



Rita Astuti

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FOOD FOR PREGNANCY.  
PROCREATION, MARRIAGE AND IMAGES OF GENDER  
AMONG THE VEZO OF WESTERN MADAGASCAR<sup>1</sup>

Rita Astuti

London School of Economics

This article discusses the Vezo, a group of fishing people who live on the western coast of Madagascar, and their fear that men may become pregnant through a special act of feeding. Through analysis of Vezo kinship, of Vezo ideas about procreation, and of how the fear of male pregnancy is elaborated and eventually overcome through the marriage ritual, two co-existing images emerge: the image of ungenderedness, which stresses people's sameness and ignores gender differences, and the image of genderedness, in which gender is a difference of great significance. The two images are shown to be mutually constituted, rather than contradictory. It is argued in the conclusion that to take difference as the focus of gender analysis is misleading if one does not at the same time also include undifferentiation.

Department of Social Anthropology, London School of Economics, Houghton St., London  
WC2A 2AE, England

In their influential essay, Yanagisako and Collier (1987) portray anthropological theorizing on gender as a succession of steps forward, each one 'making what once seemed apparent cry out for explanation' (1987:14): whether sexual inequality is cross-culturally universal; whether the categories 'male' and 'female' apply to the same 'natural' objects in all societies; whether dichotomies such as nature/culture, domestic/public can be transferred from one society and its cultural constructs to another. A consequence of this questioning has been an increasing subtlety and complexity in the theoretical categories used to analyze gender constructs.

This subtlety and complexity is the topic of a recent collection of essays entitled Beyond the second sex (Sanday and Goodenough 1990). The terms used throughout the volume to describe the cultural constructs of gender among peoples as varied as the Hopi of Southwestern United States, the Beng of Ivory Coast, the Suku of Zaire, the Hua of Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea, etc., are 'multiplicity', 'complexity', 'multilayered', 'ambiguity', 'ambivalence', 'variability', 'contradictory'. This terminology conveys the aim of the book, which is to 'demonstrate that gender representations are multifaceted and must be understood first in terms of the context in which they appear and second in terms of their fit with other representations in other contexts'; 'such an approach' -- we are told -- 'is a significant change from the usual Western approach to gender as sexual difference that remains invariant across all contexts' (Sanday 1990:8). Gottlieb, for example, shows that the Beng have 'two very distinct models of gender symbolism' (1990:129), one in which female sexuality is thought to be both polluting and healing, and one in which men's and women's sexuality are mutually polluting. Thus, as Gottlieb concludes, 'the Beng case challenges us to consider the possibility of multiple models existing within a single society' (1990:130). In an earlier publication, Bloch (1987) had made a similar point for the Merina of Madagascar, who hold three contradictory views of women and femininity. Bloch also argued that it would be a mistake -- ethnographically as well as theoretically -- to reconcile these contradictions in an attempt to accommodate the multiple images of gender into a unified cultural model (1987:336). In a different context, Strathern (1988) has demonstrated the complexity among Melanesian peoples of non-unitary gender identities, in which one sex contains the other within itself.

This paper is a contribution to the effort of thinking about gender with subtlety, through notions of multiplicity and contradiction. It discusses the Vezo, a group of fishing people who live on the western coast of Madagascar, who fear that men may become pregnant through a special act of feeding. From the analysis of how this fear is elaborated and is eventually overcome, two different images will emerge: the first one I shall call the image of ungenderedness,<sup>2</sup> which stresses people's sameness and ignores gender differences; the second is the image of genderedness, in which gender is a difference of great significance.

In the first part of the paper, I analyze Vezo kinship, filongoa, which is a prominent domain of experience in which gender does not differentiate people. The content of Vezo kinship is relatedness between people, which comes through shared links of generation; these links are strictly ungendered. I then show how in the context of sexual reproduction the Vezo hold men and women to be crucially different. Thus, we find that the difference which the Vezo draw in procreation coexists with the identity that they assert in the context of kinship -- in other words, we find that ungendered kinship is produced by gendered, heterosexual reproduction.

Since the two images of genderedness and ungenderedness both lie at the very heart of kinship, there must be a point at which they clash. This point is marriage and the act of feeding that I mentioned earlier, and which I analyze in the second part of the paper. Through an analogy between feeding and sexual intercourse, the Vezo imagine and fear that men can become pregnant as if they were women. Through the drama enacted around this fear, and through its resolution, the images of genderedness and ungenderedness are articulated in a subtle, complex ritual discourse.

