8

OPPRESSION

In Malagasy there is a word, *tsindriana*, that means "oppressed." The literal definition is "to be pressed down, crushed by a heavy weight." Used in a political context, it means to suffer under some kind of unjust power or authority.

Malagasy is hardly alone in having such a word. Actually, most languages do. The English sentence "the people are oppressed" (or the Malagasy equivalent, *tsindriana ny vahoaka*) could be translated directly into the languages spoken by a majority of human beings, using the same metaphor, with no need for exegesis or elaboration. Even in those languages that do not have an explicit term for "oppression", I would hazard to say that if a competent speaker were to improvise such a metaphor, no one would find it in any way difficult to understand what he was talking about.[1]

It's easy to see why the metaphor might seem obvious. Power is almost invariably figured as something placed over people: what better way to express abusve power than by something above you pressing down? Here, though, I want to ask: What would an anthropologist have to say about this? Because, if one is speaking of most contemporary anthropologists, it's pretty obvious the answer would have to be: nothing. Presented with such a generalization, the first reaction of most anthropologists would be to try to show it isn't true. If this proved impossible, they would try to dismiss its significance.

It seems to me, though, that such connections are potentially extremely significant: mainly, because they point a way out of certain political dilemmas born of cultural relativism. Let me state the dilemma as simply as I can.

Most anthropological fieldwork has been conducted among subsistence farmers, slum dwellers, or indigenous peoples, the vast majority of them marginal even within the relatively poor countries in which they live. Most have been, at one time or another, victims of conquest, exploitation, state terror, or

outright genocide. In other words, anthropology, more than any other discipline, has tended to focus on people who might by most definitions—including their own—be considered oppressed. Politically, we anthropologists tend to identify quite strongly with those we study. Often, we act as advocates. Yet, unlike activists involved in radical social movements, anthropologists almost never speak of such people as being "oppressed."

Why? Mainly because anthropologists tend to be keenly aware that one can only create the machinery of oppression once one has first dehumanized or infantilized one's victims, which in practice means, first and foremost, delegitimizing their point of view. In fact, that dehumanization, and its attendant humiliation, is one of the most damaging forms that oppression itself tends to take. Hence, we tend to be very suspicious of any sort of argument that assumes that certain people's perspectives are more legitimate than others, let alone, universally true. The obvious problem with this argument is that, if you take it to its logical conclusion, it would mean there would be no basis on which to claim anyone was being oppressed (or even treated unfairly) to begin with. No one really wants to argue that a rapist's perspective is just as legitimate as his victim's, or a master's just as legitimate as his slave's. So the usual solution is to appeal to some notion of cultural relativism: yes, we have a category "rape" or "slavery" by which we can make moral judgments, the argument goes; the Nuer, or Nambikwara, have different ones. They live in a different moral and conceptual universe, and who are we to say ours is more intrinsically legitimate? Politically, this generally leads to a kind of uncomfortable compromise: while few anthropologists would deny that phenomena we would normally describe as "rape" or "slavery" are indeed evils, wherever they are practiced, they also tend to insist that imposing our own definitions in another cultural context is an even greater evil, especially if our judgments are backed up (as so often ultimately comes to be the case) by force of arms.[2]

In practice, this seems reasonable. Since at least the nineteenth century, with the British abolition of the slave trade, colonial empires have largely been justified by what we'd now call "humanitarian intervention." This is, of course, if anything even more true today. Still, adopting such a position leads to one significant, if largely unnoticed, conceptual problem. In order to say that "the Nuer" live in their own moral and conceptual universe, we are necessarily assuming that "the Nuer" actually exist: that is, that there is a relatively coherent set of ideas and principles that can be identified and described as belonging to the Nuer, and systematically compared with our own.[3] This implies bounded entities, which is a problem, but even more, it means even once you have decided who the Nuer are, you are not treating all Nuer perspectives as equally legitimate, since, after all, it will be nearly

impossible to find any statement that every single person you have identified as "Nuer" will agree with. As a result, the entire project of cultural relativism depends on being able to identify structures of authority, and thus certain individuals who, more than others, can legitimately speak for the Nuer as a whole. But here is the logical dilemma. By what criteria are these authorities to be identified? One cannot employ "Nuer conceptions" of authority, because, until one has identified who those authorities are, there is no way to know what those "Nuer conceptions" are. Like it or not, the relativist has to use some sort of external criteria. The paradoxical result is that, if one is to take a consistent position of cultural relativism, authority is the one thing one *cannot* treat relativistically.[4] The classic relativist has to assume that all cultures or societies do have structures of authority similar enough that they can be identified by an outside observer, and, furthermore, that these structures are intrinsically legitimate. The political implications are, to say the least, disturbing.

We seem to be caught, then, between three almost equally bad choices. Either we relegate to ourselves the authority to determine what's right and wrong everywhere in the world, or we relegate to ourselves the authority to determine who holds legitimate authority everywhere in the world, or we give up on making moral judgments of any kind.

Could things really be so bleak? It seems to me there is a way out. It starts with the recognition that there are two problems here—a conceptual problem and a political problem—that we would do well not to conflate. After all, there's nothing intrinsically oppressive about universalism. If a Tibetan Buddhist like the Dalai Lama claims the right to make judgments about America based on privileged access to universal spiritual truths, Americans rarely feel they are thus the victims of a terrible injustice. Some might find it inspiring, others might find it ridiculous: but no one is likely to feel particularly oppressed. This is because the Dalai Lama holds no power over them. The real problem, it seems to me, is not with the mere fact of universalistic judgments, but with the existence of a global apparatus of bureaucratic control, backed up by a whole panoply of forms of physical and economic violence, that can enforce those judgments: whether by imposing itself directly, or by reserving to itself the power to recognize what are legitimate groups and who are their legitimate representatives, anywhere in the world. If one accepts that some such apparatus is inevitable, then, yes, we have little choice but to agonize over the moral quandaries it creates. But there is an alternative: we can ask what it would take to eliminate such coercive structures entirely. To do so would mean asking a very different set of questions. First and foremost, on what basis can one hold these structures to be intrinsically illegitimate? It is here that the existence of terms like *tsindriana* becomes so

important, because they demonstrate not only that the authority is always contested, everywhere—but even more, because they suggest that the ways in which it is contested, even down to popular metaphors and images, are often surprisingly similar. They hold out the possibility that even if no consensus on such questions exists now—even though there's probably nothing everyone on earth currently agrees on—there is at least the *possibility* for such an agreement in the future. After all, what is most essential about human beings is not what they are at any given moment, but what they have the capacity to become.

At this point we can come back, I think, to the conceptual problem: except now I think it looks quite different. Once we allow that structures of authority are everywhere contested, and that the terms of contestation are at least close enough that we can all begin talking to each other, what do we do with the fact that, in most ways, a Malagasy term like "*tsindriana*" and an English term like "oppression" are extremely different? Like similar terms elsewhere, they draw on certain apparently universal—or universally comprehensible—metaphors: the sense of being stifled, crushed, ground down, overburdened, struggling under a heavy weight. But they speak so powerfully because they also draw on images that are extraordinarily specific. For the typical American, "oppression" might evoke images from movies about Medieval serfs or the building of Egyptian pyramids, personal memories of bad jobs, gym teachers, tax auditors, strident and rather foolish radical rhetoric, or stiflingly hot summer nights. These images, in turn, tend to open on a whole series of assumptions about the nature of freedom, autonomy, justice and the individual, each with endless concrete associations of their own. A Malagasy using the term *tsindriana* would be evoking an entirely different fan of historical and personal associations. It is the vividness of such associations that gives these words their almost visceral power; but, at the same time, their specificity that makes it seem slightly absurd to even consider using them as terms of social analysis.

What I want to do in this essay is to begin to begin to ponder how to think our way out of this problem by looking more carefully at the Malagasy term *tsindriana*—not to reject any notion of relativism, incidentally, but rather, in order to think about how we might go about developing one without the same authoritarian implications. This means unpacking some of the dense constellation of ideas, images, and moral practices surrounding the bearing of burdens, the experience of being crushed by heavy weights, and how they are seen to bear on the legitimacy of different forms of authority. I think Madagascar is a particularly appropriate place to start because the non-Malagasy reader is likely to find so much of the larger cultural context profoundly alien and exotic. We will be looking at very different assump-

tions about the nature of the family, government, and spiritual practices that are, in these respects in particular, most likely very different from our own. But this, of course, is in keeping with one of the founding assumptions of anthropology: that if one is to try to understand what all human beings have in common, it behooves us to start with the cases that seem maximally unfamiliar.

I will be using material mainly drawn from the province of Antananarivo in the Malagasy highlands, an area historically referred to as Imerina. Most of it comes from a region of Arivonimamo where I lived and worked between 1990 and 1991. This was not, at the time, a place where there was a whole lot of oppression going on. The people there were, certainly, very poor. But almost no adults of either sex spent any prolonged period of their lives working under the direction of anyone else, and state control was practically nonexistent. On the other hand, it had not always been this way and people were keenly aware of that. The nineteenth-century state had been based on a combination of forced corvée labor and slavery that most people now saw as the very definition of oppression; tokens of this state were present everywhere. The same was true of the French colonial regime which most saw as having been even worse. Everyone saw themselves surrounded everywhere by the traces of oppressive regimes, and living in a landscape that had been largely created by them. As a result, as in so much of Madagascar, some forms of authority were seen as inevitable, but all forms of authority were seen as inherently problematic.

The body of the essay falls into three parts: the first concerning the family, the second concerning the nineteenth-century kingdom, the third about idioms of pressing and carrying in spirit possession today. Only then will I return to the problem of relativism.

PART I
BEARING BURDENS WITHIN THE HOUSEHOLD

In Malagasy one can refer to a sibling in one of two ways. One can refer to their gender (my brother, my sister...) or to their order of birth: "my senior," or *zoky*, "my junior," or *zandry*. One almost never refers to both at the same time. In part, this is because when it comes to matters of seniority within the household, or at least among siblings, gender should not, in principle, make a difference. If parents are away, for example, the oldest child is considered to be in charge of the household. Whether that child is a boy or a girl should be irrelevant.

In Madagascar, relation of older and younger, *zoky* and *zandry*, is a relation of simple hierarchy. It is perhaps the most elementary form of hierarchical relation. It is also often described as a based on a principle of mutual responsibility: it is the responsibility of older siblings to speak for their younger brothers and sisters in any situation which requires a degree of tact, or delicacy. It is the responsibility of younger siblings to carry their elders' things. Hence the well known proverb, *Manan-jandry, dia afak'olan'entina; manan-joky, dia afak'olan-teny*: "if you have a younger sibling, then you'll have no problems with carrying, if you have an older one, then you'll have no problems with speech" (Houlder 1915: #1901, Cousins 1963: 37; Camboué 1909: 385).

