IAI **AFRICA**

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The chameleonic nature of freedom: notes on the concept of *fahafahana* in the Highlands of Madagascar

Marco Gardini

University of Pavia, Italy
Email: marco.gardini@unipv.it

Abstract

This article explores the conceptual and practical meanings of *fahafahana* ('freedom' in Malagasy) in the Highlands of Madagascar, a context where the legacies of past forms of slavery have left deep marks both in local memories and in social and economic hierarchies. In particular, it focuses on the ways in which specific notions of freedom have been elaborated against the background of the local history of slavery and emancipation; how these concepts have been charged with different meanings in different periods of Malagasy history, becoming an arena for the elaboration of different political agendas; and how people of different status, class, gender and age reframe the concept of freedom in their everyday lives. Local notions of freedom emerge as part of the local political commentaries through which power positions are accepted, renegotiated or contested, and they intersect deeply with local notions of honour and respectability. The idea that freedom is somehow related to issues of genealogical purity and to the ability to maintain and improve the wealth and dignity of the family continues to characterize local understandings and representations of this notion, signalling that the legacies of what it meant to be 'free' when slavery was still a legal institution still inform and shape current power structures and local social commentaries.

Résumé

Cet article explore les significations conceptuelles et pratiques du mot *fahafahana* (« liberté » en malgache) dans les Hautes Terres de Madagascar, un contexte dans lequel l'héritage d'anciennes formes d'esclavage a laissé des marques profondes dans les mémoires locales et dans les hiérarchies socioéconomiques. Il s'intéresse en particulier aux manières dont des notions spécifiques de liberté ont été élaborées dans le contexte de l'histoire locale de l'esclavage et de l'émancipation ; comment ces concepts ont été chargés de sens différents à différentes périodes de l'histoire malgache, devenant une arène pour l'élaboration de projets politiques divers ; et comment des personnes de statuts, classes, genres et âges différents recadrent le concept de liberté dans leur vie quotidienne. Des notions locales de liberté émergent dans le cadre des commentaires politiques locaux à travers lesquels les positions de pouvoir sont recadrées, acceptées ou contestées, et se recoupent profondément avec des notions locales d'honneur et de respectabilité. L'idée que la liberté soit liée d'une manière ou d'une autre à

des questions de pureté généalogique et à la capacité à maintenir et à améliorer le patrimoine et la dignité de la famille continue de vivifier les interprétations et représentations locales de cette notion, indiquant que l'héritage de ce que signifiait être « libre » lorsque l'esclavage était encore une institution légale continue d'informer et de façonner les structures de pouvoir et les commentaires sociaux actuels.

Introduction

'Freedom is like a chameleon. It changes meaning according to the background. This is the reason it is so difficult to find.' With these words, Rado,[1] a Malagasy former political activist who participated in the popular demonstrations of 1972 that ended the Tsiranana regime (Randriamaro 1997; 2009; Gardini 2015; 2021), resumed a very long conversation we had on the (unfulfilled) aspirations of young people of slave origin in Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar, and the political role they played in those years. Like many others among my Malagasy interlocutors,[2] he found it easier to talk about the many forms of bondage, constraints and restrictions characterizing the life of those who were at the bottom of local social and economic hierarchies than about 'freedom' – something that he considered alternately as a relatively abstract concept, a rhetorical device, or a promise that could never be fulfilled entirely.

Indeed, Madagascar, like many other African contexts, has often been considered a place more suited to the study of slavery and personal dependence than the analysis of freedom, and probably for good reasons. Before colonial abolitions – and in many cases also after them – slavery had been a widespread institution that for centuries shaped the economies and the political and social structures of the many African societies that were connected to different degrees with the Atlantic, trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean slave trades (see, for instance, Lovejoy 2012; Medard *et al.* 2013). In many of these contexts, the honourable status of the 'free' was often defined in opposition to the conditions and dishonouring status of the enslaved and changed accordingly. Indeed, since slaves experienced very different social and economic conditions and slavery was a plural and changing institution that could involve different social relations between masters and slaves and different degrees of social inclusion, the contours and features of a 'free status' varied greatly. In general terms, however, and in contrast to concepts of freedom developed in the classical liberal tradition, a 'free status' was not framed in terms of a supposed autonomy of the individual rooted in some kind of 'natural rights' or 'divine will'; rather, it was based on the nexus of specific and unequal rights that individuals – in different power positions on

---

[1] Interview with Rado, Antananarivo (Manarintsoa-Anatihazo), 22 June 2015. I use pseudonyms to protect the identities of my interlocutors.

[2] I conducted fieldwork in Madagascar between 2013 and 2018 in Antananarivo, Ambositra and their surrounding rural regions, with the initial aim of analysing local legacies of slavery and social discrimination against slave descendants. Then, my attention shifted towards the study of domestic work and how current forms of labour exploitation affected the redefinition of status distinctions. The analysis of the vernacular meanings of slavery led me to explore how people of different class, status group, generation and gender renegotiated their notions of freedom and how they practically tried to build specific trajectories of emancipation. These topics emerged strongly in the informal conversations and the semi-structured interviews (in French and Malagasy) that I carried out during fieldwork, as well as in the life histories that people of noble, free and slave origin had the kindness to share with me.

the axes of gender, age, religion, class and status – could enjoy as full members of given lineage groups. Scholars have shown how slavery in Africa (and elsewhere) was conceived as the antithesis of kinship (Meillassoux 1986; Miers and Kopytoff 1977), since slaves were stripped of their own ancestry, their kin networks and the possibility of being recognized as legal parents of their children. Consequently, a 'free status' (however defined or translated) emerged from the multiplicity of social and political relations, ideological frameworks and kin networks that protected individuals from enslavement and that people could activate to defend or increase their status and their economic and political circumstances and to be recognized as full members of their kin group (Viti 2007; Nyamnjoh 2002). While in some African contexts enslaved individuals – despite their differentiated conditions – were included in a legally defined and rigid category that separated them clearly from the 'free' part of the population, in others the 'slave' and the 'free' represented two ends of a spectrum of different but partially overlapping statuses that problematized a rigid dichotomy between freedom and slavery (Campbell 2003; xxx).[3]

The study of slavery and its legacies provided a fertile ground for the analysis of its conceptual opposite(s), in ways that allowed an exploration of how notions of freedom, in all their plural historical and geographical variations, could not be considered only as a Western monopoly (cf. Patterson 1991) nor as a liberal 'Robinsonade' detaching individual freedom from the wider social and cultural landscapes that define its contents, meanings and values. Building on the pioneering works of Paul Riesman (1977) and the wide literature on slavery, post-slavery and forms of personal dependence in Africa (see, for instance, Cooper 1980; Rossi 2009; Pelckmans 2011; Gaibazzi 2012; Bellagamba et al. 2013; Hahonou and Lecocq 2015; Rodet 2015), a growing number of scholars have tried to grasp what freedom meant practically and how it was conceived in different African historical and social contexts (Young 2002; McDougall 2005; Hobson 2008; Rossi 2016; 2017; Bellagamba 2017). These efforts involved both an historical and an anthropological analysis of the vernacular terms used to define a 'free' condition in given historical contexts, as well as of the practices that unfree subjects activate in order to improve their status (Bidney 1963; Humphrey 2007). As Benedetta Rossi has pointed out:

