NAMING AND NAME CHANGING IN POSTCOLONIAL MADAGASCAR

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WHEN I FIRST MET Sahondry, she was a primary school teacher at the Catholic school of a small village in the southern Betsileo highlands of Madagascar, where I was conducting fieldwork.[1] As I expressed my surprise that an urban, educated woman lived in a such a rural place, I was told that she had taken up this job to hide from the police. A few years before, Sahondry had been accused of stealing a large sum of money while working for a nongovernmental organization in Ambovombe, in the south of Madagascar. She proclaimed her innocence but nevertheless chose to escape out of fear of being jailed. She first fled to the town of Betroka, a few hundred kilometers north, where she hid for some time at her grandparents' home. But the police tracked her down and came to arrest her in Betroka. She managed again to escape. Before leaving the town, however, she went to the city council *(mairie)* of Betroka and, with the help of a diligent civil servant who was a friend of her grandfather, she changed her name and her filiation in the civil registry. From one day to another, she officially became, under a new name, the natural daughter of her mother's sister (who had died prematurely some time before) and of an unknown father. With this new civil identity she felt a bit safer but decided nonetheless to stay away from the town and police. So when her mother and stepfather suggested a teaching job in a remote village, she took it up.

Unlike me, most people who knew about Sahondry's story were unimpressed by her change of name and filiation. They seemed to find this

change to be common sense, even though they were aware that it had been made somewhat illegally. Why, I wondered, was Sahondry's change so easily accepted, in particular by her close relatives, who helped her to make this change at the *mairie*? In order to fully understand Sahondry's story and the reason it looked so commonsensical to my Betsileo friends, it is necessary to situate it in the wider context of Malagasy and Betsileo naming practices.[2] This is precisely what I intend to do in this paper. My second goal is to further explore the significance of name changing, not only in Sahondry's arguably special case but also for the Betsileo in general.

In the first pages of his ethnography of the Betsileo (Kottak 1980), Conrad Kottak explains that he has changed personal and village names to preserve anonymity. This practice of name changing, he writes, "would no doubt be acceptable to the Betsileo themselves, since most change their names two or three times during their lives" (Kottak 1980, xi). But why do most Betsileo feel the need to change their name, and what consequences or implications does this practice have? Anthropologists have increasingly paid attention to naming systems and practices, as well as their relationship to social organization (Maillard-Vincent and Pauwels 2000; vom Bruck and Bodenhorn 2006; Zheng and Macdonald 2010; Chave-Dartoen, Leguy, and Monnerie 2012). They have emphasized that naming practices are far from anecdotal but rather have deep, sometimes unexpected meanings and effects and that personal names are often used to "do" a variety of things. As I show, name changing among the Betsileo is an important part of the process, well described in particular by Astuti (1995) and Bloch (1993) for Madagascar, through which an individual with no social role at birth slowly becomes an active adult and then a respected elder.

Naming Issues and State Control

Before addressing this issue, a few words need to be said about traditional Malagasy naming practices and their translation into Malagasy civil law after the 1960 independence.[3] In 1880, the British missionary Sibree noted that in traditional Madagascar there were no family names but only personal names that were attributed at birth and could be changed in the course of one's life (Sibree 1880, chapter 8; Gueunier 2012, 185). This situation is still the case today, even when we look at the issue in legal terms, because Malagasy law does not oblige people to bear a family name and it allows individuals to change their name, though with some restrictions. Although French colonial rule lasted more than 60 years, the postcolonial Malagasy state did not follow European rules on matters of naming. Whereas the French colonial administration had relied on a sort of regionalism where local *coutumes indigènes*

(indigenous customs) were maintained—a deliberate colonial policy known as *diviser pour régner* (divide and rule)—after independence, the new Malagasy Republic went the opposite way and sought to replace the colonial system by a civil law that would be applicable to the whole island.