Around the turn of the century, a Catholic missionary posted to the area north of Arivonimamo observed that this principle was taken so seriously it often led to scenes that seemed, to the European eye, quite unreasonable. "By the age of about ten," he wrote, "children begin to help in the gardens and rice-fields by carrying burdens and packages. What is remarkable about the practice is that: it is to the youngest that the heaviest parts usually fall" (Camboué 1909: 385). Almost a century later, I observed much the same thing: one might often spot a sixteen year old girl strolling up the hill after a morning of weeding in the rice fields, with her ten year-old sister struggling with a basket behind her, or a healthy middle-aged man coming back for lunch followed by a twelve-year-old son carrying his spade. Indeed, some have been known to go so far as to say that it is taboo for an elder to carry such tools if a younger family member physically capable of carrying it is anywhere around (so Ruud 1960: 25)—just as it would be inappropriate for a young man to speak in a village assembly or court case if he had a father or elder brother available to state his case for him. No one I knew in Arivonimamo would go that far. Most, even in the countryside, insisted such hard-and-fast rules were largely things of the past; though neither did they deny that, in practice, younger members of the family generally did end up doing a lot of the carrying, and that if one really needed a spokesman, and asked one's father or elder brother, they would normally feel they needed a very good excuse to refuse.[5]

One can think of *zoky/zandry* relations as an "atom of hierarchy" in two senses, actually. First of all, because talking about how older and younger siblings should relate to one another has always been one of the main ways to talk about relations of superiority and inferiority in general; second of all, because it was by growing up within families organized along these lines that people in Imerina have, over the last several hundred years or so, developed their most elementary, deeply embedded, experiences of what being inside hierarchical relations is like.

Let me give an example of each.

Whenever people talk about how *zoky* and *zandry* should behave towards one another, they tend to produce idealized statements, almost invariably prefaced by some statement to the effect of "of course, the kids nowadays no longer really do this, but in ancestral times, it was like this..." Apparently, this has always been the case. The very first account of household etiquette we have, written in the 1860s by a Merina Christian and assembled by a British missionary named Cousins in a book called *Fomba Gasy* or "Malagasy Customs" (Cousins 1963: 124–127), begins exactly the same way: "there's nothing older people complain about so much as the lack of respect for etiquette among the young people nowadays." The author then launches into a detailed account of how *zoky* and *zandry* should properly behave in each others' presence (leaving it a bit ambiguous whether he is talking just about siblings, or older and younger people in general). The account that follows revolves around three central principles, that can be summarized as follows:

1) Height.

Zandry should never place themselves physically higher than *zoky*, particularly during meals or other formal occasions; neither may their beds be placed higher than their elders'.

2) Priority.

At meals, the eldest must eat first. Neither can *zandry* take the lead when walking on a path, but they must follow their *zoky*.

3) Fetching and carrying.

The most extreme taboo (*fady*), the author notes, is to send one's *zoky* to fetch something. Great apologies are in order if one is to so much as ask them to pass something at table. If at all possible, the younger person should make sure their *zoky* do not have to carry any burdens at all. Should one, say, run into one's elder brother or sister carrying something on the road, one ought to immediately offer to take it. (This was an obligation, notes the author. A parent or elder sibling's responsibility to speak for their junior, "if there's something that needs to be explained to someone" is different; since the *zoky* need only do it if the *zandry* specifically asks.)

The theme of bearing burdens, however, resonates throughout. This is from the original text:

> It was the custom of the ancients, too, for brothers, or sisters, etc., to eat from the same plate. Once the *zoky* had eaten the larger part, he would leave the rest to his *zandry*, and when the *zandry* deferred, saying "eat

> on," his *zoky* would reply, "no, you eat, because it is you who will be carrying the baskets" (Cousins 1960: 124).

Now, as I say, all this is rather an idealization. In practice, such rules always tend to apply to certain contexts, and certain people, more than others. It's hard to imagine that even the strictest family would have kept a constant eye on a five-year-old child to ensure she never sat with her head at a higher elevation than her ten-year-old sister. In fact, if Malagasy in 1860 were anything like the ones I knew, under ordinary circumstances, no one paid much attention to where five-year-olds sat at all. Rules of seniority were observed mainly on more or less formal occasions—in fact, one might say this is what a "formal" occasion was: one in which rules of seniority were strictly observed. And this was still true among the people I knew. Principles of height and priority were almost entirely ignored in everyday practice, but were carefully observed at ritual moments. On mildly formal occasions, they tended to be observed in abbreviated, allusive form: for instance, in the way that, when guests were in the house, anyone getting up to leave the room would always stoop down slightly when walking past those still seated, to indicate they knew they really shouldn't be allowing their heads to be in a position higher than those of anyone older or more exalted than themselves.

Still, these principles did have an effect on early family experience. The issue of fetching and carrying, for example, remained extremely important, even among the relatively educated and not especially traditionally-minded families I knew best in Arivonimamo, and certainly among farmers in the countryside. Children's lives, one might say, went through three broad stages. During the first, before they could walk, children were usually carried on their mother's backs, or on that of some other female relative. As soon as they could get about themselves, however, they were left largely to their own devices. We can call this the stage of autonomy. When not at school, they were expected to spend their time with other children, who formed a sort of autonomous community of the young, roving about in bands, reappearing only occasionally, mainly at mealtimes. During this period—which lasts till eight or ten—boys and girls were both treated very indulgently, and not expected to do much of anything around the house. But as soon as a child could walk, their elder sisters and other women of the household would also begin playing at sending them off to fetch small items—often to much amusement if the child wandered off or refused. As time went on, tasks grew more serious: it was common in town to send even children of six or seven to buy things at the store, and the child would often return triumphantly to great adulation if he or she had completely the mission successfully. The term used for such fetching, *maniraka*, literally means to send someone as an envoy, agent,

or representative (*iraka*), and is the same verb that's used for more serious household chores, such as sending girls to fetch water, or spell their mothers or sisters from carrying babies, sending boys to carry their parent's tools or packages, all of which also begin around the ages eight to ten.[6]

It was at this third stage, when a child started having to carry burdens, that he or she first became integrated into the adult world, with its endless distinctions of seniority. One became part of the adult world, then, not only by sitting lower or following behind, but especially by following behind carrying heavy things on one's head or in one's arms. It happened in a way that often seemed seamless, even natural; play tasks turned into real duties, just as the inevitable way parents or older siblings would speak for children began to take on a new, more formal, significance as young people slowly became more capable of speaking for themselves. In the end, even outside the household, carrying burdens could be seen by obvious common sense as an emblem of subordination; and something quite naturally opposed to the power of speech.

Of course, real households have always been more complicated than these idealized accounts suggest. One has to take account of gender and generation as well as birth order; and on top of that was the fact that during, say, the 1860s, when *Fomba Gasy* was written, the majority of Merina households owned slaves. After several decades of predatory warfare, the Merina kingdom had become the center of a state that, in theory at least, controlled the whole of Madagascar. About a third of the population came to be made up of slaves captured in these wars, and ownership of slaves was so widespread that probably only one out of every three families had no access to slave labor. This began to happen at the same time that mission schools were introduced, part of a larger government plan to build the foundations of a modern, bureaucratic state.

The largest slaveholding families made up the state apparatus itself: most of the men in such households were officers in the Merina army, or government officials (who themselves held military rank)—and became stalwarts in the Protestant church. Their wives and children formed a leisured class, who, unless they became involved in the schools or government, usually did nothing at all. "They have all their needs attended to by slaves," remarked one Quaker missionary, "their beds made, clothes washed, food cooked and even cut up for them, so there is nothing much to do but eat food and sit about talking scandal" (in Ratrimoharinosy 1986: 202). This was the stratum European missionaries were most familiar with, from which the author almost certainly derived our earlier passage on etiquette.

These were the most enthusiastic supporters of the missionaries, but the latter found many of their habits disconcerting. Many remarked on the way

that members of this class would never appear in public bearing anything remotely resembling a burden. James Sibree of the LMS wrote:

> It appears strange to the Malagasy to see us Europeans walking out for short distances unaccompanied by a servant or some attendant; for no free Malagasy, male or female, would think of going abroad without at least one follower at his or her heels... So again, no respectable Malagasy would carry with him any small article, such as a Bible or hymn-book; that must be taken by a slave boy or girl following them: and they wonder to see us carrying a map or roll of drawings as we go to our schools or Bible-classes (Sibree 1880: 183).

Joseph Sewell of the Society of Friends similarly remarked how "ludicrous" it was, to foreign observers, to see "ladies followed in the street by a slave holding some trifling thing like an umbrella or a bible... Even schoolchildren will have a little slave to carry their books and slates" (1867: 11).

Now, as I say, these authors are describing a particular social milieu.[7] Churches and schools were (then as now) places for the well off to make a show of affluence. But I suspect there is more going on in these descriptions than mere conspicuous display. Note the nature of things being carried: Bibles, hymn books, maps and rolls of drawings, school books and slates. They were all objects which embodied, in one sense or another, the power of words.[8] The Malagasy government saw missions and mission schools mainly as the means to acquire technologies of bureaucratic rule: the lists and ledgers, registries and correspondence that would enable them to make their kingdom an effective, "modern" state. Objects of verbal learning had a particular place as emblems of power. One rather suspects the Reverend Sibree's parishioners would not have been so quick to remark on the impropriety of carrying, say, a shaving brush, a hammer, or a ukulele.

Once again, then, we have an explicit opposition between bearing burdens and the power of speech.

Since most men in this period spent the bulk of their time performing government service (or trying to avoid it), the presence or absence of slaves mainly affected the workloads of women and children, who did the bulk of domestic and agricultural work. In contrast with the pampered Christian ladies who did not deign to carry their own parasols, another missionary complains that, "in heathen households" (a word often used as a synonym for "poor"), a wife is often "regarded by her husband in the light of a superior slave" and terribly overburdened (Haile 1893: 8). After the abolition of slavery in 1895, much of the emphasis once put on children's responsibility to carry burdens seems to have been refocused on women: when towns-

people nowadays think of backwards country folk, one of the stereotypical images is that of the dutiful wife following behind her unburdened husband with a basket on her head. I did, occasionally, witness such scenes in rural Imerina—in fact, even some of my more educated female friends from town would, occasionally, offer to carry my bags for me, insisting that it was properly women's work (they never insisted very hard)—but, in fact, there are so many principles at play that in practice, there is a great deal of room for adjustment and negotiation. Would an older sister ever carry her brother's things? Certainly not; he should carry hers—that is, if it's the sort of thing it would be appropriate for a male to be carrying. What if the wife is older than the husband? Well, she shouldn't be older than her husband. But it happens sometimes: what if she is? That would depend on the family...

PART II
EMBLEMATIC LABOR AND THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY KINGDOM

The state, as has often been noted, tends to construct its own legitimacy by drawing on the idiom of the family, appropriating bits and pieces of family ritual or symbolism. The Merina state was no exception (Bloch 1989). If one looks at the structure of traditional kingdoms in the highlands, and particularly the organization of public works, one discovers a meticulous attention to what sort of people have to carry what sorts of objects—though, as we'll see, on this level the bearing of burdens was contrasted as often with powers of speech as with powers of material creation.

