

Songs From Imerina

A Creative Study of the Evolving Craft of
Merina Hainteny in Madagascar

Elly Bookman

Academic Director: Roland Pritchett

Academic Advisor: Jeannine Rambeloson

SIT Madagascar: Culture and Society

Fall 2007

Introduction

I don't know much about *hainteny*. It's an elusive form to me still, for by nature it's only a foggy representation of a culture that I can never truly be a part of. And anyway, even many members of the Malagasy population are uncertain of the plethora of possible meanings behind this literature, as I was told on more than one occasion when I discussed my plans to study these mysterious verses.

Luckily, though, I do know poetry, and while *hainteny* may fall outside any Western parameters set up to define this medium, it nonetheless exists in the same way: it is a manipulation of words intended to represent a certain experience of time and place. The old creators of this Merina poetry must have known this too when they called their collections *hainteny*, loosely translated as “art of the word,” for after all, art is often little more than our attempt to manipulate life into something tangible, something we can classify more easily than the enigmas of our own human nature.¹

It didn't take me long in the course of my study to figure out that for the Malagasy this “something,” didn't reach much further than – literally – their own backyard. Nearly every example of *hainteny* that I encountered felt heavy with a unique sort of nature imagery, one that, for all its vagueness and tangles, always succeeds in transporting the reader to the vast landscape of Madagascar's highlands, also known as *Imerina*, or land of the Merina, at one time the most prominent and powerful ethnic group on the island.

It takes a good deal of digging to even get down to the first layer of meaning behind these descriptions, but by recognizing the attempts within *hainteny* to first of all describe things that are inherently human, things that any reader should be able to wrap their finger around, the meaning becomes more clear.

¹ Haring, 100.

For example, the most common form of *hainteny* is actually the love poem, which might as well be the most common form of the entire world's poetry for the infinite amount of times it has been re-created, the subject over-analyzed while remaining elusive. The unique thing about *hainteny*, however, is that it uses the imagery of animals, plants, landforms and even natural processes to describe that most intense of all human emotions, or on a literal level, the contracts and negotiations of marriage.

The scope of this craft is a powerful one. These descriptive techniques work to shine a rare light on a culture that is truly unlike any other in the world. From it, we can at least begin to understand the literal roots of the Merina. With *hainteny*, suddenly the strange idea of ancestral worship becomes something we can grasp, while the indisputable importance of the homeland seems no more than a given.

This study will attempt to show, through analysis and emulation of *hainteny*, how this rare glimpse into the rich heritage of the Merina is achieved not only in the creation of these original verses of those wise old orations, but also how it influenced the work of the most famous and respected individual writer of Madagascar, Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo. Ultimately, I have placed myself in the same position as these long-gone poets to create my own emulations of this poetry. And as I happen to be looking over the same panoramas of *Imerina*, I hope to be able to share a new understanding of the way inspiration is drawn from this majestic land, this place where mornings are full of promise while sunsets sing only of sadness and regret.

***Hainteny*: The Art of the Word**

The emergence of *hainteny* came around the same time that the Merina people of the highlands began to assert themselves as the strongest ethnic group in the central highlands, if not in all of Madagascar. They most likely originated in Indonesia, probably first making

their home in Madagascar in the fifteenth century. In fact there are numerous similarities between *hainteny* and some of the Asian poetic traditions such as those from China and Borneo.²

Yet as is commonly the case in Malagasy culture, this outside influence is only the starting point, for the people of the island have a way of making their traditions as endemic as the vast spectrum of plants and animals that also populate the island. *Hainteny* is no exception. When these verses were first performed around the end of the sixteenth century, they introduced a window into the world of this culture that was exceptionally characteristic, marked by a unique use of symbols and metaphors that remains relative even amidst the expanse of cultural collisions that we see today.³

One thing that makes *hainteny* exceptional is that it first appeared as a literary form with a function, indeed it often had a practical purpose in Merina society. As a result of this, it is essentially an authorless poetry, at one time consisting of an infinite number of verses passed on through oral recitation. Such uses included formal addresses by kings and other leaders, the marking of a special occasion like marriage or circumcisions, and most often, as a literal battle of words shot between two Merina men over anything from domestic disputes to assertion of one's manhood. "There was a real situation of interaction, a symbolic deflation of the opponent, and figurative language to accomplish the deflation," Lee Haring suggests in his look at the art form.⁴ Clearly, this real-life application was one of the key reasons behind the density of meaning that perpetuates in this poetry. Therefore, the revelations that this project has worked to achieve become all the more valuable, if only for how they give insight into the intimacy of daily life.

Even the very construction of *hainteny* lends itself to this sort of integration. Much of this poetry was simply a collection of proverbs and pre-existing wisdoms woven into slightly

² Fox, 18.

³ Haring, 147.

⁴ Haring, 113.

more lyrical verses.⁵ Obviously this is quite a leap from how Westerners picture the creation of poetry, for while Shakespeare and Spenser were somewhere writing their often personally reflective sonnets elsewhere in the world, there was never one single poet who sat down to write his feelings into the verses of *hainteny*. Still, this difference in craft setting makes them no less revealing. If anything, it causes *hainteny* to be all more of a symbol for its people as a whole, as it draws from parts of real life, which, while it may seem mundane, in fact lets us into the part of the culture that is often farthest away from an outsider's comprehension.

Along with this practical use, *hainteny* was also shaped by the period in which it emerged. In noting the first appearance of its performance, Haring suggests that “A contradictory and elusive poetry plays out a contradiction that was very real in Malagasy politics of the time: the struggle between an expanding centralized monarchy and the local chiefs whom that monarchy sought to bring under its sway.”⁶ The result then was a poetry full of paradoxes and undeniable clash, but ones that still played off of each other to express societal ideals and understandings. As we will see, such a reflection of the times happens perhaps to the extreme with the work of Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo, for as Christiane Ramarantsoa noted, the poetry of Madagascar almost always reflects its concurrent era of history.⁷

By the time the Latin alphabet was adopted to fit the Malagasy language in 1823, this struggle had become more or less eclipsed by a powerful and sovereign rule over most of Merina territory and even most of Madagascar.⁸ The famous Queen Ranaivalona II brought about the most significant recordings of *hainteny*, in order to preserve the words of the ancestors in an attempt to “hide them in writing.” Most of the recording of *hainteny*, however, was mostly done by European missionaries, and for this reason many of the more

⁵ Haring, 137.