Malagasy legislators addressed issues of naming in a decree published in the *Journal Officiel* on August 4, 1962. This decree is worth looking at, especially the part in which the legislators explain why the Malagasy law on naming had to differ from other legal systems:

> In numerous countries, the name marks the attachment of individuals to a family or a person from whom they take the name, so measures have been taken to render the use of a family name or patronymic name obligatory. Moreover, it is in principle forbidden to change this name.
>
> The national inquiry that has been made to collect the various Malagasy customs allows us to see that it is not possible to impose the patronymic name or to retain the principle of immutability of a name. The family name cannot be imposed because it is taboo (*fady*) to pronounce the name of a defunct. Moreover, there exists in Madagascar names that are typically masculine or feminine. It would be difficult to give to a girl her father's name, Rakoto, for example, or to give to a natural son his mother's name, Raketaka or Rasoa. Finally, almost all our customs have it that the name is the exterior reflection of someone's personality. It serves to identify the soul, the *fanahy maha-olona.*
>
> It is therefore normal that members of the same family all have different names.
>
> To respect these customs, it is decided that the adoption of a patronymic name will be facultative (article 2).
>
> Name changing is also maintained. However it has seemed necessary to … limit its number after majority. Misuse can effectively happen with deceptive goals, notably on the part of delinquents who want to hide their identity. (quoted in Gueunier 2012, 196, my translation)

The national inquiry mentioned in the text was conducted after independence by lawyers and social scientists who collected data on the customs existing in different parts of the island. The goal was to make sure that in the process of creating, almost from scratch, a new civil law, the young Malagasy Republic was not alienating itself too much from the traditional institutions of the country (Gueunier 2012, 195).

The last sequence of the quote shows that people like Sahondry, who changed their name in order to escape the police, caused some anxieties to the legislators of the new republic. This is why they set a limit of only one change of name after the age of majority (21). Such anxieties were previously shared by French colonial officers, who regarded the Malagasy habit of name changing as "deplorable." Gueunier cites in this respect the administrator Julien, who wrote the following shortly after the French takeover of the island:

> Because adults do not conserve the name under which they have been registered at birth, they can easily escape all the searches made to discover their trace. There is, moreover, a deplorable habit rooted among the Malagasy that consists of introducing oneself, when traveling, under a different name according to where one finds oneself; even more so do they change names when there is a capital interest, for example, when it is a question of shirking or even cleansing oneself from a defilement received under a previous name. The most "black" indigenous can therefore change his image (*faire peau neuve)* and change, so to speak, his individuality through his own action. A police record is impossible to establish; it is a true danger for society in general, as well as for the interests of Malagasy families in particular. (quoted in Gueunier 2012, 196, my translation)

Thus, from the point of view of colonial administrators or legislators of the new Malagasy Republic—or, to employ a useful shortcut, from the point of view of the colonial and postcolonial state—what we could call the "naming freedom" of the Malagasy constituted either a "true danger for society" (Julien) or at least was identified as a custom threatening the authority of state because of the risk of misuse. But why would the Malagasy change their name if they did not have to dissimulate their identity like Sahondry? Gueunier seems to suggest that the practice of name changing exists because people are sometimes given a "bad name" at birth (e.g., because they are born on an inauspicious day) and they want to change it when they grow up (Gueunier 2012, 195). The necessity of changing a bad name is well attested in the island, but it cannot account for the existence of Betsileo name changing because in the case of a bad name received at birth, one change would suffice. As we have seen, changing a birth name at majority is allowed by the Malagasy civil law today. In the decree I already referred to, the legislators explained that they left this possibility open (for one change only) precisely because they found it important that people could change a bad name at maturity.

"Positive" Reasons for Name Changing

In this paper, I am interested in more than the "negative" aspects of name changing, when it is used either to dissimulate an identity (as in Sahondry's case) or to remove a bad name given at birth. My initial assumption is, on the contrary, that the Betsileo practice must also have "positive" aspects that are not just concerned with remediating an unfortunate situation. The Betsileo I know who have changed their name several times were apparently never in need of dissimulating their identity or getting rid of a bad name. So why did they change their name?

Before answering this question, let us take a brief look at the structure of Malagasy names, drawing again from Gueunier's account. Nowadays, most names borne by individuals in Madagascar are a particular mix of foreign names (mainly Christian, French, or British but sometimes Muslim) and Malagasy names. This is because the spread of the Christian faith in the nineteenth century resulted in people increasingly giving names from the Bible to their children. These biblical names were often modified to follow the phonological and morphological rules of the Malagasy language (e.g., John becomes Jaonina or Jaona), and often the honorific particle *Ra-*, the word *andriana* (lord), or both were added to them (e.g., Rajaonina and Randrianarijaona). While at the beginning of Christian evangelization most people still had, in traditional Malagasy fashion, only one name, progressively the most common structure of names became "binomial," as Gueunier calls it (Gueunier 2012, 197). In this case, a Christian name (or other foreign name) is often juxtaposed to a Malagasy name, although sometimes both names are of Malagasy origin or, more rarely, both names are foreign.

