

Environment as Social and Literary Constructs: An Exploration of the Relationship between the Environment and Mahafaly Oral Literature

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Eugenie Cha

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Project Advisor: Jeanine Rambelason

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Introduction

There was a time, long ago, when a small lake or reservoir had formed in a remote area whose location still remains a mystery today. One day, a king was passing through this region. He desperately needed water and searched and searched, but to no avail. Finally, he found this lake and was able to quench his thirst, and thus prevented himself from dying of dehydration (Avimary).

This story is one of many that are present within the canon of oral literature in Madagascar today. It originated from a small town called Ampanihy, which lies in the southwestern region of Madagascar, about 250km from Toliara (Tuléar).¹ The Mahafaly, who predominate the region, live in an extremely arid and dust-ridden climate that is marked by stretches of land harboring cactus and sisal. The environment thus greatly influences the culture of this ethnic group, which manifests itself in their oral literature. It is a fundamental feature of how stories are created amongst them, for it provides the components that constitute a tale.

This research project aims to explore the relationship that exists between Ampanihy's arid, desert locale and Mahafaly oral tradition, particularly with the genre's emphasis on water, nature, and symbols. I will look at how the direct relationship between the existing desert surroundings affects how the Mahafaly express their desire for water through the verbal art of storytelling. In so doing, however, the project does not attempt to define or categorize their identity; rather it shows an aspect of their culture that succeeds in giving a glimpse into a world of a unique ethnic clan. Additionally, it is a project that aims to reveal an ongoing social and economic conflict of living in such extreme dryness and isolation that the Mahafaly continue to face to the present day.

¹ <http://www.mindat.org/loc-45931.html>

An interesting element that is essential to understanding how Mahafaly oral tradition distinguishes itself from others is the reason why Ampanihy is dry. The first portion of the paper discusses the historical and political history of oral literature in Madagascar. Foreign influence and its relationship to literacy have played important roles in the evolution of Malagasy oral literature. I will then present both past and present definitions of oral literature in Madagascar. The variety of styles and dialectical differences that exist within Malagasy oral literature will be paralleled to the ethnic diversity, which greatly affects the way stories are transmitted. The current dialectic concerning this subject can be viewed in two main divisions. There are those who feel that identifying a more unified picture of Malagasy oral literature is needed. Others see that these variations and differences already constitute that picture. I will then examine how these differing opinions panned out amongst the oral culture of the Mahafaly in Ampanihy. Lastly, the paper delves into the location and research methodology of the project.

The next portion of the project delves into the varied explanations of Ampanihy's desert climate and how such notions induced the Mahafaly to deem water as a prized, sacrosanct symbol. Specific rituals, public ceremonies, and objects within their community will be provided as examples of how they exhibit their reverence for water. Five stories, each told by a different storyteller, are then presented to exemplify how these traditional beliefs and practices concerning water and the environment are conveyed through the art of oral literature. I then examine how one can contextualize such stories and the art of storytelling within today's dialectic of oral tradition's evolution in Madagascar, and thus in Ampanihy. Understanding how modern technology and the various changes that came with the colonial area affected Mahafaly oral tradition situates this genre as a present, ever-changing social process. As Lee Haring explains: "Folklore performance in Madagascar is 'a dynamic

process evolving through space and time” (Haring 16).² Finally, the paper concludes with an analysis of the findings and how studying oral literature can be an effective means of approaching development.

History of Oral Literature

Understanding the history of Malagasy oral literature involves looking at the relationship it has with literacy. Malagasy civilization began with oral narrative, speech, or the use of words (Congo). Before 1820, a writing culture had yet to be established in Madagascar (Razainorvelo). Nothing was written down, as there were no schools to garner the practice of writing (Congo). In order for one to communicate ideas and express sentiments, one therefore had to verbally state them (Razainorvelo). Competing theories, however, indicate that early Arabic and Roman writings have been present in Malagasy society (Rajaonarison, Haring 5, McElroy 21)³ even before the first British Protestant missionaries arrived in 1818 (Haring 6). In the 17th century, the Antemoro clan would use the Arabic alphabet to “write Malagasy on paper made from bark and with ink they extracted from gumtrees” (Haring 6).⁴ Historically, however, Madagascar is a country that has a deep practice of the oral genre (Rajaonarison). Malagasy written literature eventually came from oral literature (Rajaonarison) when the stories that were once told were written down in the form of verse, ou *la parole*. It was then that a ‘writing culture’ began to be visible.⁵

Literacy, however, played a crucial role in the *writing* of oral literature. When the British missionaries did arrive, they had no intention of translating the stories of the Malagasy people (Haring 6), for translating Scripture and grammar dictionaries had precedence. As Haring concurs: “In both Britain and Madagascar, learning to read Scripture had to come first, and to the missionaries of the first wave (1820-36), oral culture had little importance” (Haring

² Haring, Lee. *Verbal Arts in Madagascar: Performance in Historical Perspective*. Philadelphia. 1992

³ McElroy, Colleen J. *Over the Lip of the World: Among the Storytellers of Madagascar*. Seattle. 1999

⁴ The Antemoro clan are originally descendants of the Arabic and Zanzibari slave traders when Islam was being introduced into Malagasy society during the 10th or 11th century (Wikipedia).

⁵ Translated from French: “L’oralité s’inscrit dans les écrits.”

6). During the reign of Radama I, however, literacy allowed for the Merina monarch to use writing as a political tool (Haring 6). Writing was used to form alliances and agreements as a means to show foreigners that “all Madagascar was under the power of the Merina king” (Haring 6). Simultaneously at this time, oral literature was ignored by the British missionaries who sought political alliances. As a result, “a gap opened between the written dictionaries and grammars and the continuing oral performance of folklore in context” (Haring 7). Oral performance was only retained by Merina further from the capital and all other non-Merina tribes where the “traditions of storytelling, riddling, speaking proverbs, and formal dialogue (*kabary*)” could continue without the interference of the political ambitions of the time (Haring 7).

This divide induced certain oppositions in oral literature to surface. Three main conflicts arose. First, the British missionaries created a division between “spoken Malagasy” (Haring 8) and the Malagasy that they created in grammar books. Then a separation between the new “purified” Malagasy and the European languages occurred (Haring 8). And lastly, a schism between the “highland and regional dialects” (Haring 8) became present when missionaries created Malagasy dictionaries that specifically separated “Merina” and “coast” (Haring 8). This divide is still present today. As Haring states: “[This divide] has been a potent linguistic and political fact ever since” (Haring 8).

It was not until during the reign of Queen Ranaivalona I (1828-1852) that oral literature returned to the forefront of Malagasy society (Haring 8). After banning all foreigners and remnants of their influence from Madagascar, the only books that were allowed were dictionaries. Using these as tools, Malagasy pupils of the British missionaries began to record *hainteny* poems (Haring 8).⁶ After the queen’s death and before French colonization usurped

⁶ *Hainteny* is, in its most absolute generic term, poetry that has its origins with the Merina. Lee Haring refrains from providing a definition due to its elusiveness in form and content. Instead, he claims that “the name of the genre means word science, word play, or, in some usages, traditional saying...A more accurate translation of *hainteny* is ‘the art of the word’” (Haring 100).

the island, collecting Malagasy folklore flourished (Haring 9). A second wave of avid missionaries, sent by the London Missionary Society (LMS) collected and translated “Malagasy tales, proverbs, riddles, beliefs, and folksongs” (Haring 9). Folklore at this time, however, was still viewed as “products of past history rather than evidence of dynamic processes” (Haring 10). The LMS group did nevertheless contribute to a significant amount of folklore being passed onto a wider audience. It wasn’t until after 1896 when French colonization was fully implemented in Madagascar did the British collecting of stories, proverbs, and other folklore come to an end (Haring 10). Rather, the French continued research in amassing vast amounts of knowledge on oral literature—through an ethnographic lens. As Haring elaborates: “A psychological approach to ‘the’ Malagasy, sometimes through the products of folklore, became a necessary adjunct to governing. In this third stage of Malagasy folklore studies, the data would reveal the Malagasy mind as a system of beliefs which must be scientifically understood so as to be ‘normalized’ or Europeanized” (Haring 11).