⁶ Haring, 147.

⁷ Ramarantsoa, 11/24/07.

⁸ Fox, 20.

sexually explicit love poems were omitted and have now been lost somewhere in the grand history of the Merina. Luckily, though, just as the symbolism eludes readers today, it often eluded those original scribes as well, for there are still many sexually-themed *hainteny* that were included due to the clever metaphorical masking of their true nature.⁹

Some of the first translations were done not long after the first recordings of *hainteny*, first by a Norwegian named Lars Dahle, who famously collected folklore and poems from throughout the region. Jean Paulhan, who himself became an expert performer of *hainteny* over the course of his collection and study of the art form, published his collection of French translations in 1913 and was one of the first Europeans to recognize the poetic nature of *hainteny*, translating them in verse form while his predecessors, Dahle among them, did so in prose.¹⁰

This struggle for poetic credibility is not unique to these early translators, however. Indeed, *hainteny* has long fought against Western scrutiny to assert itself as true poetry. Haring notes that even some Merina agree that its unique way of penetrating daily life makes it impossible to actually be poetry, but he ultimately asserts that “Despite these views, their reliance on meter and their performance as song classify them as poems.”¹¹

In all that has changed in Madagascar since *hainteny* first appeared, there are many things that have remained constant. The landscape of *Imerina* for example, for all the brushfires and bloodshed it has seen, still feels ancient somehow, like the red of the dirt is in fact some kind of rust that comes back with every rainy season, each time providing the perfect foothold for those of us trying to get a glimpse at the inferences of these poetic creations.

⁹ Haring, 106.

¹⁰ Haring, 106-107.

¹¹ Haring, 102.

Hainteny is today most often seen in collections that distinguish between several different poetic themes, the most common of which is love. Within these sections there are also smaller divisions, together constituting a poetry that covers all of the bases the tumultuous road of human relationships. Professor Beby Rajaonesy pointed out that on a practical level, these poems were used as contracts for marriage, and in fact they are often still recited at wedding ceremonies today.¹² For the purpose of this study, we will focus on these poems that reflect this always-intriguing part of human behavior.

Even as they exist individually, however, *hainteny* seems to follow a kind of formula, to work by some sort of code that needs cracking. There is rarely more than one explicit or literal statement in each of these pocket-sized poems, and even the meaning of these thoughts morphs within the context of the rest of the densely figurative language. Therefore, at first glance the poems can seem nearly impossible to comprehend. Take for example this poem, translated from Malagasy by the American Leonard Fox and incorporated into his collection as part of the “Consent and Union” section:

When I saw her from a distance, she was tiny;
When I drew near, she was large;
When I spoke to her, she was wise.
Perplexity fills me to the brim:
I love her and her father has consented.¹³

Perplexity indeed. Here we have a set of five lines that upon first reading seem to have nothing to do with each other, yet our instinct tells us there has to be something coherent that ties them together. The only clue we get is that apparently the speaker is talking about “Consent and Union,” but the imagery is just describing a guy walking toward a woman while she gets bigger and bigger and then all of a sudden he’s confused about her father.

¹² Rajaonesy, 11/12/07.

¹³ Fox, 127-128.

You have to crack the code; but it's not as difficult as it seems. The problem is that most Western poetry begins with a small thought and extends into a bigger one, which causes us to always expect some kind of progression from beginning to end. While such a growth does sometimes happen in *hainteny*, it is never the only direction of meaning. Indeed, the path to interpreting *hainteny* is often a genuine maze, so that to find the theme of one of these poems one has to look at each image individually, regardless of its placement in the poem and only in relation to the ones before or after it. It's no wonder the recitation of these poems was once a battle of wits.

This poem in particular requires us to start at the end, for the last line is one of the only ones in which the speaker's experience and intentions are clearly defined. We learn that he loves this woman, and that now with her father's "consent" we assume they are to be married.

Armed with this concession, the opening description can begin take on new meaning, since at least we know that this woman is the object of the speaker's affection. At this point, however, we have to again take a step inside the unique context of this literature to appreciate the way the image works. By acknowledging a certain similarity between the perception of the woman and the way things might be perceived in nature, we can see how the two worlds play off of each other.

Here, it also becomes necessary to have some awareness of the unique landscape of *Imerina*. If the reader is able to picture the vast plateaus and valleys that stretch endlessly under the huge, pale sky of the highlands, they could also picture this woman standing stagnantly on the horizon in the distance, growing larger as the speaker approaches just like a fixed landform on the horizon, like a mountain at the end of a grand pilgrimage. The mutual understanding of an image between the creator and the reader is often one of the most difficult hurdles in poetic craft, one that only grows with the cultural boundaries within this study. If we can get to that point of congruency, however, the pay off is all the more valuable. In this

case, the necessary common experience would be a familiarity with *Imerina*, which allows us to grasp how the metaphors in all of these poems blur the lines between humanity and nature.

Rajaonesy helped add some final pieces of the puzzle. In describing the inferences of this image, Rajaonesy suggested that the way the woman is seen as “tiny” from a distance yet “large” when approached nearby suggests that the speaker is in fact learning more about her as he gets closer, which is in itself a progression, but again one that only makes complete sense within the reverse progression of the poem itself.¹⁴

With only this minor analysis we can begin to see the effects of the constantly interwoven verses of *hainteny*. In later summarizing the cultural expression of *hainteny*, Rajaonesy explained that while these may be love poems, the love they express is first and foremost for the land, and it is through this relationship that the human element is expressed. It’s a constant give-and-take, in other words, between the earth and its people, to the point where eventually, there seems to be no division at all.¹⁵

The exchange happens especially often with personification. Whether it’s a direct impression of human characteristics on plants or animals or simply the voice of a hillside being projected across a valley, one always gets the sense that the world of *Imerina* has come alive inside the rhythm of these lines. One of the most interesting uses of this happens in number 22 of Fox’s translations. While this poem is first of all significant because it is one of the few to feature a direct, explicit metaphor, it also manages, within just its first four lines, to assign human emotion to nature, creating a very powerful kind of comparison. It comes from Fox’s section on “Desire, Hesitation and Declaration”:

Destiny is a chameleon at the top of a tree:
A child simply whistles and it changes color.
-The lake did not want to create mud,
But if the water is stirred, it appears.¹⁶

¹⁴ Rajaonesy, 11/12/07.

