. Moreover, looking at the plethora of ethnic/regional associations (*terak'a Mahanoro, Fénérive, or Mananara*) it is clear that amongst the Betsimisaraka themselves, natives of Tamatave are not in themselves dominant. Being a Tamatavian cuts through the lines of ethnic cleavage since the main definitional criterion refers to residence, not to ethnic or regional origin.

One can even push this line of thinking further. Isn't a born Antandroy, who is working and whose children have grown up on the sugar plantations of Maromamy just as concerned with the regional development problems of Brick-aville as much as a native Betsimisaraka? Is this not true even if he retains very strong ethnic and sentimental links with his distant village 'of origin' in Androy? There is no necessary contradiction between these two loyalties. The apologia for primordial ethnicity is fundamentally reactionary in the sense that real

ethnicity is an evolving historic category. For numerous regions are not ethnically homogeneous, particularly around the large and medium-sized urban centres. Recognising and managing the coexistence of ethnic communities is a preliminary to any democratic debate about regional development or the administration of the community.

### **Temptations of the Dominant Unitarist Discourse**

As for the unitarist discourse, in particular that enunciated by the *Comité des Forces Vives* in 1991, it can be summarised as an incantatory hymn of praise to National Unity, presented almost as a 'natural' or 'divine' gift to Madagascar,<sup>8</sup> showing contempt for the lines of fission introduced by history. Feeding itself from the reference points and themes emerging from anti-colonial nationalism, unitarist discourse is just another mystification of 'bourgeois' nationalism along with federalism. Given their drive for possessing access to modernity, the different fractions of the ruling class possessing state power have always defined national unity as the obligatory passage to the modern existence of the state: construction of the state and construction of the nation are two sides of the same coin. But they always confused national unity with their own interests so neatly that every time fractures appear in their heart, they brandish the spectre of civil war with inter-regional or inter-ethnic connotations.

The dominant unitarist discourse hides in fact the historic responsibilities of the ethnic/regional oligarchies for the fractures that have opened up in the heart of the Malagasy 'nation' in its long period of gestation. This discourse totally denies the existence and vitality of ethnic tensions, to whose generation in fact it has powerfully contributed, under the cover of a superficial unity essential for the establishment of order. If federalist discourse carries demagogic responses (the ethnic/regionalist mystique) to real questions (regional development), unitarist ideology sidesteps the latter in taking refuge behind a 'natural' unity, the mythically constructed Malagasy people. Both approaches appear to be a priori contradictory, indeed opposites, but they are in fact constructed on the same irrational plan: the mystification of an idealised primordial ethnicity on one side, and the nation, a natural given, on the other. For the bards who celebrate the unitarist discourse in Tananarive, the Malagasy nation has always existed and it is only colonisation which introduced the ethnic divisions which would have [eventually] vanished through political unification under the aegis of the [pre-conquest] Merina monarchy. Even the classic writing of Pierre Boiteau, despite its many merits, does not escape from this trajectory (Boiteau, 1960).

In their way, both federalism and unitarism proceed from a denial of history. Even in an island such as Madagascar, national identity can only emerge from an adhesion freely consented to on the part of several distinct man-made entities

(ethnic, cultural, linguistic or economic) in accordance with the elaboration of a common plan. Insularity alone is not necessarily a necessary condition for the emergence of the idea of a nation (ie Cyprus, Haiti/Dominican Republic).

If, in advocating a return to ethnicist values romanticising the past, insisting more on cultural particularities than on pluralism, federalism can seem like a reaction, the simplification that goes together with unitarist discourse sins by its explicit refusal to recognise the historic reality of ethnic communities, of their often conflictual inter-relations and still less of new lines of identification different than so-called primordial ethnicity. Ethnic relations today are cumulative in nature, far from simply being a recapitulation of those of the past. They integrate new dynamics introduced through history around new political (state-building), economic (merchant relations) and social (demographic dynamism or stagnation, urbanisation) initiatives. They can take the form of a bitter competition for the control and the maximisation of existing resources of social reproduction such as land in rural areas (conflict between the Zafisoro and Antesary) or over jobs in government or in the urban private sector (Sakalava/ Tsimihety conflicts in Mahajanga).