Since independence, both French and Malagasy researchers have continued to study Malagasy oral tradition. An English-speaking audience, however, did not become formally introduced to it until anthropologists and ethnographers, such as Lee Haring and Colleen McElroy, have researched it for themselves.

What is ‘Oral Tradition’?

According to Professor of Literature Jeanine Rambeloson at the University of Tana, oral tradition consists of stories and recitations that are transmitted through the use of both the mouth (the storyteller relaying the story) and the ear (the audience listening to the story) (Rambeloson). Stories are passed down from generation to generation through a specific process. A three-ring hierarchy shows that stories began to be recited at the family level (Congo). Generally, the grandparents hand-down stories to their children, who then pass it on

to their children, and so on (Rambeloson). Then, the stories are integrated into the social life outside of this family unit, and lastly, it is shared with the much larger, global circle of society (Congo)⁷. Often these stories recount historical figures, invented characters, how the world originated, the evolution of *fady*, and the origins of an ethnic group which serve to relay a message or explain some natural phenomenon (Rambeloson).⁸ Malagasy oral tradition contains various ‘classes’ or subgenres in which ‘invented’ stories are separated from the recounting of history (stories based on actual, historical events); poetry from proverbs, and so on. Invented stories are creations based on reality that incorporate literary elements and devices in which other worlds and figures are conjured (Congo). It can include something extraordinary occurring, such as an animal speaking or the presence of a monster (Congo). Malagasy oral literature thus is a creative process, and namely one that is currently evolving (Rajaonarison).

In Madagascar, oral literature has a variety of styles and forms (Razainoroveloo). Some take on the shape of a conventional storytelling session where there is a storyteller and an audience. Others are performances of the recitation of a poem. To classify which are the most fundamental to Malagasy oral history is a matter of opinion, for each region has their own style and form, let alone word to describe a story. According to Olga Razainoroveloo, a teacher at the Collège Adrianarisoa in Tana, despite the variety there are three types that are known throughout the island (Razainoroveloo).⁹ The first is called *ohabolana*, the genre that includes sayings and proverbs. The second is called *angano*, or the genre that includes stories, fables, myths, and legends. And the third is *kabary*, a form of public speech or discourse that can take on a social, familial, or political role (Razainoroveloo). It should be noted, however, that within these three types, each ethnic clan has their own unique styles and subtypes (Razainoroveloo, Ramiandrisoa, Mafferson). Moreover, the words given to

⁷ This hierarchy however is not as fluid in actuality as it is in theory.

⁸ *Fady* is the Malagasy word for “taboo.”

⁹ The capital of Madagascar is Antananarivo. It is commonly known and referred to as “Tana.”

designate “proverbs,” “stories,” or “public discourse,” (*ohabolana*, *angano*, *kabary*, respectively) are not the same in other parts of Madagascar. Particularly with *angano*, a word that is used by the Merina, or the people of the central highlands, *tapasiry* is used in Toliara to indicate “story,” while *takasiry* is used to denote the same thing in Fort Dauphin (McElroy 18). Both Toliara and Fort Dauphin lie in the southern region of Madagascar.¹⁰ In Ampanihy, the Mahafaly use *talily* to designate “story” and while *tapasiry* is also used and has essentially the same denotation, it differs in that it designates stories that are told at night (bedtime stories) (Mafferson). One source even claimed *tapasiry* was the word they used in the north (Ramiandrisoa). Differences between each word however go far beyond just regional and dialectical variations. It marks the way in which stories are told and how (Ramiandrisoa, Congo, Mafferson).¹¹ In this sense, the face, the actual story or what message the story seeks to relay is not what changes so much as the manner in which it is presented or articulated (Congo). How one tells the story, what one chooses to include or exclude, the practices that are involved with its telling, if any (Congo, Ramiandrisoa, Mafferson), but most significantly, what importance it has for the individual and audience (Rajaonarison) all serve to distinguish *le conte* (story) from each region, while simultaneously being unified with the same base, or *matière* (Rajaonarison).

The Influence of Linguistic and Ethnic Diversity

Indeed, the concept of a “uniform but diverse” (Haring 16) linguistic presence in Malagasy oral literature is its most intriguing feature. When alphabetization of the Malagasy language came into existence during the Merina monarchy (Haring 16), certain problems arose that greatly affected the folklore to be collected over the subsequent years. At this time, scholars tried to holistically define the Malagasy to the foreign public (Haring 17). The conclusion resulted in giving the “privileged position to light-skinned Indonesians as the

¹⁰ See “Appendix A” for reference to a map.

¹¹ Translated from French: “C’est la façon de dire qui est la différence.”

ancestors of the Malagasy. From them, we said, the Merina were descended” (Haring 17).¹² Later a uniform Malagasy language that was based on the Merina dialect was standardized based on this conclusion (Haring 18). As Haring states: “The LMS missionary lexicographers awarded to the Merina dialect of the central highlands the ‘destiny’ of becoming the national language and the universal Malagasy” (Haring 17). Then, with the institution of the Académie Malgache, a center for research that developed during the French colonization period, the Merina dialect was adopted as the universal Malagasy language (Haring 18). A disparity between the taught, “official” Malagasy and the local language formed (Haring 18).

Today, the dialectic between a uniform, but diverse Malagasy is still a prominent political and social issue. But in terms of oral tradition, the subject matter practically defines the complexity of it. There are said to be eighteen official different dialects in Madagascar (Haring 17), but recent research from the Musée d’Art et d’Archéologie in Tana indicates that there may be even more sub-dialects within these major ones (McElroy xxii). The current discourse is thus greatly affected by this ethnic and linguistic diversity. Rambeloson claims that reconciling the exclusivity of oral practices with a holistic identification of the Malagasy is necessary. In actuality, a true, ‘pure’ oral traditional practice is reserved for specific ethnic groups over others because of the way in which stories began at the family unit and are passed down within each ethnic clan (Rambeloson). This exclusivity, however, is rarely seen in society today, which presents a problem for the sustainment of oral tradition (Rambeloson). Modern technology, such as the radio and television, has nationalized the art form, transforming it into a form of mass-production (Rambeloson). It is rare nowadays to see oral tradition in its ‘true’ form and only few ethnicities still practice it in its original form

¹² Lee Haring quotes Alfred Grandidier’s (1836-1921) *Physical, Natural, and Political History of Madagascar*.

(Rambeloson). The problem with this transformation, according to Rambeloson, is that there is a lack of an understanding of what Malagasy oral tradition is in the first place.

Such a problem deals largely in part with Madagascar's linguistic history. In essence, Rambeloson provoked the question of how dialectical differences, despite the presence of a 'unified' Malagasy language, shape the way stories are transmitted. A holistic perspective thus has yet to be visualized (Rambeloson) and stands as the current dilemma facing Malagasy oral literature today. There are indeed certain stories that contain universal messages in which everyone can relate to, but in Rambeloson's opinion, these are not enough. This insufficiency is largely due to politics. Many politicians try to profit from ethnic differences.¹³ Thus, one needs to find which ideas and cultural notes best represent the larger context of Malagasy cultural identity. The problem that thus remains is identifying these ideas and choosing who gets to decide them.