¹⁵ Rajaonesy, 11/12/07.

¹⁶ Fox, 99.

As previously stated, the opening of this poem directly equates destiny with the chameleon, setting up a kind of familiar symbol that is then supported with the next line of the poem, which essentially explains the inability to predict or control both nature and the chameleon. This technique of essentially putting the two representatives of both humans and nature on the same level, the same playing field, really, is especially characteristic of the metaphors within *hainteny*, and can be seen throughout any collection of these verses.

The next two lines continue to support the opening assertion, but with a slightly different approach. First, the lake is described as not wanting to create mud, suddenly giving this natural landform a personality, indeed a preference, just like a human being would have. That this preference is tested by the inevitable laws of nature, of really life in general, gives further credibility to the argument that destiny is completely unpredictable and uncontrollable.

The fact that there is an implied switch in speaker completes the idea of one argument supporting the other; one can almost picture two performers throwing their two cents back and forth. The end of the poem promises more of the same:

There are many trees,
 But it is the sugar cane that is sweet.
There are many grasshoppers,
 But it is the *ambolo* that has beautiful colors.
There are many people,
 But it is in you that my spirit reposes.¹⁷

This ending is essentially a continuation of the second speaker's supportive argument. It gives more contexts in which to place the thematic ideas of desire, hesitation and declaration that are expressed in the poem as a whole. In the way that the final couplet follows the same pattern of "There are many... but it is..." once again describes the human element within the same terms as the trees and the grasshoppers, as if each of them was no

¹⁷ Fox, 99.

more relative than the others, as if they all reflect this destiny of love. The description of the “repose” of the “spirit” in the beloved is the declaration, the announcement of affection that so often jump-starts what Fox qualifies as “the course of love” that runs throughout *hainteny*.

The next theme along this “course” is that of “Consent and Union,” and also provides another example of how elements of nature are personified to once again express the love of the beloved and ultimately, of the homeland. This time, however, the metaphor is not nearly as explicit. In fact, it becomes obscured even further by the use of proper names to describe the beloved. Unfortunately, the characteristic power of this descriptive technique is partly lost in translation, but nonetheless works to create a very fine and even vague line between the human and animal world, as if the two were one to begin with. Here is Fox’s translation number 58:

You hills there in the west,
Lower yourselves, level yourselves,
That I may gaze on Red-coral from a distance.
If we are corals, let us be strung together;
If we are lead, let us be melted together.
Then Red-coral said:
“If you cherish me, I cherish you.”¹⁸

As we can see, personification is at work from the outset when the speaker directly addresses the “hills there in the west.” Use of cardinal directions is in fact quite common in *hainteny*. It’s even used by the Malagasy in every day life, as directions are more often given using either north, south, east or west than left or right. Each of the cardinal directions even has a certain connotation to it, which we must assume is implied in this poetry. West is the more neutral direction, however, usually tied to every-day life.¹⁹

After the request is made of these hills in the first couplet, the second one introduces us to the use of proper names with “Red-coral.” In Malagasy culture as well as within the

¹⁸ Fox, 127.

¹⁹ Fox, 25.

poetry of the Merina, it's typical for first names to mean something literal, so while it may seem like blatant symbolism in this translation, the effect should be much more subtle: it speaks of this beloved without saying explicitly whether she is simply *like* red coral or even by stating in a straightforward metaphor that she *is* red coral. Again, the lines are blurred.

The expression of union comes next with the image of corals being strung together, then of lead being melted together. Coral is an especially important symbol, as Jeannine Rambeloson pointed out, because it was once used as currency in Merina society, so therefore it was something especially valuable. Rambeloson even ventured to say that it represents “beauty and temptation,” because of this connotation.²⁰ The fact that it is described as being “strung together” therefore suggests that this relationship is being culminated, as well as that it is a very valuable one. In this simple image of a necklace, we see yet another example of the way that parts of everyday interactions, in this case currency, can be made into powerful and often beautiful metaphor in order to express the vague emotions of relationships with something more familiar.

The poem ends with a new voice, that of the ambiguous “Red-coral” expressing the reciprocation that defines the union. This would be the one literal statement in this verse, meaning that once again *hainteny* has made a bit of a tangle of everything, but just as humans and corals can exchange names and emotions, so do the lines of the poems accomplish a give-and-take along its windy path.

In the same way that proper names of people can express unique and characteristic symbols of Merina culture, so too can the names of places. They are in fact abundant in *hainteny*, placing further limits on the outsider's ability to grasp the meaning, but all the more powerful in expressing a familiar appreciation for the land. In a popular, more general

²⁰ Rambeloson, 11/13/07.

example of *hainteny*, Fox's number 451, we see this happening multiple times in the context of a poem that expresses some of the central parts of Merina belief and practices:

Distant thunder rolls over Ankaratra,
Orchids bloom at Anjafy.
The little-blue-bird cries,
He-who-does-not-fear-requital laughs.
If it is a requital of death, may it not come,
But if it is a requital of love, may it come.²¹

Ankaratra, it turns out, is a mountain in the southwest part of *Imerina* that often shows up in the verbal art in Madagascar. In Fox's translation of Bakoly Dominichi-Ramiaramanana's commentary on this very same poem, we get a glimpse as to its meaning:

"It is a solitary mountain—frequently covered with a veil of mist—which, even in sunlight, always appears to be weeping, because of the glistening of water that springs from its rocks. On the other hand, it is a majestic mountain, the adobe of spirits and gods and the kingdom of legendary princes, a cold desert that is somewhat frightening for men. There are a number of myths involving frustrated love connected with this mountain... In other words, it is linked to themes of solitude, separation, mourning and nostalgic sadness."²²

Once again it becomes clear that there is practically an overflow of possible meaning behind the mention of this mountain. The remarkable part, though, is that this landform in particular is known to many Malagasy and that it almost always brings up ideas of sadness and regret; both Rajaonesy and Rabeloson instantly equated it as such.^{23/24} That a mountain could inspire such consistent human emotions speaks volumes to the emotional investment in the landscape of *Imerina*.