Kingdoms were organized around a figure called the *Andriana*, which means sovereign, or king. Roughly a third of the free population were also considered *andriana*, either because they could claim descent from the royal line, or because their ancestors had been raised to *andriana* status because of some heroic act of devotion or self-sacrifice on behalf of royalty. In the nineteenth century, there were seven orders of *andriana*, with the sovereign's immediate family at the top; at the bottom were local descent groups hardly distinguishable from their *hova*, or "commoner" equivalents. Maurice Bloch refers to all these groups as "demes"; each occupied their own valley and network of terraced rice fields amidst the vast rolling country of Madagascar's central plateau. *Hova* were defined as people who owed some form of work—*fanompoana*, or "service"—to the king. There were other groups, such as the Mainty Enin-Dreny, who were specialized royal warriors. Finally, slaves did not have descent groups of their own and did not perform *fanompoana* for the king (in fact, anyone who could prove they had performed royal service

was automatically manumitted), but, rather, did the bidding of their owners.

The whole system was constructed around service. The status of any given deme was largely determined by what particular type of service it performed for the royal family. This was particularly true before British missionaries and military advisors arrived in the 1820s and King Radama I began using the principle of *fanompoana* as the basis for creating a modernizing state. Since our historical sources also begin around this time, it is a little difficult to reconstruct exactly what "royal service" really meant in the eighteenth century, when Imerina was still broken into dozens of warring principalities. While, in theory, a local king could demand most anything from his subjects, it seems that a ruler's ability to extract goods and services from groups who did not happen to live in the immediate vicinity of a royal residence was quite limited. Those services they did receive revolved largely around what we consider ceremonial tasks, such as building and rebuilding royal palaces and tombs, or participating in the annual New Year's ritual. During such events, each deme was usually assigned some very specific set of tasks, which marked their status, as forming part of a more generic labor pool. It's important to bear in mind that, except for a handful of the very most exalted andriana, almost all of these groups were, in terms of how they earned their livelihoods, remarkably similar: all devoted most of their energies to farming in the summer, and to handicrafts or petty trading in the agricultural off-season. It was what one did for that king that determined one's status in the kingdom as a whole and, therefore, such tasks could be referred to as "emblematic labor," which defined the nature of each group, what kind of people they really were.[9]

Andriana were not entirely exempt from royal service; but their services tended to focus on a few, relatively privileged tasks. Take, for example, the building and repair of royal tombs, a task so exalted only andriana and certain very high-ranking *hova* groups had the privilege of taking part. Malagasy accounts (once again, written in the 1860s: Callet 1908: 260–2, 267, 1213–14) broke down the tasks into two broad categories. The first were acts of production: the actual fashioning of the tomb and manufacture of the objects that would be placed inside. These tasks were monopolized by *andriana*. The orders of the Andriamasinavalona and Andriantompokoindrindra, for example, provided the stone-masons and carpenters who built the tomb itself; the *Andriana*ndranado provided the smiths who made the huge silver coffin in which kings were buried, and later, who made the tomb's tin roof; women of the Andriamasinavalona and Zazamarolahy orders wove the mats that would be hung on the walls inside; three other groups were expected to provide the silk shrouds used for wrapping the dead (Callet, Ibid.). The

second set of tasks were always phrased as matters of "carrying" things; especially, carrying off the tattered mats and other rubbish from inside a tomb when it was opened or repaired, and gathering and conveying baskets full of the red clay that was used to seal it afterwards (Callet 1908: 164, 307, 490, 534–5, 812–3). These tasks were never assigned to *andriana* but always to *hova*.[10]

This distinction carries through all sorts of other tasks as well. In such ritual moments, *andriana* were defined as the kind of people who produce things; commoners, as those who fetch and carry them. At times, these emblematic tasks leaked over into broader contexts. The Andrianandranado, for instance, the order of andriana who provided the smiths for royal rituals, also produced all the gold and silver objects used at court. As a result, they eventually managed to win a formal monopoly on gold- and silver-working within the Merina kingdom as a whole. During the nineteenth century, other branches of this same order provided also almost all the tin smiths and a large number of the skilled iron-workers in the capital.[11] Other groups were famous for other specialties. As a rule, *andriana* were seen as producers, makers; it was their basic identity in the structure of the kingdom, a fact which was perhaps most clearly revealed when, in 1817, British envoys asked King Radama I chose a handful of boys from his kingdom to study artisanal trades in England. Every young man the king chose were *andriana*.

I am not sure if any foreign scholar has ever drawn attention to the connection between andriana and industrial and craft production before, probably because it seems so odd to see "nobles" as industrial producers.[12] Though perhaps it is easier to conceive if one sees the privileged stratum as monopolizing the powers of creativity. Nobles spoke first at council and were seen as being the masters of oratory and poetic speech (Domenichini Ramiaramanana 1983). They also created the most beautiful objects.

King Andrianampoinimerina, who unified the country at the end of the eighteenth century, used his right to demand *fanompoana* to marshal the manpower to reclaim thousands of hectares from swamps. King Radama and his successors in the nineteenth century expanded it to include such things as military service, school attendance, and participation in all sorts of industrial projects. The vast majority of these new tasks fell to commoners. Still, certain tasks remained emblematic, in the sense that they were seen as defining the essence of the relation between subjects (*Hova*) and the Sovereign (Andriana). Sources speaking of *fanompoana* in the abstract in the nineteenth century tended to produce a remarkably standardized list of emblematic tasks—and the same list reappears as those tasks from which andriana demes were specifically exempt. These lists always emphasized four, typically in the following order:

1) *Manao Hazolava*, or "dragging trees." Since Imerina proper was largely devoid of timber, it was necessary to form crews of workmen to drag the vast trunks needed for royal houses and palisades from the edge of eastern forests up to the center of the country. The right to set up the central poles of royal houses was, again, a highly esteemed privilege.

2) *Mihady Tany*, or "digging earth." This mainly refers to leveling and the making of embankments for royal building projects.[13]

3) *Manao 'Ari-Mainty*, or "making charcoal." In practice, this mainly involved transporting baskets of charcoal produced in the eastern forests to the royal court in the capital, Antananarivo.

4) *Mitondra Entan'Andriana*, or "carrying royal baggage." Most often this involved transporting imports bound for the court from the port of Tamatave, but it could include any number of other transport duties.[14]

The reader will no doubt have noted that in every case, these were tasks which, once again, centered on dragging or carrying heavy things—usually, in baskets on one's head. (#2 might seem a partial exception, but anyone who has ever taken part in a large scale digging project knows the lion's share of the labor, and usually the most onerous part, involves hoisting and carrying containers of displaced earth.)

The emphasis on bearing burdens, of course, did have something to do with existing physical conditions. Imerina in the nineteenth century lacked beasts of burden or wheeled vehicles. It was also notoriously lacking in decent roads. As a result, just about everything had to be moved by human beings, and often with great difficulty. But choosing these tasks as paradigms of *fanompoana* also clearly drew on a broader sense that, in the kingdom as in the household, carrying things for someone was emblematic of subordination. Indeed, in the case of royalty the principle was taken even further, because royals and officers of state did not walk for long distances at all. Like foreign visitors, they were carried everywhere on palanquins borne on the shoulders of trained bearers. The royal bearers were a class of relatively esteemed specialists, in their own right, of a status similar to royal warriors.[15] Important court figures, or local grandees, tended to keep specially trained bearers of their own, who usually formed an elite corps amongst their slaves. Actually, there was something of an irony in their position: since free people were defined as those who served (i.e., carried things) for the king, and slaves, as those who did so for private citizens, European merchants found it almost impossible to recruit free-born Malagasy as bearers, either for palanquins, or, more importantly, to carry goods along the difficult roads that lead from the capital to the seaports of the coast. Only slaves were willing to do such work. As a result, many slaves ended up in a surprisingly advantageous economic

position, working independently of their owners (to whom they were usually obliged to turn over only a certain portion of their earnings), forming semi-corporate guilds that ended up dominating the overland carrying trade in much of Madagascar and securing very high wages as a result (Campbell 1981). This pattern of turning extreme subordination into practical power is one we will be seeing again and again.

The Ambivalence of "Carrying"

So far, the picture I have been presenting has been fairly simple. Merina children learn about the nature of hierarchy in large part through the experience of carrying heavy burdens—being literally "oppressed," pressed down by the weight of objects balanced on their heads, or backs, or shoulders—objects which, significantly belonged to someone else. [16] Within the structure of the kingdom as a whole, such tasks became emblematic of subordination. In either case, the experience of physical compression could be posed against ways in which one might be said to expand, or extend oneself into the world: by producing words (if one was a *zoky*), or objects (if one was an andriana) which can then be detached from their creator and influence others.

Probably, the difference is mainly one of emphasis. In households, when a man is working a forge or a woman weaving, it is generally the most senior person who actually fashions the object, while younger people scurry back and forth carrying supplies. And when kings assembled their people to pass down rulings or ask their permission to begin some project (for example, dragging trees to make a new palace) it was the Andriamasinavalona and Andriantompokoindrindra—the same orders who had the privilege of actually building royal tombs—who had the privilege of being the first to respond to the royal words. In doing so, they were seen as acting as spokesmen for the kingdom as a whole, in much the same way as a *zoky* can speak for his *zandry* (Callet 1908: 288). And of course, as we have already seen, whether or not the identification of elite status with the control of words was salient in the formal organization of the kingdom, it certainly emerged with the spread of Christianity and mission schools later in the century.

What's more, the image of bearing burdens carried with it a certain ambivalence. In ordinary usage, for example, "carrying" by no means always means subordination. Sometimes it means exactly the opposite. The word *mitondra* means not only "to bring" or "to carry"; but also "to lead." One can say a person arrived "carrying a shovel" or "leading a detachment of a hundred soldiers"—it's exactly the same word. Authority itself is often spoken of as a burden, so that one "carries" a certain responsibility, even a certain office. Active governance is a matter of "carrying the people" (*mi-*

tondra vahoaka) and the most common word for governance is in fact an abstract noun, *fitondrana*, which might best be translated as "the manner of carrying."

Such idioms might not mean much in themselves, but they seem to draw on a much broader sense of reciprocal obligation which again, seems to be rooted in relations of hierarchy in the family, which ultimately became central to the way people imagined their relations to the state.