For others, however, there is no dilemma. Professor of Anthropology Elie Rajaonarison at the University of Tana points out that when one speaks of 'Malagasy literature,' one refers to two specific genres. The first is a written form known as *haisoratra* and the second is an oral form known as *haivolana*, but neither of these are independent from each other; they overlap extensively, for Malagasy written literature is inherently based on the oral one (Rajaonarison). Thus, it is impossible, with this notion in mind, to form a holistic, unifying Malagasy oral tradition. Specifically with regards to ethnic differences, Rajaonarison remarked that whatever one's ethnicity is in Madagascar, one is still Malagasy. These different ethnicities only serve to add variants and nuances to a tradition that has fundamentally the same base (Rajaonarison). The richness of Malagasy oral literature, according to Rajaonarison, is based on such uniqueness. There is no *one* Malagasy oral practice, but variations that simultaneously express the past, present, and future.

¹³ For example, if a politician is running for President, the majority of the support will be coming from those that are of the same ethnic clan that the politician is from.

Such varying discourse is thus what will be explored and examined through the oral literature of the Mahafaly people in Ampanihy. The storytellers I met with in this small, rural village entrenched in the southern desert are constantly inspired by their cultural heritage. At the same time, they exhibited no desire to designate a uniform Malagasy oral tradition, nor did they try fiercely to separate themselves above or below other ethnic clans. Rather, they succeeded in displaying an oral practice that best portrays who they are as the Mahafaly (in the opinions of a few, select individuals) as well as identifying the greatest influences to their stories that they know all too well already: the environment in the form of an arid desert landscape and the absence of water.

Location: Ampanihy

Madagascar is the fourth largest island in the world (McElroy xii). Eighty-percent of the world's biodiversity is endemic to the island (nescent) and its terrain and geographical regions are as diverse as its inhabitants (McElroy xii).¹⁴

The 'core' of my research took place in Ampanihy, a small, rural village nearly 250 km southwest of Toliara.¹⁵ Its predominant ethnic group is the Mahafaly clan (Ministère de L'Intérieur).¹⁶ The cultivation of crops and the herding of grazing animals are the primary occupations (Ministère de L'Intérieur). Corn and manioc are the two principal crops grown in the area (Ministère de L'Intérieur). An abundance of zebu and goat were observed. The Ampanihy region is in fact known for its *tapis*, hand-woven mats made from goat or sheep wool.¹⁷

There are a total of 16 rural communes in the District of Ampanihy. Within each of these communes, there are a number of *fokontany*, or villages. I did the majority of my

¹⁴ http://www.nescent.org/eog/documents/Madagascar_Summary.doc.

¹⁵ See "Findings" for reference. The 'core' of my research indicates the research conducted in the region of the people that this project focuses on.

¹⁶ "Monographie du District d'Ampanihy/Ouest, Année : 2006." Ministère de L'Intérieur Province Autonome de Toliara, Région du Sud/Ouest de Toliara, District d'Ampanihy/Ouest. No.76, le 16 Mars 2007.

¹⁷ "Manioc" is the French word for "Cassava."

fieldwork in the Ampanihy-ville, or Ampanihy as it is commonly known (Ampanihy-town), which is in the Ampanihy-Ouest (Ampanihy-West) rural commune. Ampanihy has a population of 3,364 (according to the 2006 district census) and is the district's main commercial center.¹⁸

I also spent one day in Ankiliabo and another in Agnosa, both villages being situated in the Ankiliabo rural commune. They are about 3 to 5 km away from Ampanihy. With the exception of these two interviews, the majority of them took place in Ampanihy.

The climate and environment is a crucial point of interest from which the crux of this research project revolves around. Ampanihy is situated in an extremely arid zone, making the weather hot and desert-dry the majority of the year. Cacti are abundant and are native to the region. Thus, tap water, although it exists, is a very rare source, as it is both difficult and expensive to acquire (bottled, mineral water is sold, but the average inhabitant that lives in Ampanihy does not make enough to buy it everyday, if at all. The two rivers that border the district limit are also too great of a distance to retrieve water.) Having water is therefore a highly respected (and desired), if not nearly sacrosanct thing for one to possess. How the environment influences what the Mahafaly are inclined to and how both of these components are present within their oral literature is the focus of this paper.

Methodology

The majority of my research is based on primary sources—first-hand interviews that were led and recorded in French and then later transcribed in English. I interviewed fourteen informants, ten of them being residents of Ampanihy and whose interviews I consider the core of this project. The other four informants were interviewed knowledgeable in the subject and

¹⁸ By 'commercial,' I mean that all public activities and public institutions, like the grand market on Saturdays, eateries, the post office, the district bureaus, are situated in Ampanihy-ville.

thus facilitated an academic understanding of oral tradition in Madagascar. The following two tables give a visual representation of all the informants.¹⁹

Interviewees in Ampanihy

Name of Interviewee	Title	Gender	Type of Interview/ Methodology
Désiré Razafitiana	Assistant at the Catholic free clinic (dispensaire)	Male	Formal, structured
Avimary	Farmer	Male	Formal, structured
Eonjondray	Grand Official; ex-mayor	Male	Formal, structured
Emilien Ramiandrisoa	Breeder	Male	Informal, structured
Tahienandro	Head of the District Bureau	Male	Formal, structured
Hector Andriamahazo	Economic operator	Male	Formal, structured
Robin Mafferson	Headmaster of the high school	Male	Formal, structured
Ezoemana	Farmer	Male	Formal, structured
Marie Razanonoro	Director of Radio Fanilon Ampanihy	Female	Formal, structured

Other Interviewees

Name of Interviewee	Title	Gender	Type of Interview/ Methodology
Paul Jaoravoana, known as “Paul Congo”	International storyteller from Antakarana; Head of the Service for Cultural and Artistic Promotion in Diego-Suarez	Male	Formal, unstructured
Jeanine Rambelison	Professor of Literature at the University of Tana	Female	Formal, unstructured
Elie Rajaonarison	Professor of Anthropology at the University of Tana	Male	Formal, unstructured
Olga Razainorovelolo	Teacher at the Collège Adrianarisoa in Tana	Female	Formal, structured

Most of the interviews were carried out ‘formally’ and ‘structured,’ that is to say that they were scheduled and a set of pre-planned questions were used to obtain the information. The ‘formal,’ ‘unstructured’ interviews were scheduled meetings where the informant and I

¹⁹ It should be noted that the majority of the informants being male was entirely coincidental.

had a conversation about the topic rather than me posing a series of questions to the informant. I had only one ‘informal’ interview, which was a chance meeting. For the most part, however, the meetings were scheduled in advance and took place in the homes or offices of the informants.

All of the interviews were conducted in Ampanihy through a translator. Gabriel (Gaby) Rahasimanana, a student at the University of Toliara accompanied me to each interview and translated the questions from French to Malagasy and the responses from Malagasy to French. José Austin, a researcher of stories for the town’s radio station assisted us by arranging meetings with the informants. Both Gaby and José were principal assistants to the project, but Gaby helped me translate the interviews and collect stories and thus played a crucial role in how the information was retrieved. I translated all of the stories from French to English. To reduce the amount of discrepancies that often arise when dealing with translations, particularly in multiple languages, I took notes during each interview in addition to recording it, and then transcribed the recordings later for the field journal. Even with such measures, however, it goes without saying that anything in translation has already been altered from its original form. But due to language barriers, this aspect of the research was inevitable, but monitored as closely as possible to minimize any major discrepancies.

My strategies mainly depended on catering each interview to the informant. Past and recent experience has taught me that trying to lead each interview in the same way culminates in nothing but disaster. Thus, many of the questions that were posed to the inhabitants of Ampanihy had to be modified at the time of each interview. I begin every interview with a brief explanation of the project’s aim and the subject matter. Then, the pre-set questions were used as a guideline; not all of them worked equally well for each interviewee. After about thirty to forty minutes of tangent conversations about related topics concerning the subject of interest, a more structured interview began. From here, I would pose new questions that led

off of the informants' responses if an interesting angle or perspective was brought up. This tactic was necessary in order for the informant to understand that what he or she was saying was of particular interest and provoked further explanation. I found that sculpting the interviews in this manner accordingly was the most useful format in retrieving information.