> The unfree subjects ... are undeniably trying to improve their circumstances, but they are often concerned more with safety from violence and economic stability than with 'freedom'. It may be possible to argue that achieving safety or wealth corresponds to being or becoming free. But this conclusion begs the question of what 'becoming free' means in particular linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic contexts. (Rossi 2017: 186)

The abolition of slavery was a long, contested and ambiguous process, achieved under the political domination of European colonial powers that used the abolitionist rhetoric to justify their rights to rule, while, at the same time, enforcing forced labour and political subordination to better control and exploit their colonial subjects. Independence was achieved in a global political context marked by the Cold War, which fuelled dictatorships and civil wars that limited political and social rights

---

[3] This, of course, was not specific to Africa (see, for instance, Finley 1964 on Ancient Greece and Rome).

and individual freedoms in many parts of the continent. Structural adjustments, the opening of African economies to neoliberal markets and greater competition over resources have increased the number of people who find themselves exposed to harsh forms of labour exploitation and violence on the continent (often labelled with the contested notion of 'new forms of slavery' used by neo-abolitionist movements and many international organizations).[4] What is certain is that, against a background of historically changing forms of unfreedom, meanings of freedom changed accordingly. In this trajectory, notions of freedom acquired new and wider meanings that pushed freedom to mean something more than the simple opposite of 'slavery' (Bellagamba 2017). And yet – as many scholars (Klein 2005; Iliffe 2004) have pointed out – it is also possible to find important continuities: as long as slavery was considered a dishonouring status and was built on systematic social exclusion, and since its legacies survived formal abolition, in many cases the quest for freedom has continued to assume the contours of a struggle for social inclusion, respectability and honour. I argue that this dynamic is also evident in the Highlands of Madagascar, where slave descendants often define freedom in very different terms compared with people of noble origin, and where class and gender play an important role in shaping the terms and conditions of this struggle.

By taking inspiration from the growing literature on slavery, post-slavery and labour exploitation in Africa and from Caroline Humphrey's suggestions to explore 'alternative freedoms' (Humphrey 2007), in this article I address the vernacular meanings of freedom (*fahafahana*) in the Highlands of Madagascar, a context where the legacies of past forms of slavery have left deep marks both in local memories and in the social and economic hierarchies that structure local political arenas. Rather than providing a universal or 'culturally neutral' definition of 'freedom' that could apply anywhere and at any time – but also avoiding a culturalist perspective that reifies differences and ultimately assigns a monopoly on the notion of freedom to the liberal West – I explore the vernacular genealogy of *fahafahana* as it unfolded at the intersection between specific historical trajectories and more globalized dynamics, and I stress how people have reshaped and renegotiated this notion according to their power position and political agenda. In particular, I focus on three main points. The first addresses how Malagasy notions of freedom have been elaborated against the background of the local history of slavery and emancipation. This allows for a better understanding of what freedom meant before and after the colonial abolition of slavery for people belonging to different status groups, and how the honourability of a 'clean genealogy' was crucial in vernacular definitions of freedom. The second point explores more deeply the concept of *fahafahana*: a word that is now considered the Malagasy translation of 'freedom' or '*liberté*' and that is broad enough to include conceptually both negative freedoms ('freedom from something') and positive freedoms ('freedom to do something') (Berlin 2002). By considering the history and the limits of this translation, I show how this concept has been charged with different meanings in different periods of Malagasy history and how it became an arena for the elaboration of different political agendas. Then, in the third part of this article,

---

[4] For a critical discussion on the current uses and abuses of notions such as 'modern slavery' or 'contemporary forms of slavery', see, for instance, O'Connell Davidson (2015), Bunting and Quirk (2017) and Bellagamba and Gardini (2020).

I stress how people of different status, class, gender and age reframe the concept of *fahafahana* in their everyday life. In particular, I compare the points of view and stories of three people: a retired teacher of noble (*andriana*) origin living in the prestigious *hauts quartiers* of Antananarivo, a young woman of rural background who moved to Antananarivo to work as a domestic for a middle-class family, and a young man living in a historically marginalized area who, for a short period of his life, joined a group of cattle raiders.

If Patterson (1991) is right and notions of freedom developed in the context of and in opposition to the institution of slavery, it could also be argued that, after the abolition of a legal slave status, vernacular concepts of freedom have acquired a certain degree of 'independence' and have been charged with new and plural meanings, to the point that concepts of 'slavery' that are now used in the public debate (in Madagascar as elsewhere) are elaborated in opposition to established ideas of (neoliberal) freedom, and not vice versa. In other terms, with the abolition of a clearly defined legal 'slave status', slavery tends to be used as a metaphor to address any kind of social or political constraint. And yet, the cases discussed in this article show that past meanings of slavery could resurface in often unexpected ways, linking local notions of freedom to issues related to purity, honour and past status distinctions. By considering 'from below' (Bellagamba 2017) the multiple meanings that people attach to the concept of *fahafahana*, I show how notions of freedom become part of the local political commentaries through which power positions are reframed, accepted or contested, and how they are interlaced with the legacies and memories of past forms of enslavement.

'Freed' does not mean free: slavery and its abolition in the Highlands of Madagascar

In the current official language of Madagascar, which is based on the Merina dialect, 'freedom' is generally translated with the word *fahafahana*. This term originates from the word *afaka*, whose primary meaning is 'detached from', but it can also be used to refer more broadly to 'being able to do something' (as in *afaka mihira isika*, we can sing/we are free to sing) or to something that is 'freed' from something else. In this latter sense, it was one of the words used before the colonial abolition of slavery of 1896 to denote the slave who was manumitted by his master (*olona afaka*), but not the 'free man' per se. Between the 'freed' and the 'free' there was a hiatus that could not be bridged easily, since the dishonoured and impure status of enslaved individuals could not be removed simply, and, when it was removed through specific rituals, it continued to resurface in social memories (Evers 2002; Graeber 2007; Freeman 2013; Regnier and Somda 2019; Regnier 2020).