The meaning behind the mention of Anjafy is unfortunately not quite as evident. In fact, Dominichi-Ramiaramanana notes that there may be a great deal of historical allusion

²¹ Fox, 399.

²² Fox, 44-45.

²³ Rajaonesy, 11/12/07.

²⁴ Rabeloson, 11/13/07.

attached to it, so at the very least it doesn't imply the same uniformed reaction as the image of Ankaratra does.²⁵ Still though, the image of "orchids blooming" does enough on its own, as it prompted Rajaonesy to assume that the poem is set at a time of changing seasons, when at the end of the dry season the first rainstorms come, bringing the first spring flowers to bloom.

The use of the specific place name, then, to some extent seems to simply play off of this observation of the habitual change of seasons in recognition of something especially familiar, even comforting. For the Merina, it is the description of what happens every year throughout their highland home, essentially an appreciation of the things you can always count on.

The poem continues again with the use of proper names. "Little-blue-bird," in fact alludes to a well-known Merina folktale, which perhaps explains why Rajaonesy first got the impression that this bird was crying in need of comfort and protection from a mother or lover, since this is the case in the old story.²⁶ In fact, this image is used over and over again in *hainteny*, making it an apparently foolproof allusion.

After this assertion, however, we are introduced to a new and especially intriguing part of the poem and in fact of Merina culture as a whole. Unfortunately, the translation to the word "requital" doesn't quite express this, for the actual term is *tody*, and it is one specific to the Merina culture used to describe its basic equivalent of karma, or an unseen force of balance and retribution in human life. In the original Malagasy version of this poem, *tody* is actually embedded within the name of this "he-who-does-not-fear-requital," which enables it to internalize its meaning more than in the English version.

In any case, the idea of *tody* is expressed completely at the end of the poem as the speaker explains that the consequences of love are desirable while those of death are not. Such a statement isn't far from the understanding of any human being; the connotations of

²⁵ Fox, 45.

²⁶ Rajaonesy, 11/12/07.

love and death are practically universal. So once again, it's instead the way that *hainteny* manages to augment the meaning of this with the other images in the poem, the ones that describe the equally inevitable forces of nature as if that roll of thunder and those blooming orchids were themselves death and love, that makes this expression unique. The human emotions are described right alongside the scenery, right alongside the familiar places of Ankaratra and Anjafy that can still be found on a map of *Imerina*.

This timelessness of the land is only one of many reasons why it is so persistently symbolic in *hain-teny*. Christiane Ramarantsoa, in asserting the presence of this metaphorical technique throughout Malagasy poetry, cites that the majority of Malagasy believe that the earth is as much a part of life as the human being is, essentially that the two elements constantly intermingle just like the lines of *hainteny*.²⁷

More than anything, though, one has to recognize the importance of “the earth of the ancestors,” as it persists still in Merina culture today. Malala Rasoanavalona, a young businesswoman in Antananarivo, explained first that for her culture, the idea of one’s “country” isn’t really defined by borders or governments or anything like a national anthem, rather that it denotes the place of origin, the place of one’s family and its history.

“My mother knows, and I know, that when we die our bodies have to go into the family tomb. Even if I die in America, my body would have to come back here. My grandparents are there, my father’s there, and I’ll be there, too,” she said with conviction.²⁸

This idea of the afterlife beginning in this very physical setting, the same one that inspired the images of *hainteny*, helps to explain the constant exchange between the emotional and the physical world, for it perpetuates even in death. One common Malagasy belief is that when a person dies and their body is buried in their place of origin, the spirit embarks on a

²⁷ Ramarantsoa, 11/24/07.

²⁸ Rasoanavalona, 11/25/07.

voyage around the world but always returns to the start of it all to spend the rest of eternity among their children and their children's children.

With the sun still rising and setting across the same plateaus where these spirits remain while their descendants go on living, following their own "courses of love," it's no wonder that the power of *hainteny* seems no less likely to fade. Mingled with this intense belief in the constant presence of past lives is the kind of appreciation for home that any human being can relate to. Yet there is also a strangeness that's a bit harder to grasp, something to do with the way this countryside is utterly incomparable: everywhere looks a little bit familiar, like somewhere you've been before, but with intriguingly unforgettable exceptions. A simple glance out the window seems to offer immeasurable possibilities and unmatched inspiration as it undoubtedly did to lead to the first utterances of *hainteny*, and as it continued to from then on, as we will see in the work of Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo, perhaps the only poet whose iconic status equals that of *hainteny* in how it represents his own experience of Madagascar, and of course, that of those who came before him.

Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo: The Modern *Mpikabary*

For the Malagasy, *Mpikabary* is an especially prestigious title. The word means "man of words" and refers to one who has a firm grasp of the verbal arts, whether it's in oral traditions or in the written form.²⁹ Those who mastered the recitation of *hainteny* during the height of Merina rule and even in the years that followed undoubtedly carried this distinguished ranking, but in the years since it has come to have different meanings.

Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo was born in 1901, not even five years after the French first officially colonized Madagascar, the product of a tumultuous time in the history of the island. He was the son of a woman named Rabozivelo, who came from the royal Merina family of

²⁹ Haring, 28.

Zanadralambo, but who in the wake of colonization was essentially poverty-stricken. He never knew his father. He attended school in the French colonial system until he was 14, at which point he officially took his education into his own hands, having developed an intense fervor for books and consequently devouring any that he could gain access to. He said himself that he was “poisoned” by what he could learn from literature. His first love was Baudelaire, the French poet whose influence was never far from Rabearivelo’s own work even until his last breaths, which he spent scribbling farewells to his family and to his Baudelaire books after drinking cyanide at the age of 36.³⁰

Rabearivelo’s intense malcontent that eventually led to his suicide is often the subject of much debate by historians and citizens alike. Many say that the death of his favorite daughter, Voahangy, in 1933, triggered his slide into depression, while others note his constant struggle for recognition by the French whose literature he so endlessly adored, culminating in the denial of his request to travel to France for an exposition in 1936. In any case, his was a story marked by internal conflict and grief that will never be fully understood.