In the household, the duties one owes to one's elders are often framed in terms of a kind of reciprocity. In speaking of child-raising, the image of a woman carrying a baby on her back became itself an emblematic form of work, an image that summed up all the work of caring for, feeding, clothing, cleaning, teaching and attending to a child's needs which parents—and, of course, particularly mothers—provide. Obligations of support which adult children later owe to their parents and ancestors, in turn, could be collectively referred to as *valim-babena*: "the answer for having been carried on the back." Alternately, they can be called *loloha* or *lolohavina*, "things carried on one's head." The term was used as way of referring to any responsibility to support others, but particularly, the obligation to provide dead ancestors with cloth and other gifts when their bodies are taken out of the tomb to be rewrapped at periodic famadihana ceremonies, and to build and repair their tombs.[17]

So far, then, we have a reciprocity of carrying: the labor of child-rearing is pictured as a matter of carrying on one's back, it is repaid by maintaining the parents themselves when they are old, and their tombs and bodies after they have died—that maintenance, then, becoming a figurative burden borne on their descendants heads (see Lambek 2002, Cole 2000: 319–20).[18]

Not surprisingly, some nineteenth-century documents actually use the term *filolohavina*, "things carried on the head," to refer both to one's responsibilities to one's ancestors, and one's responsibilities to provide taxes and labor to the state. What is particularly interesting here is that, as a result, relations between the people and ruler were often represented as nurturing ones. (This quite literally.) Perhaps the one term most constantly invoked in discussions of the people's relation to their ruler is *mitaiza*, which literally means to breast-feed, to take care of a child not yet capable of taking care of its own needs (Rajemisa-Raolison 1985: 909). Used in a broader sense, it can mean to nurture, care for, as well as to foster a child not one's own. In the nineteenth-century literature, the people, or their representatives, are always being represented as nurturing the king. This is another aspect of Merina royal symbolism which has been largely ignored in the historical and ethnographic literature, apparently because it seems so odd. Seeing a king as a small child being nursed by his subjects so flies in the face of our own

accustomed image of a ruler as the patriarchal "father of his people" that, in its way, it jangles even more oddly than the idea of "nobles" as industrial producers.[19]

Commoners who served as royal advisors, like those who, beginning in the reign of Queen Ranavalona I, took effective control of the kingdom in the role of royal "ministers," were always referred to in Malagasy texts as "*mpitaiza andriana*," "the king's nursemaids" as well. Among the most desirable ritual services owed to royalty, many specifically involved the caring for royal children: for example, the Antehiroka, commoners considered the real autochthonous population of the plain of Antananarivo, had the privilege of blessing young princes during their circumcision ceremonies, and the Manendy, one of the specialized warrior clans, were also the privileged playmates of young Merina princesses (Domenichini-Ramiaramanana & Domenichini 1980).[20] All this was, in part, simply the recognition of a certain dependency: one who is carried by someone else is obviously dependent on them. Kings who are fed by the people are also, in a sense, infantilized.

One may ask how much of this was simply rhetoric, and how much it had any effect on practice. The answer is, probably, that this varied. In royal service, for example, the tasks that were considered particularly legitimate focused on the needs of the royal household itself. This was true even—indeed, particularly—of such spectacular tasks as dragging tree-trunks across miles of countryside, which were always seen as part of building or rebuilding royal residences. Other tasks, such as working on national industrial projects or serving in the army, were not seen as legitimate in anything like the same way, and were widely resisted. Different people managed to make more or less effective claims on royalty on the basis of their role as "nourishing" and "caring for" the king or queen. For instance, the (mainly commoner) guardians of the royal *sampy*, or national "palladia," who formed as close as the Merina kingdom had to a priestly class, also regularly represented themselves as *mpitaiza andriana* (see e.g., Jully 1899: 325; Domenichini 1977). So did the families of commoner politicians and generals who, after the reign of Radama, became the effective rulers of the state. When they tried to use *fanompoana* to extract labor for their own personal projects however, this was treated as profoundly illegitimate by those summoned to tend their cattle or carry their commercial wares to port.

Popular factions could try to play the *mpitaiza andriana* card as well. One of the earliest visitors to Imerina, a French slave trader named Nicholas Mayeur, noted in 1777 how representatives of a kingdom's women would periodically assemble to scold the same monarch—Andrianamboatsimarofy—rather as one would a disorderly child, ordering him, for instance, to stop drinking rum and lower taxes. When King Radama I instituted a permanent

standing army in 1822, and declared that half the kingdom's young men were to be military recruits and have their hair cropped short as indication of status, a large number of women, claiming to be "nursemaids" of the king (Ellis 1838; Larson 2000: 240–253), attempted a similar protest. But things didn't go so well. Radama was notorious for his contempt for traditional institutions, and reliance on brute force. He had soldiers pen them up for two days without food and the leaders thrashed before sending them all home.

However, exactly the same imagery appeared in what was certainly the most dramatic protest of the nineteenth century—in fact, one might think of it as a kind of uprising—the outbreak of the *Ramanenjana*, the "dancing mania" of 1863 (Davidson 1889; Raison 1976).

I should explain here that one of the most dramatic images of royal power—one which appears to have made a profound impact on the popular imagination—was the rounding up of people to carry royal baggage during court outings. This was apparently particularly disastrous during the reign of Queen Ranavalona I (1828–1861). Whenever the Queen traveled abroad, she brought her entire court and enormous quantities of furniture and provisions, so that she had to be preceeded by agents summoning almost the entire population of surrounding villages for forced labor. This was a very ambivalent demand, since on the one hand carrying royal baggage was indeed personal service to the crown and hence seen as inherently legitimate; however, the results were usually catastrophic. Since the workers were not fed, and the Queen's party tended to absorb all available supplies, hundreds if not thousands would perish of a combination of exhaustion, starvation, and disease. "Never," wrote the Queen's secretary Raombana, after one royal expedition to Manerinerina in 1845, "was an excursion of pleasure more productive of famine and death" (488).

Ranavalona was Radama I's wife and, later, successor on the throne, established there by several prominent commoner generals. She is famous for expelling missionaries and other foreigners from the country, restoring the *sampy*, but at the same time, maintaining the army and bureaucratic apparatus created by Radama. Her reign was considered the most oppressive in popular memory, between the endless demand of *fanompoana* and the systematic use of the poison ordeal to root out rebels and enemies, real and imagined.

When she finally died in 1861 and her son, Radama II, came to power, he immediately attempted to reverse almost all of her policies, abandoning most court ritual and allowing foreign missionaries and economic adventurers of every stripe to flood back into the country. Within a year or so, churches and plantations were being set up all around the capital, and the resulting popular suspicions, apparently, sparked one of the most famous

moments of popular resistance in Malagasy history. Thousands of people all over Imerina—the vast majority women, many slaves—began to be affected by what foreign observers described as a "dancing mania," a "disease" referred to as the Ramanenjana. It was, in fact, a form of spirit possession and, since it was widely held that the only way to cure such a condition was to allow the spirit to emerge, to dance itself out, musicians quickly appeared to help victims—who soon began gathering together into bands and then descending on the capital. Those affected claimed to be bearing the luggage of the late Queen, who, they said was returning to the capital in order to chasten her son for abandoning her policies, opening up the country to outsiders, and especially for reintroducing Christianity.[21] It was in its way quite similar to the revolt of 1822, but it also came in a form that the government found almost impossible to suppress. Faced with an army of entranced women surrounding the royal palace, swirling about and making periodic forays into its precincts, Radama II was paralyzed with confusion. He kept asking his Christian advisors if he was witnessing the apocalypse. In the end, military officers took the occasion to assassinate him and ordered his most objectionable policies—particularly, granting foreigners the right to buy land and other economic assets in Madagascar—reversed.

In each case, note the specifically maternal relation between representatives of the people and the (male) king; maternal authority, which, at least towards male children, is always thought to be a particularly close and affectionate kind, was the proper medium for reversing power relations. In the second case, those possessed even represented themselves as bearing the burdens of the Queen: in classical possession fashion, taking an image of total subordination and, by a kind of dialectical jujitsu, turning it into a way of yielding power. But this in turn adds yet another wrinkle to an already complicated set of principles and images surrounding authority in Merina culture. Let me turn, then, in the next section, to look at the phenomenon of spirit possession and mediumship as I encountered it in twentieth-century Imerina to see how all these principles continue to work themselves out in the way people imagine the nature of political power.

PART III
ARIVONIMAMO AND ITS SPIRIT MEDIUMS

The town of Arivonimamo hugs the highway that runs west from the capital. Most of it lies on an extremely gentle slope. As a result, the town's porters have developed a unique system for transporting goods. Anyone hanging around the taxi station near the market, or just gazing from the verandah of

one of the houses that line the highway, is likely to see a wagon—or maybe it would be better described as a very large dolly—rolling down the hill every ten minutes or so. Almost always, these dollies are crowded with bags and boxes and packages of commodities of one sort or another, with two or three young men at the helm—one steering, others simply there to enjoy the ride and to help with loading when they arrive. When I was there between 1989 and 1991, these porters were almost invariably "black people" (*olona mainty)*—descendants of nineteenth-century slaves—except for a smattering of men of slightly higher birth who are, largely for that reason, considered even more the detritus of society: drunks, ne'er-do-wells, losers unfit for any decent occupation. For all that, these are also the only people one can regularly see having fun in public: rolling down the hill is a very pleasant job, even if the same people do have to drag the dollies back up afterwards. It's not really all that onerous: as I say, it's a very gentle slope.

The taxi stand centers on a little booth near the marketplace, very much the fulcrum of the town, always full of vans and station-wagons loading and unloading. This work was hardly limited to descendants of slaves. Almost anyone could be a member of the taxi cooperative. It was the more simple, physically taxing business of actually carrying things around—since the men who worked the dollies, I soon found, were also readily available to strenuously carry burdens by hand over side roads and difficult rural paths—which was a class apart. The prejudice against carrying things for a living, then, remained very much alive.

It was next to this same taxi-stand, in a line of tiny restaurants that was part of Arivonimamo's market, that, during one of my first visits to the town, I met a very peculiar person who I shall call Ramose. The very first time I met him, I was not sure if he was entirely sane. He was a pale, middle-aged man who wore a patchwork outfit rather reminiscent of a European court jester, but with a loud and very self-confident voice. Born to an illustrious family (his father had been the Malagasy ambassador to the U.N. under an earlier regime), Ramose was a notorious eccentric, having frittered away his share of the family fortune on an endless series of wives and adventures, eventually even abandoning his job as a teacher of French and Malagasy in the local public high school (CEG) to take up work as an astrologer and part-time curer with a specialty in locating stolen goods. He first discovered his true talents, I was told, when he proved the only person capable of curing an outbreak of ambalavelona, a form of spirit possession, at the CEG. While talking about the incident with him and his daughter Chantal, I first became aware of how important, and strangely entangled, idioms of oppression and carrying things were in discussions of such phenomena.

Spirit Possession

There are two terms in the colloquial Malagasy spoken in Arivonimamo one might use to translate the English "possessed by spirits." One is *tsindrin-javatra*, which literally means "pressed down by something." The other, is *entin-javatra*, which means "carried by something." In general, "pressed down" implies a somewhat milder state, in which a person enters into some relation with a spirit. It is used, say, of the experience of being addressed by a spirit in dreams, or falling into a trance in which a spirit seems to be whispering in one's ear or otherwise speaking to one, but such phenomena also seem to shade into more extreme forms of trance, in which the personality of the medium begins to be effaced. *Entin-javatra* is usually only used for the most extreme forms, in which the possessed person has lost all consciousness of their own identity, but simply acted as an extension of the spirit's will. [22] Almost always, someone "carried along" by a spirit would be said to have no memory of how she behaved during the incident.[23]

However, the confusing thing is the way that, when people tried to explain exactly what happened during possession—that is, those few who felt they could even make the attempt, since most insisted they had no idea—their descriptions slipped back and forth between the two: between representing people as interacting with external forces, and being entirely effaced by them. This is what became clear when I first talked to Ramose because he was probably the one person best able to talk about such issues—he was not only educated in Malagasy studies, but was an experienced lecturer—and even his account was remarkably confused.