At the same time, the contents, meanings and contours of 'freedom' were socially and legally articulated in quite different terms from those that developed in the European liberal tradition. During the nineteenth century, in the Malagasy regions under the control of the Merina rule, people who were not enslaved were nevertheless exposed to the arbitrary power and will of the sovereign (Raison-Jourde 1997), who obliged the so-called free part of the population to perform forced labour (*fanompoana*) for the crown (Campbell 1988). *Fanompoana* included both compulsory military conscription and agricultural or administrative tasks and was the main royal

instrument to capture labour during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In Imerina, individuals who were not enslaved belonged to three, generally endogamous, categories: the *andriana* ('nobles', i.e. people belonging to families with kinship ties with current or past sovereigns), the *hova* (the commoners), and the *mainty* (literally 'black people', who were 'servants' of the king and often enjoyed important political and economic positions). All these categories were equally exposed to *fanompoana* due to the sovereign, albeit often with different tasks according to their status. Slaves (*andevo*) belonged to a fourth statutory group that was excluded from *fanompoana*; they were legally considered to be the exclusive property of their masters, they were not recognized as legal parents of their children, and they were socially perceived as impure and dirty (*maloto*) and systematically infantilized (Bloch 1979; Rakoto 1997; Larson 2000). *Ankizy* (children) or *zazahova* (children of the *hova*) were terms often used to address them. They were 'lost people' (Graeber 2007) or 'people without history' (since their links to their ancestors were cut by enslavement) who – unlike other statutory groups – had no right to build family tombs for themselves or be buried in the family tombs of their masters. Mainly for this reason, in the Highlands of Madagascar, family tombs became a symbol of 'free status', testifying to the link between 'free' people and their ancestry and enshrining their rights over the land of their ancestors (Larson 2001). People could be enslaved for crimes and debts, but the main sources of slave labour were raids against neighbouring political entities and the commercial networks that connected Madagascar with the East African coast, from where a large number of African slaves had been imported at least since the sixteenth century (Armstrong 1984).

These four categories (*andriana*, *hova*, *mainty* and *andevo*) did not overlap perfectly with class distinctions, political power, economic conditions or the relative 'freedom' of individuals (Bloch 1977): rich families of *hova* and *mainty* origin could hold more important political positions and enjoy more power than rural families of *andriana* origin.[5] Certain slaves, such as those who were permitted to work autonomously as porters by their masters in exchange for part of their annual earnings, could enjoy better economic conditions and comparatively more 'freedom' than *hova* farmers with little land.[6] Slaves were concentrated in the hands of the Merina economic elite, and few families of rural origin held more than two slaves, even when the number of slaves was at its peak during the nineteenth century. Thanks to the agreements to abolish the external slave trade signed by the British and the Merina king Radama I in 1817–20, and to the conquest of two-thirds of Madagascar by the Merina rulers in the following years, the enslaved part of the population increased considerably in the Highlands of Madagascar, the heart of the Merina kingdom, during the nineteenth century, reaching between two-fifths and one-third of the total population in rural regions and half of the population in the capital, Antananarivo.

As well as *olona afaka*, freed slaves were known as *hovavao* (new *hova*), signalling that manumission was often not enough to reinsert people fully into the 'free' part of

---

[5] Proverbs often stress this point: *Ny andriandahy malahelo tsy mahaleo ny hovalahy malaza* (a noble who owns nothing is inferior to a rich *hova*).

[6] And, as a result, they were also considered the laziest: *Andevolahy avy nandranto: izay atao rehetra 'izaho avy nandranto'* (the slave who comes back after having done business: whatever job you ask him to do he replies, 'I just came back from business').

the population. This also held true for the slaves of African origin who were freed in 1877 by Queen Ranavalona II (Domenichini and Ramiaramanana 1997) in yet another attempt to discourage the slave trade in Madagascar, which had continued despite the 1817–20 Merina–British agreements (Campbell 1981). These freed slaves were named with terms such as *makoa* or *mazombika* that distinguished them from the rest of the 'free' population (Brown 2004; Razafiarivony 2005).

The French abolished slavery in 1896, a few months after the conquest of Antananarivo, but colonial policies did not create real paths of emancipation for former slaves: laws against vagrancy undermined the opportunity of former slaves to migrate in search of new job opportunities, colonial investments in cash crops benefited those who could claim ownership of land, thus excluding many former slaves, who were also more exposed to colonial forced labour, and – last but not least – colonial authorities ignored the many forms of labour exploitation that continued to link masters with their former slaves. And yet, former slaves tried their best to emancipate themselves from their subordinate positions. Some left their former masters, found new and unoccupied land to claim as their own, or settled on the main transport routes to work as porters (Rantoandro 1997). Others remained with their former masters and were able to renegotiate their position as sharecropper labourers. In some cases, masters gave them parcels of land for their own needs, in exchange for part of the crops or for days of work in their fields (Bloch 1979). Still others moved into urban contexts in search of new job opportunities. In Antananarivo, they became part of the growing lumpenproletariat living in the poor neighbourhoods called *bas quartiers*, unless they were recruited into the colonial army, the police, the lowest ranks of the administration or commercial companies (Gardini 2021). In all cases, they started to build their own family tombs in the hope of making people forget their slave origins, reinforcing their newly acquired land rights, and finally acquiring the social markers of honourability.

However, despite their best efforts, the stigma of slavery was not forgotten (Evers 2002; Regnier and Somda 2019). By abolishing past processes and rituals of manumission together with slavery, colonial powers froze statutory distinctions and the descendants of former slaves continued to be called *andevo* by *hova* and *andriana* descendants who considered them impure, dirty and inferior.[7] Marriage between 'free' and slave descendants continued to be socially forbidden and slave descendants understood quickly that their 'liberation' by the colonial power was not considered legitimate by a significant part of the Merina elite. They might have achieved formal emancipation, but what mattered most was their inability to provide 'clean' genealogies and family histories (Razafindralambo 2005; 2014; Graeber 2007; Regnier 2015; 2020; Regnier and Somda 2019; Gardini 2015; 2020; 2021).

Gerald's[8] family history is a good example of the reproduction of the stigma attached to slave ancestry. Unlike people of 'free' or noble origin living in the *hauts quartiers* of Antananarivo, Gerald, a man in his sixties living in the *bas quartiers*, was unable to provide 'a long genealogy'. He grew up with his mother and his sisters in the house of his maternal grandparents, not knowing who his father was or where he came from. During the colonial period, his maternal grandmother worked as a

---

[7] For a discussion of this process of essentialization and its consequences, see Regnier (2020).

[8] Interview with Gerald, Antananarivo, 2018.

housemaid for a French family, while his maternal grandfather came from an unspecified village on the route to Ambatolampy, where his family worked as share-croppers and where he never returned because 'people there were bad against him and his family'. Due to his job as a bricklayer, and with the help of his wife, Gerald's grandfather bought a small house in the *bas quartiers* and a small piece of land on the outskirts of Antananarivo where he built a family tomb where he and his offspring could later be buried. Gerald has spent much of his life trying to expand and renew both of them, these two little buildings being the material symbols of the 'honour' of his family. And yet, Gerald's family history exposed them to still being considered as *andevo*, and Gerald could not marry the girl of *hova* origin he loved in his youth as her family strongly opposed the marriage. He later met and married a woman who shared with him a supposed slave origin and who lived in the same neighbourhood.