The interviews that did not take place in Ampanihy were more structured in which a consistent question-response format took place. All of them were conducted in this way or in a similar manner of this sort in Tana, except one that was held in Diego-Suarez.

The greatest obstacle that was encountered during the research process dealt with the language barriers and communication. In spite of the fact that I had a translator who was competent in both French and Malagasy, he had difficulty understanding the dialect that is unique to the Mahafaly and the Ampanihy region. Thus, this aspect of the interviews posed as somewhat of a challenge because the meaning or semantics of the information was difficult to sustain.

Findings: How Ampanihy Came To Be

In the past, Ampanihy was not as arid as it is today (Tahienandro, Ramiandrisoa). Rain fell consistently in this region (Tahienandro, Ezoemana), but as time progressed and evolution took place, it became infrequent (Tahienandro). The region, moreover used to be covered with forests, but deforestation has consequently damaged much of the land and forced the natural richness of Ampanihy to dry up (Eonjondray, Mafferson, Razanonoro).

Other explanations include Ampanihy's geographic location. Not only is the village situated in an incredibly heated and arid zone (Mafferson, Razanonoro), but the land's physical features prohibit much water from being retained even during the rainy season (Mafferson). The water gets trapped underground because of the soil's inability to retain the rainfall (Ezoemana, Mafferson). Nor is there a reserve or system that collects the water runoff

(Ezoemana, Mafferson). Natural evolution, geographic location, and the presence of humans have thus gradually altered Ampanihy from a temperate region to an extremely dry one.

Another reason, however, was discovered. According to Avimary, Ampanihy is dry because the Mahafaly do not follow their customs.²⁰ A long time ago, the ancestors had a discipline that contained the laws, traditions, rights, and customs of the Mahafaly people and strictly adhered to it (Avimary, Ramiandrisoa, Tahienandro). The subsequent generations, however, stopped following this discipline (Avimary, Tahienandro, Andriamahazo), forcing an increase in neglect and disregard for Mahafaly traditions. The word *mandikalily* is used to describe the violation of this discipline (Tahienandro, Avimary, Ramiandrisoa), which consequently explains the ‘real’ reason why Ampanihy remains extremely dry today (Avimary).

“The Source of Life” and the Sacredness of Nature

It thus stands as no surprise that water exists as an important element for the Mahafaly. In addition to its significance as a necessity however it plays an even more crucial role in their oral literature and practices. Water is the source of life, not just for humans, but for everything living on this earth (Avimary, Razafitiana, Eonjondray, Andriamahazo). It sustains mankind, a characteristic that places it first and foremost in Mahafaly oral tradition (Razafitiana).²¹ Its scarcity within the region is why it is so revered. One must first make a benediction if one wants to ask for it (Avimary), and one asks for water because it is sacred and symbolizes life (Razafitiana).²² Such emphasis placed on water indicates that it exists as something more than just a vital element for the cultivation and planting of the crops (Tahienandro). It can serve as a token of respect to the God Andrianagnahary when one throws it in the air to wish God good fortune (Eonjondray). When a baby has his or her first haircut, one uses water to cleanse the newly shaven scalp, symbolizing purity. This ritual also

²⁰ Translated from French : “Les gens Mahafaly ne suivent pas les coutumes.”

²¹ Translated from French : “C’est primordiale dans les contes.”

²² Translated from French : “Pour demander l’eau c’est comme demander la vie.”

blesses the child to have a bright future as well as wishing goodwill to the ancestors (Razafitiana). Other gestures that signify water as a sacred element is when one gives a benediction to a tortoise. If villagers see a tortoise wandering through their village, it is immediately seen as a good luck sign—“un signe de bonheur”—and an indication that it will rain (Avimary). Tortoises, thus, are totems. To this day, it is *fady*, or taboo to kill them (Avimary). Rather, when one sees a tortoise, one throws water on its shell as a mark of reverence (Avimary).

Such rituals portray the belief systems and social practices of the Mahafaly people. Indeed, the ritual of requesting water is in itself fundamental to Mahafaly culture. This ritual is practiced every September through October (Razafitiana) or during December (Tahienandro). It requires each family who owns *zebu* to kill one as a sacrifice to God as a plea for rain (Mafferson, Razafitiana, Razanonoro, Tahienandro).²³ Generally, the oldest male in the family leads the ritual (Razafitiana, Razanonoro, Mafferson) or the most important religious figure in the village (Emilien).

Many variations exist as to the specific details of how the ritual is then performed. One can behead the *zebu* and wait for the blood to cool a little, at which it is then poured into a water bowl as an offering (Razanonoro). The ritual carried out in this fashion is called *Tsotse* (Razanonoro). Another name for this ritual is *Sorom-bala* (Mafferson). Another way is taking out the organs of the *zebu* (after killing it) and cooking them on a grill over a fire (Razafitiana). The smoke that emits from the sacrificed insides of the *zebu* serves as the plea to Andrianagnahary for water (Razafitiana). The performance aspect of this ritual conveys the Mahafaly's inherent faith in a higher, spiritual being that is always present, but an invisible spirit (Ramiandrisoa). For some, this ritual is practiced because it is a necessity every year (Razafitiana).²⁴ Others, however, recognize its presence as a part of Mahafaly

²³ *Zebu* is a cow. It is a particular breed that is historically known for its huge horns and thick hump on its back.

²⁴ Translated from French: “C’est une obligation chaque année.”

culture, but deem the ritual as an element, not a necessity of their belief system. “Sometimes this ritual works,” claimed Marie Razanonoro, director of Radio Fanilon Ampanihy.²⁵ When it rains, another sacrifice of the same sort is made in turn to thank God (Razafitiana, Ramiandrisoa). It is a sign that Andrianagnahary has heard their prayers (Razafitiana, Tahienandro).

The components of the ritual are as crucial to the ritual itself. The *zebu* has innumerable significances within Mahafaly culture, symbolizing first and foremost the wealth and social prestige of an individual (Avimary, Eonjondray, Mafferson). One is considered worthless if he does not even own one (Avimary). Additionally, its importance stems from its use in nearly every milestone event of an individual (Mafferson). The tombstone of a man will have a *zebu* as the highest object on his *aloalo* (Avimary).²⁶ Moreover, when one dies, Mahafaly custom dictates that the family of the deceased pays someone in *zebu* (not in *ariary*) to get a sacred type of wood from a blessed forest so that they can construct the coffin (Mafferson).²⁷ The family of a deceased will also pay the *fokonolona* in *zebu* for bringing stones that will be put atop the tombstone (Mafferson).²⁸ The number of *zebu* given is matched to the number of ox carts it takes to haul as many stones as needed (Mafferson). Particularly for funerals, the *zebu* plays a crucial role in how the rites are performed. A death, in general, is usually an event that requires the sacrifice of a *zebu* in honor of the deceased’s family (Mafferson). Other milestones in life where the *zebu* has a prominent presence are

²⁵ Translated from French : “Quelquefois ça marche.”