Even more than the uncertain roots of his turmoil, however, is the constant question of Rabearivelo’s identity. Some people, like Rajaonesy, simplify his struggle by saying only “He wanted to be a *vazaha*,” or foreigner, for all his emulations of French Romanticism and its contemporaries.³¹ Rambeloson described him as being like a tree, with his roots in the earth of Madagascar while his head was up in the sky, with a clear view of the possibilities of the world and yet no way to reach them. Her assessment was that Rabearivelo’s greatest difficulty arose with his fight for respect from the Western world, for he was certainly aware of his talents and his aptitude at French yet experienced constant dismissal from that world simply because of his Malagasy heritage.³²

³⁰ Riffard, 11/21/07.

³¹ Rajaonesy, 11/12/07.

³² Rambeloson, 11/13/07.

Perhaps this has something to do with why, as his brief career progressed, Rabearivelo became more and more a child of Madagascar, indeed a true *mpikabary* meant to chronicle the trying times of the first part of the colonial era when the French had adopted a system of “repression and assimilation.”³³ Haring in fact noted that “Any *mpikabary* would give his discourse more authority by quoting, adapting and alluding to traditional lines.”³⁴ In this spirit, Rabearivelo fell more and more under the same influences as the creators of *hainteny*, the influences of his culture and of the land itself. His constant readings included samples of *hainteny*, which he collected over 600 of before making his own attempt at transposing them in his own style in a work entitled *Vielles Chansons des Pays d’Imerina*, or *Old Imerina Songs*, which was published after his death in 1939.

Before this posthumous collection, however, came two of his most recognized works, *Presque-Songes* and *Traduit de la Nuit*, or *Near-Dreams* and *Translations from the Night*, published in 1934 and 1935 respectively. Both are heavily decorated with western influences, their images and metaphors expanding in a linear progression that is quite far from the complex formula of *hainteny*.

Nevertheless, the reader inevitably finds himself once again transported to the wide open countryside of the island’s central highlands, trapped perhaps, within the lines of a poet whose style echoes that of Rousseau and Baudelaire, but whose descriptions once again keep the feet solidly planted in the red earth of Madagascar. Most remarkably, Rabearivelo took the time to write the poems of these works in both French and Malagasy, pushing both languages to their limit and finally challenging the old proverb, “to translate is to betray.” The introduction of the 1960 edition that presented both works together in both languages, notes that in these two collections Rabearivelo seems to have recovered the original instinct and rhythm, the accent that penetrates his race and the melody, the color and the perfume of the

³³ Riffard, 11/21/07.

³⁴ Haring, 28.

highlands of Madagascar.³⁵ Fox summarizes by saying that “His finest work, issued in the two volumes, *Presque-Songes* and *Traduit de la Nuit*, does not attempt to reproduce the style of *hainteny* in French; rather it expresses the poet’s assimilation of that genre and its spirit, which he casts in a new and entirely personal form.”³⁶

The first work, *Presque-Songes* is the slightly lighter and more comprehensible of the two. The titles alone of these collections indicate the progression between them as well as in the life of Rabearivelo, as he travels from something that is “near dreams” to something that is literally a “translation from the night.” Rabemananjara, a contemporary and friend to Rabearivelo, differentiated between the two by equating *Presque-Songes* to a mirror that reflects the mystery of the highlands in its descriptions of its people and scenery, one that internalizes the majesty of the outside world, while *Traduit de la Nuit* is more of a reflection of the poet’s personality with how it instead externalizes Rabearivelo’s inner thoughts and impresses them upon that same landscape. Either way, we get another unique representation of a place that, apparently, runs in the blood of all who know it well enough.

Presque-Songes presents us with our first example of this. *Le Poeme*, from the early part of the collection, demonstrates in its first stanza not only a unique use of nature imagery, but also comments on the need to express the continuous influence of the “tongue” of the dead:

Words for song, you say, words for song,
o tongue of my dead,
words for song, to designate
the ideas conceived by the spirit long ago
and which are born at last and grow with words for swaddling clothes—
words still heavy with the imprecision of the alphabet,
and which cannot yet dance with vocabulary,
not yet being as supple as ordered phrases,
but which already dance on the lips
like a swarm of blue dragonflies on the shore of a river
greeting the evening.³⁷

³⁵ Rabemananjara, 11.

³⁶ Fox, 71.

³⁷ Fox, 72.

From the outset we can see quite a stylistic difference between this poem and those timeless lines of *hainteny*, if only for the sincere musicality of the repetition and the lyrical line “o tongue of my dead.” Still, this address is relative in other ways, for it suggests that the speaker has truly possessed this idea of ancestry, in fact that he has internalized it as his own in the same way that Rabemananjara first hinted toward when he categorized *Presque-Songes*.³⁸

In fact, as the lines continue we get more of this sense of reverence for the raw beginning of things, along with a desire to “designate the ideas conceived by the spirit long ago.” This is followed by a personification not of nature but of these “words” themselves, as if they were still young and lacked the maturity of music that could accurately convey these ideas. The lines almost wander into the territory of an *Ars Poetica*³⁹ with how they firmly express the need for language to take on this role, a need which any poet must know all too well.

With the final lines of this stanza, the inevitable presence of the earth reveals itself with the beautiful image of these words dancing on the lips “like a swarm of blue dragonflies.” In this scene, the “words” are completely brought to life as we are able to see them fluttering through the countryside like those buzzing creatures that are so familiar to *Imerina*. The final thought of “the river greeting the evening” personifies this body of water that often runs so tranquilly and as a source of life near the tiny Merina villages that are scattered in the region, giving it a humanity just as *hainteny* would.

As a whole, this poem allows us to show the general differences and similarities between the use of metaphor in *hainteny* and in the work of Rabearivelo. *Hainteny* often equates humanity with nature by placing them right up against each other both literally within the poem and figuratively in the imagery. Rabearivelo, however, spreads his metaphors a

³⁸ Rabemananjara, 11.