As in other post-slavery contexts (McDougall 2005; Pelckmans 2011; Gaibazzi 2012; Rodet 2015; Becker 2021), in the Highlands of Madagascar a lack of 'genealogical free-dom' (Riesman 1977) can significantly affect individual trajectories of social and economic emancipation. This became particularly evident in the urban context of Antananarivo, where slave descendants have historically constituted the poorest part of the city (Fournet-Guérin 2008). This economic marginalization combined in Antananarivo with a progressive racialization of past status distinctions. The most commonly used dichotomy in the city today is between *fotsy* ('white people', i.e. people of *hova* and *andriana* origin who claim a Southeast Asian origin) and *mainty* ('black people', a category that – from being a privileged one in the past – slowly became a synonym of *andevo* and African origin).[9] A darker skin and frizzy hair are often considered proof of slave ancestry, despite the fact that most enslaved individuals were not of African origin and despite the fact that African slaves were freed twenty years before the *andevo*. But many of these processes are not known – or are systematically forgotten – by part of the *fotsy* population. As a *fotsy* public servant of *hova* origin[10] told me:

> The *mainty* will never be really free: their ancestors were our slaves; they came from Africa and therefore they are not pure Malagasy. They are traitors who sold themselves to the French instead of serving us. The French could have freed them, but you cannot be freed [*afaka*] by your history.

As Paul Ottino (1998) and Sandra Evers (2002) have pointed out, in many rural Malagasy contexts the lack of a 'clean' ancestry exposes people to stigma and subordination, as it often translates to limited and more precarious land rights and, therefore, a reduced amount of the economic autonomy that characterizes the members of 'free' kin groups. Even where slave and free descendants enjoy similar rights to land ownership, the stigma attached to slave ancestry is enough to make marriages between the two groups very difficult (Graeber 2007; Regnier 2020). To quote a Malagasy proverb, the stigma attached to slave ancestry is even worse than 'the

---

[9] After abolition, many slaves tried to be recognized as *mainty* in order to avoid the stigma of slavery. The unexpected consequence was that *mainty* became a synonym of *andevo* (see, for instance, Ramamonjisoa 1984).

[10] Interview with Andry, Antananarivo, 2018.

plumage that the hen can get rid of only after her death' (*lamban'akohoka faty no isarahana*, i.e. a feature that characterizes your very essence), since it is transferred to the following generations in a seemingly endless cycle.

Fahafahana . . . **and its malcontents**

Charles Ravoajanahary[11] is one of the few Malagasy intellectuals to have tried to reconstruct the genealogies of Malagasy notions of freedom (*fahafahana*). As he pointed out (Ravoajanahary 1968), the history of the term *fahafahana* is far from being simple or linear, and the process through which it became a direct translation of the Western notion of 'freedom' has been long and contested. According to him, *fahafahana* was a neologism first introduced by Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century in their translation of the Bible into Malagasy, a long and complex task that involved many discussions and the creative redefinition of local terms that could convey the appropriate meanings (cf. Meyer 1999). Ravoajanahary stressed that *fahafahana* was originally used to translate the Christian idea that faith would free Christians from following the imperfect laws of mankind, but also that it was not the only word used to translate 'freedom' and it was far from being uncontested. In the Malagasy translation of the Bible from the 1830s, for instance, the term *hamotsotra* also appeared to denote the act of freeing someone from slavery, and at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century many Christian intellectuals still preferred to use the English words 'freedom' or 'liberty' or the French word '*liberté*', feeling that there was no Malagasy term able to overlap perfectly with the Western concept of freedom. A malagasization of the English term 'liberty' gave birth to the word *miliba*, meaning 'acting following your desires'. Despite these multiple translations, however, the word *fahafahana* progressively replaced all the others in later editions of the Bible, and its meaning came to cover not only slave manumission but also the liberation of people or the absence of obstacles of any kind (Ravoajanahary 1968).

The use of *fahafahana* as a direct translation of 'freedom' became popular in the first decades of the twentieth century, as long as it overstepped the boundaries of Christian debates and assumed different meanings in the local political arena. On the one hand, it was used during the beginning of French colonial rule by liberal Malagasy intellectuals, known as *libres penseurs*, in their campaigns against religious obscurantism and in their explicit support of French colonization. On the other hand, since the 1920s, but increasingly after the 1930s, the word became synonymous with independence (*fahaleovantena*) and was the central notion around which several anticolonial movements and intellectuals organized their political activities. Today, together with *Tanindrazana* ('Ancestors' Land') and *Fandrosoana* (Progress), it is part of the Malagasy national motto (*Tanindrazana, Fahafahana, Fandrosoana*).

According to Ravoajanahary (1968), the notion of *fahafahana* was rather obscure and abstract, a term that fell short of capturing Malagasy meanings of freedom

---

[11] Before independence, Charles Ravoajanahary was one of the leading figures of the Malagasy anticolonial struggle. In 1972 he joined and inspired the movements that contributed to the fall of the First Republic. Later, he became an important figure in the Ratsiraka regime and contributed to the writing of the Red Book (*Boky Mena*).

and missed many of their historical and cultural nuances. He proposed instead a different – and almost forgotten today – Malagasy expression that, according to him, could have conveyed better what freedom meant practically in the rural contexts of the Merina Highlands: *mahatsangy no ary*. This formula was composed of *tsangy* (shelled rice) and *ary* (a lot) and was used during marriages to address the young couple as people who had become able to provide economically for themselves and to create a new domestic group. In a wider sense, the expression was used to indicate 'those who are able to perpetuate the honour of the family' or 'those who can replace their father with dignity and enlarge the wealth of the family'. This concept had at least a couple of advantages: first, it was rooted in the Malagasy rural world and was not a neologism from abroad (or from above); and second, it pointed to a more 'positive' concept of freedom – not 'freedom from' but 'freedom of'. It recognized the process of social promotion and progressive economic independence of young people vis-à-vis their respective families, without denying the network of social relations and belonging that was necessary to create this sort of emancipation. The difference between the slave and the free lay precisely here. Enslaved people could never achieve the status, rights and relative independence of a fully grown adult. They were condemned to be socially and economically considered as children (*ankizy*) forever, as they lacked control of the means of production as well as the material and symbolic resources that were necessary to build *mahatsangy no ary*.

It should be said, however, that, despite Ravoajanahary's attempt to find a Malagasy translation of 'freedom' better related to Malagasy rural experiences, the expression *mahatsangy no ary* did not gain currency as a popular alternative to *fahafahana*. None of my Malagasy interlocutors in Ambositra or Antananananarivo knew this expression or related it to the concept of freedom. Despite – or probably because of – its abstract nature, the word *fahafahana* has somehow encompassed all the conceptual space and meanings of 'freedom' and, in many cases, it is framed as a desirable condition to achieve. Indeed, while in the years between World War Two and 1960 *fahafahana* was often a synonym of independence (*fahaleovantena*) from colonial power, after independence it became clear that these two notions could not be conflated. The First Republic (1960–72), led by Philibert Tsiranana, saw the consistent presence and insertion of the French in Malagasy affairs and policies, making it clear that formal independence did not mean complete freedom from former colonial powers.