Today the binomial name is probably the most widespread name structure in Madagascar, even though there still are people who have only one name (e.g., Ratsoja) or others who have more than two names. This binomial structure, however, significantly differs from that of European names because none of the two names is a patronymic or family name that is transmitted to children. As explained earlier, the legislators decided in 1962 that European-like patronymic names would be facultative. This decision held even though some people adopted the practice of transmitting a name with the binomial name. But even in these cases, and at any generation, the chain of name transmission can be broken since people are not bound by law to follow it. Another frequent habit, which in practice represents some middle way between totally unconstrained naming and European-like transmission of a family name, is that a particular name is transmitted to children as a root, although through different forms. Sahondry, when she changed her name, did precisely that: She chose a name with the root *Jaona*, a root found in the

names of her grandfather and many of her uncles, aunts, and cousins. I come back to the reasons this is so later, but for now it suffices to say that a kind of transmission of a name may exist, though it is always optative and takes a flexible form.

The flexibility in choosing personal names resonates with another kind of flexibility found in the organization of Betsileo society. The Betsileo belong to descent groups (called *karazana* or *foko*) that are corporate in several respects, though only at the local level. This means that a local branch of a supralocal descent group is headed by its most senior member, who exerts his authority (at least formally) over the group's land, cattle, and tomb. By contrast, the supralocal descent group is not corporate in this sense and does not have a head, strictly speaking. Yet only Betsileo supralocal descent groups have names (e.g., Zazamena, Otaray, and Maroafo). Descent is cognatic, meaning that individuals automatically belong to the groups of their two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, and so on. In practice, however, local descent groups tend to be patrilineally organized and post-marital residence is viripatrilocal. Most commonly, therefore, the children of a married couple live in the village of their father's local descent group, say a branch of the group known as Zazamena. Yet children are free, when they grow up, to choose to be affiliated with another group they belong to—for example, they may want to establish themselves in the village of the group of their maternal grandfather, known as the Maroafo, because they have the opportunity to cultivate some land there. Such a circulation of individuals among local descent groups is further facilitated by practices of fosterage and adoption, which are common between Betsileo kinsmen (Kottak 1986). A man's child, for example, may well be fostered until adulthood by the man's sister, who had married in another village and thus lives with another descent group. As a result, the child first has a main affiliation—the group of her father's sister's husband—that differs from the affiliation of her two parents, though this may change if the child decides later to come back to her father's village or to live in the village of origin of her mother.

What all this means is that there is a high degree of flexibility in group affiliation in Betsileo society, and this flexibility in turn has implications for the way people use descent group names to introduce themselves. For example, a woman who has established residence in the village of the Maroafo, the group of her maternal grandfather, will introduce herself locally as a Maroafo, whereas if she goes back to her paternal village, she will introduce herself as a Zazamena. This habit of presenting oneself contextually, the one the French administrator Julien found "deplorable," owes much to the Betsileo, in some contexts, being more readily identified by their belonging to a descent group rather than by their personal name, their function, or their village of origin.

People always introduce themselves with the descent group name that seems to be the most relevant in a given context, especially at rituals and in political meetings (e.g., in practice at funerals, where a party of men will say they are representing the Zazamena from Tanambao).

Thus even though Betsileo descent group names may appear, roughly, the equivalent of European-like family names, there is an essential difference. Because the descent group name is not part of someone's personal name, it never fixes or definitely categorizes a person into a particular group. On the contrary, as I have just explained, individuals can always choose the descent group name they want to use. In some, situations they may be asked to demonstrate, by providing some genealogical information, that they truly belong to the Maroafo, Zazamena, or Otaray, but once they have done so, nobody will dispute their belonging to the group and their right to use the descent group name for themselves. A great deal of flexibility is thus at work in the use of descent group names. As shown, the use of personal names is even more flexible. In this case, individuals are not limited to choosing among a number of names at their disposal: At a certain point in their life, they can decide how they want to be named.