### identity

Let us start with a brief overview of Vezo kinship. To examine filongoa I begin by adopting the point of view of a very old man who looks with great pleasure at the kinship he has created. I shall call him dadilahy, grandfather, the term of address people used for him; he is a man, but his gender is irrelevant as far as his vision is concerned; women who have lived a long time have the same vision and experience his same aesthetic enjoyment. By using dadilahy's point of

view I will be able to describe filongoa without defining it as a cognatic kinship system.<sup>3</sup> Instead, I will refer to it as a system of ungendered relations, by which I mean that dadilahy's point of view stresses sameness between persons over difference between genders (or in other words, that in this vision gender is a difference that makes no difference).

The terms 'ungendered' and 'ungenderedness' used in this article are of course problematic, for instead of conveying sameness in its own right, they assume that sameness is the result of a negation of pre-existing genderedness. I use these terms nonetheless because our terminological and conceptual framework still lacks a 'positive' term to describe a condition in which gender is irrelevant. 'Ungenderedness' therefore denotes the irrelevance of gender; it indicates that when dadilahy looks at filongoa, he is gender-blind.<sup>4</sup>

When dadilahy looks at kinship, he looks down at his numerous descendants, and as he does so he has a vision of growth and expansion. He looks at his children (anaky), at the children generated by his children (zafy), at the latter's children (kitro), etc. As his vision moves downwards, he draws no distinctions between his descendants: he includes his sons as well as his daughters, his brothers' children as well as his sisters' children, his sons' children as well as his daughters' children, and so on further and further down the generations. The old man views all his descendants indistinctly as grandchildren; in so doing, he construes the link between himself and his descendants as an ungendered relation. In his view, filiation is non-gender specific.

The converse of dadilahy's view is that of his grandchildren, who look upwards and recognize him as their ascendant. For a young man dadilahy is the man who generated the woman who generated his mother; for another woman, he is the brother of the man who generated her father; for a small baby, he is the father who generated the father who generated the mother of his father, etc. When dadilahy's descendants look upwards, they trace him along the same ungendered paths that the old man follows to embrace them all as his children and grandchildren. In the descendants' view, parenthood is non-gender specific: to have been born by a woman and to have been born by a man is equivalent insofar as they all trace their ascendancy back to dadilahy, indistinctly through men and women.

The ungendered view of the old man's grandchildren moves upwards through their two

parents, their four grandparents, their eight great-grandparents, and so on. Just like the old man's vision, theirs is a view of growth and expansion, which branches out to reach an ever increasing number of ascendants. Although the path that leads to and beyond dadilahy is only one of the many that each of his descendants draws upwards from themselves,<sup>5</sup> dadilahy's grandchildren are related to each other as longo because they share dadilahy on one of their many paths of ascent.

To be longo means to have been generated by the same people. Two persons are ampilongo (reciprocal kin) if they or any one of their ascendants 'share a mother [and/or] share a father' (miharo neny, miharo baba). This definition of kinship stresses horizontal links of siblingship (having shared the same parents), rather than lineality (having been generated by a certain apical ancestor). Josy and Leky, for example, are ampilongo because the father of the mother of Josy's father was a brother of the father of the father of Leky's mother. The fact that Josy and Leky are ampilongo by reference to a sibling pair is significant because siblingship is a non-sexual, ungendered relation. Thus, like the old man who looks downwards, and like his descendants who look upwards, Josy and Leky retrace the source of their relatedness through ungendered links of generation.

We can conclude that in Vezo kinship men and women are alike: to be a mother is like being a father; to be a daughter is like being a son; to have been born by a woman is like having been born by a man. In filongoa, gender is not a difference that matters. This is one of the reasons why, as my informants endlessly repeated, 'the Vezo have very many kin' (Vezo manan-dongo maro mare). As I was told, this is because the Vezo have kin on both their father's and their mother's side (amin'ilan'babanteña, amin'ilan'neninteña). A complementary way of describing the process whereby the Vezo come to have so many kin is by noting how new kinship is established when a new generation of descendants is born by marriage. Marriage can only occur among people who are not ampilongo, reciprocal kin; these people are called olo hafa, different people. The Vezo emphasize that marriage does not erase the 'difference' between oneself, one's partner and all of one's partner's kin. This means that in-laws do not become kin. On the other hand, when 'different people' generate children, new filongoa is established, since both parents are kin of their offspring, and all those who are 'different people'

for the parents are transformed into kin of the children: parents-in-law become grandparents, sisters- and brothers-in-law become mothers and fathers. The transformation of `difference' into filongoa means that `people's kin increase all the time' (longon'olom-belo mihamaro isanandro isanandro), because `if one has children, one's parents-in-law become one's children's kin' (laha latsaky anaky teña, rafozanteña manjary longon' anakinteña). The transformation of `different people' into kin is what makes filongoa grow bilaterally and ungenderedly.