These two variants in political discourse both seem to forget that the construction of a nation requires a political will duly acceptable to the citizenry and cannot just be the exclusive property of different fractions of the 'national' bourgeoisie in power. This is why the democratisation of political life is one of the conditions *sine qua non* for achieving national identity. So long as political life remains the exclusive prerogative of dominant urban groups, democratisation can only be another manifestation of the dominant ideology. Yet no deep desire has been demonstrated to break off the historical process constructing a nation amongst the Malagasy population.

In order to be fecund, unitarist discourse must recognise that ethnicism (and not ethnicism)<sup>9</sup> is an integral part of the nation-building process. And that the process, contrary to certain themes developed by the epigones of nationalist ideology, was neither achieved under the Sakalava rulers in the eighteenth century nor during the Merina expansion in the nineteenth. The 'Kingdom of Madagascar', recognised by the great powers during the second half of the nineteenth century (the USA, Germany, France) was not properly speaking a nation-state. If the Merina monarchy was able to instal after Radama I [reigned 1810-28], a real centralised state (standing army, administrative apparatus), it never brought to life a national ideology acceptable to the different populations of Madagascar because its domination actually accentuated social cleavages and differential status (fiscal obligations, corvee labour, servile labour). It is hard to conceive that the Merina oligarchy grouped behind the Queens and their Prime Minister Rainilaiarivony [in power 1864-95], which governed and exploited the



resources of the conquered provinces through connivance or in competition with the local oligarchies turned into vassals, could have united the island around common 'national' values. This diplomatic outreach [on the part of the Kingdom of Madagascar], determined by an obsession with international recognition, hardly succeeds in hiding the failure of hegemonic unification under the Merina monarchy, a state which failed to mould a 'nation'. Eroded by its internal contradictions and sapped by frequent palace intrigues, the Merina monarchy was no Prussia and Rainilaiarivony was far from being the Bismarck of Madagascar.

The political (infeudation and non-association of local oligarchies), economic (monopoly of trade), and social (the Merina oligarchy gathered up the fruits of its conquest without redistribution to the population at large) bases of the Merina monarchy were incompletely established and thus fragile and could not perpetuate their own reproduction. The failure of the Merina national initiative was patent; notable were the kingdoms, theoretically under the control of the Merina (Behemisatra and Antankarana) which participated in the French Expeditionary Force in 1895 [that conquered the Merina state] and which asked to remain French in the late 1950s, brandishing the spectre of the restoration of Merina hegemony.

The process of construction of an ideology around which a national identity could be structured emerged during the colonial period, based on unity achieved through submission to a foreign presence. This process developed on soil where the former dominant oligarchies as well as social groups previously subordinated (Makoa, Mainty, former slaves) came together to integrate and reappropriate the instruments of colonial power (particularly the schools and the bureaucracy). This induced the composition of the political class at the time of independence. And it is on the basis of this new 'hegemonic alliance' (Bayart, 1979) that these different groups tried to channel and control the construction of national identity. Rattled by major crises in 1972-75 and 1991-92, national unity rests formally on a fragile consensus amidst a ruling class that is very divided (Rakotondrabe, forthcoming). It has always confused the higher interests of the nation with its own private, fractionalised and regionalised interests.<sup>10</sup>

In the present phase, the so-called democratic transition, no decentralisation, conceived as a means of perfecting national unity, will be effective unless the democratisation of 'public affairs' (in the etymological sense of *res publica*) is not also effective. I understand by this, the freely consented participation of the citizenry in the government of the community at all echelons of national life, not designated through the means of ethnic or regional origin but through a national identity freely sought for and shared, involving the entire population. It would not be too much to demand of the class of politicians for we must question its

representativity and its own interests. Pursuing false issues (federalism vs unitarism) debilitates political debate but permits the different fractions of the 'state bourgeoisie' to isolate and exclude the real issues concerning the challenges that Madagascar confronts at the end of this century.