The ambalavelona outbreak in which he became famous occurred in 1977. An entire dorm of teenage girls at the local CEG fell prey to a condition rather like Ramanenjana, usually caused by an evil-doer who exposes his victims to the influence of hostile ghosts. I heard many accounts of the spectacular results. The victims first began to be seized by sudden panics which lead them to suddenly bolt from the classroom; matters soon escalated to the point where some began tearing off their clothes and running naked across campus, others ripping their clothes to shreds as they lay writhing and screaming on the ground. There were stories of possessed girls jumping out of second- or third-story windows and landing unharmed, suddenly developing such enormous strength it was impossible to subdue them. How? Here is Ramose's description of what happens when one is afflicted by ambalavelona:

> *Ramose*: The first thing that happens is that the person develops a sudden headache, then eventually, their minds become lost. They start

> speaking in words that make no sense, and it's like there's a second person inside them.
>
> There's something frightening the sick person. It chokes them. It torments them. It feels like they're struggling with a snake, or some fierce beast (depending on how the evil spirit (*fanahy ratsy*) manifests itself).
>
> That's why one says: there's a "second person" that comes over them.
>
> *Chantal*: So they can see this second person?
>
> *Ramose*: They can see it. The person can see it—see the snake which is hurting them and choking them—and tries to fight it.[24]

At one point, he was called in to question a girl who had been afflicted but had temporarily come to her senses. She told him she had been attacked by an invisible beast—but all she could see of it was its hands, grabbing at her. That was the reason she tore off her clothes, she said, because it seemed as if the beast had attached itself to them. That was why she seemed to be writhing and screaming for no reason. She was struggling to shake it off.

But then in summing up, he asserted the exact opposite. Actually, it was the ghost itself—the "second person"—that was screaming and struggling:

> *Ramose*: The first person no longer has any control of herself: it's the second person who rules over her.
>
> *David*: So it's the second person who...
>
> *Ramose*: It's the second who's acting strangely, who's speaking without making any sense, who's ripping their clothes off...
>
> *David*: But is this really a second *person*, or is it...?
>
> *Ramose*: It's an evil spirit. The soul of someone who has died, which frightens them. It appears as a snake, as a ferocious human, as a hostile ghost...
>
> *Chantal*: And is that what makes them so strong?
>
> *Ramose*: And that's what makes them so strong—because a girl with *ambalavelona* has the strength of five men. Her strength is truly remarkable.[25]

I was completely confused. At first I assumed it must be a language problem. I must have been missing something. It was only the next day, after having transcribed the tape and satisfied myself that what he was saying was really as contradictory as it sounded, that I brought up the matter again. It's confusing, I said. Sometimes, it sounds as if these victims were conscious, struggling with the ghost. At others, it's as if their minds were entirely ef-

faced and it was the ghost itself speaking or acting, making them speak nonsense, or giving them enormous strength, and not the victims at all.

He reflected for a moment. Well, yes, he replied. Sometimes they were more possessed than others. At those times, their own personalities would be entirely effaced, and it was the spirit that was acting through them. Later they would begin to regain consciousness (to "remember themselves"), and then it would seem the spirit was outside, struggling with them. They would shift, in other words, from being "carried" to being "pressed down."

Zanadrano

Mass outbreaks of ambalavelona are rare. But professional spirit mediums, called Zanadrano, are everywhere—in every town and most villages in rural Imerina—and séances occur on a daily basis. Everyone has been to such a séance at some time or other and most people attend whenever they are seriously ill, even if they normally seek the services of the local clinic or hospital as well. Like the porters, Zanadrano consist overwhelmingly of the descendants of slaves. One of the defining features of a slave is that they are people "lost" to their own ancestors, particularly to their ancestral territories. To this day, descendants of slaves don't really have their own ancestral territories in the same sense that other Merina do. Zanadrano, however, created a different way of linking up to the ancestral landscape because they rely on a pantheon of "Andriana," the souls of ancient kings, whose mountaintop tombs have become places of pilgrimage. Most visit these compounds periodically, to renew contact with the spirits, and sometimes in difficult cases they bring their patients to such compounds for curing rituals.[26]

Now, there are a lot of things one can say about rituals of curing and the work of Zanadrano more generally, but what I really want to emphasize here is the division of labor between spirits in their practice. Most compounds contain several tombs and, generally, each royal spirit is accompanied by at least one other spirit—often buried just outside the compound proper—who is often referred to as his "soldier" or "worker," or sometimes, less euphemistically, as his "servant" or his "slave." Both the royal spirits and the spirits of the slaves possess people and take part in curing ceremonies, but they play radically different roles. The role of the first centers on speaking; the second, on fetching and carrying.

What mediums basically do is treat people who have been victims of one or another kind of magical attack (or witchcraft; while there were many different kinds, most Zanadrano I talked to insisted that their single most common task was to cure cases of *ambalavelona*). As such, mediums can be referred to generically as *mpitaiza olona*, "nurturers" of those they cured and

otherwise took care of. Almost always, a family will come to a Zanadrano complaining of some malady. The first stage of treatment is dedicated to finding out who was responsible, their motives, and how they went about working their witchcraft. Music is played, the medium will enter into a trance; often they will call on a number of different "andriana"—here meaning, royal spirits—for advice,each of whom is often said to have their own specialty: for instance, Andriantsihanika is noted for his ability to diagnose and cure cases of ambalavelona, Rafaramahery is an expert in problematic pregnancies and women's ailments, and so on. Often the medium will brandish a mirror, in which he or she is said to be able to see the culprit or the place in which they have hidden *ody*—that is, "charms," horns, sacks or boxes containing dangerous medicine—which almost always turn out to have been planted around the victim's house or property, and which are the prime cause of their affliction.[27]

This first stage, diagnosis, typically consists of a kind of multi-sided dialogue involving the medium, various spirits, the patient, and various members of the patients' family. In a sense, the medium is seen as merely conveying the spirits' words, constantly interspersing his words with "he says," to mark it as reported speech. However, the medium says nothing of his own, and there is a certain ambiguity in his state—he is almost always considered in a state of what we would call trance, and, while one or two mediums claimed they were simply conveying words they heard whispered in their ears, the majority insisted that, even at this stage, they no longer "remembered themselves," that they remembered nothing of the experience afterwards, or if they did, that it was only in isolated snatches and fragments that melted away soon afterwards, rather as in waking from a dream.[28]

Once the problem has been identified the most dramatic stage comes: extracting the *ody* from their hiding places. While the spirits who diagnosed the problem were always referred to as *andriana*, often as "holy spirits" (*fanahy masina*), the extraction was always performed by another class, by the agents of the royal spirits, slave spirits, who were not so much "holy" (*masina*) as "powerful" (*mahery*).[29] Where spirits of the first type are sometimes referred to as *mpanazava*, "explainers," the latter are called *mpaka ody*, or "*ody* takers"

This stage is usually referred to as "drawing forth" (*misintona*) the evil medicine. The idea is that the royal spirits dispatch (*maniraka*) one or more powerful spirits to remove the various ody hidden on the victim's property, and whisk them away invisibly through the air, until they arrive at the ceremony. This phase is, as one might suspect, the climax of the curing drama, and often involves intense participation by all concerned—the curers and their family, the family and friends of the victim, other attendees—as the

music picks up to a fever pitch, all clap, until the medium rises, possessed by the spirits of the *mpaka ody* themselves.

Here there is a great deal of room for variation in techniques. One Zanadrano I knew would stay seated until at the very end of the ritual, then rise from his seat to begin dancing in a deep state of trance, with a horn full of powerful wood in one hand and a wand in the other, with which to guide the *ody* in the last stages of its flight into the antechamber of the house—where it would descend, invisible to the gathered multitude, into a bucket of water treated with medicines meant to break its power. One of his daughters or other assistants would then rush in to bind it with vines. Another Zanadrano would hold two mirrors, each treated with significant marks of white clay, and struggle with the invisible forces protecting the charm until it finally comes flying through the window into the room where the session is taking place (usually breaking one of the mirrors in the process), whereupon he too would plunge the object into a basin of treated water. In all cases, though, the struggle is conducted silently; the *mpaka ody* never speak.

After the ody has been removed, the royal spirits normally return and prescribe various medicines, perhaps remove *sisika* (small objects that a witch places under the victim's skin), or paint daubs of earth and water collected near the tombs of different royal spirits on the patient's body, to protect her from further attacks.[30] But, by this time, the real crisis has clearly passed.

Once again, the same pattern: andriana who speak, and underlings who serve by silently carrying. But in this case, too, the opposition becomes mapped on the distinction between two types or perhaps levels or intensities of engagement with a spirit: the ancestral, benevolent spirit who "presses down" on one, with whom one can at least potentially enter dialogue, and the dangerous unruly spirit which can only "carry one away," entirely displacing one's mind or subjectivity.[31]

There is, of course, a very complex play of displacements going on here. Royal spirits send off their "soldiers" or "slaves" to do the actual work of taking the evil medicine—according to some mediums this involves actually having to do battle with the spirits the witch has left to protect it. They are sent to fetch and retrieve things, like children sent on errands, or teams of commoners sent to drag trees for royal building projects. At the same time, the role of the medium themselves in some senses reproduces that of the *mpaka ody*—they also call themselves the royal spirits' "soldiers" and, of course, in effect are conveying or following their orders, but from another perspective, they are somewhat in the position of older brothers, who speak for the royal spirits—since they speak not in the voice of the spirit but in their own, merely conveying the royal words.[32]

The ambiguity emphasizes how much one is witnessing precisely the kind of complex play of oppressions within oppressions that marked the "dancing mania" which overthrew King Radama II a century and a half before. Because, as noted earlier, the sort of people who become Zanadrano are also overwhelmingly descendants of slaves. They are people whose very presence in Arivonimamo is a testimony to past acts of injustice and oppression,[33] and who remain an oppressed minority—mostly poor, mostly landless, mostly without social networks connecting them with government officials or members of other powerful institutions—but whose (universally acknowledged) talent for mediumship itself is largely about making effective theatrical displays of oppression that can often win social prominence and (see Graeber 2007) even, when things go very well, a certain degree of political power.

PART IV: CONCLUSIONS

On the Morality of Hierarchy

We are left with a picture which is admittedly pretty confusing.

When one wishes to say that someone is "oppressed" in Malagasy, one uses the word *tsindriana*, which literally means "pressed down" as by a heavy weight. The term is used much as it is in English: it implies having one's subjectivity squashed, not being able to act for oneself because one is forced to do onerous tasks for others. Or it can simply mean that one is part of a class of people treated badly by their superiors. Given the evident importance of carrying weights as one's first experience of hierarchy, the usage might not seem particularly surprising. But in another way it is. After all, it is not as if, even now, one can find many people in Madagascar who would say that hierarchy itself is wrong. To the contrary, just about everyone assumes as a matter of course that there must always be *zoky* and *zandry*, elders and juniors. They note that it is ancestral custom that dictates that younger brothers should carry the older one's baskets or tools. Ancestral custom is never seen as immoral or unfair. Rather, it is usually treated as the very definition of morality. The same could be said of *fanompoana* in the late nineteenth century: one examines the sources in vain for any suggestion that commoners felt that it was in principle wrong that they should have to carry things for the Queen. In the Malagasy literature that has come down to us, whether government documents, historical accounts, or texts like *Fomba Gasy*, such responsibilities are simply assumed. As in so many monarchies,

one does find complaints about "evil councilors," a tendency among the oppressed to interpret any particularly oppressive royal decision as the product of some coterie of selfish politicians who don't really reflect the royal will. But, as foreign observers invariably noted, loyalty to the sovereign herself was unquestioned.[34] Presumably, this was true even when Ranavalona I was sweeping up thousands of bearers for her pleasure tours and leaving a trail of corpses behind her. When common people did try to make claims against royal power, they did so using a language that assumed its legitimacy: for example, by representing themselves as "nursemaids of the king."[35] Or, like the Ramanenjana (or contemporary spirit mediums), they wielded images of absolute subservience to make covert claims to higher authority.