### difference

I stated above that a very clear image of gender difference emerges against the background of filongoa and of ungendered parenthood and filiation. In sexual reproduction, in the act of `generating' offspring, Vezo women as mothers are crucially different from Vezo men as fathers.

When I began to enquire about Vezo views on procreation, I formulated my opening question as `what is it that places the child inside the woman's belly?' (ino ro mampisy zaza añatiny sarotson' ampela?). My closest women-friends were at first puzzled that I did not know, but after a few jokes to the effect `did not you find this out yet?', they answered my question, pretending, as it were, that I really did not know.

First of all, they drew a womb in the sand: a circle with an opening, a sort of funnel facing downwards. They told me that it is the semen that the man puts inside the womb that causes the child to form inside the woman -- accordingly, they drew a line in the sand, showing that the semen enters through the opening and gets inside the womb. It is there that the child gradually forms (miforona), little by little, and grows bigger and bigger. The womb is called `the house of the child' (tranon'zaza). During this time, it is important that new semen keeps entering the woman's womb, for this makes the child grow strong. Another reason why a pregnant woman should have sex as late into pregnancy as she can is that she thereby keeps the baby's way out wide open and makes delivery easier.

When I asked whether the woman contributes to the `placing' of the child inside her own body, the answer was a consistent and categorical denial. In one instance, I was told that

whoever had taught me the contrary -- implying that my own people might have done so -- was lying. How else can one explain why women, who are the ones who give birth, cannot become pregnant unless they have sex with men? Women have the 'house' in their body, but men are the 'origin', the 'source' of pregnancy (ampela trano, lehilahy ro fotoran' ateraha); it is men who give pregnancy to women (manao akory tsika ndra teraky tsy mana, rozy avao ro omena azy).

In a few instances, I was told that women's menstrual blood contributes to the making of the placenta (zokin'zaza, lit. the eldest sibling of the child). When a woman is pregnant, her monthly bleeding stops; instead of coming out of the womb, menstrual blood clots inside it (mipako mipako). Thus, while the man's semen builds up the child (mañamboatsy zaza), the woman's menstrual blood builds up the placenta (mañamboatsy zokin'zaza). I already mentioned that the woman provides the 'house' for the child; the forming of the placenta in her womb seems to be part of the housing facilities she provides.

We have seen that the baby grows strong if the womb is supplied by a constant flow of semen. But the baby is also hungry for food, and this is supplied by what the woman eats during pregnancy. The baby sits upright, its head at the height of the woman's chest and its mouth wide open, ready to ingest what the mother swallows, especially fat and tasty foods (tsiron-kany). When a woman discovers that she is pregnant (after two 'moons' of missed periods), she may consult a diviner; if things are expected to be difficult, for example because the woman has already many miscarriages, the diviner may impose some special restrictions, which often take the form of food prohibitions -- the commonest I heard about is a ban on shark meat (faly akio). Interestingly enough, however, these prohibitions may in fact be disregarded if the woman feels a craving for the banned foodstuff. The reason for this is that any cravings during pregnancy (mañovaly) are thought to be due to the child's, rather than the woman's, desire for certain kinds of food, and the woman must always fulfil the baby's requests or else the foetus will die. Thus, if the baby craves shark meat which the diviner has forbidden, the mother will eat it, in secret and with little fuss.

When the baby finds its way out of the woman's body, its bones (taola), muscles (hosatsy) and fontanelle (hevo) are still soft (malemilemy). They will get harder (henja) as the baby is fed on its mother's milk; breast feeding is soon combined with attempts to feed the baby



other kinds of food -- rice water, fish broth, etc. While responsibility for nurturing the child is shared by both parents increasingly over time, women emphasize their contribution during pregnancy and during the first months of the baby's life.