²⁶ *Aloalo* is a hand-sculpted wooden post that relates the life of the deceased and his rank in the clan (MGIAS.com). A typical *aloalo* has four different symbols. (Avimary). The highest object is a *zebu* (*omby*), which symbolizes the richness of the deceased. (This carving is highly dependent on the economic status of the individual). After the *omby*, comes the moon (*volamiratsy*) which symbolizes the earth. Next come the two half-moons (*valovalo*) as signifying the four main stages of the moon and which symbolize the separation between a man and a woman, but the unification of both half-moons stuck back-to-back indicates that they die together; if one them dies, the other figuratively dies. And the last carving is anything the *aloalo* artist wants it to be, but generally it is a woman. (Avimary). The carvings and lengths of an *aloalo* of the deceased varies from each individual, depending on gender (a male can have no less than 4, but as up to 30 or 90 if economically feasible whereas a woman is only allowed up to 6), social status within the clan, and reputation. Generally, the more reputable the individual, the more *aloalo* one can have (Avimary). *Aloalo* are for funerary rites and are native to the Mahafaly clan. (Avimary).

²⁷ *Ariary* is the Malagasy currency.

²⁸ *Fokonolona* is the Malagasy word that defines the people who live in a *fokontany*, or village.

marriage ceremonies and circumcisions. A *zebu* is sacrificed to honor and celebrate a boy entering his manhood (Razafitiana).²⁹

The emphasis on animals thus adds a fundamental perspective to what the Mahafaly deem sacred. For in many ways, each element within their surroundings, their lifestyle, the items they possess, all stand as significant aspects of their most sacred ritual, the ritual of asking for water. The sacred forest known as the Mendorava Forest, for instance, holds particular meaning because it not only has the special wood used to build coffins (Mafferson), but it is where the Mahafaly used to bury their dead (Mafferson). The *aloalo* is used to tell the story of an individual's lineage and life. Thus, such aspects are used and expressed in Mahafaly oral literature as one will see below.³⁰

Mahafaly Stories: Present-day Literature

Oral practices and stories that recount the importance of the aforementioned symbols are abundant and an inherent feature of Mahafaly oral literature. Animals such as *zebu* or goat, the purity and sacred qualities of water, holy forests—such cultural markers can be found in a variety of styles and structures, from stories to practices (Mafferson). According to Avimary, there are three oral practices that are reflective of the Mahafaly people:

The first practice is a rite known as *Takasy*. This practice is a sacred song that is unique to circumcision and funeral rites. Many people are generally involved in its performance. Those who perform this ritual are those that abide strictly to Mahafaly customs and traditions.

The second practice is also used for circumcision and funeral rites, but unlike *Takasy*, *Sabo* is considered less worthy and significant.

²⁹ A particular circumcision ritual that the Mahafaly practice known as *savadse* is extremely significant within the culture (Razafitiana). It should be noted that the Mahafaly place a considerable amount of importance on this ritual. Professor Jeanine Rambeloson of literature at the University of Tana stated in an interview that the Mahafaly do not consider a male child truly born until he has been circumcised. As she put it, circumcision is the true birth [of a child] (Rambeloson). (Translated from French: “La circoncision est la véritable de naissance.”)

³⁰ *Aloalo* are particularly referenced in myths (Avimary).

The last ritual is called *Beko*, which is a song that only 2 or 3 people are involved in (Avimary).³¹ However, current scholars claim that usually there is a designated individual who has the ‘right’ to speak and recite the song-poem (Mafferson, Razainorrovelo), that is to say that this individual is generally someone with prestige such as a chief of a family or clan (Razainorrovelo). *Beko* is performed at nearly all public ceremonies—marriages, burials, and funerals (Avimary, Mafferson, Razainorrovelo, Rajaonarison) and can involve the recitation of a poem and singing (Razainorrovelo). In addition to the exclusivity placed on the speaker, a gift-exchange of money is involved. Thus, it is a ritual practiced mainly by the upper-class (Avimary, Razainorrovelo). A wealthy member of the audience will give money to the singer to sing louder and more sonorously about the pride and valor of the deceased individual (Avimary, Rajaonarison).

Oral practices such as these therefore act as portals in which to transmit the everyday emotions, conflicts, and events that comprise the Mahafaly people. The following collected stories are a glimpse into the culture of the Mahafaly. None of them had ‘official’ titles. They require the suspension of disbelief on the reader’s part, for the essence of each story stems from the storyteller’s ability to manipulate reality. Although none of these stories fit into the three categories mentioned above, they are interesting in that they deal with the environment or aspects of the surroundings as cultural markers and symbols. All were recounted verbally and translated from French into English, some even from Malagasy to French, and then to English. Through symbolism, allegory, and other literary techniques, the stories convey the sentiments and belief systems of the storytellers and the Mahafaly cultural identity as well.

³¹ *Beko* is also practiced throughout the southern region, particularly in the province of Toliara (Razainorrovelo, Rajaonarison).

1. Etsimangafalahy and Tsimagnolobala

Etsimangafalahy asked a young girl named Tsimagnolobala for her hand in marriage. Before they married, however, Tsimagnolobala's father said to Etsimangafalahy, his future-son-in-law, "You cannot marry my daughter, unless you bring me water so that I can give you a benediction." Then, Etsimangafalahy brought water to his father-in-law. In blessing Etsimangafalahy, Tsimagnolobala's father drank the water and threw it at him in the name of the God Andrianagnahary.

After this blessing, Tsimagnolobala's father said to Etsimangafalahy and Tsimagnolobala, "Water is very important and sacred in life because with the water that your parents give you, they are also giving you their blessing and pardoning your faults."

He continued. "After dinner or a long journey, you do not have the right to drink water in front of your parents or before the oldest member in the family; that is to say, the parents and the oldest member are the first ones to drink water after dinner or a long journey. Also, if there are foreigners or guests in your home who have come from a very far place and have just arrived, give them water first and then you can ask them about the reason for their visit, for water is considered to be a cure for thirst. Thus, if you respect the importance of water in life, you will become the leader, a respectful man in society, and live a long life on earth."

Thus, Etsimangafalahy respected his father-in-law's advice and he became, at last, as Tsimagnolobala's father told him.

-Désiré Razafitiana, Ampanihy

2. The Three Kings

A long time ago, there was a couple who had many children. One day, a famine struck their village.

The husband said to his wife, “We have too many children. We need to leave some behind.” But the wife did not want to. Afterwards, she was left with no choice but to agree and three of the children were chosen. One of the three was the oldest of all the children and knew that his parents were going to abandon him and his two siblings. The other two did not know. The wife said to her husband, “For me, I cannot leave my children. Do what you will, but I wash my hands of whatever it is that you decide to do.”

Later, the father said to his three children, “We are going to go find some food for the family.” They set out on the journey. When they had gone very far from their village, the father asked his children, “Do you know where we are?”

The oldest answered, “Yes.” They continued to walk farther, until the father stopped and asked his children the same question. “Do you know where we are?” The oldest responded, “Yes, Father.” They continued to walk even farther and farther and farther away from the village until the father turned to his children and asked the same question for the third time. This time, the oldest answered, “No.”

Hearing this, the father stopped and said, “The three of you will rest here and wait for me and your mother to come and get you. When it gets dark, you will hear two Toulo birds chirping. The sound of the male bird is different from the sound of the female bird. If you hear the male bird, then it means I am here. If it is the sound of the female bird, then your mother has arrived.” And with that, he left them there and walked away.

Later, the two younger children heard the sound of the female bird and thought that Mother had arrived. The oldest said, “No, it is not Mother. Our parents have abandoned us and we are lost.” It was night. The three children eventually slept near a fire in the order that they were born, oldest to youngest.

Awhile later, a monster appeared to where the children were sleeping. This monster spoke and ate humans.

He asked, "Who sleeps before the fire?"

The oldest, hearing the monster's voice, responded, "It is me, the oldest."

The monster asked, "Who is the second one sleeping before the fire?" The second child was fast asleep. The oldest answered, "It is me, the second one."

The monster asked, "Who is the third one sleeping before the fire?" The third child was also fast asleep. The oldest answered, "It is me, the third one."