### **The Constraints in the Democratisation Process: decentralisation and the regionalisation of development, what is at stake?**

The social movements of 1991-92 have shown at least one thing: the nation-state as it has functioned since independence has not created any true dynamic of decentralisation, even if decentralisation was inscribed in the constitutions of 1959 and 1975. But the two principal protagonists of the political scene (Federalists and *Forces Vives*), offer different interpretations to the contestation over the centralised state. The first, under the sway of the barons of the old regime, concerned with their eventual dismissal to the provinces, contest the legitimacy of the unitary republican state whose authority formerly they did so much to enforce and demand the creation of a state federated on the basis of the six provinces, a strategy which would permit them to retain their network of interests. The second, in the name of a unity whose contours remain vague, advocate the maintenance of the unitary form of the state while bestowing considerable autonomy to territorial units. This is the position for the moment of the *Forces Vives*, consecrated by the constitutional referendum of August 19, 1992.

But beyond the polemic created around the juridical form of the state (federal or unitary), fed by the class of political middlemen, what lies beneath is the deep aspiration of the population for more autonomy in the generation of 'public affairs'. It is in this sense that decentralisation and regionalisation are in fact requirements of the democratisation process, beyond any partisan or party-political consideration. The Malagasy state has not until now succeeded in generating the concept of the nation, hence its intrinsic fragility. There exists a fluid national consciousness but the nation as a goal for its own sake, that is to say the desire to share in a common journey, characterised by shared values, remains to be built. The democratic process may be a chance to construct national identity if decentralisation and regionalisation are recognised as imperatives and on condition that they really imply bringing together the whole population on the basis of a search for common well-being. It is thus essential that the process be totally disengaged from the inclination of the ruling classes to lock things up; this is the key to its potential success.

As a gamble, decentralisation is not exempt from constraints and risks. The

control over allocation of resources from the capital, serves as cement in building unity over the facade of the different regional fractions of the ruling class. It flows from the extreme centralisation of political, economic and financial decision-making power that have rested in the hands of the president of the republic and of the government. The former structures called 'decentralised' were simply modes of execution and the more so as the principles of 'democratic centralism'<sup>11</sup> largely deprived decentralisation of any logic and reduced it to the status of a slogan. Riven by contradictions, themselves exacerbated first by the nationalisation of much of the economy and then by the programme of structural adjustment in the 1980s, these decentralised structures have become the refuge of a provincial 'nomenklatura' which uses them to sustain the redistributive networks of corruption and of clientelism, the abuse of authority and tribalism whilst state power disintegrates at the centre.

Decentralisation of decision-making power and of the management of state resources induces a geographical displacement of those resources under the control of the state apparatus. The first of these concerns the territorial carve-out which has already begun to agitate the political class and the ethno/regional associations, even before the National Assembly which will enact the legislation, has been put into place. It is only apparently paradoxical that most of these associations (*Menabe miray, Zanak'i Mananjary, Toliho*) have their headquarters in the capital. They seek to present themselves as indefatigable pressure groups elaborating new territorial structures (*vondrom-bahoakam-paritra*). These threaten to breach the logic of multiple (budgetary, geo-historical and geo-economic) practical constraints by engendering demands of autonomy for ever smaller micro-regions. (Why autonomy for Antsohihy and not Befandriana?)

But the main risk incurred by decentralisation resides in its diversion to the advantage of the dominant urban groups, such as the associations cited above, by simply changing the location of centralisation, so long focussed on Tananarive, whose activities they have long paralleled in any case. The frustrations and grievances of the peasantry, often manifested in a disaffection towards the political class, will become simply more accentuated. Decentralisation would be confined to a dispersion of bureaucratic practises, abuse of authority or clientelism, instead of being the catalyst for the regionalisation of development. In place of introducing a new dynamic for constructing national identity from the base, the inclination of local oligarchies through controlling decentralisation to their own advantage, in the name of a not always evident ethno/regional legitimacy, threatens to transform decentralisation into a straightforward intensification of ethno-political competition at the community level.

