

THE POETRY OF MADAGASCAR

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MADAGASCAR'S comparative smallness in size contrasts with the mosaic of her many races. Because of the island's particular geographical situation between three worlds—Asia, Africa and Australia—it has become a turning point of monsoons and a meeting place of peoples. Of these, the Indo-Malayans predominate.

In the west of the island live the *Sakalava* ("those holding the length and width"), an isolated tribe living on the shores opposite Mozambique. On the eastern plains live the *Antonosy* ("those of the island"), the *Tsimihety* ("those who do not cut their hair") and the *Besimisiraka* ("those who are numerous and united").

The *Antaimorona* ("those of the water's border") occupy the south and show a preponderance of Arabic influence. It is through them that we know of the first Madagascan scripts, dating back to the ninth and tenth centuries B.C. Still further south live other tribes: the *Tanala*, the *Vevo* ("those of the forest"), and the *Mahafaly* ("those who render happy"), with songs and funeral monuments similar to relics of ancient India. Next to them live the *Rara*, whose features indicate Australo-Melanesian blood.

And in the heart of Madagascar live the *Hova-Ambaniandro*, ("People from under the Sun"). They are of Indo-Malayan origin and have preserved their ancient philosophy, rituals and system of caste, as well as their language. Madagascar's most important ruler was Andrianampoinimerina, a contemporary of Napoleon I. He restored the unity of the *Hova*, which had become decentralized after a period of many wars one century before his reign. He made Tananariva the capital of Imerina, extending the frontiers of this province; and in the process of conquering other tribes, living scattered around Imerina, he established the superiority of the *Hova* amongst the other groups of the island. He also divided Imerina into six administrative territories; at the same time organizing the population of Imerina into six classes, after the pattern of the earlier caste-system of the aristocratic *Hova*. It is due to this monarch that, despite the multitude of tribes, so great a unity of language, manners and institutions exists today in Madagascar. For with

the consolidation of tribes under his reign, the mixture of Africa, India and the Far East became a unified country. Under Andrianampoinimerina too, much of the traditional Madagascan folklore and poetry was collected, with its three surviving principal forms:

<i>Hain-Teny</i>	—	Poetry.
<i>Kabary</i>	—	Discourses.
<i>Ohabolana</i>	—	Philosophy.

The African poet Léopold Sedar-Senghor once said that it is difficult for someone not living in Madagascar, or “thinking as a Madagascan thinks”, to understand the full meaning of Hain-Teny poetry, which is completely different from Western or even African poetry. Indeed, the only comparison possible is perhaps with Japanese Haiki poetry.

Verse in Madagascar originated as dialogue, the invention of which demanded a great ability in the use of language. The Kabary (literally “discourses”) have been, quite falsely, called “Negro-Palavers” by Europeans; the origin of these “poems” did not lie in a social gathering, but rather in a means of communicating ideas in a particular way. The most important Kabary were royal proclamations and demands for marriage.

The Hain-Teny, in a sense the more “popular” poems, are poems of love expressed by images and comparisons rather than by direct statement. Unfortunately Hain-Teny have been translated as riddles, obscure poetry, erotic poetry (see sample 1), word-games and especially proverbs. By the examples given later, this translation will be seen to be inadequate. Proverbs are indeed used in the Hain-Teny language and are part of its charm, but there are no poems consisting of proverbs alone. In many of these poems rhythm and form *resemble* proverbs and have therefore become more ‘popular’. In the poems quoted below, we see the difference between “pure” Hain-Teny (sample 2), and the use of authentic proverbs where only the contents reveal a poetic aspect (sample 3). In many of the contemporary Hain-Teny, false proverbs sometimes serve as a bait (sample 4); in others they serve as key or conclusion (sample 5). “To speak or to think in Hain-Teny” is best made understood in sample 6. Sometimes, as in other languages, the music of words alone forms images (sample 7). For onomatopoeic reasons it is impossible to translate this poem into any other language: its last lines express an arrogance symbolized by locusts; their wing’s noise is evoked in the poem’s first lines.

Another important characteristic of the Hain-Teny, especially in the older poetry, is the particular insistence on a parallelism in symbols and comparisons (sample 8). Unscribed passages belong, of course, to the rich body of Madagascar's traditional poetry.

1. May I enter, Rosao-the-precious?
—Come in, Radriamatoa,
I will spread for you a clean mat.
—I do not care for a clean mat,
I want a corner of your loincloth.

2. I am astonished,
the great sterile rock
dares the diluvial rain
and in the hearth crackle
the bad grains of maize.
Like the renowned smoker
who sniffs the tobacco
when he has no hemp to burn.
Foot of hemp?
—Germ in the Andringitra,
is nothing but ashes here.
Perfidious flattery
stimulates love a little
but the plate is double-edged,
why change nature?
If you are tired of me
mirror yourself in the water of remorse,
you will decipher there a word I left.
(F. Ranaivo)

3. A little word, Mister,
a little advice, Madame.
I am not the one-who-comes-often
like a spoon of meagre capacity,
nor the one-who-talks-all-day-long
like the rivulet across the rocks . . .
I am not the one-who-dances-without-invitation,
nor the bachelor-who-gives-advice-to-the-married
since I am not like the blind who sees for others.
You are hardly so foolish that one must lecture you
you are of noble ancestry
you are the voara in the bushy foliage

the water-lilies finery in the pool. . . .

(F. Ranaivo)

4. Half-sigh imaginary flower,
The girl had come to meet me
when it occurred to her parents to stop her.
I addressed her with beautiful words
but she did not answer me . . .
You will get old here, you and remorse;
We and love
We shall go home.
5. I represent the eyes
you the ears:
you listen to me
I look at you.
I am the bird-trap
you the piastre-pieces:
if you abandon me, the weight can only loose;
should I abandon you,
you will rust.
6. This tree here, on the edge of a dream:
its blue leaves are intertwined
its black branches united
its twisted roots invisible
and its fruited flower the memory:
I think of you, Madame,
since the time we separated.
(Rabéarivelo)
7. Akory Rabehaitraitra
No miriintona tsy nisy ady?
Sa taitry ny akanga marevaka
Ka nandao ny akoho miara-nihafy?
Mihetaketaka foana ny aketa
Mibitabitaka foana ny ambolo — — —
8. Indigoplant flowering for the second time,
Ambrevade flowering for the third:
Gather what you have poured out
Take back what you abandoned:
Three times you have changed
And three times you have hardly found better . . .
(Rabéarivelo)

Here She Stands

Here she stands
her eyes reflecting crystals of sleep
her eyelids heavy with timeless dreams
her feet are rooted in the ocean
and when she lifts her dripping hands
they hold corals and shimmering salt.

She will pile them into little heaps
close to the bay of mist
and give them to nude sailors
whose tongues were cut out,
until the rains begin to fall.

Then one can no longer see her
but only her windswept hair
like a clump of unwinding seaweed
and perhaps some grains of salt.

JEAN JOSEPH RABÉARIVELO.

translated by Miriam Koshland

Love Song

Do not love me, my friend,
like your shadow—
shadows fade in the evening
and I will hold you
until the cock crows—
Do not love me like pepper,
it makes my belly too hot ;
I cannot eat pepper
when I am hungry.
Do not love me like a pillow—
one would meet in sleep
and not see each other during the day.
Love me like a dream—
for dreams are your life in the night
and my hope in the day.

FLAVIEN RANAIVO

translated by Miriam Koshland.