The Vezo thus draw a sharp contrast between the role of men and women in sexual reproduction: although men are the source of female pregnancy and are responsible for placing the child inside the womb, they make a lesser contribution to procreation than do women. Men, I was told, simply 'throw away' (aria) their semen inside the woman's body; women instead bear the burden of housing the baby and feeding it, activities that are described as very hard work. It is for this reason, because of their physical effort, that women are considered 'the real source - origin - hence the owners of the children' (ampela ro tena tompony).<sup>6</sup> This claim, which establishes gender difference in procreation, clashes with the claim discussed above that parenthood is ungendered.

In one context, this conflict leads to women being mothers, whereas men are prevented from being fathers. Young people, I was once told, 'make love with no purpose' (mandranto fahatany). If a woman becomes pregnant and does not want to marry her lover (or vice versa), the child will be an 'outside child' (anaky amonto), a term meaning that the child is outside marriage. Because it is women, rather than men, who are 'the real source - origin - hence the owners of the children', the 'outside child' will have a mother but will lack a father (tsy mana baba). As a result, the child will only have kin on its mother's side; this means that the child loses one side of its potential kinship relations. In fact, very often such a child is effectively removed from its generation, and made to be a sibling of its mother, so that its maternal grandparents become its parents. As a sibling of its mother, the 'outside child' has both a mother (its grandmother) and a father (its grandfather); as a result, it possesses kin on both sides just like its mother. Thus, one may note that in a context in which motherhood prevails over fatherhood, motherhood itself is in some significant respect denied and negated -- it is as if parenthood cannot be at all, if it is not ungendered.

Yet the fact remains that outside marriage the child lacks a father (and its father's kin); and conversely that its father loses it, its children and great-grandchildren as his descendants. Only through marriage -- when people make love 'with a purpose' -- does filongoa grow

bilaterally as people acquire kin on both their parents' sides; only in marriage does the difference between women's hard labour in procreation and men's pleasurable throwing away of their semen, make no significant difference; and only in marriage is parenthood ungendered.

Marriage, therefore, appears as the point at which the image of gender difference clashes with the image of ungenderedness. The source of this clash can be identified in the drama that precedes marriage and in the ritual that resolves it.

### threatening food

During the course of their life Vezo men are exposed to the danger of catching hanimboky, a very unpleasant disease (arety) that only affects men. Hanimboky literally means swollen/full (voky)<sup>7</sup> with food (hany). A man sick with hanimboky is unable to `shit and pee' (tsy mangery tsy mamany), and this causes his stomach to swell up (mitombo sarotsony) until it resembles the belly of a pregnant woman (manahaky sarotson' ampela bevoka). The illness is caused by food that the male kin of a sexually active woman accept and eat from her. This food is said to be dirty (hany maloto), for it is assumed that the woman has acquired it with tangy, the presents her lover gives her for having had sex with him. When a man accepts food from one of his female kin, it is therefore as if he were receiving food from the woman's lover; if a man accepted such food, he would be put in a very inferior position (mañambany azy mare). This is hardly surprising, for to accept such food would be tantamount to receiving tangy; and although this was never explicitly stated, it would seem that by accepting tangy a woman's male kin would be put in the position of receiving a present for having had sex with their daughter's or sister's lover. As will become clear below, however, hanimboky does not concern the danger of sexual relations between men, but the danger that men be treated as women.

Vezo women and men agree that hanimboky only occurs in men, because eating tangy-like food does not affect a woman's female kin. For example, a woman may use tangy to buy a few packets of chewing tobacco, some of which she may give to her mother; but she will inform her of the source so that the mother can ensure that none of her daughter's male kin gets any. The only instance in which a woman should avoid tangy-like food is during pregnancy, because if the baby is a boy he will suffer.

The reason women can eat food associated with other women's tangy, I was told, is that women are alike (sambiampela tsy mañahy) because they have similar sexual organs: 'they all have vaginas' (sambility iaby).

The reference to female sexual organs is worth pursuing. I myself never thought of asking why a man's body is prone to swelling with dirty stuff; in other words, why men cannot have babies. However, a friend once took the initiative of explaining this. A man's body, she said, has no place to collect 'women's semen' (deron'ampela), i.e. the vaginal mucus (which has the same name - dero - as male semen).<sup>8</sup> Female semen, therefore 'falls out' (atempa amonto) and is lost during sexual intercourse. A woman's body, on the contrary, has an opening and a place where it can retain male semen; the womb is a 'straw basket' (fisia), which is small when empty and expands as it is filled -- as we have seen earlier, the womb is called 'the house of the child' (tranon'zaza).