The Betsileo Name-Changing Ritual

During fieldwork I was told by the oldest of my Betsileo friends that they had changed their personal name several times, but unlike Sahondry they had never done it officially; that is, they had never modified their name in the state's civil registry. In other words, they had not taken advantage of the possibility of one change offered by Malagasy law. In practice, these elders had borne, in the course of their life, different names that I call here usage names because they were different from their birth name, which remained their official name. Someone that everyone knew as Randriambelo, for example, was officially named Rajaonina Justin. His change to Randriambelo was never recorded at the *mairie* but only in the memory of his relatives, neighbors, and friends. How do people manage, one could ask, to have all their acquaintances call them by a new name when they suddenly decide that it would be better so? The answer is that name changing among the Betsileo is done publicly through a ritual performed at large family gatherings. Kottak reports that name-changing rituals are witnessed rarely among contemporary Betsileo (Kottak 1980, 218). Perhaps because the place where I conducted my research is more isolated than Kottak's field site, I had the opportunity to attend a few of these rituals, which are still commonly performed in this region.

It is a sunny morning in the southern Betsileo highlands and a *kiridy* (an ancestor-thanking ceremony) is going on in a village. A large number of humans and cattle are standing in a pen—the humans are grouped in the western part while the cattle are maintained in the eastern one—and outside the pen an even larger crowd is waiting. In the corral, the elders address the group's ancestors, sprinkle water from a large cup, and give their blessings to the group's members and zebus. After these blessings, the *lahy mahery* (strong men, i.e., young men in charge of the tasks requiring strength) of the group show their prowess during a *tolon'omby* (a kind of bullfight). When the *tolon'omby* comes to an end, the *lahy mahery* catch the animal that will be used to feed the guests of the *kiridy* and kill it. After the slaughtering, the *lahy mahery* leave the corral and join the audience around the wooden fence circling the pen. Then a man steps into the corral and approaches the dead zebu. He is the oldest son of the organizer of the *kiridy* and wears the formal dress of Betsileo men—a hat, a *lamba* (a large piece of cloth used to wrap oneself), and a walking stick. He is also carrying a baby wrapped in a *lamba hoana* (a printed cloth only used by women) on his back. He starts walking slowly around the zebu and, at regular occasions, violently strikes the animal's flank with his stick. While doing so, he shouts a litany of names: "Randrianarijaona Daniel's name is now Zaindrano; Rasoa is now Renibao…."

The man is announcing to the guests of the *kiridy* that a number of people are changing their name. The place and moment—in the center of the corral immediately after the elders' blessings, the *tolon'omby,* and the slaughtering of the zebu—make sure that the attention of the hundreds of guests is at its maximum, in a setting where the crowd will quickly disperse as soon as people want to eat, drink, talk, and dance in various parts of the village. Importantly, the ritual is also directed at another kind of audience: the man announces the new names to the *fahasivy* or *razana* (the ancestors). This is why he keeps on hitting the dead animal with his stick: He wants to attract and keep the ancestors' attention. The moment is well suited to making such an announcement to the ancestors too, since during their blessings the elders have already addressed them. Moreover, the slaughtered zebu is viewed as a kind of medium ensuring a privileged means of communication with them. But why does the man carry a baby on his back? During the blessings in the corral, all the group's babies were carried by women in such a fashion, behind the elders and in front of the zebus. The gathering of humans and animals in the pen stressed the fundamental continuity existing between the fertility of the descent group and the fertility of the herd of zebus, and humans and zebus were blessed together in the speeches of the group's elders. In the name-changing ritual, the man carrying a baby on his back and shouting new

names stresses another, though equally fundamental, kind of continuity: that existing among ancestors, living adults, and young children.

After a name-changing ritual, the social memorization of someone's new name is facilitated by the use of this name in a number of other ritual and social contexts. This happens at funerals, for example, where gifts offered by the guests are written down in notebooks. These notebooks are kept carefully because the members of the deceased's group want to keep track of the gifts they will have to reciprocate. In such a context, the names written down in notebooks are the usage names of the heads of families or local descent groups rather than their *anarana amin'ny karatra* ("names on the card"), that is, their official names. Moreover, at funerals the names of the members of the main descent groups to which the deceased belongs (i.e., usually the names of the members of the patrilineal descent groups of the deceased's parents) are recalled. In these genealogical speeches (*tetihara*), the names that are pronounced are again usage names rather than birth names.[4] In such contexts, as in many other situations that would be too long to list here, it is always people's usage name that matters.