Despite the popular protests that in 1972 brought to an end the Tsiranana regime (Althabe 1980; Randriamaro 1997; 2009; Gardini 2015) and the subsequent rise of the socialist government led by Ratsiraka (Gow 1997; Randrianja 2003), many of my interlocutors believed that 'real freedom' was something that needed more than formal declarations in order to be achieved. This point, for instance, was the central topic of a song that all my interlocutors knew by heart, written by the group Mahaleo in 1982 and titled '*Rafahafahana*'. In the song, freedom is depicted as someone who refuses the friendship of the poorest and as a racist who prefers to enter the houses of rich, white-skinned people rather than dwelling among the poor:

How I wish, how I wish … My dearest wish is that you be my friend
And that you take my hands
Alas! Alas! I'm asking for the sky.

Because you, Freedom, you always pass me by!
Here I am, so sad and lost, I'll never have what I long for most
And yet my love will never run dry
It's stubborn and wild, for no one but you
Sometimes, sometimes, words escape me
You flirt with those who couldn't care
But turn your back on all our prayers
Why, oh why, do you put me down?
How do you choose your destination?
D'you prefer the skin of certain nations?[12]

As the Mahaleo song notes, in its practical use *fahafahana* – as *mahatsangy no ary* – is often conceptualized by making reference to status and class. Only those who can prove a 'clean, *fotsy*' genealogy and can provide economically for themselves are considered – and consider themselves – 'really free'. Freedom has much to do with how local hierarchies are constructed and imagined in a nexus of unequal power relations. For instance, many of the domestic workers I met in Antananarivo and Ambositra (Gardini 2019; 2020) stated that freedom depends ultimately on the number of dependants you have, since only by 'pushing some other down' is it possible to have free time, enjoy a good economic position, and build a privileged and superior status. Their points of view problematized the depoliticizing framework on which abstract notions of freedom rested and stressed how freedom is closely linked to power relations. Beside the issues of translation that were at the core of Ravoajanahary's analysis, it is therefore crucial to understand how the practical meanings of *fahafahana* change according to individual positions along the axis of status, class, gender, age and political agendas. In other words, the meaning of freedom is always relational and closely linked to local values, social position and political aspirations.

Freedom, in practice

When I met him in 2018, Olivier was a retired man in his late sixties, living in the *hauts quartiers* of Antananarivo, the neighbourhoods at the top of the central hills that form the capital's centre and that are generally inhabited by the descendants of the Merina elite of the past. Olivier was proud of his origins and never missed an opportunity to emphasize the importance of his family history. He belonged to a family of ancient *andriana* origin, whose genealogy he was able to trace back to King Ralambo (sixteenth century). His nineteenth-century ancestors were all important functionaries or generals of the Merina kingdoms, many of whom had early access to Protestant missionary schools as part of their *fanompoana* and who sent their own children to school. Thanks to their literacy, their descendants enjoyed important public or economic

---

[12] This is the English translation that can be found at <=https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jN91gaV7bWI>, accessed 5 January 2021. Other translations of the last sentence I collected among my Malagasy interlocutors were more explicit: 'Are you a racist?'

positions during the colonial period. Olivier's father also spent some time in France as a student, and, after World War Two, he became a keen activist in anti-colonial movements. First, he served in the MDRM (Mouvement Démocratique de la Rénovation Malgache or Democratic Movement of Malagasy Renovation), an anti-colonial party that was banned by the colonial authorities in 1947; then he joined AFKM (Antoko'ny Kongresi'ny Fahaleovantenan'i Madagasikara or Party of the Independence Congress of Madagascar), which was the MDRM's successor politically. Both parties were the expression of a Merina educated elite flirting with Marxism, and both were considered with hostility both by the French colonial power, which supported parties that could guarantee a less radical transition, and by slave descendants and people from other regions of Madagascar (often known by the slightly derogatory colonial term *côtiers*), who feared that obtaining independence under the banner of the former Merina elite would mean a return of the Merina kingdom.

The political alliance between *mainty* and *côtiers* constituted the main foundation of the political parties that came to rule the country after independence, during both the First Republic (1960–72) and the Ratsiraka regime. Being nine years old in 1960, Olivier grew up in a political context in which the role of the Merina nobility was constantly under threat from new and emerging administrative and political elites. Of course, as Didier Galibert (2011) has pointed out, a process of mutual assimilation among the elites took place and members of the Merina elite continued to play important political and administrative roles. However, the spectre of a return of the Merina hegemony was often raised to gain the support of the non-Merina majority on the island (Cole 2006). Olivier had to wait until 2002 to finally see a *fotsy* Merina becoming president of Madagascar, and yet he believed that the only way to make Madagascar a country free (*afaka*) from external influences and to solve its many economic and social problems was for royalty to return. Olivier cultivated a nostalgic view of the Merina kingdom and believed that 'freedom' had been definitively lost with colonial conquest, independence being just smoke and mirrors:

> We [the *andriana*] have to take back the dignity we lost after the French colonization. The Kingdom of Madagascar was a free and strong country before that, then we left strangers to take control. But the Malagasy people are to blame. The *côtiers* and the *andevo* preferred to serve the French than to stay with us, and the French gave them power over us. Look what they have done to this country. We are among the poorest countries of the world. That happened because they were not entitled to rule. They have no autonomy, since they have no *hasina*. They are always the slaves of someone else.

By using the notion of *hasina*, Olivier was referring to a central concept of the Malagasy theory of power and was connecting it to a particular notion of freedom. Before colonial conquest, *hasina* was the name given to the silver pieces given as tribute to the sovereign, and also to the sacred power that flowed from the realm of the ancestors to the living, and from the top of the social hierarchy towards the bottom (Raison 1998). The Merina sovereign was conceived as the person with the greatest concentration of *hasina*, the *andriana* as having more *hasina* than the *hova*, and the slaves as having less *hasina* than anyone else. *Hasina* was connected to notions of

purity and honour, to fertility and the ability to create wealth, and to the super-natural forces that gave power to particular individuals. From Olivier's point of view, only those who possess *hasina* thanks to their genealogy are entitled to rule, since they are the only ones who can create prosperity and have enough power to be 'really' free from external influences. In his ideas of freedom converged notions of genealogical purity, the rhetoric of anti-colonial struggle, the stigmatization of slave origin, and the political agenda of a Merina nobility that has seen the slow decline of its former political influence.