³⁹ A kind of poem that addresses the craft and purpose of poetry itself.

little more thinly by describing one thing in terms of another, whether it be words, dragonflies or the beloved. The lines are still blurred, but with more of a hint of surrealism, an influence that often manifested itself in the verses of Rabearivelo.

Never is this more evident than in the poems of *Traduit de la Nuit*, which are practically a soup of vague imagery and most certainly place the reader inside the dream of their author. Rambelason even noted that to submit to this displacement is the first step in understanding the tangle of it all, and it is definitely necessary in trying to extract the influence of *hainteny* as we will try to do with number 23 of the 30 songs within *Traduit*:

Slow
as a limping cow
or a mighty bull
four times houghed,
a great black spider comes out of the earth
and climbs up the walls
then painfully sets his back against the trees,

throws out his threads for the wind to carry,
weaves a web that reaches the sky
and spreads his nets across the blue.

Where are the many-colored birds?
Where are the precentors of the sun?
—Lights burst from their sleep-deadened eyes
among their liana-swings,
reviving their dreams and their reverberations
in that shimmering of glowworms
that becomes a cohort of stars,
and turns the spider's ambush
which the thorns of a bounding calf will tear.⁴⁰

In approaching this poem, Rambelason suggests that first we must recognize Rabearivelo's style, similar to many of his Western influences, in which he starts with one small, concrete image and then expands it into a greater one which then illustrates the general

⁴⁰ Tyson, 269.

idea.⁴¹ The description of the spider through these verses almost works as a narrative in how it follows this linear progression, first stirring the reader with its poignancy, then intriguing him with its mystery.

This kind of storytelling is rarely if ever used in *hainteny*. The personification of the spider that runs throughout the poem definitely achieves some symbolism, but again, it doesn't do so directly, for the thing that is represented is not present in the poem as it would be otherwise. As we watch this spider cast his nets "across the blue," we are confronted with a strange kind of tale that appears devoid of any actual human presence, but one that is told with the voice of a speaker that is full of personality and music.

In this strange way, the "spirit" of *hainteny* that Fox insists is always present in these lines comes through. Especially in the final stanza, with the mention of "the many-colored birds" and "that shimmering of glowworms that becomes a cohort of stars," we seem to be wandering through a night that is undeniably characteristic of the highlands of Madagascar, the place that Rabearivelo knew as home to his love, his life and always his poems.

Nowhere is this more true than in the collection published two years after Rabearivelo's death, *Vielles Chansons des Pays d'Imerina*. After avidly reading the poetry of his Merina predecessors, Rabearivelo created this collection of "creative translations" of *hainteny*, as Lucien Michel Andrianarahinjaka refers to them in his introduction to the 1974 edition of the work.⁴² Translations were in fact a favorite practice of Rabearivelo's, and understandably so with his mastery of French, Malagasy and even Spanish always hard at work. *Vielles Chansons*, however, takes this to a new level as it not only changes the form and style of the original *hainteny* while keeping to its story, but also even fills in the blanks with the always uniquely moving ideas of Rabearivelo, providing a rare glimpse into the poet's own interpretation of this exceptional art form.

⁴¹ Rambeloson, 11/23/07.

⁴² Andrianarahinjaka, 6.

In keeping with his appreciation for Western movements, Rabearivelo first took the liberty of turning the original *hainteny* into prose poems, “a form especially popular with the French symbolist poets whom he admired so much.”⁴³ This abandonment of the sometimes harsh lines of *hainteny* worked well with the subtle yet significant stylistic changes that Rabearivelo made to what he would’ve liked to call “transpositions,” in homage to his hero, Baudelaire.⁴⁴ The result is this collection of “songs” that are at once echoes of the original context of *hainteny* and modern reflections on a place that transcends both eras.

Many of these echoes match up almost perfectly with the individual *hainteny* that inspired them, while still never sacrificing Rabearivelo’s individual flare. This is especially evident in the 28th of his *Vielles Chansons* which happens to have been undoubtedly inspired by the same *hainteny* that we know by Fox’s translation number 451:

A single cut of thunder in Ankaratra, and the orchids bloom, and cries
and cries the blue bird’s daughter and laughs and laughs he-who-does-not-fear-
the-requital-of-evil.

Requital of evil? Let it be suspended! Requital of love? Let it be
applied!⁴⁵

At first glance, the transposition into prose seems to be one of the only real differences between this poem and the original *hainteny* that it copies, but even the tiniest exceptions can be clues toward Rabearivelo’s own instinctive take on the verse. First of all, the opening description of the thunder at Ankaratra and the orchids at Anjafy describes all of these things as if they were happening simultaneously, as if they might even have something to do with each other, while the original *hainteny* simply lines the descriptions up against each other independently, so that their connection is only implied to the reader. This is one of many instances when Rabearivelo takes it

⁴³ Fox, 73.

⁴⁴ Riffard, 11/21/07.

⁴⁵ Translated by the author from original text, Rabearivelo, *Vielles Chansons Des Pays D’Imerina*, 25.

upon himself to make explicit what was once only hinted toward. Perhaps more intriguingly, however, we are able to see that Rabearivelo understood these original clues enough to include them as he attempted to represent these words of his ancestors.

The second part of this prose poem illustrates more of Rabearivelo's creative license, yet in a slightly different way. With the direct questioning and the immediate, enthusiastic responses we see a real character emerging, a real voice within the exchange, complete with an emphatic personality that would never be so direct in the original verses of the Merina where the speaker so often seems more like an omniscient wise man. This helps, perhaps, to add an extra layer of humanity that counteracts the subtle distortions of language that might make it less personable, like the musical repetitions in the previous stanza or the blending of the imagery.