Hanimboky, the illness that makes a man's belly swell like that of a pregnant woman, is thus a kind of male 'pregnancy'.<sup>9</sup> Since men cannot have babies because they lack both an appropriate opening in their body and a 'basket' -- that is to say, they lack the sexual organs that make women alike and render them immune from hanimboky -- male pregnancy occurs through another opening in their bodies, their mouth, and through the ingestion of food. But since the food they are fed by their daughters or sisters, or rather by the latter's lovers, is 'dirty', male pregnancy is dirty too -- men swell up with excrement they are unable to expel.

In conclusion, the reason why men are exposed to hanimboky is that men are not the same as women. As we shall see, hanimboky poses a serious threat to men because they are treated as if they were women by their daughter's or sister's lover.

Every night Vezo villages are alive with the soft movements of young men, wrapped up in blankets, who knock, when all is safe, at their lover's door and are silently let in. Early in the morning, well before dawn, they leave as secretly as they came. Secrecy is necessary, for as long as the woman's male kin are kept uninformed about the relationship, as long as 'they do not see it with their eyes' (tsy hita maso), no affinal links are established between the man and his lover's kin. Conversely, as the Vezo say, a father- or brother-in-law only becomes such on being informed about an affair between a kinswoman and her lover (laha mbo tsy hainy, mbo

tsy rafoza ie; lafa hainy fa rafoza, atao rafoza, atao velahy, if he doesn't know yet, he is not yet a father-in-law; when he knows, he is your father-in-law, you say father-in-law, you say brother-in-law). Now, it is when the woman's male kin do not know, hence when they have not yet become the lover's in-laws, that they are in danger of hanimboky.

I must make it clear at this point that what makes a man ill with hanimboky is not a daughter's or sister's secret sexual activities as such; men fall ill only when they are fed by their daughter's or sister's lover. The woman's male kin are not threatened because a daughter or sister is sexually active, but because they are in danger of being involved in her sexual life without being recognized as individuals separate from her. When the lover feeds them tangy, he treats all his lover's kin as if they were merely an extension of the woman he has sex with. In other words, he treats them as if they were women.<sup>10</sup> We now understand why this poses no problem for the woman's female kin, for they are treated for what they are: women. By contrast, her male kin fall ill with hanimboky, a kind of pregnancy caused by the fact that men are not the same as women but are treated as if they were.

#### dirty food made healthy

Hanimboky is like an illness for which a reliable vaccine exists. Before vaccination, one should avoid catching the disease by shunning food that comes from one's sexually active female kin. Those people who may cause one to become ill are expected to be equally careful with their use of tangy. Then, the time comes when one is administered the vaccine and one becomes immune from the disease.

The fact that a vaccine for hanimboky is available means that I know about the disease without knowing of anyone becoming ill with it. I know about the fear and the threat of hanimboky, and how people can overcome them. The Vezo told me that they marry because marriage puts an end to the danger of falling ill with hanimboky. Marriage, in other words, is the vaccine against male pregnancy.<sup>11</sup>

The threat of hanimboky is averted when the secret lover decides to 'come out in front of his father-in-law' (miboaky am-rafoza) and to 'beg' (mangataky) for the woman. When he 'comes out', he makes himself visible and, what is more, he sees his lover's kin; instead of

ignoring them as he has done up to then, he recognizes them as his in-laws. The ritual that follows this 'coming out' is said to 'render healthy' the 'dirty food' that had previously posed such a threat to the woman's male kin.

When people ask whether a couple has undergone marriage, they mean to ask whether the ritual of soritse has been performed. Soritse (which literally means 'tracing') takes place at the house of the eldest of the wife's kin, when vertical lines of 'white earth' (tany foty, chalk) are traced by groom and bride on the stomach and right-hand arm of all the woman's male kin, including classificatory sons and her own male children born from other men. Since the purpose of the tracing is to put an end to the danger of hanimboky, women do not need to be smeared; they are traced only if they are pregnant, on the grounds that the child might be a male.