Unlike *hova* or *andriana* families, slave descendants are often unable to provide lengthy genealogies and even their most ancient family tombs were built only after colonial abolition. Genealogical purity is rarely included in the meanings they attach to *fahafahana*. Malala, for example, was a nineteen-year-old woman, born in a rural area forty kilometres east of Antananarivo, who moved into the capital when she was twelve to work as a domestic for a relatively rich family of *hova* origin. As she told me, her grandparents were sharecroppers who, fifty years before, had been obliged to move to a new village – the one where she was born – because their previous land-owners accused them of stealing part of the crop. In the new village, they found work again as sharecroppers, and in due time they bought a small parcel of land to build their own family tomb. Malala did not know where her great-grandparents were buried, nor if there was a tomb predating the one her grandparents built. Since she knew the implications of that in terms of status distinctions, she was ashamed to go further into the topic during our conversations and preferred to focus on the forms of exploitation she experienced as a domestic worker. After the death of her grandparents, Malala's father and uncle took their place as sharecroppers. Malala was sent by her parents to work in Antananarivo after the end of primary school, since they needed money to send her younger brothers to school. Like many other young domestic workers I met (Gardini 2019; 2020), she never received her salary (it was sent directly to her family), she was often the object of insults and physical violence, and her employers denied her any free time with the excuse that they were responsible for her and wanted to avoid her getting pregnant. These points recurred in her definition of 'freedom':

> For me, freedom [*fahafahana*] is to have control of my own salary and have the power to negotiate it, to live in my own house and have a family and children, to work for myself. My masters treat me as their own slave. They insult me, they beat me, they make me work all day long without rest, but if I don't find a better job, I'm stuck here, because my parents need my money to send my younger brothers to school. If I protest, my masters say that they can find someone else easily.

According to Hannah Arendt (1961), freedom is deeply rooted in action, and particularly in that kind of (political) action that is able to start something new and do the unexpected. For Malala, freedom was strongly related to economic independence and working conditions that could protect her from the dishonouring status of 'being the servant of someone else': a difficult goal to achieve for someone, like her, who was trapped within the intersectionality of different forms of subordination. As she remarked:

In Madagascar, if you are a young woman, poor, without land and coming from the countryside, your only possibility to be free [*afaka*] is to marry someone with a better economic condition and have an independent job. If you are trapped in the house of your employer, it is difficult to find a good husband, and often men consider you as trash if you are a domestic worker. They think you are a slave.

Beyond class and status, Malala stressed the gendered dimension of freedom, a dimension whose importance emerges clearly if we compare her case with the life trajectory of Njaro, a twenty-two-year-old man I met in a mountain village fifty kilometres east of Ambositra who had spent three years with a group of cattle-raiding 'bandits' (*dahalo*). Because of its very difficult access, the valley where he was born had been a place of refuge for runaway slaves and people escaping the control, first, of the Merina kingdom and, later, of colonial power. During the colonial period, former slaves found new land to cultivate there and a place where they could hide their origins. Among them were Njaro's great-grandparents. Like many other young boys living in rural regions, Njaro spent his childhood as a cattle guardian, working for a richer family from Ambositra who had moved to the valley in the 1990s. Like Malala, the small amount of money he earned was given directly to his parents. Tired of this situation, however, at the age of sixteen he helped a group of young men to steal his employers' cattle. A few months later, he joined them, spending the next three years raiding cattle within a radius of fifty kilometres. Cattle raiding has a long history in Madagascar and, for poor young men of rural origin, it has represented a way not only to accumulate wealth but also to construct their own masculinity (see, for instance, Rasamoelina 2007). The group comprised about fifteen young men, approximately between sixteen and twenty-five years old, from different parts of the Highlands. After their raids, they sold the cattle to intermediaries who took the animals to urban slaughterhouses or, occasionally, sold them to international buyers. As Njaro remembered: 'These were the more adventurous years of my life. We were really free [*afaka*]. We shared the loot equally, and no one could tell us what to do. We never killed anyone. We simply stole the cattle to sell them. I have never been so free in my life. It was fun.' Njaro left the group when one of the leaders proposed buying weapons and starting to attack private houses and *taxi brousse* ('bush taxi'): 'You know, that was something else … I disagreed. It was dangerous. You cannot be free if you are dead or your hands are stained with blood.' Thus, Njaro returned to the valley and started to work as a middleman and porter in the illegal trade of rum that connects the valley with neighbouring regions. When I met him, he had collected enough money to marry and to start to enlarge his parents' house. Meanwhile, his former bandit group dismantled, with some members joining a more structured group that works in the illegal smuggling of rosewood for international traders. 'They are not free any more,' commented Njaro, 'just exploited by some Chinese trader who leaves them the leftovers.'

While, for Olivier (an old man of noble origin), a talk about 'freedom' became an opportunity to discuss issues related to genealogical purity and to the political trajectory of the country, for two young people of slave origin, such as Malala and Njaro, talking about 'freedom' was a way to stress the importance of creating a space of autonomy from parental obligations and labour exploitation – a space that could help

them achieve the social markers of adulthood and find the economic means to build their own families. Of course, the gendered dimension of these aspirations mattered. While Malala saw in a 'good marriage' her only way of emancipation and was scared that the stigma attached to domestic work could jeopardize her chances, Njaro could profit from job opportunities – albeit illegal – from which Malagasy women were generally excluded and saw his past cattle-raiding activities as a useful step in becoming an 'adult and independent' man. And yet, despite their different social positions, life trajectories and ideas, Olivier, Malala and Njaro did not frame their concepts of freedom in abstract terms but used them to criticize the practical and social circumstances that limited their chances of achieving honourability, as socially and culturally defined in the Highlands of Madagascar. It could be argued that, with the abolition of a clearly defined and legally sanctioned 'slave status', the concept of freedom has been detached in some ways by its conceptual opposite. However, even if the institution of slavery has disappeared, the quest for freedom continues to be related to social inclusion and the everyday efforts to be recognized as people who can 'replace their father with dignity and enlarge the wealth of the family', as the notion of *mahatsangy no ary* proposed by Ravoajanahary implied.

Conclusions

Whether forms of personal dependence in Africa fostered individual 'freedoms' or rather reproduced 'unfreedoms' is part of a growing debate. James Ferguson (2013), for instance, has argued that his South African interlocutors preferred the social security guaranteed by forms of personal dependence to the risks and precarity connected to the neoliberal restructuring of local economies, and that notions of autonomy and 'independence' are not values per se, as liberal ideologies tend to assume. Others, in contrast, have stressed the profound ambiguities of personal dependence in other African contexts and the ways in which individuals have tried to overcome the power structures associated with it (Diggins 2015; Rossi 2016; Gardini 2020). As John Christman (2017: 164) has pointed out: 'Standard notions of freedom in the liberal democratic tradition have been defined to describe the condition of those who enjoy it, and have not paid sufficient attention to the aspirations of those to whom it is denied.' An approach 'from below', as proposed by post-slavery scholars working in Africa (Bellagamba 2017), opens up the opportunity to explore alternative meanings of freedom as they are used by people in their ordinary lives, based on their different positions along the axes of social differentiation. This approach allows us to avoid both the universalizing assumptions that liberal notions of freedom often imply and the risk of considering the notion of freedom simply as a Western monopoly.