Decentralisation ought in fact to contribute to break down the mystified conflicts bedevilling inter-ethnic relations through a growing awareness of

common interests that cross-cut existing community cleavages. In a city such as Toamasina, for instance, decentralisation also should signify the explicit recognition of different ethnic communities and the inclusion of all in local self-government rather than giving pre-eminence to some on the basis of a fallacious primordial ethnic identity. On a modest level, to take an example from current events, the Antesaka or St Marien docker employed by the Toamasina port has no more interest in his employer going bankrupt than does the Betsimisaraka, Merina or Betsileo higher or middle-level employee; the ethnic or regional origin of the director-general does not finally matter. Their common future depends on the good management of the company at all levels and its chances of expansion. Comparably, but on a larger scale, the decentralisation of political and economic decisions demands the same common purpose.

The alter ego of decentralisation, regionalisation, is also a gamble. If decentralisation really involves a new sharing-out of the prerogatives of administrative power (decision-making, administrative management, budget), regionalisation must breathe life into a new dynamic for regional economic development. Regionalism builds on applied geography and not from an arbitrary political decision at the behest of the state. Is the prospective region natural, historic, geographic or economically defined or is it essentially an arena for regional planning? The debate should be open and avoid any a priori assumptions which may be hasty or based on faulty generalisation. It must also be democratic, that is to say, responsive to the aspirations of the populations concerned and not simply a football in the political game. I will limit myself here to sketching fragmentary reflections on the demands of regional development having regard to the real issues that it can bring to bear.

The recent debate about the vanilla plantations of the north-east (Sambava-Antalaha) can shed light on what regional development is not. Cultivated almost as a monoculture, vanilla growing mainly profits a group of exporters and traders, without much real benefit to the economic development of the region. The money earned through vanilla export feeds the state treasury and the exporters who re-invest very little in the area. Add to this the connivance of the local oligarchy with the vanilla purchasers, the exporters and the traders at the expense of growers. As a result, the profits from vanilla growing do not bring about the much-needed diversification of productive activities (diversification of agriculture in order to avoid the risks of monoculture) nor the installation of an adequate infrastructure (roads, ports, hospitals, electrification) in the region. Sambava-Antalaha [despite producing a relatively valuable crop for export] remains lacking in facilities and an export enclave zone. Vanilla cultivation is an excellent example of how the real potential of a regional economy is being squandered at the hands of a local oligarchy anxious to perpetuate its grasp at the expense of

the qualitative improvement of the economic and social conditions of the population.

The provincial bourgeoisies are not able at the present time to give a decisive impulse to regional development. Not unlike the Merina bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century, they tend to adopt the behaviour and typical characteristics of a colonial mode of production. On the one hand, the weak capacity for capital formation, leads to a drive towards speculative activities which bring about quick profits but do not create jobs, or real economic wealth, and whose profits are never re-invested in productive activities. On the other, the lack of an enterprise culture of this bourgeoisie, formed in the wake of the state apparatus, means that it serves as an ally, or perhaps only the managers of staging-posts for foreign capital (Chinese or Indo/Pakistani) which seeks simply to place its profits in a safe place, that is to say, overseas. This kind of system does not allow for the formation of capital necessary to stimulate regional development. True to their own interests, the provincial bourgeoisies seek particularly to channel the decentralisation of powers and resources linked to such a decentralisation in order to assure their own social reproduction and not to define a real regional development which would encroach upon their immediate interests. For it is only when the regions are characterised and economically specified effectively, and synergies function between them, that the aspirations for federalism, defended by the dominant provincially-based groups, would start to make sense. Otherwise, the structural limitations to regional development and the intensification of disequilibrium between the Central Highlands of Madagascar [containing the capital city] and the coastal regions simply permits the local élites to feed their political discourse in a demagogic way (tribalism or ethnicism).

From the perspective of the political history of Madagascar, no state power so far has really succeeded in imposing the idea of a nation from the top effectively, whether because it did not want to do so (the colonial state) or because of its weaknesses (the pre-1895 Merina kingdom and the post-colonial regimes). Andrianampoinimerina, the unifier of Imerina at the end of the eighteenth century, was the first surely to think of the island in terms of a potential national terrain and [his successor] Radama I, to conceptualise the military conquests as a means of realising the potential. But their successors [up to the French occupation of 1895] were unsuccessful.