After dissolving the chalk in a little water in the woman's palm, the man traces a line on the men's stomachs and the woman traces a line on their arms. At the same time the couple recites a formula, either 'that you may shit, that you may pee' (mba hangery, mba hamany) or 'that the food coming from my hand may bring you good' (hahasoa hahatsara anao ny sakafu baka ny tanako). When everyone has been marked, the men on the woman's side may for the first time accept food -- in this instance rum, beer and soft drinks -- from the woman's lover, who has now become a son- or brother-in-law or classificatory father. Although the drinks brought by the husband-to-be have been in full display throughout the ritual, the woman's elders ignore them, for none of the woman's male relations dare consume anything offered by the former lover before the tracing is complete. Only after having been smeared do the woman's elders accept an envelope with some money from their new son-in-law and drink his rum. The money is no longer like tangy, and the food is no longer dirty.

The ritual of soritse averts the danger of hanimboky. The formulas uttered while the couple traces the white lines on the men's belly (the belly that was in danger of swelling up) and on their right-hand arm (the arm with which 'dirty food' would have been received) refer explicitly to the causes and symptoms of hanimboky. The lines of 'white earth', I was once told, are like a medicine (fanafody), because they transform food that was once dirty (hany maloto) into 'food made healthy, that has been cured' (hany voataha). Once the ritual has been performed, the woman's male kin will be able to eat any food offered by their son- or brother-

in-law with no fear of becoming pregnant. The food will now be considered a 'gift' (fanomeza); what used to put the woman's male kin in a position of inferiority vis-à-vis the woman's lover is now received as a token of respect from a dutiful son-in-law.

I suggested above that in the marriage ritual and the drama that precedes it, the image of gender difference clashes with the image of ungenderedness. The first image, gender difference, is implied by the aetiology of hanimboky and is created in the ritual itself; the second image, ungenderedness, also emerges through the ritual, which establishes the identity of men and women in filongoa. It is time to look more closely at these two processes, in order to show how each one is implicated in the other.

Let us first consider how gender difference is construed in the ritual. We have seen that hanimboky is a gender-selective illness, for it only befalls men. We also know that the reason for this is that men are different from women, for they lack what women possess, a space to house the baby during pregnancy. From this perspective, the difference between men and women appears to be categorical, a given fact of human physiology. In the context of hanimboky, however, the Vezo do something more than simply acknowledge the physiological difference between men and women. They appear to question the difference on two grounds: firstly, by imagining that women could make men pregnant in sexual intercourse with their semen, the vaginal mucus; secondly, by imagining that by treating a man as if he were a woman, the man could become pregnant. In both cases, the Vezo posit an essential identity between men and women. Having pushed difference to the limit of identity, however, hanimboky reasserts the difference, by establishing that men's pregnancy is other than that of women, and is a deadly disease. Hanimboky and the ritual that cures it provide their own terms for defining gender difference, namely that men and women are different because only men fall ill with hanimboky. Thus, while the drama of hanimboky plays on available and familiar ideas of gender undifferentiation, it also establishes gender differentiation. Most significantly, the difference established by hanimboky is mediated by feeding, and therefore no longer depends solely on physiological characteristics of male and female sexual organs.

There is a second way in which the marriage ritual creates gender difference, and that is

through an aspect of the ritual which I have not yet discussed. Something I did not mention above is that the woman's female kin are present throughout the ritual. They sit next to and mingle with the men; they are usually very talkative and appear far from marginal to the procedure. Yet, they are not smeared. The reason for this is ostensibly quite simple: women do not need to be traced for they are immune from hanimboky. There is, however, another aspect of women's exclusion from the tracing, which is that during the ritual men are sorted out from women. In other words, the tracing establishes difference by attributing gender: men are recognized to be men because of the two white lines on their body; women are recognized to be women because they remain unmarked. Significantly, this distinction is enacted after a period in which hanimboky had threatened to treat men as if they were the same as women.

Yet the same act that re-establishes the difference between men and women also re-creates their identity. The couple which sorts men out from women in the crowd, does so as an ungendered unit: for as a married couple, they are the source of ungendered filongoa. Thus, the ritual asserts gender differentiation by negating the identity established by hanimboky; it also establishes this difference through the tracing while at the same time creating ungenderedness in filongoa.