The monster, now realizing that there were three humans sleeping in front of the fire wanted to eat all of them. The monster decided to return later and left. The minute the monster disappeared, the oldest child woke up his two siblings and said, "Do not sleep. There is a monster that wants to eat us, and thus, our parents have abandoned us."

All three were now wide awake and awhile later, the monster returned, asked the same questions, and left once more.

Morning arrived. The monster had left and the three children discussed what to do. They decided to leave and find safer shelter. They went to an enormous baobab tree and made a staircase to climb up to the top of it. After the last child was in the tree, the oldest left his two siblings there and went to go find things to eat. He put the staircase up on the tree so that the monster could not climb up.

Later, the oldest returned with many hedgehogs. He cooked all of them, leaving one at the base of the tree, and taking the rest up to his siblings. The monster instantly smelled the odor of the freshly cooked animals, found his way to the baobab, and ate the hedgehog at the base of the tree. Afterwards, he was still hungry and wanted more. The children looked down from above at the monster searching for more hedgehogs. When it was close enough to the baobab, the children let down a net to catch the monster, but the net got caught in its mouth. The children pulled the cord that the net was attached to, causing pain in the monster's throat.

The monster asked, “Why does my throat hurt so much?”

The children responded, “Come closer. We can help you.”

Following the cord, the monster slowly made his way to the top of the tree, but just as he was near the summit, the children cut the cord, forcing the monster to fall and die. Seeing that the monster was dead, the children climbed down the tree and approached it. They decided to cut open the monster’s stomach with a knife. When they did, they found that all the people who were eaten were still alive in his stomach. There was a little lake near this spot in which they had slain the monster. The people drank this water and were saved. From then on, the three children were considered kings and treated like royalty by these people, for having saved their lives.

News of lost children who were abandoned in the forest and then suddenly becoming wealthy kings spread to the villages. The father of these three kings was one of the first to hear the news.

He told his wife, but she refused to believe him, saying, “Our children are already dead.”

The husband said, “We are going to go see them for ourselves.” The wife refused, and in the end, the father chose not to go either.

One day, the children sent their servant to find their mother, but gave orders to leave the father. When the messenger arrived, the mother and the rest of the children left for the palace to live a nice life with the three kings. The father ended up penniless and died a beggar, deeply regretting his act and said, “If I could undo what I have done, I would never have abandoned my children.”

-Emilien Ramiandrisoa, Ankiliabo

3. The Baobab

There was once a person who went into the forest. He climbed to the top of a baobab tree with a ladder. When he reached the summit, he found that there was an abundance of water lying there.

One day, somebody was walking by the baobab and took the ladder that was still hung on the trunk, leaving the person stranded in the tree.

For one week, he was stuck in this baobab, but did not perish because he drank the water that was there. He could not eat anything, as there was nothing to eat, but he drank this water that the baobab had to offer.

This is why water is important and that sometimes it is better to drink it than eat anything at all.

-Tahienandro, Ampanihy

4. The Origins of the Mahafaly and Antandroy

A long time ago, the first group to settle in Ampanihy was from the Bara clan. Many men from this tribe, however, left and deserted this region, leaving behind just a few. One of these men was a father of two sons. The first-born and the second-born were not on good terms.

One day, the father said to his two children, "I am going away for eight years. The two of you will stay here."

The first-born was a herder of zebu, lamb, sheep, and goats. The second-born was a farmer and tended to his harvest. The second-born was a very good cook and could make delicious meals with what he grew.

Eight years passed. The father returned home to his two sons. The oldest child had amassed a great deal of cattle; four million livestock were in his possession. When the father came to see him, the oldest said, "Father, I have raised a lot of livestock. I want to show

you.” The livestock, however, was divided into two parts, one of which was already within the proximity of the father, who could see the many zebu congregated. Wanting to show his father the other half of the livestock, he went to go amass the zebu and bring them to his father. But while he was trying to do so, some of the zebu began fighting in front of a tree called ‘Roy’. The group, thus, could not be brought to his father, and he went and informed him of the problem.

Awhile later, the second son arrived. He gave his father a cooked meal. When the father was done eating and felt content and full, he said to the youngest, “I am pleased with how you’ve welcomed me home.” He continued. “From now on, you will be known as ‘Mahafaly,’ which signifies contentment.” To the first child, the father turned towards him and said, “From now on, you will be ‘Antandroy,’ which signifies zebras that fight in front of the ‘roy’ tree.”

Afterwards, the father divided both brothers. Antandroy was allotted the lands east of Ampanihy. Mahafaly was given the west. Today, the Mahafaly, or the people living to the west of Ampanihy, drink water that comes from the Menarandra River, while the Antandroy drinks water from the Mandrave River. Because of these two different rivers that yield two different types of water, each ethnic tribe has their own dialect and culture. Nevertheless, both the Antandroy and Mahafaly share a common ancestor. This story explains the origins of the Mahafaly.

-Jean XIV Albert, Ampanihy

5. *‘Mandikalily’*

In the past, a long, long time ago, Ampanihy was divided into three parts, each part ruled by one of three brothers from the Maroseragna clan. The first part bordered the River Menarandra-Ampanihy. The second bordered the River Onilahy-Betoky. And the third bordered the River Linty-Ejeda.

After many, many years, these three divisions caused the dryness of what Ampanihy and much of the southern region experience today. Moreover, along with time came change and development. Evolution was eventually what caused each division to change and adapt to the times. The people within each division thus also followed the evolution of their society, inhibiting them from upholding the traditional Mahafaly beliefs and practices.

-Hector Andriamahazo, Ampanihy

Modernization and Oral Literature: Developments and Dilemmas

Storytelling has evolved into somewhat of an enterprise in Madagascar today. The social and technological developments have altered facets of the way stories are transmitted, by whom, and why. In the past, telling stories was a means of informally educating the children in each village (Razafitiana, Avimary, Ramiandrisoa, Tahienandro, Razainorvelo). Every night, the grandmother or the grandfather (Razainorvelo) or the oldest member in the village (Razafitiana), would bring all the village children together (Razainorvelo) and recount stories, legends, and myths to educate the young about their history (Razainorvelo). Usually, the story told would contain a lesson or moral to be learned (Razainorvelo, Razafitiana). The absence of schools in the past had allowed for this type of informal teaching to evolve. Today, however, politics and the changing economy have developed both public and private schools all over Madagascar, forcing oral practices to become a mere pastime (Ramiandrisoa). Development brought formal education, which in turn rendered the practice of oral literature unnecessary (Ramiandrisoa). Socially and politically moreover, the concept of traditional practices itself became questioned once the missionaries introduced Christianity into Malagasy society (Tahienandro). Everyone began going to church instead of telling stories, which are fused with traditional belief systems (Tahienandro).

Today, one can only find oral tradition retained in those villages where traditional customs are strictly adhered to and development has yet to reach them (Ramiandrisoa). This statement, however, is debatable, for one of the transformed facets of oral tradition significant to its existence altogether is the storyteller himself. In the past, a storyteller held a much-coveted role that only select individuals could have (Tahienandro, Avimary). Today, most if not nearly all of the “real” (Tahienandro) storytellers are long deceased (Tahienandro).

Additionally, the radio has replaced the grandparent in today’s oral practices (Razainorvelo), and for many, such a development is a positive aspect that helps sustain the genre of oral tradition. The radio and television have become tools that simplify the transmission of stories (Razainorvelo). Time and modernization have uprooted many individuals to various parts of Madagascar (Razafitiana). Thus, the radio helps preserve the stories by transmitting them no matter where one is on the island (Razafitiana, Eonjondray, Ramiandrisoa, Tahienandro, Andriamahazo).