If one were to base oneself exclusively on nineteenth-century sources, it would be hard to escape the conclusion that hierarchy was universally assumed to be a natural and inevitable principle of all human life, deeply embedded in the family, the basis of all social life in the kingdom, and that it would never have occurred to anyone to challenge this.[36] But, if so, we are left with something of an historical puzzle. Because all of this changed remarkably quickly following the French conquest in 1895, and the abolition of slavery and dismantling of the monarchy in 1896. Almost immediately, one begins to see signs the kind of moral discourse so prevalent across rural Imerina today: one in which kings and queens are almost invariably represented as oppressors who treated their subjects like slaves and whose descendants have since been punished by sterility and death (Graeber 2007). Where did this sort of rhetoric come from if such ideas had been literally unthinkable a mere generation before? One could argue, of course, that they were introduced by the French themselves: point to the newfound importance of Christianity as a focus of nationalist resistance, or of Western egalitarian ideals picked up from the French educational system. But this would be a very difficult case to make. First of all, one would have to explain how a set of alien concepts managed to so completely supplant traditional ideas that no one now even remembers what those traditional ideas were. Even more puzzlingly, one would have to explain why it is that the well-educated, devoutly Christian, Francophile elites of the capital and larger towns remain to this day the only significant group of people in Imerina who do *not* subscribe to this new, egalitarian view, but instead tend to insist that ancient Malagasy kings and queens were noble and just, and ancient Malagasy forms of hierarchy, intrinsically legitimate. Meanwhile, the descendants of the oppressed, with the least access to foreign Enlightenment ideas, have come to see that very elite as the heirs of their former royal oppressors.

Now, there is one obvious explanation. Perhaps our sources—which after all mostly consist of missionary reports, government documents, and

official rhetoric of one sort or another—are not giving us the full picture. James Scott (1992) has argued that, at least in cases of very clear-cut oppression—slaves, untouchables, serfs, that sort of thing—this will always, necessarily, be the case. Part of what it means to have a situation of extreme inequality, he argues, is that there will always be an official ideology which claims that this situation is just and reasonable—an ideology that no one really believes, neither those on top nor those on the bottom, but that everyone feels obliged to go along with in public. Plantation slaves do not really feel that their masters take a paternal interest in their well-being (any more than masters really do); rather, it is part of the nature of any masters' power—its first line of defense, one might even say—to insist that slaves play along with the pretense in their masters' presence. The result is that, in such situations, people act almost exactly as they would if they were conspiring to falsify the record for future historians, since it is, of course, the official events and opinions, and not what people are saying offstage (what Scott calls the "hidden transcript") that makes it into the kind of documents likely to come down to historians.

Scott is writing primarily about situations where the hierarchical lines are clearly drawn: where there are two clearly defined groups, one obviously on top and the other clearly subordinate. Still, he also suggests that, even in more complicated situations, where the lines are blurrier, something like this will tend to occur. This is precisely what appears to have happened in Imerina. Hence, Pier Larson, an historian who has done a thorough survey of sources on popular attitudes in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Imerina, reports to have found no evidence for explicitly egalitarian sentiments in existing texts. "Social equality was neither a reality nor a cultural ideal in central Madagascar," he concludes, "hierarchy was a fundamental principle of human interaction," never questioned in itself (2000: 89).[37] In fact, Scott would argue this is precisely what one would normally expect.

On the other hand, it does seems rather unsatisfying just to insist that people must have been whispering egalitarian sentiments to one another, because people always do. It seems reasonable to assume that if egalitarian principles were present, they must have manifested themselves in some way that left traces of some sort or another. In fact, if one examines the record carefully, I think principles of equality can be detected—often, perhaps especially, inside some of the most ardent assertions of hierarchy themselves. At times, it is true, Merina kings emphasized that they were guardians of property and maintained the ranks and divisions of the kingdom; at others, though, they emphasized that, as Andrianampoinimerina is said to have put it, "you should all be equal because you are all equally my subjects." The absolute gulf between ruler and ruled made internal distinctions between

subjects irrelevant in comparison, even perhaps a bit subversive. Similarly, in royal labor projects: here one can turn for evidence to some of the very texts in which foreign observers emphasize absolute loyalty of subjects to the Queen. Where many early Malagasy sources emphasized how ranks and divisions are worked out through the allocation of different sorts of royal labor, foreign observers were often struck by how, when actually performing personal service to the Queen, all such status distinctions would simply be thrown aside:

> When there happens to be special work requiring to be done in connection with the royal courtyards, such as rebuilding or extending the lofty retaining walls, all ranks of the people, from the highest to the lowest, take a pride in doing with their hands some of the actual labour. Under the eye of their Queen, who sits on a raised seat looking on, the highest officers are seen with their *lambas* [mantles] girded round their loins, working harder than their slaves, carrying stone, digging or ramming earth, and doing whatever manual labour may be required. Much of the same kind of feeling exists in clearing the ground for the erection of their chapels, when every one—male and female, *Andrians* and slaves, officers and soldiers—will all labour with the greatest zeal; some digging, others bringing stone, others laying bricks, while their wives will mix the mortar and fetch the water required for the work (Sibree 1880: 189–90).

One needs to be careful with texts like this. It's hard to know how much the author really understood of what was going on. For instance, the text implies (but doesn't quite say) that free people and slaves worked together on royal projects. This could not have been true. Slaves were strictly forbidden to work on royal projects, and any slave who could prove that he had in court could win his freedom. But the rest seems accurate enough. And masters and slaves did indeed work side by side in building Protestant churches; a perfect example of how the logic of existing practices made ordinary Merina disposed to be receptive to the Christian message that at least in religious contexts (and by implication, potentially, other ones) everyone was equal before the Lord.[38]

One can see this as an example of a something inherent in the nature of hierarchy, whose logic always seems to create images of equality as a kind of side-effect (Graeber 1997). Or one can see it as an example of a particularly Malagasy variation on this logic, whereby one creates freedom and equality by effecting common subordination to some, distant, absolute Power which, in any practical sense, does not really exist (Althabe 1969; Graeber 2007).[39]

Both would, I think, be true. What I want to draw attention to here, though, is the way that principles like hierarchy and equality are always available to people as ideas because they are always immanent in forms of practice. They tend to become thoroughly entangled in one another as a result. It is only right and according to ancestral custom that a ten-year-old girl should carry her fourteen-year-old sister's basket; but obviously, only within reason. No one would want a child to be so burdened as to experience real pain, risk serious injury, or, for that matter, to stumble along with such difficulty that it takes everyone forever to get home. At some point, the hierarchical principle will always come up against others: that adults are responsible for the welfare of children, or that, among people performing a common task, each can only be expected to contribute according to their capacity to contribute, and each ought to be given the resources which make it easiest for them to do so. At least, within the work process itself, people practice a form of unreflective, pragmatic communism—"from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs." As the quote above indicates, even *fanompoana* seems to have had a tendency to slip into this sort of equalizing logic outside of certain highly ritualized contexts (foundations, royal funerals) where there were particular issues of status to be worked out (who gets to put up the central pillar? who gets to provide the mats?). There was a common task to perform, it was in the interest of all to perform it well, therefore, each took on tasks according to their abilities. All forms of hierarchy, I would venture, rest on egalitarian, even communistic, practices whose logic can always be invoked to subvert them, since it is the basis of so much everyday morality. This is, I suspect, the reason for the strange ambivalence of the proverb with which we began: "if you have a younger sibling, then you'll have no problems with carrying, if you have an older one, then you'll have no problems with speech." Even the most basic atom of hierarchy has to be represented as somehow equal and reciprocal, in order to seem fair.[40]

Terms of Conversation

So what is oppression, then? In the Malagasy context, it appears to be the point where an experience of subordination (which here, as elsewhere, tends to be expressed by being set underneath something or someone) clashes against a broad and not even necessarily all that clearly articulated sense of fairness, equality, and justice. For each individual, this probably calls up all sorts of deeply internalized childhood memories—for instance, the indignation which any child would feel upon discovering that, where once it seemed to amuse adults when they refused to perform ordinary tasks, and they would be treated as conquering heroes when they did deign to do them,

suddenly they were being handed the most onerous tasks and actually being expected to do them, not because their youth made them particularly special, but, rather, because it suddenly made them the bottom of the heap. Such indignant memories would, for any Malagasy adult, be inextricably bound up with memories of carrying heavy burdens on one's shoulders or one's head. The underlying structure of ideas about speaking and carrying might have been so deeply embedded that it tended to shape even dreamlike, unconscious states (as we've seen in the case of mediums above). For any individual, oppression was a potentially universal abstract principle, a particularly Malagasy set of cultural practices, and a unique collection of very personal memories—all at the same time.

The interesting thing is that this richness of sensuous experience does not make such concepts incommunicable across cultures—any more than the fact that any two Malagasy are drawing on a different set of personal experiences when they talk about oppression makes it impossible for them to really understand each other. If anything, I am convinced the opposite is the case. This very richness is a source of endless creativity that ultimately is an essential part of what makes it possible for us to speak across apparent cultural boundaries to begin with.

Perhaps the original inspiration for this paper was a conversation I had, in English, with a university student from Antananarivo, quite soon after I'd arrived. I was still living in the capital, learning the language, beginning to get a sense of what was in the archives. I spent a lot of time sitting in cafés and restaurants, thinking about posture, gesture, the movement of bodies in space. Most anthropologists spend a lot of time thinking about such matters, in that very early stage, when they can't really talk to anyone and most of time have no idea what the people around them actually think is going on. Most also know it's a good idea to jot down the thoughts one has at that early stage because one is likely to notice things that effectively vanish from consciousness soon after. I became obsessed with the politics of the gaze: specifically, at who dares to look freely about in public places. On a couple occasions, when I myself felt entirely constrained and inhibited by the surety of challenging counter-gazes, I remember reflecting that this must be something like what most of the planet's women live with constantly in public, and that the effect it produces—of constant contraction inwards, never knowing quite where to fix your eyes, or searching for safe empty places nearby, living in a claustrophobic bottle of oneself—could only have a devastating effect on one's sense of investment in one's surroundings, one's way of occupying space. I had recently been reading Elaine Scarry's book *The Body in Pain* (1985), so I began reflecting on the analogy between this and pain and physical discomfort which Scarry describes as a process of destroy-

ing worlds, as something that collapses that very sense of investment in the surrounding world with its networks of meaning and objects, that sucks the meaning away, compressing it into the minimal, circumscribed space of the hurting body. My notebooks were full of speculation about how the play of surrounding eyes, feelings of pain or painlessness, objective potentials for action or the threat of violence, all contribute to (and also flow out of) one's immediate physical bearing, carriage, gestures, how one holds one's arms and legs, tendencies to curl up or splay oneself out, speaking loudly or not at all, and so on.