The last evidence toward the new spin that Rabearivelo put on these poems is that there is actually another stanza beyond these first two, one that appears to be entirely original within *Vielles Chansons*. More than any other part of the poem, this section lets us glimpse the meaning that Rabearivelo drew from the original *hainteny*:

If it's a veil of the head that doesn't know how to reveal the beauty, if it's a means of covering what one cannot wear publicly, then go back to your home: the night will fall before the hour.⁴⁶

Here, Rabearivelo is literally taking the liberty to fathom what this "requital of love," the one that is so welcomed, would be. Rambeloson noted that this is what's known as *tody fitia*, or a good requital, one that is desired. She explained that the speaker is essentially expressing the beauty of the hypothetical beloved in noting that it should not be hidden, that it should be accepted as a part of the love, as the equal reaction that *tody* would dictate.⁴⁷ The final phrase, which warns of the coming night, maintains the standard of description that is so often upheld in

⁴⁶ Translated by the author from original text, Rabearivelo, *Vielles Chansons Des Pays D'Imerina*, 25.

⁴⁷ Rambeloson, 11/23/07.

hainteny, in the way that it denotes something negative with only the image of this daily part of nature.

This obviously clear understanding of the Merina idea of *tody* coupled with that of the symbolic “night” helps prove that Rabearivelo was heavily invested in both the originality of *hainteny* as well as the representation of his own experience of it. In fact, throughout these later works of this great poet, we can see this remarkable fusion at work. Just as he fell under the spell of Baudelaire, Rabearivelo also fell under the spell of *hainteny*, always jumping to defend its important place in the culture of his people and finally attempting to incorporate it once again into a literature that was fast becoming engulfed by colonialism. As part of this endeavor, Rabearivelo succeeded in finding his voice as it could only echo through the hills and valleys of *Imerina*. His work effectively serves as a perfect example of how the spirit of *hainteny* never dies, how it can be re-shaped and yet retain its powerful representation of this place in an attempt to understand its people.

Conclusion: Nouvelles Chansons

Overlooking the same hills and valleys of *Imerina* where *hainteny* was once thrown back and forth in dispute, where Rabearivelo felt that pressing need to sing “Iarive! Iarive!” in a desperate address to the buzzing capitol city he had always known as home, I feel a little unsure of my identity in Madagascar just like he did. The reasons for this are a little more obvious, though, since half of my feelings of misplacement come from the way my appearance makes me stick out like a sore thumb in this island in the middle of the Indian Ocean, only a stone’s throw from the depths of Africa. While Rabearivelo may have wanted to be a *vazaha* from time to time, I actually *am* one, in a world of words created in a culture of which I am so blatantly an outsider.

Yet that need to create, that urge to explain the unexplainable by transposing the often vague mists of our minds is still practiced the world over, so while my process and product reflect

a lifetime of contrasting influences, I like to think there's still common ground to be found in embarking on that creative journey. This, along with the fact that I'm literally *standing* on common ground with these past poets, gave me faith as I started on this final part of my study, to try my hand at something like *hainteny*, to find a means of emulation that felt natural as it did for Rabearivelo.

Of course, in picking apart the complicated persona that is Rabearivelo, I came to appreciate his work not necessarily as emulations, but rather as another step along the historical path of literature in Madagascar, particularly the literature of the Merina. His was just one way of working a unique personality and set of influences in with his own experience of *Imerina*. The fact that this experience continued to reflect the power of the ancestral homeland in its imagery and metaphors only served to strengthen my chances of understanding those experiences as they evolved from *hainteny*, for as long as I've been in Madagascar, I, too have been captivated by these surroundings in a constantly profound way.

It started with the mornings, with the view I got from my bedroom window in Antananarivo. True, practically every window in this city affords a spectacular view, but as I woke to this one in particular every morning, most often with the sunrise, I came to feel a specific attachment to it. I was writing about that overlook before I'd even begun to shape my plans for this project, influenced by the life that seemed to pulse inside the window frame.

When it came time to actually create a few poems in response to what I'd learned from *hainteny* and Rabearivelo, I only started out a little rough before finding a real rhythm and going with it. Whether that was the same rhythm that Rabemamanjara gave Rabearivelo credit for finding is unclear, as it should be, but I think it's safe to say I could never discount the feeling of this place as an influence on my work.

After all, a lot of my creative process is based on triggering, which is essentially the way a writer lets one thought lead to another within the actual process of writing, instead of planning out

progressions as they would lead to a specific theme. Often my “triggering” is influenced by whatever I’m most heavily reading at the time, so of course, the texts of *hainteny* resurfaced practically of their own accord. Whether this also happened for Rabearivelo, who we know to have devoured hundreds of those old verses as he was in the midst of creating his own, is something we can only speculate.

In any case, I was barely halfway through some of my poems before I realized they could be categorized just as *hainteny* was, that they reflected those same specific cornerstones along the “course of love.” I completed a total of three poems, all of which helped me step inside the shoes of those old *mpikabary* in a way that allowed me to understand the things that shaped those lines, to grasp, for example, the way the significant yet subtle details of the changing seasons can become a part of everything: the person, their love and their death. The following is the most comprehensive example of my creations, as well as the one that best explains the appreciation I developed for this place:

Consent and Union (For No Picture of the Dawn Will Do)

A blue haze tilts into the white and stale start
of morning and as it douses the jacaranda trees
they come open with color and I become
the spring bird who knows it’s night somewhere.

And so I ask all of it to climb inside
my feathered breast, to throb beside
my mango heart so the end of the day
will take us together to the fresh green

of somewhere else, though we will be reluctant.
For look how the smoke is starting to lift, how
the huts on the hillside blink in the shade
of their doors opening to some children standing

so tiny and content with sleep so close
behind them. *But they can come, too,*
from my insides those purple petals whisper,
so willing to make room, *yes,*

and the mothers, too, crouching in their
sturdy curtsies by the hearth, and the river
they've just returned from, though its current
will need to deepen to accept the rains

already in my veins. I'll swing lightly
with the tide of it, perched with the leeches
hanging heavily all around me, moving
to the rhythmic mud-suck of feet

in the rice paddies. It's something of a dance,
really, led by the air that's already
running from summer, trying to say
simply, *It is yours, daughter*. It is yours.

The title of this poem first points out that it matches up with those selections from *hainteny* from the "Consent and Union" section, much like numbers 58 and 60 of Fox's translations that we saw earlier. There is also the additional sort of second title in parentheses, which situates the more contemporary part of the poem, my own personal clue to supplement the one that the original poems would've given.