For others, however, modernization has failed to sustain oral literature (Avimary, Mafferson, Razanonoro), rendering it a mere relic of the past. Much of the reasoning behind this rationale stems from the *mandikalily* (Avimary). Modern development has induced today’s generation to have new forms of interest (going to the movies, watching television were some ‘interests’ cited) (Avimary). As a result, they no longer follow tradition (Avimary). Technology, specifically the radio, has not facilitated the continuation of oral tradition; the young know how to ignore the radio by shutting it off (Avimary). The only way to ensure that the practice is sustained is to integrate the stories within a pedagogical repertoire within a formalized educational setting (Avimary).

Such insinuations that oral tradition is a dying art stems from the changed role of the storyteller. The storyteller no longer carries the power of enchanting children with stories and legends. Back in the day, when a grandparent told a story, the children would listen

(Avimary). But development has changed this custom—and not necessarily in a negative way. Avimary used his own family as an example. With his children, he does not want to interfere with their intellectual growth. He would rather have his children pay attention to their studies than listen to an old man recite stories. Studying, he claimed, produces a diploma, which means a future.³² If his children want to hear stories, however, it is undoubtedly his pleasure to tell them, but the choice is theirs, not his. The maintenance of today's stories depend on the younger generation. The reality of social evolution therefore is recognized no matter how nostalgic one is of the past. Avimary is aware, however, of this shift in power from the storyteller to the listener and he blames nationalization for this transformation.³³

For others, however, the issue of how oral tradition has not evolved deals more with how the Mahafaly have not allowed it to; their tenacious attachment and obstinacy to these practices have inhibited the traditions to change, i.e., progress (Mafferson). M. Robin Mafferson, the director of Ampanihy's high school, believes that technological advancements such as the radio and television have not retained the oral tradition of the Mahafaly people because much of that is already being done by the people themselves. He made the following comment:

The problem with our society here is the mentality of tradition. The people do not want to change, neither in their mentality nor in their actions. They want, simply, to respect their tradition...It is for this reason that I said [earlier] that scholars [from outside Ampanihy] should come and do research to try and bring with them certain ways of thinking or just to observe so that they can bring about change that can be adopted by the oral tradition of the people.³⁴

³² Translated from French: "Les études a crié le diplôme."

³³ Translated from French: "Ca c'est la faute de nationalisé."

³⁴ Translated from French: "Le problème de notre société ici, c'est justement un raisonnement de la tradition. Les gens ne veulent pas changer, ni leur façon de penser, ni leur façon d'agir. Ils veulent tout simplement respecter leur tradition...C'est pour ça que j'ai dit que les intellectuels doivent faire des recherches pour essayer d'apporter quelques manières de penser ou bien de voir pour amener de changement adapter à la tradition orale."

Oral tradition amongst the Mahafaly people, thus, has not evolved because the people do not want to (Mafferson). Even with the presence of the radio, the traditions are not being upheld because most of the storytellers who knew the stories have long since deceased and today's generation has minimal knowledge about the genre to sustain it (Mafferson). Hearing a story being told through the town's own radio station has yet to take place (Mafferson).

This last comment is indeed a problem. Marie Razanonoro, the director of Radio Fanilon Ampanihy, Ampanihy's radio station, took this controversy even further by revealing how the cash economy affects whether or not stories are generated. Oral literature has not evolved, or rather, the process of evolution has not yet reached oral tradition (Razanonoro). There are few people who are interested in the subject nowadays and this disinterest hinders the tradition's sustainability (Razanonoro). The radio, despite having an allotted time slot every Wednesday night, cannot do much to uphold the practice either—because today's storytellers demand money in exchange for the stories (Razanonoro). Conserving this practice, in Razanonoro's perspective, is thus an economic matter. The people who know tales to tell want a sum in return, one that neither the station nor Razanonoro herself has the capability to finance. As a result, stories rarely come in, which means the program never gets aired. Moreover, the financial state of the station is oftentimes at stake and thus it is difficult to maintain a program that is rarely played.

This change in mentality has much more to do with the changing economy than anything else (Razanonoro). In the past, the quality of life in Ampanihy, in all of Madagascar in general, was better (Razanonoro). Stories *could* be told for free by the old sages who knew them. But today, the political and economical strife has forced individuals to constantly be searching for ways to make money (Razanonoro). Thus, in this circumstance, knowledge of stories exist as an item for sale that the individual can profit from. The practice of oral

tradition, however, is not completely dead. One can still find it practiced within the context of rituals and ceremonies, a common one being a funeral rite (Razanonoro).

Synthesis: Analysis of Findings

In looking closely at how some Mahafaly believe the desert landscape in which they inhabit is a punishment from God for disobeying traditional customs, an intriguing social schema becomes apparent that takes complete precedence over anything else. Many of the informants that adhered to this belief showed an aspect of Mahafaly culture that respects and fears a higher authority that exists. For the majority of the informants I interviewed, honoring this relationship with Andrianagnahary is crucial. They are guided by this “invisible spirit” (Ramiandrisoa), as indicated by the water ritual in which the focal point of the ceremony is to offer a sacrifice. Oral literature thus succeeds in presenting these factors that motivate a group or a community to participate in a public ritual (“It requires each family who owns zebu to kill one as a sacrifice as a plea to God for rain” (Mafferson, Razafitiana, Razanonoro, Tahienandro.))

This belief of the desert as punishment is thus one example of how the figurative aspect of their environment induces the Mahafaly to perform such rituals. On a more literal note, animals stand as important symbols and totems that dictate how one behaves and thinks within Mahafaly society. There is, however, a correlation between this more literal, grounded belief in the holiness of animals and the more figurative, philosophical belief in Andrianagnahary’s punishment. Both stand as powerful symbols that inspire the Mahafaly to believe in a social order that is ever-present for them today as it was in the past. There is much to be said about the fact that these rituals were not merely accounts of ceremonies that were done long ago. The informants themselves were providing evidence of their reality and how they behave accordingly to these beliefs today. Avimary’s small tale of the tortoise is

not something that was once believed and forgotten. As he claimed, “to this day, one cannot kill [tortoises].” They remain as an element of Mahafaly society that is still recognized.

The collected stories all have the commonality of identifying water as a sacrosanct object that quenches the thirst of anyone or anything in dire need of it. I understand this unity as exemplary of the sacred position water holds for the Mahafaly. The dryness in these stories parallels anything deprived or in need. In *The Three Kings*, for instance, the children split open the monster’s stomach to find the people still alive, but barely surviving. The audience knows that they are alive, but not well, for the next scene describes them going to a nearby lake to quench their thirst, at which they are then saved. The people, realizing that they would not have been able to retrieve the water without the three children cutting open the monster’s stomach and freeing them, equates them with the holiness that they found in the water that saved them. In *Etsimangafalahy and Tsimagnolobala*, the underlying message that is relayed at the end of the story is to regard water with reverence by doing such things as offering it to guests if they have traveled far before asking them the reason for their visit; or how water can be used to give blessings for marriages and pardoning sins. Both stories, although different in style and form, share the same role of signifying water as an important facet of living.

In *The Origin of the Mahafaly and the Antandroy*, water has such a powerful presence in Ampanihy that it can induce people to speak different dialects: “Today, the Mahafaly, or the people living to the west of Ampanihy, drink water that comes from the Menarandra River, while the Antandroy drinks water from the Mandrave River. Because of these two different rivers that yield two different types of water, each ethnic tribe has their own dialect and culture. Nevertheless, both the Antandroy and Mahafaly share a common ancestor” (Jean XIV Albert). This particular story, however, also uses the ‘uniform but diverse’ theory in that an ethnic clan can define itself, but its origins share roots with another. Specifically, it is an attestation to Mahafaly personhood, that in spite of the common ancestor they share with the

Antandroy, the need to distinguish each identity is important to them. The story, however, is clearly biased in the way it attempted to explain the character traits of the Mahafaly and the Antandroy respectively. The Mahafaly, according to this version of this story, are gentle, nice farmers, while the Antandroy are showy, fierce—as implicated through the bulls fighting in front of the *roy* tree—breeders. Such rigid, binary divisions allow the Mahafaly to pronounce their cultural identity so as to distinguish themselves from others in a country that is brimming with various other ones. There is no indication in the story, nor in the way it was recited, that the bias was there out of malice and resentment. On the contrary, Jean XIV made sure to emphasize the amicable relations between the two ethnic clans by stating that “nevertheless, both the Antandroy and Mahafaly share a common ancestor.” Thus, any suspicion of animosity is reconciled.