The problem was that I soon realized this had almost nothing to do with how Malagasy women normally lived or behaved. This became apparent the moment one moved, as I soon did, away from institutions dominated by foreigners. If anything, the situation seemed the reverse of what I was used to. Before long, I was remarking to a friend—a woman named Lala who was a student at the university at Ankatso—how remarkable it was that in terms of ordinary body language, it was often women who seemed more apt to make the bold, expansive gesture, who strode with greater confidence in public. Men, even many young men, more often seemed to contract in on themselves in public, to often seem shy and self-contained. Why was that? (I was expressing myself here as much by imitating postures as by actual words.)

"Well," Lala said, "that's because they are pressed down by their culture," accompanying the words by a gesture: her hand pressing steadily downward, as if on something invisible in front of her. The interesting thing is: idioms of oppression were not, generally speaking, used when speaking about gender, and certainly not about men. But, even between two people who were just learning to speak to each other, playing around with such imagery in original ways seemed the obvious way to begin a conversation.

Over time, with much more observation after many more conversations, my thoughts on gender in the Malagasy highlands evolved and crystallized. Eventually they turned into an essay (Graeber 1996). As it turned out, Lala's comment didn't prove all that relevant. Still, the gesture stuck with me. It seemed somehow important. This was probably the reason I paid attention later when I started hearing different uses of the term *tsindriana*.

One might call that first, basic level—before words—the level of phenomenology. Often, the most profound cultural insights are achieved by intentionally bringing things down to this sort of degree zero, and then working back up again. This was in fact precisely what Scarry was trying to do in *The Body in Pain*, a book which draws richly not just on the phenomenological tradition but on the half-forgotten insights of Existentialism. As such, it did prove useful after all. Scarry begins by proposing an opposition between pain and language. Physical pain, if sufficiently intense, destroys the very

possibility of language; language being the most important way in which the self embeds and invests itself in the surrounding world. Hence suffering makes one collapse into oneself. In this sense, having another person bearing your burdens, then capturing their right to speech, could indeed be seen as the most obvious way to expand into larger worlds at their expense. But I ended up using Scarry's work not just to understand Malagasy concepts, but to bounce off them—in fact, to bounce each off the other in a kind of conceptual dialogue. The second half of the book (1985: 159–326) is specifically concerned with production, or as she puts it, "material making," as a kind of meeting point between language and pain.[41] Labor she argues is not experienced as inherently painful, as a form of oppression, unless it's divorced from a sense of agency, of making something. This is true, but the three-part division between words, making, and carrying—the latter emblematic of all sorts of other forms of support and maintenance work, classic forms of women's or menial work—seemed a useful corrective. It reminds us how much our habits of thought have, at least since the time of Marx, made the work of the craftsman or factory worker emblematic of labor in general; and how that focus itself tends to relegate most forms of real work to the shadows.

In fact, none of the Malagasy conceptions I've discussed, however apparently exotic, emerge from an entirely alien conceptual universe. This is why they have the potential to tell us something. To describe kings as children seems bizarre, but only until one really thinks about it. Heads of state in general do tend to be self-important, petulant beings, surrounded at every moment by people taking care of their physical necessities and reminding them how to act. We consider Hegel a great philosopher in part for having made a point that, for most Malagasy, seems to be a matter of simple common sense.

A Plea for Dialogic Relativism

One could even argue that comparisons like this have always been what anthropology is really all about. Or should be: at its best, anthropology is the beginning of a conversation. It is premised on the assumption such a conversation is possible, even if it is difficult to know precisely why. Even if, in fact, when anthropologists wax theoretical, they often seem determined to deny it is possible.

Here, I can finally return to question of relativism. The reason why anthropologists are often so reluctant to make cross-cultural generalizations, it seems to me, is because, when they do look for common terms, they tend to look on precisely the wrong level.[42] They invariably look for forms of constituted authority. If looking for some sort of moral universal, they assume

this would mean principles present in all known legal systems; if they are asked to search for aesthetic universals, they look for any quality that might be seen as present in every object formally recognized as "art" (or whatever they decide is the closest local equivalent). The inevitable conclusion, then, is that such universals do not exist.[43] What I am suggesting instead is that it would be better in such cases to look at common ways of arguing about morality, or common ways of thinking and talking about aesthetic pleasure, which seem far more similar cross-culturally than any particular conclusions that such conversations may come to (let alone conclusions that are then given some kind of authoritative stamp). This would be the way to try to get a sense of the common underlying tendencies and capacities—the generative mechanisms if you will. These become easiest to see, perhaps, precisely when someone is challenging what is locally considered received authority or received wisdom.

My main point here is perfectly obvious, even if it is a point to which classical relativists have seemed oddly blind. Questions of cultural difference only become relevant when there's already some sort of conversation going on. There is no reason to ask oneself how and whether one is to sit in judgment on another person's cultural universe unless you have some idea what that universe is; and that means people are, to some degree at least, already communicating.

The fact that people are communicating, in turn, presumes two things. First of all it presumes that there is some ground of similarity between them that makes communication possible. All human languages, for example, seem to have the equivalent of nouns and verbs, subjects and objects, and so on. This is why any Quechua-speaker is capable, if she really puts her mind to it, of learning Swedish and any Swedish-speaker can learn Quechua, but no one, even experts armed with powerful computers, have figured out how to communicate with dolphins or killer whales. This is why some (e.g., Sperber 1985) have remarked that anthropology, in embracing extreme forms of relativism—i.e., trying to deny that all human languages really do have meaningful common features—sometimes seems as if it wishes to deny the possibility of its own existence.

The second point is that the conversation has to take place within some larger social and political context, that this context is not simply a product of the conversation, but, rather, plays a substantial role in shaping what people feel they have to talk about. Cultural relativism in the form we're most familiar—what I've been calling "classical relativism"—took shape within a very particular political context. Its heyday was the mid-twentieth century, a time when anthropology was considered politically relevant largely insofar as it could contribute to describing structures of legitimate authority within

Indian reservations, colonial systems of indirect rule, or newly independent nations within an inter-state system still firmly controlled by the former colonial powers. In other words it was all about helping bureaucrats identify legitimate authorities. "Just talk to the chief," one old teacher of mine reports he was told by his advisor in the 1950s, "he's the only one who really knows anything anyway." It is not surprising, then, that it took the form that it did: even if it was a form that, if taken to its logical extreme, could only lead to a logic of apartheid.

Things have changed, but they probably haven't changed as much as we like to think. An anthropologist in 1925, consulting with the British government to help clarify tribal divisions in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, was not doing anything so very different from an anthropologist today, consulting with the United Nations or the World Bank to determine which Nepali ethnic groups should be granted "indigenous" status. Both face very similar moral conundrums. There is no reason to believe this will entirely change any time soon. As long as there are powerful international bureaucracies, they will be asking anthropologists to help them identify who to recognize as legitimate local authorities, at least in those areas they find the most marginal and confusing, Still, there were always other conversations going on and, today, it is at least possible to suggest that these are no longer the most important ones. Increases in mobility and indications of the possible beginning of a major breakdown of traditional power relations (East-West, North-South) make it possible to conceive an anthropology that would be, first and foremost, a mutual conversation—between everyone, equally—about the nature of authority itself.[44] If anthropology is to emerge as a political force of liberation, rather than simply damage control, this is what it must, ultimately, become.

This is not to argue that all forms of authority are illegitimate. If that were so, there would be nothing to discuss. By the same token, neither would such a broader conversation mean a general effacing of boundaries and eradication of difference. Mutual relations—even the most intimate—always involve the recognition of boundaries and acknowledgement of difference: this is, for example, what we are generally referring to when we speak of "dignity" or "respect." Far from suggesting we abandon relativism, then, I am saying that we need to expand our notion of what relativism is, to see it as an aspect of any fundamentally healthy human relationship, whether individual or collective, whether distant or close. At its most minimal, the practice of relativism is just a matter of mutual respect.

One might refer to this as "dialogic relativism"—a mutual recognition of, and respect for, difference founded on the recognition of an even more fundamental similarity (hence, equality) that makes such recognition pos-

sible. It could only rest on a commitment to carry on the conversation in a way that never pushes aside uncomfortable questions—such as, for instance, who gets to speak, and who has to do the heavy lifting?—but that also proceeds on the assumption that no single tradition has a monopoly on insight on such issues. If our exploration of the term "oppression" shows anything, I think, it is how rich, and how heterogeneous, the material from which we could thus patch together a shared sense of humanity really is.

Endnotes

1 Pretty much all major European languages have a term paralleling the English "to oppress." A fairly superficial examination of dictionaries, and consultations with a few fluent or native speakers, and leaving out those languages using characters or diacritics too difficult to reproduce (such as say Thai or Arabic), adds Albanian (*studjoj rëndshëm, shtyp*) Basque (*zapalketa*), Biblical Hebrew (*tahan*, lit. "to grind down, to oppress"), Chinese (*yà min*), Coptic (*tmtm, xa0x0)*, Finnish (*ahdistaa)*, Ganda (*zitoowererwa*), Gurarani (*jopy*), Hawaiian (*kaumaha, koikoi*), Hittite (*siyyaizzi, siyezzi, siyait*), Japanese *osaetsukeru, yokuatsu-sur,* Malay-Indonesian (*tekan, mameras, tindas, tindih*),Mongolian (*darulal(ta)/daruldug-a*), Nepali (*thichnu*), Nuer (*mieet*), Paiwan (*q/m/ezetj)*, Persian (*sarkoob*, lit. "head pressed down"), Quechua (*ñitiy*), Sanskrit (*avapídita*), Shona (*udzvinyiriri*), Somali (*cadaadid*), Tamil (*nerukku/nerukkam* and other constructions from the root *neri*, also Dravidian *arepuni, arepini, areyuni, arevun*, "to grind down or oppress"), Tswana (*patikèga)*, Turkish (*baski, ezmek*), Tuscarora (*turiye)*, Vietnamese (*dè nâng, su dàn áp*), and Zulu (*cindezela)*. The apparent exceptions are interesting in themselves: Native North American and Australian languages, for example, do not seem generally to have terms glossed "oppression" of any sort. Nor do most spoken by traditionally stateless peoples. African languages are a mix: in Africa words translated "oppression" in dictionaries appear about equally likely to come from terms for injustice or humiliation than "pressure downwards."

2 I am, of course, hardly the first to discuss these dilemmas. For some analogous reflections from a feminist perspective, see Hodgson 1999, and Jackson 1995. Others have made similar points regarding postmodern forms of relativism: so, Maschia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen (1989: 27) cite Nancy Cott's remark that a feminist approach, motivated by a political project to oppose the oppression of women, is difficult to maintain if one deconstructs the very category of "oppression"—or even "women."

3 This also raises the perhaps even more thorny problem of who "we" are, but I will leave this to be addressed, at least briefly, in the essay "There Never Was a West," below.

4 It follows that it might be possible to argue the Nuer lack any equivalent to our institutions of religion or the family, but it would not be possible to say they lack any institutional conception of authority, because otherwise, "the Nuer" would not exist.