Unlike the original *hainteny*, however, this one dives straight into the nature imagery. This is one of the instances where this poem is more similar to the work of Rabearivelo, for in traditional western practice there has to be that starting point, that first material description that the rest of the poem builds upon. The rest of the first stanza, indeed the rest of the whole poem, uses descriptive techniques that more closely resemble *hainteny*. This happens most definitely with the personification of the "spring bird," which is in fact the speaker embodying the animal, creating a tangle between human and nature that is meant to rival the one that *hainteny* would also make.

The relevance of the second title hopefully comes into play with the second stanza, as it explains the request of the bird to internalize these surroundings in, appropriately enough, a kind of union. That it should be one to carry the joined forces "together to the fresh green of

somewhere else” plays upon that period of change between winter and summer, which is hopefully already implied by the imagery of the jacaranda trees, the mangoes and of course, “the spring bird.”

The reluctance described in the third stanza lends itself to the descriptions that follow, of the habitual start of daily life over the landscape of *Imerina*: the children in the doorways, the mothers by the fire, even the river that runs through all of it. Hopefully this achieves some sense of reverence for these things that happen over and over, that mark a lifetime in the lives of the Merina and that have come to mark the daily life I’ve led for only three months.

The dialogue that comes out in these stanzas is of course the voice of nature, of the jacaranda petals to be specific, answering the internalized request of the speaker in what can only be described as consent to the union that by the end is fully achieved. This exchange between human and nature is meant to compliment the constant existence of both entities throughout the verses, to once again weaken the boundaries between these two worlds, creating a place that treats all of it as one just as the Merina always have.

The final description of the rice paddies hopefully rounds off the images that are so characteristic of this setting, for almost nothing is more familiar in the vast expanse of Merina territory; even Rabearivelo wrote descriptions of those vividly green valleys from time to time. The voice of nature comes by one last time, this time with the wind of the changing seasons, to express an equivocation that envies those of *hainteny*. “It is yours, daughter,” it says to the spring bird, who then answers in the same way to say again, “It is yours,” exemplifying a true partnership and understanding that always makes me think back to the end of that same example from the “Consent and Union” section:

Then Red-coral said:
“If you cherish me, I cherish you.”⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Fox, 127.

These two little lines, like so many others in *hainteny*, must have been begging to be recreated with the way it worked its way into my subconscious and then my poem. Almost more than anything else, this is what I've learned from this strange yet incredibly valuable dive into the poetry of Madagascar's highlands: that *hainteny* inspires in a way that is quite different than any other kind of timeless literature I've come in contact with, whether it be Shakespeare or Cinderella. Perhaps this is in part due to the original nature of the genre, a sign of the days when the words were constantly reborn and challenged in within the common discourse of the Merina.

Yet even that setting was born out of another exchange, which I now think is one that happens in all parts of this remarkable culture: the exchange between humanity and nature, between the people and their home. The importance of ancestors, the identity that is so often defined by that same place of origin and the persistence of that dialogue within the literature are all evidence of this. It was never more true than at the beginning and height of the Merina society, the days when *hainteny* worked its way into every day conversation, and still it has only barely faded, not for Rabearivelo or anyone else who can call these highlands their home. It might've only been as much to me for a matter of months, but the power of this place is unrelenting, and so I still choose to secretly think I've got something in common with these poets of Madagascar, especially with the certainty that this scenery will come to life again and again in my words, perhaps for years to come.

Bibliography:

1. Fox, Leonard. Hainteny: The Traditional Poetry of Madagascar. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1990.
2. Haring, Lee. Verbal Arts in Madagascar. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania P, 1992.
3. Rabearivelo, Jean-Joseph, and Jacques Rabemananjara. Presque-Songes et Traduit De La Nuit. Antananarivo, 1960.
4. Rabearivelo, Jean-Joseph, and Lucien Michel Andrianarahinjaka. Vielles Chansons Des Pays D'Imerina. Antananarivo: Madprint, 1974.
5. Rabearivelo, Jean-Joseph. Traslations From the Night: Selected Poems of Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo. New York City: Heinemann Education, 1975.
6. Rajaonesy, Beby. Personal Interview. 12 November, 2007.
7. Ramarantsoa, Christiane. Personal Interview. 24 November 2007.
8. Rambelason, Jeannine. Personal Interview. 13 November 2007, 23 November 2007.
9. Rasoanavalona, Malala. Informal Interview. 25 November 2007.
10. Riffard, Claire. Exhibition at the Centre Culturelle D'Albert Camus, Antananarivo, visited 21 November, 2007.

Desire, Hesitation, Declaration (From a Bedroom Window)

East-facing, I remember too much.
The dry sunset can't lift the yellow of it
over the slow plateaus, out of Antananarivo.

The valleys of Ambanidia are victims, too.
The hum of the brousses burrowing forward
in the folded road below is them screaming.

But you are the walk into Isoraka,
the way north that curves toward the echo
of afternoon thunder over a grassy tabletop.

And you are red, like the rocky surface
that waits for rain to make mud of it,
to wash the rested reptile from his winter cavern.

You are inevitable like that. You are the salty
waft the palms have come to expect
as that air moves inland. And I come from

a thousand villages away, hungry for the sky
to crack open over our hot earth, for
the saline taste of your homesick supper.

Separation and Abandonment (Sunsets Are Sad)

It could be the dulcet gold of that sun
descending or the gentle orange blaze
of a brushfire but the light exhausts me
tonight as it folds around the width of this

mud-stucco home. Often it blisters away
in the wind of at least rides off, but now
the rays streak down the walls like rice water
drank too anxiously. The day has

somewhere else to be, it seems. Somewhere
south of the lake with you and the larks
dull and unexceptional in the trees
and you call from the stud of your gut

in loneliness. The coral necklaces can
only be assembled underwater, is the thing.
And you took them too bravely from
their anemone nests and now they're

only crumbs of the ocean that I count
futilely in the firelight. Nothing comes forward
to claim the spilled shadows we cast
on the mat. Only night. And he is young.