The use of these names in rituals and customary contexts offers a stark contrast with other situations in which the southern Betsileo must provide the name that they received at birth and that has remained their official name. The most frequent situation when they have to do so is when they have to interact with the Malagasy state in one way or another. When, for example, they have to fill in administrative forms or sign a contract, they are well aware that they have to use the name that figures on their identity card. This may seem an obvious point, but I am highlighting it because, in practice, such a double naming leads to much confusion. Usage names can never completely replace one's birth name, even when the usage name has become so popular that most people do not recall what someone's birth name was, because there are always situations when the official name is needed. Conversely, knowing someone's birth name is never enough to navigate smoothly through local society. I found it a bit difficult to adapt to this double-naming practice when I was conducting fieldwork. But on several occasions I could see that it was not just me, a foreigner, who was struggling with personal names. In conversations people frequently had to make sure that their interlocutors knew who they were talking about. They often did so either by using both usage name and birth name, if they knew them, or more commonly by adding the name of the village of residence (e.g., "Razafipanjato from Tanambao") or some kinship links (e.g., "Ralay, the child of Razambelo"). I would suggest that this kind of confusion was perhaps less likely in the past, before the apparition of civil registries and the systematic use of identity cards in Madagascar, since presumably once someone had changed name the former name must have

been soon forgotten, because it was of no use anymore. In the contemporary situation, on the contrary, people must constantly switch between usage name and official name ("the name on the card"), because they need both of them.

After the naming ritual described earlier, it is not always the case that a new name sticks and easily replaces a former usage name (Kottak 1980, 218). My friend Franklin, for example, told me that he had already tried to bear the name of Randriatsoa but his attempt had somehow failed. Yet he had scrupulously followed the customs. At a *kiridy*, he had asked a man carrying a child on his back to shout his new name while hitting the dead zebu's flank with a stick. To his despair, however, people did not retain his new name and continued to call him Ramose Franklin ("Mister Franklin"). There might be several reasons for this relative failure. First, since Franklin is a primary school teacher, people kept on calling him Ramose ("Mister" from the French *Monsieur*), a common "function name" for a teacher, instead of calling him Randriatsoa. It is a specific and common feature of Malagasy naming practices that someone's function is used as a personal name (other examples include Rapasy, "Mister pastor," and Rapresy, "Mister president"). Second, and more importantly, Franklin had tried to bear the name of Randriatsoa when he was only in his midthirties. My guess is that he might have been a bit too junior for that, given that the name Randritsoa is that of his father and his father's brother (named Randriatsoa and Randriatsoa Michel, respectively). Since both men are still alive and are the most senior members of Franklin's local descent group, it may be that his choice of name was somewhat premature. Franklin told me that it was only a question of time and was confident that someday he too will bear the name of Randriatsoa that he had chosen for himself.

Franklin's difficulties in attributing himself a new name illustrate the difference between the various usage names under which the Betsileo can be known throughout their life and the conditions in which these names are acquired. To begin with, in daily life children are not often called under the name they received from their parents at birth, especially if the name they received was a non-Malagasy name, for example, a French or Christian name. Most children are called by a nickname as soon as they leave the cradle and start walking and playing around. Sometimes the nickname is simply an altered form of the birth name, sometimes it relates to a particular trait of the child (e.g., Pepela, "little girl"), or sometimes, as stressed by Kottak (1980, 218), a depreciative nickname is chosen because of its protective function against malevolent spirits (e.g., Rajako, "Mister monkey"). Let us call these affective or protective nicknames a child name. Needless to say, just like they cannot choose their birth name, children do not choose their child

name—the choice is made by adults in their surroundings. Child names are often used for quite a long time, often until a person's late teens or early twenties. They tend to be used until the children marry and have children themselves. Then as soon as they become parents, a significant change occurs in the naming practice: they are now called by a teknonym. Because as parents they often take part to the choice of their child's name, for the first time in their life they are partly responsible for the way people will call them.[5] Thus, for example, if the boy nicknamed Rajako (Mister monkey) became the father of a son named Baholo, after his child's birth he will be increasingly called, in his family and in his neighborhood and village, by the more respectful teknonyms Baban'i Baholo or Rain'i Baholo (father of Baholo). The same holds for Baholo's mother, who will be called Ren'i Baholo or Maman'i Baholo (mother of Baholo).