5 I note the role of gender in all this is ambiguous: while, as I say, in most matters of seniority between siblings, gender should not really weigh in at all, in reality it almost always does. In this case, elder sisters may well have their younger brothers carry things for them, but in formal occasions at least they would be unlikely to speak for them, at least unless they happened to be very good speakers, or very assertive, and no senior male were available.

6 It's a term, then, that could be used either for sending someone to be one's spokesman, or to send someone to carry one's things. In the nineteenth century, for instance, royal representatives were always referred to as the King's *iraka*, here meaning "spokesmen," who carried their words. Sometimes these were literally messengers, but the same term was used for those delegated to make decisions in the King's name.

It was also the only real way in the language of the time in which people freely talked about relations of command, of ordering people around. The word *baiko*, which literally means "command," existed at the time but mainly referred to military commands; since the latter were largely given in foreign languages, it meant "foreign words" by extension.

7 As if to underline the point, Sibree continues the above-quoted passage by adding: "There is a great respect paid to seniority among the Malagasy; so that if two slaves who are brothers are going on a journey, any burden must be carried by the younger one, so far at least as his strength will allow" (ibid., 183). The obvious assumption is that, if two brothers who are *not* slaves go on a journey, there would be no question of either having to carry anything.

8 An umbrella: an imported luxury, identified with Western styles of comportment, is the only exception.

9 The notion of "emblematic labor" might be compared to Barth's idea of ethnic "diacritics" (1969), where one or two apparently minor features can become the reference to distinguish otherwise overlapping or similar social groups. The situation in eighteenth-century Imerina rather recalls Hocart's definition of caste (1968, 1970: 102–127; Quigley 1993), where each caste's nature is determined by the labor they do for the king. The Merina system is sometimes described in fact as a "caste" system (see Bloch 1977).

10 One group of former *andriana*, of somewhat ambiguous status, did have the special privilege of providing one silk shroud on such occasions. Another group of similar ambiguous status had the privilege of actually "carrying" the royal body to be placed in the tomb—the most exalted form of carrying, but still one not

relegated to a group considered royal kin. These are the closest one has to exceptions.

11 Oral traditions I gathered around Arivonimamo insisted the Andrianamboninolona, the *andriana* order ranked immediately above them, were famous as blacksmiths.

12 One might hazard the following formulation: the production of objects and words are the domain of *andriana*; carrying and construction that of the hova; to the *Mainty Enin-Dreny,* in their capacity as royal warriors, is relegated the sphere of destruction.

13 Sources sometimes substitute "digging red earth" (*mihady tanimena*), in an obvious allusion to the task of "digging red earth" for royal tombs, mentioned above.

14 This follows the same order as the list given by Standing (1887: 358), though I left out Standing's fifth category (building and maintaining roads and bridges) since it does not appear in any Malagasy-language account. For evocations of the standard list in nineteenth-century legal cases, see National Archives IIICC 365 f3: 111–112; IIICC37 f2 (Ambohitrimanjaka 1893). For standard lists of exemptions in the *Tantara ny Andriana*, a collection of Malagasy histories, see Callet 1908: 411 (Andriamamilaza), and 545 (Antehiroka). See also, entries in the *Firaketana* (an early twentieth-century Malagasy encyclopedia— Ravelojaona, Randzavola, Rajaona 1937) for Ambohibato, Ambohimalaza, Ambohimirimo, Andriana, and Antsahadinta.

15 They were referred to in royal documents as *alinjinera*, or "engineers."

16 Traditionally these things are gendered: women carry objects on the head or hips; men on the back or shoulders.

17 In fact, as I have argued at length elsewhere (Graeber 1995), these ceremonies ultimately have the effect of infantilizing the ancestors and treating them, in turn, like small children. I should also note that my discussion of mutual obligations of "carrying" owe most of their insight to discussions of the subject with Jennifer Cole, whose work with the Betsimisaraka people of Ambodiharina brought out these issues much more clearly than my own.

18 Lambek's book *The Weight of the Past* (2002) contains a detailed analysis of parallel idioms in a rather different social and political context among the Sakalava of Madagascar's west coast.

19 Not that the more familiar sort of symbolism was entirely absent (see Bloch 1986). A common expression was "the king is father to the people but the people are both father and mother to the king."

20 Domenichini argues that such groups had a *ziva* or "joking relation" with the crown. See Hebert 1958.

21 In the royal case, even baggage being carried for the Queen in a sense participated in the Queen's presence or anyway esteem. Royal carriers, even those carrying jars of water to the palace, were proceeded by a man bearing a spear warning all on the

roads before it to make way, step to the side, and remove their hats as a gesture of respect just as they would if the Queen herself were passing.

22 Literally they did not "remember themselves" (*tsy mahatsiaro tena*).

23 This was true whether one was "carried" by dead kings, evil ghosts, or the power of one's own magic—as were many women who became possessed by their love magic and ended up running around as witches during the night. Generally speaking, the term *tsindriana* was applied to forces that were essentially benevolent or at least neutral in nature; *entina* was used almost exclusively for forces that were intrinsically dangerous or malevolent in nature

The reluctance to speak of being "carried" by, say, ancestors or royal spirits seems to derive from a feeling (which I have described at length elsewhere) that to entirely efface or overwhelm the agency of another person, to replace it with one's own, is a morally dubious way of exercising power.

24 R: Dia avy hatrany, dia marary andoha tampoka ilay olona, dia very saina avy eo izy. Dia miteniteny foana, toa sahala amin'ny misy olona faharoa ao aminy.

Ka misy zavatra mampahatahotra ny marary. Voa manakenda azy. Voa mampijaly azy. Sahala amin'ny miady ambiby masiaka iray izy, sahala amin'ny bibilava iray. Arakaraky ny fiseho ilay fanahy ratsy, izay atao hoe, olona faharoa ao aminy.

C: Hitan'ny maso ve izany?

R: Hitan'ny masony izany. Hitan'ilay olona. Nohitany ilay bibilava. Niady amin'ireo heny, izay manimba azy, manakenda azy.

25 R: Tsy ny tompon'ny tena intsony ilay olona voalohany, fa ny olona faharoa no manjaka.

DG: Fa ny olona faharoa dia...

R: Io no adaladala, io no miteniteny foana, io no mandrovitra akanjo...

DG: Fa tena misy olona faharoa sa misy, misy...

R: Fanahy ratsy.

DG: Fanahin'ny olona maty ve?

R: Fanahin'ny maty io, ka mampahatahotra azy. Miseho toy bibilava, miseho toy olona masiaka, miseho toy ny angatra...

C: Izay no mampatanjaka azy io?

R: Izay no mampatanjaka azy io—fa ankizivavy iray voan'ny Ambalavelona no manana ny herin'ny lehilahy dimy. Manana hery manokana.

26 There is surprisingly little written about Zanadrano in the contemporary ethnographic literature on the highlands: nothing really in English, very little in French, and that largely about shrines and pilgrimage sites rather than ordinary curing practice: e.g., Cabanes 1972; Radimilahy, Andriamampianina, Blanchy, Rakotoarisoa & Razafimahazo 2006.

27 Often there is a whole network of *ody* to be dealt with: the "mother ody" may be buried in the fields or yard, with various "children" planted around the house itself.

And, often, also *sisika*—little bits of wood, bone, tooth, or what-have-you—buried in the patient herself, underneath the skin.

28 One medium for instance would pray, gazing into a mirror placed beside a book and candle in his cabinet, waiting for the spirit to come over him. His wife explained that, as he stared, the face of the *andriana* would gradually replace his own. When his own features had been entirely effaced, he would be entirely possessed (tsindriana) and begin to speak. Similarly, in ambalavelona, victims often were terrified of mirrors, seeing monsters and snakes in them instead of their own image.

Several mediums were eager to hear my tape-recordings of their sessions, claiming they had never had an opportunity to hear what their spirits sounded like.

29 Actually "holy" is not a very good translation for *masina* in most contexts but it will serve for present purposes. For the distinction of masina and mahery, see Bloch 1986a.

30 Often, too, there is a final ceremony called the *famoizina* or *faditra*, in which some object representing the condition is finally cast away or buried, so that it cannot return.

31 Actually, mediums tend to be reluctant to actually apply the term *entina*, "carried," to any basically benevolent spirit; but the description is otherwise the same.

32 And this is rather unlike better known forms of possession practiced elsewhere in Madagascar, such as tromba.

33 And are in fact seen as such by the descendants of their former owners: see Graeber 2007.

34 At least in public. Of course Raombana, the Queen's personal secretary, expressed nothing but hatred for her in his elaborate history from which the earlier quote about the Ranavalona's pleasure expeditions was actually taken. But his history was written in English so no one at court could read it. So it's not as if such a position was unimaginable.

35 Though here it is useful to consult Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1992) on how often the cult of the king and denunciation of "evil councilors" is simply the most obvious practical strategy for peasant farmers to take, and may bear no real relation to what people were likely to say to, for instance, their drinking friends.

36 Even at the birth of twins, it must be noted who emerged from the womb first to establish who is *zoky* and who is *zandry*. For there not to be rank between siblings is inconceivable.

37 Larson not only finds no evidence for a "hidden transcript" that flat out rejected the basic terms of royal ideology (2000: 256–57), he insists no such hidden transcript existed. With all due respect for Larson's exemplary scholarship, I don't understand on what basis anyone could claim to know for certain what Malagasy peasants were *not* saying behind closed doors.

38 There is a similar egalitarian message in mortuary ritual. At famadihana, everyone is supposed to dress equally modestly, and if possible, more or less the same. Distinctions are to be effaced in order to emhasize equality in common descent. Duing the nineteenth century mortuary ritual focused on the collective dragging of granite stones, much like the dragging of trees for royal houses, to construct tombs.

39 One must bear in mind that, during most of this period, the Queen was in fact a figurehead.

40 For a somewhat analogous argument, see Bloch's excellent "Hierarchy and Equality in Merina Kinship" (1986b).

41 Or to be more accurate, between pain and the imagination. Pain, she argues, is sensation without an object; imagination, object without sensation.

42 Or really, to own up to doing so. After all, no one developing a theory of ritual writes as if ritual is a phenomenon that exists only in Africa and parts of Eurasia, but not in, say, South America. Analytical terms are always universal. As anthropologists discovered in the 1970s when they began deconstructing away every familiar term from "marriage" to "religion," once you have done so, you have very little left to talk about, except perhaps some abstract theories of structures of the mind—which then turned out to be ridiculously simplistic.

43 I have been referring to "cultural relativism" in a broad sense. In fact, there are various kinds and degrees of such relativism. Mark Whitaker (1996) distinguishes three: (1) conventional cultural relativism, which holds that any human action can only be understood in its cultural context, (2) epistemological (or cognitive) relativism, which holds that different systems of knowledge are fundamentally incommensurable, and (3) ethical relativism, which insists that cross-cultural judgments are therefore impossible. Each clearly builds on the others. When I speak of "classical relativism" I am really speaking of the rather haphazard mix of the three that seems to emerge when anthropologists find themselves arguing with those they consider universalists.

44 Since scholars have a tendency to read sentences like that in strangely reductionist ways, allow me underline: I said "first and foremost" about authority. Not "only." Obviously it should be about everything else as well.

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