Explanations such as these portray pieces of the cultural identity of the Mahafaly, but more importantly, it also examines how the environment’s relationship to the verbal arts shapes the Mahafaly people and their social customs.

The influence of modernization on Mahafaly oral literature is that technology such as the radio and television has eventually introduced novel ways in their environment in which to tell a story. The majority opinion lies in the fact that technological advancement has indeed helped transmit stories on a much wider scale than before. Now no matter where one is on the island, one can listen to stories, poetry, etc. Désiré Razafitiana is living proof of this phenomenon. Sometimes, he will have a story to tell and will go to Radio Fanilon Ampanihy so that all of Ampanihy can hear it. But such a project is rarely, if at all, performed. As Marie Razanonoro claimed: “The people who know tales to tell want a sum in return.” Her comment on the decrease in the quality of life has affected the way oral literature exists in Ampanihy today. Although I understand the sentiment behind Razanonoro’s nostalgia for the way things were, it is crucial to realize, that this reality has not completely eradicated

traditional customs, nor does having something be ‘affected’ necessarily mean that it ‘changed’ it. It is relatively easy, particularly for first-world countries, to situate traditional practices and belief systems of developing countries in their ‘original’ form, that is to say, ‘the way they were back in the day.’ But doing so places and assumes that the traditional practices of a group of a people are static and unchanging, that they are and forever will be a practice that is disconnected from its present-day reality. The fact, however, that these stories have been shared by these storytellers shows that at least this assumption is not the case for Ampanihy.

Conclusion

There is a saying that a ceremony is not really a ceremony unless it includes discourse (Razainoroveló). The significance of oral literature then lies in its ability to use words. The power of the spoken word has a considerable amount of weight in Malagasy society today because of its eminent presence in public performance that is constantly changing and adopting both new and present methods. What these performances, practices, stories, etc. seek to convey to the general public and why is a notion that needs to be continuously reevaluated, not just in the field of anthropology, but in literature, history, and development as well. For in many instances, oral literature gives a visual representation of the communication of ideas between two people; subtleties, metaphors, emotions—things that one can experience from reading a novel or poem are physically witnessed in real, current, present-day practices of a society and culture. And why is this important? Because it closes the gap that exists from one culture to the next, encouraging an exchange of ideas and cultural nuances that are irretrievable from reading a history book. It is thus also crucial to recognize oral literature as a dynamic process that is continuously changing. Just as there is not one, definite way of telling a story, there is not one definite ideology behind oral literature; its

messy, overlapping amalgam of sub-genres are what should compel others to continue research and further study of its complexities.

Specifically in regards to Mahafaly oral literature, little is known on the subject itself, let alone the people and their region. Further study can potentially bring more awareness, not just to Mahafaly oral literature, but the Mahafaly themselves and the development issues they face today. The reason I chose to look at Mahafaly oral literature through the environment stands largely due to the fact that I find they are interdependent. If oral literature is the expression of the day-to-day existence, the *culturs vivants* of a people itself, then the two are virtually inseparable. Only until such expressions become part of the pedagogical repertoire in institutions of higher learning can the understanding that the study of another culture (whether through the guise of anthropology or literature) is not a static, permanent, and perfectly pristine subject. Rather it is a process that is always developing.

What can potentially result from such conclusions is perceiving and distilling developmental issues through the understanding of the society confronted with these issues. Only then can international aid agencies, local NGO's, and other workers in development act accordingly. On September 28, 2005, a Professor of Anthropology, Michel Razafiarivony at the University of Tana's ICMAA issued forth the following statement in the abstract to his research dissertation on oral literature as a positive means of education:

[Oral literature]...needs to be studied by those who are responsible for children's education. They can be used to pass on knowledge, new ideas and new technology to pupils and students at school. It is verified by the study made in this paper on an oral poem created and taught by a schoolmaster at Anosibe an'ala in the East Center of Madagascar in 1940. Now, the old men who had learnt this poem, still remember and understand the message given to them...It is possible because the teacher thought in the world of his pupils and he spoke in their daily language, according to their customs. This fact must be considered regarding the fight against poverty undertaken nowadays in many of these oral societies. It will not have a good result if it is not supported by all the population; it does not belong only to the Government and the scholars. These lasts need to understand the mentality of the people. They are required to master the national or local language and then to talk to the people, to send their message. It is necessary to improve the level of knowledge of

the rural areas in order to make the national development a success, and oral literature is a good instrument for that.

-Michel Razafiarivony

Appendix A: Photos of Ampanihy

Main road in Ampanihy-ville, the central commercial center of the Ampanihy-West rural commune.

Radio Fanilon Ampanihy (RFA) is the radio station of Ampanihy-ville.

Radio announcer at work. (Ampanihy-ville)

Ankiliabo in the rural commune of Ankiliabo.

Cactus fruit. (Ankiliabo).

A hedgehog, such as this one, is the food for the hungry children in *The Three Kings*.
(Ankiliabo)

Emilien Ramiandrisoa; breeder, storyteller of *The Three Kings*. (Ankiliabo)

Jean XIV Albert; traditional medicine man, storyteller of *The Origin of the Mahafaly and Antandroy*. (Ankiliabo)

Residents and extended family members of Emilien. (Ankiliabo)

Typical Mahafaly tombstone with *aloalo*. (On the road to Agnosa)

Aloalo. (On the road to Agnosa).

Spiny cactus and sisal. (Ankiliabo).

Glossary

1. *Aloalo*- A word that describes a long, wooden post that relays the life and social reputation of the deceased in Mahafaly funeral ceremonies. It is usually placed on top of the tombstone.
2. *Angano*- The Merina word for 'story.'
3. *Beko*- A song-poem recited at funerals. This practice is predominantly practiced in the southern region of Madagascar.
4. *Bonheur*- good luck.
5. *Conte*- story, tale.
6. *Fady*- taboo.
7. *Fokonolona*- The people that live in the fokontany.
8. *Fokontany*- towns. In actuality, this word describes the various groups of communities within a rural commune.
9. *Hainteny*- The oral genre that includes poetry, poetic verse. It is predominant amongst the Merina.
10. *Haisoratra*- the written form of Malagasy literature.
11. *Haivolana*- the oral form of Malagasy literature.
12. *Kabary*- The oral genre that includes formal dialogue, or public speech.
13. *Mandikalily*- the violation of laws, customs, traditions.
14. *Matière*- base.
15. *Ohabolana*- The oral genre that includes sayings, proverbs.
16. *Parole*- verse, lyrics.
17. *Sabo*- A similar ritual to Takasy, but considered less prestigious.
18. *Sorom-bala*- The other name that designates Tsotse.
19. *Takasiry*- The word for 'story' used in Fort Dauphin.
20. *Takasy*- Sacred song that is unique to funeral and circumcision rituals amongst the Mahafaly.
21. *Talily*- The Mahafaly word for 'story.'

22. *Tapasiry*- The word for 'story' used in Toliara. It is also known as the word for 'bedtime stories' amongst the Mahafaly.
23. *Tapis*- hand-woven mats made from goat or sheep wool.
24. *Tsotse*- The ritual that each family performs where a sacrifice is made.
25. *vivants*- alive, fresh.

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