   After becoming parents and receiving a teknonym, and aside from the case of function names that I have already mentioned, a further step into adulthood and seniority is to choose a new name for oneself, and it is here that we find the names that are publicly announced at the naming ritual. In this case, names are fully chosen by those who want to bear them, and I suggest that this is precisely the point: It is a name that individuals freely choose, as opposed to the names that were imposed upon them by others. If I am right, then the increasing freedom in self-naming is closely correlated to the achievement of senior status. Birth names, child names, function names, and even teknonyms are not freely chosen. But as people grow up, beget children, and are increasingly considered as *raiamandreny* (father and mother),[6] they also become more likely to participate to important decisions in the local community. In this context, attributing oneself a new name is a way of both demonstrating and enacting senior status. Of course this new name will have to stick and as we have seen in Franklin's case it is not always the case that it does. My understanding is that the new names shouted at the ritual are more easily retained when local people tend to judge that the person has reached the senior status allowing her to bear this name. Choosing one's name is thus a meaningful action in life principally because, provided the intended change is successful, it demonstrates one's seniority and agency—or, to put it differently, one's *raiamandreny* status. The practice of name changing is therefore an important aspect of the Betsileo construction of the person. By choosing a new name, individuals indicate their belief that they have reached the status allowing them to do so, and by proposing their name through the naming ritual they make this claim known to a wide audience. The audience, in turn, somehow evaluates this claim by starting to use the new name or by continuing to use the former one. In other words, if a majority of people tend to

think that the person is senior enough then the new name will stick and the former one will tend to be forgotten.

In this self-naming practice the names chosen are not just names that peo-ple have heard somewhere and found so nice that they wanted to bear them. In most cases, they are meaningful because they connect people, in one way or another, to other people in their descent group and family history. We have seen in Franklin's case that he wanted to bear the name of Randriatsoa. Randriatsoa is not only a name borne by his father and paternal uncle but is also that of several of his ancestors, and most importantly that of the ances-tor who first migrated to the region and founded the village where Franklin still lives. Randriatsoa is therefore the apical ancestor of the local descent group, and as such he is the most important figure in Franklin's genealogy. Interestingly, Franklin, despite his young age (forty-one), is already acting as the head of his local descent group, since his father and paternal uncles are too old to deal with all the duties that their position implies (although they still have to give their blessings for whatever is decided by more junior mem-bers like Franklin) and his older brothers have migrated to another region of Madagascar. It therefore makes much sense that Franklin is claiming the name of Randriatsoa for himself.

Let us call a name that someone's ancestor has borne in the past an ances-tral name. Choosing an ancestral name is one of the favorite options for enacting *raiamandreny* status. Sometimes ancestral names are simply reused as such, like in Franklin's case, but often they are modified, for example, by adding the root *zafy* ("grandchildren," but also, by extension, "descendant") or another word in the construction of the new name. Thus, a name like Razafimahasely may be chosen to stress that the person is a descendant of the man called Ramahasely. Or remember the case of Sahondry, who reused Jaona, a root she had found in her mother's group, to construct her new name. What I previously called the root is nothing other than the name (or part of the name) of an important ancestor on the maternal side of Sahondry. This emphasis through naming of a special connection between oneself and a particular person among one's ancestors is often motivated by prestige, like in the case of Franklin, but it can also be motivated by other reasons such as affection—a person may want to bear the name of a cherished grandpar-ent—or a particular episode or character in the family history.