After the abolition of slavery, Malagasy concepts of freedom acquired new meanings that reflected the economic, cultural and political changes affecting the colonial and postcolonial trajectory of the country. Confronted with new forms of unfreedom and inequalities, people developed new ideas of what freedom could practically mean, in a process that saw vernacular concepts being reshaped in order to adapt to – and more deeply affect – changing political scenarios. The notion of *fahafahana* emerged as abstract enough not only to translate Western ideas of freedom, but also to coalesce different aspirations and different trajectories of social and economic emancipation. At the same time, however, the idea that freedom was somehow related to issues of

genealogical purity and honour and to the ability to maintain and improve the wealth and dignity of the family continued to shape local understandings and representations of this concept, signalling that the legacies of what it meant to be 'free' when slavery was still a legal institution have continued to inform and shape current power structures and local social commentaries.

Local meanings and practices of freedom should be understood within this ambivalent tension between deep social continuities and strong political discontinuities, between notions that circulate on a global scale and the constant efforts of people to translate them locally, between the structural forces that strengthen inequalities and individual aspirations for a possible social change (cf. Arendt 1961). Rather than being an insurmountable relativistic conundrum, the fact that local notions or practices of 'freedom' are not easily translatable from one context to another and the plurality of different meanings attached to them by people in different power positions (not only in Madagascar) offer an opportunity to better understand what is politically at stake in specific historical and social contexts. The chameleonic nature of freedom and its dialectic relations with past forms of slavery and their legacies make this concept a political catalyst and an arena of power negotiations, which is something that my Malagasy interlocutors – despite their different social positions – always emphasized.

References

Althabe, G. (1980) 'Les luttes sociales à Tananarive en 1972', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 20 (80): 407–47.

Arendt, H. (1961) *Between Past and Future.* New York NY: Viking Press.

Armstrong, J. (1984) 'Madagascar and the slave trade in the seventeenth century', *Omaly sy Anio* 17–19: 211–33.

Becker, F. M. (2021) 'Looking for life: traces of slavery in the structure and social life of southern Swahili towns', *Journal of African Diaspora Archaeology and Heritage* 10 (1–2): 87–109.

Bellagamba, A. (2017) 'Freedom from below: some introductory thoughts', *Journal of Global Slavery* 2 (1–2): 1–9.

Bellagamba, A. and M. Gardini (2020) 'What is a "slave"? Terminologies, historicity, and anti-trafficking in two contemporary African contexts (Madagascar Highlands, Southern Senegal)', *Africa: Rivista Semestrale, NS* 2 (1): 67–86.

Bellagamba, A., S. E. Greene and M. A. Klein (eds) (2013) *The Bitter Legacy: African slavery past and present.* Princeton NJ: Markus Wiener.

Berlin, I. (2002) *Liberty* [revised and expanded edition of *Four Essays on Liberty*]. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bidney, D. (ed.) (1963) *The Concept of Freedom in Anthropology.* The Hague: De Gruyter Mouton.

Bloch, M. (1977) 'The disconnection between power and rank as a process: an outline of the development of kingdoms in central Madagascar', *European Journal of Sociology* 18 (1): 107–48.

Bloch, M. (1979) 'Modes of production and slavery in Madagascar: two case studies' in J. L. Watson (ed.), *Asian and African Systems of Slavery*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Brown, M. L. (2004) 'Reclaiming lost ancestors and acknowledging slave descent: insights from Madagascar', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46 (3): 616–64.

Bunting, A. and J. Quirk (eds) (2017) *Contemporary Slavery: popular rhetoric and political practice.* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Campbell, G. (1981) 'Madagascar and the slave trade, 1810–1895', *Journal of African History* 22 (2): 203–27.

Campbell, G. (1988) 'Slavery and Fanompoana: the structure of forced labour in Imerina (Madagascar), 1790–1861', *Journal of African History* 29 (2): 463–86.

Campbell, G. (2003) 'Introduction: slavery and other forms of unfree labour in the Indian Ocean world', *Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 24 (2): ix–xxxii.

Christman, J. (2017) 'Analyzing freedom from the shadows of slavery', *Journal of Global Slavery* 2 (1): 162–84.

Cole, J. (2006) 'Malagasy and Western conceptions of memory: implications for postcolonial politics and the study of memory', *Ethos* 34 (2): 211–43.

Cooper, F. (1980) *From Slaves to Squatters: plantation labor and agriculture in Zanzibar and Coastal Kenya, 1890–1925.* New Haven CT: Yale University Press.

Diggins, J. (2015) 'Economic runaways: patronage, poverty and the pursuit of "freedom" on Sierra Leone's maritime frontier', *Africa* 85 (2): 312–32.

Domenichini, J. P. and B. D. Ramiaramanana (1997) '1877: une abolition de l'esclavage?' in I. Rakoto (ed.), *L'Esclavage à Madagascar: aspects historiques et résurgences contemporaines.* Antananarivo: Institut de Civilisations, Musée d'Art et d'Archéologie.

Evers, S. J. T. M. (2002) *Constructing History, Culture and Inequality: the Betsileo in the Extreme Southern Highlands of Madagascar.* Leiden: Brill.

Ferguson, J. (2013) 'Declarations of dependence: labour, personhood, and welfare in Southern Africa', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 (2): 223–42.

Finley, M. I. (1964) 'Between slavery and freedom', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 6 (3): 233–49.

Fournet-Guérin, C. (2008) 'La géographie invisible de la ville. L'inscription des castes dans l'espace urbain à Tananarive (Madagascar)' in R. Sechet, I. Garat and D. Zeneide (eds), *Espaces en Transactions.* Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes.

Freeman, L. (2013) 'Speech, silence, and slave descent in Highland Madagascar', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19: 600–17.

Gaibazzi, P. (2012) 'The rank effect: post-emancipation immobility in a Soninke village', *Journal of African History* 53 (2): 215–34.

Galibert, D. (2011) *Les Gens du Pouvoir à Madagascar: État postcolonial, légitimités et territoire (1956–2002).* Paris: Karthala.

Gardini, M. (2015) 'L'activisme politique des descendants d'esclaves à Antananarivo: les héritages de Zoam', *Politique Africaine* 140: 23–40.

Gardini, M. (2019) '"Sauver les domestiques malgaches à l'étranger": l'appropriation de la rhétorique "néo-abolitionniste" à Ambositra (Madagascar)', *Politique Africaine* 154: 75–94.

Gardini, M. (2020) 'The risk of sliding down: domestic labour and the legacies of slavery in Madagascar', *American Ethnologist* 47 (3): 264–75.

Gardini, M. (2021) 'Fear of the dark: urban insecurity and the legacies of slavery in Antananarivo', *Journal of African Diaspora Archaeology and Heritage* 10 (1–2): 110–27.

Gow, B. A. (1997) 'Admiral Didier Ratsiraka and the Malagasy socialist revolution', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 35 (3): 409–39.

Graeber, D. (2007) *Lost People: magic and the legacy of slavery in Madagascar.* Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press.

Hahonou, E. K. and B. Lecocq (2015) 'Introduction: exploring post-slavery in contemporary Africa', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 48 (2): 181–92.