The colonial regime did not make the construction of Malagasy national identity the first of its priorities and only pursued such a goal superficially. The post-colonial regimes have tried, with various nuances, to take up again the Merina national design [from pre-1895] without much success. The ruling classes have seized the reins of the state apparatus but they have not really obtained the adhesion of a nation, for lack of a clear political project. This is

equally true of the *moramora* socialism of Tsirinana [the first and quite conservative president of independent Madagascar], the Malgachisation [equivalent of Africanisation] plans of Ramanantsoa [the military regime that overthrew Tsirinana in 1972] the *fokonolona* of Ratsimandrava [equivalent roughly to Nyerere's ujamaa socialism in Tanzania] and the Third-Worldist socialism of Ratsiraka [military strongman who ran Madagascar 1975-92, much of the time from an apparently scientific socialist perspective] - and perhaps the humanist liberalism of Zafy Albert [Madagascar's newly elected president] also.

The failure of these different attempts at hegemonic unity by a centralised state which has never been strong,<sup>12</sup> contrary to common wisdom, can largely be explained through the resistance of the people to drives for national unification which fails genuinely to integrate them and which they feel to be exterior to themselves. Perhaps it is here that can be located Madagascar's insularity. For it is in its natural isolation as an island, not its state or its quality as a nation, that Madagascar's originality lies. Michelet once wrote of England, 'England is an island' as the first truth in understanding British history.

Is it not high time to start constructing this Malagasy state 'from below'? With all the 'sacrifices' that this may mean for the republican dynasties whose own failures are manifest? In the history of the rise of modern nation-states, the formation of a strong state has permitted the nation to emerge successfully (France, Germany) but has sometimes come to grief (Soviet Union, Yugoslavia). In Madagascar, the process has not really been tried. Why not turn the problematic around, that is to say, first construct the foundations of a nation, of which the state would be an emanation? Let us stop posing this continued gap between state and nation. Ethnicity is containable on condition that the idea of the nation is democratically debated. The question is prudent; on its future hinges the future of our island.

#### NOTES

1. [These movements led to the fall of the Ratsiraka government and the restoration of democracy in Madagascar.] With some perspective, it now seems to me incorrect to speak of a 'popular movement'. The insurrectionary phase dominated by the *Forces Vives* from April-May, 1991, has been followed by a reaction in which the supporters of federalism have come to the fore since August, 1991. This is not the place to evaluate the authenticity of different movements. On the contrary, I want to stress instead the nature and scope of the political discourses they bear.
2. [Local taboos, chiefship.]
3. Governor-General of Madagascar, and the key figure in establishing the form of French rule from 1896.
4. Betsirebaka (in the region of Mahajana), Korao (in the region of Morondava), are sobriquets for Betsileo immigrants and those from south-eastern Madagascar [who have come to settle in the thinly-peopled west].

5. Characteristic is the exaggerated respect paid to the *Mpanjaka*, descendants of the Maroserana Sakalava conquerors of the eighteenth century, apologies for Sakalava customs and traditions, rediscovery of distinctively ethnic particularities exalted to an extreme extent.
6. *Ethnic* refers to a regular process of affirming one's identity by reference to belonging to an ethnic group (ie, I am Merina) while *ethnicism* is a glorification of the ethnic group whose characteristics are exalted and turned into myth.
7. [This refers to the commercial plantation country south of Toamasina on the east coast where many migrants live and work.]
8. *Foin' i Zanahary ho nosy i Madagascar*. God, the Creator, has made Madagascar an island.
9. See the distinction made above in footnote 6.
10. From the perspective of contemporary history, it seems legitimate to ask if the concept of 'national' bourgeoisie is adequate for designating the totality of the Malagasy ruling class. I prefer here to speak of provincial oligarchies.
11. [Presumably copied from Communist party regimes in the radical phase of the Ratsiraka government.]
12. Verifying the saying, 'force is the refuge of the weak', the cycle of military-political repression which struggled against insurrection from below in 1971, 1972, 1975 and again in 1991-91 does not really indicate a strong state. The main characteristic of a strong state resides in its internal and external effectiveness.

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