Besides ancestral names, the other popular option for *raiamandreny* is to choose a teknonym. When a man asks to be named Raiboba or a woman asks to be named Renivao, they want people to remember that they are the father of Boba (*ray,* "father," plus Boba) or the mother of Vao (*reny,* "mother," plus Vao). At first, the choice of a teknonym may seem to contradict my interpreta-tion of name changing as a way of demonstrating and enacting *raiamandreny*

agency since, as I have already stressed, teknonyms are usually names that are only partly chosen by oneself. But there is no contradiction: the choice of a teknonym still makes sense for a *raiamandreny* if we remember that most Betsileo have a relatively large number of children and that the custom is to use the teknonym referring to their first (or, sometimes, last) child. In these conditions, the choice of a particular teknonym means, in practice, stating one's preference for being called in reference to one child rather than to another. As with ancestral names, the motives for such a preference may be affection but also prestige, for example, when children have, as adults, achieved a high status in society and their proud parents want their name to show their parental link to them.

I have highlighted so far the significance of Betsileo name changing at the individual level by stressing its importance in the construction of the person and the achievement of *raiamandreny* status. But the practice of name changing also has meaningful consequences if we consider it at the level of the group. Because the new names chosen by adult members of the group are, in majority, either ancestral names or teknonyms, the outcome is that the group as a whole is always simultaneously looking backward and forward, so to speak. What I mean is that the coexistence of ancestral names and teknonyms among the group's *raiamandreny* evoke both the past (i.e., the group's ancestors, its dead, and its family history) and the future (i.e., its children and its descendants). Thus, even though the group's personal names always keep changing through time, in a kind of permanent back-and-forth movement between past and future as people change an ancestral name for a teknonym, or vice versa, taken together these names remain the expression of a strikingly visible continuity among the ancestors, the living senior members, and the children of the group. As Kottak rightly stresses, the name-changing ceremony "can be viewed as a ritual statement of the individual's incorporation within a descent group consisting of dead and living representatives" (1980, 218). The practice of name changing, therefore, not only participates in the construction of the person but also in the dynamic perpetuation of the group's identity through time.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, let me briefly go back to the case of Sahondry in the light of what I have explained about Betsileo name changing. It should be clear by now that Sahondry's decision to change her name to escape the police took place in a cultural context where changes of name and group affiliation are frequent and important for the construction of a person. Sahondry became officially the natural daughter of her deceased mother's sister and of an unknown father, but this did not pose a problem to her

relatives, not only because fosterage and adoption between close kinsmen are common practices among the Betsileo—and Sahondry's change of filiation can be seen as a kind of adoption—but more importantly because she managed to blur her legal identity while remaining legally affiliated with her maternal descent group because of this stratagem. Despite being different from the customary practice, Sahondry's change of name was also easily accepted, not only because she used the ancestral name Jaona, found in her maternal descent group, to construct her new name but also because people seemed to consider Sahondry's success in name changing more as evidence of her agency than as a morally or legally wrong action. After all, in a way she made use of the possibility offered by Malagasy law to change a bad name—in the sense that her birth name had become bad because it could bring her serious trouble—even though she had to do this change illegally because she could not take the risk of leaving an administrative trace of her change. She also needed to modify her filiation, in addition to her change of name, to make sure that the police could not identify her through her parents' names, which appear on Malagasy identity cards. Unlike what happens in the traditional practice of Betsileo name changing, however, the agency that Sahondry showed through her acquisition of a new official name did not correlate with any achievement of senior status. Most people continued to call her by her child name.

NOTES

1. The fieldwork upon which this paper is based was conducted in the southern Betsileo region of Madagascar, first from 2008 to 2010 for my PhD degree at the London School of Economics (LSE) and then in September–October 2012 for postdoctoral research at the Institut Jean Nicod. I am grateful to the LSE, the University of London, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Institut Jean Nicod, the Ecole Normale Supérieure, and the European Research Council for their support. I also thank Rita Astuti, Maurice Bloch, Michael Scott, and the participants to the Austronesia seminar at LSE for providing comments on an earlier draft.

2. In this paper, "naming" mostly refers to personal names, although at some point I also say something about descent group names.

3. In what follows, I build on a study by Gueunier (2012), who gives an interesting account of the evolution of Malagasy personal names.

4. See Regnier (2012; 2014) on the importance of *tetihara* among the Betsileo.

5. For comparative material on teknonymy in another group of Madagascar—the Zafimaniry—see Bloch (2006).

6. Being considered a *raiamandreny* is important in Betsileo society, since the word not only means "parents" but also "elders" and "notables" in a given community.

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