Hobson, F. (2008) 'Freedom as moral agency: *wiathi* and Mau Mau in colonial Kenya', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 2 (3): 456–70.

Humphrey, C. (2007) 'Alternative freedoms', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 151 (1): 1–10.

Iliffe, J. (2004) *Honour in African History.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Klein, M. A. (2005) 'The concept of honour and the persistence of servility in the Western Soudan', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 179–80: 831–52.

Larson, P. M. (2000) *History and Memory in the Era of Enslavement: becoming Merina in Highland Madagascar, 1770–1822.* Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.

Larson, P. M. (2001) 'Austronesian mortuary ritual in history: transformations of secondary burial (*famadihana*) in Highland Madagascar', *Ethnohistory* 48 (1–2): 123–55.

Lovejoy, P. E. (2012) *Transformations of Slavery: a history of slavery in Africa*, 3rd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

McDougall, A. (2005) 'Living the legacy of slavery: between discourse and reality', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 45 (179–80): 957–86.

Medard, M., L. Derat, T. Vernet and M.-P. Ballarin (eds) (2013) *Traites et Esclavages en Afrique Orientale et dans l'Ocean Indien.* Paris: Karthala.

Meillassoux, C. (1986) *Anthropologie de l'Esclavage: le ventre de fer et d'argent.* Paris: PUF.

Meyer, B. (1999) *Translating the Devil: religion and modernity among the Ewe in Ghana.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Miers, S. and I. Kopytoff (1977) *Slavery in Africa: historical and anthropological perspectives.* Madison WI and London: University of Wisconsin Press.

Nyamnjoh, F. (2002) '"A child is one person's only in the womb": domestication, agency and subjectivity in the Cameroonian Grassfields' in R. Werbner (ed.), *Postcolonial Subjectivities in Africa.* London: Zed Books.

O'Connell Davidson, J. (2015) *Modern Slavery: the margins of freedom.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ottino, P. (1998) *Le Champ de l'Ancestralité a Madagascar: parenté, alliance et patrimoine.* Paris: Karthala.

Patterson, O. (1991) *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture.* New York NY: Basic Books.

Pelckmans, L. (2011) *Travelling Hierarchies: roads in and out of slave status in a central Malian Fulbe network.* Leiden: Africa Studies Centre.

Raison, J. P. (1998) 'Pour une geographie du *hasina* (Imerina, Madagascar)' in D. Guillaud, M. Seysset and A. Walte (eds), *Le Voyage Inachevé … à Joël Bonnemaison.* Paris: ORSTOM.

Raison-Jourde, F. (1997) 'Familiarisation de l'esclavage, asservissement des libres. Le paradoxe merina d'une mutuelle privation du desire de liberté' in I. Rakoto (ed.), *L'Esclavage à Madagascar: aspects historiques et résurgences contemporaines.* Antananarivo: Institut de Civilisations, Musée d'Art et d'Archéologie.

Rakoto, I. (ed.) (1997) *L'Esclavage à Madagascar: aspects historiques et resurgences contemporaines.* Antananarivo: Institut de Civilisations, Musée d'Art et d'Archéologie.

Ramamonjisoa, J. (1984) '"Blancs" et "noirs", les dimensions de l'inégalité sociale', *Cahiers des Sciences Sociales* 1: 39–77.

Randriamaro, J. R. (1997) 'L'émergence politique des *mainty* et *andevo* au XXe siècle' in I. Rakoto (ed.), *L'Esclavage à Madagascar: aspects historiques et résurgences contemporaines.* Antananarivo: Institut de Civilisations, Musée d'Art et d'Archéologie.

Randriamaro, J. R. (2009) 'Aux origines des Zwam: les jeunes de bas quartiers de Tananarive, de l'entre-deux-guerres jusqu'à 1972' in D. Nativel and F. Rajaonah (ed.), *Madagascar Revisitée.* Paris: Karthala.

Randrianja, S. (2003) '"Be not afraid, only believe": Madagascar 2002', *African Affairs* 102 (407): 309–29.

Rantoandro, G. (1997) 'Après l'abolition de l'esclavage à Madagascar, le devenir immédiat des ésclaves émancipés' in I. Rakoto (ed.), *L'Esclavage à Madagascar: aspects historiques et résurgences contemporaines.* Antananarivo: Institut de Civilisations, Musée d'Art et d'Archéologie.

Rasamoelina, H. (2007) *Madagascar: État, communautés villageoises et banditisme rural.* Paris: Karthala.

Ravoajanahary, C. (1968) 'La notion de liberté chez les Malgaches', *Annales de l'Université de Madagascar – Lettres* 7: 45–61.

Razafiarivony, M. (2005) 'Les descendants des anciens esclaves importés d'Afrique à Madagascar: tradition et réalités', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 70: 63–80.

Razafindralambo, L. N. (2005) 'Inégalité, exclusion, représentations sur les Hautes Terres centrales de Madagascar', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 45 (179–80): 879–903.

Razafindralambo, L. N. (2014) 'Esclavage et inégalités, entre constructions sociales et différences "naturelles"' in I. Rakoto and S. Urfer (eds), *Esclavage et Libération à Madagascar.* Paris: Karthala.

Regnier, D. (2015) 'Clean people, unclean people: the essentialisation of "slaves" among the Southern Betsileo of Madagascar', *Social Anthropology* 23 (2): 152–68.

Regnier, D. (2020) *Slavery and Essentialism in Highland Madagascar: ethnography, history, cognition*. London: Routledge.

Regnier, D. and D. Somda (2019) 'Slavery and post-slavery in Madagascar: an overview' in T. Falola, R. J. Parrott and D. Porter Sanchez (eds), *African Islands: leading edges of empire and globalization*. Rochester NY: University of Rochester Press.

Riesman, P. (1977) *Freedom in Fulani Social Life: an introspective ethnography*. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.

Rodet, M. (2015) 'Escaping slavery and building diasporic communities in French Soudan and Senegal, ca. 1880–1940', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 48 (2): 363–86.

Rossi, B. (ed.) (2009) *Reconfiguring Slavery: West African trajectories*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Rossi, B. (2016) 'Dependence, unfreedom and slavery in Africa: towards an integrated Analysis', *Africa* 86 (3): 571–90.

Rossi, B. (2017) 'Freedom under scrutiny: epilogue', *Journal of Global Slavery* 2 (1): 185–94.

Viti, F. (2007) *Schiavi, Servi, Dipendenti: antropologia delle forme di dipendenza personale in Africa*. Milan: Raffaele Cortina Editore.

Young, C. (2002) 'Itineraries of ideas of freedom in Africa: precolonial to postcolonial' in R. H. Taylor (ed.), *The Idea of Freedom in Asia and Africa*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.

Marco Gardini is Assistant Professor in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Pavia. He has conducted research in Togo, where he worked on land conflicts and witchcraft accusations, and in Madagascar, where he explored issues related to the legacies of slavery, current forms of exploitation of domestic workers and banditry.