Let us look more closely at the process whereby identity is created out of difference; or, what is the same, at how ungendered filongoa is created through marriage. Like other people in Madagascar, the Vezo say that marriage is an exchange of a woman for a man (ampela takalo johary). The two sides of the exchange say to each other: 'here is my child, it is not my child but is your child' (anako ty tsy anako, fa anakinao). The exchange renders the two sides equal; as the Vezo say, 'no-one is below, no-one is above' (tsy misy ambany, tsy misy ambony). The two sets of parents-in-law are said to be like siblings, (notwithstanding that if they were, their children could not have married), because, as I was told, they are equal as siblings are. Their equality simply reflects the identity of what they have exchanged: a child for a child.<sup>12</sup> And yet, if we look at the two movements that constitute the exchange, the movement from the woman's side to the man's and vice versa, we find that they both originate in the difference between men and women.

Let us first consider the movement from the woman's side to the man's, the nature of

which is rather simple. We have seen that the man who sneaks into his lover's house at night is not going to be a father unless he reveals himself to his lover's kin and transforms them into in-laws. This is because 'women are the real source - origin - hence owners of the children'. When he asks for and receives the woman, he is also given the woman's offspring, who would otherwise not be his. Even if the woman subsequently leaves him or is sent away, his fatherhood will not be erased. Whatever happens, the children possess his side of filongoa as well as their mother's;<sup>13</sup> and when as an old man he looks down at his descendants, he will be able to include these children, their children and grandchildren within his vision.<sup>14</sup> In sum, the reason why the man enters the marriage exchange is that men differ from women, for it is women who do the hard work of bearing children and are therefore the children's real 'owners'.

Turning now to the other movement, from the man's side to the woman's, we find that things are rather more complex. When the woman's elders are approached by the woman's lover, their position vis-à-vis the man is the same as that of their daughter or sister -- namely they are, as she is, 'the real source - origin - hence owners of the children'. For this reason, even if the woman does not enter the exchange, she and her elders will nonetheless retain the children; these, as 'outside children', will only have their mother's side of filongoa. However, retaining the children by refusing to agree to the marriage is very dangerous because of hanimboky; quite simply, if a daughter or sister does not marry, she, her lover and his dirty food will never cease to be a threat to her male kin. From this perspective, when the woman's elders agree to the marriage, they agree to let go what they could retain only at great danger -- they let go the children of men who threaten to make them pregnant. Ultimately, the woman's side enters the marriage exchange because, as hanimboky proves, men are not the same as women.

The problem with letting go of something that is too dangerous to retain entirely for oneself, is that one may be left with nothing at all. The woman's elders, who could retain the children but instead give them to their son-in-law, could lose them altogether as a result. In terms of the children's filongoa, this would mean that before marriage the children are the woman's children only, while after marriage they would become the man's children only, and filongoa would be, in both instances, gendered.

We know, however, that after marriage filongoa is ungendered. This means that the



marriage ritual must accomplish both the inclusion of the father's side -- in one direction of the exchange -- and the retention of the mother's side -- in the other direction. The tracing of white lines and the gift of healthy food offered to the woman's elders move in this second direction, by creating what we can imagine to be a form of 'male pregnancy', that nonetheless is very different from hanimboky.

In the marriage ritual the men on the woman's side must for the first time acknowledge their daughter's or sister's sexual life. ('they see it'). The food displayed in front of them is food that, if they were being treated like women, would make them ill with hanimboky. But the lover who is becoming a son- or brother-in-law does not treat them like women, like an appendix of the woman's body, because he recognizes them as his in-laws -- as men respected as men. Thus, when the couple performs the tracing, the woman's male kin are reassured that they will not become pregnant: the food they receive will do them good; they will eat, and then shit and pee.

There is, however, a sense in which these men do, in a new and safe way, become 'pregnant'. This is because their daughter's or sister's children will also be their children, even after they let them go; these children and their descendants will be part of their vision of filongoa. As a result of the tracing, the woman's male kin become 'pregnant' through her instead of like her. The healthy food that the men will consume and digest will flow freely through them; in the same manner, the links of filongoa created by the children of their kinswoman will also freely 'flow' through them. Ungendered filongoa is created by this free flowing of food and children.

Marriage creates the identity between man and woman that makes their exchange an equal exchange, one in which the two sides are neither below nor above. No difference exists in filongoa between men and women, sons and daughters, mothers and fathers; filongoa is created through marriage. It would be tempting to conclude on these grounds that the marriage ritual creates the image of ungenderedness out of the image of gender difference; this would imply that the ritual transforms an inherent, basic difference between men and women into their identity. In fact, a transformation occurs in both directions: while the image of ungenderedness is created out of difference, the image of gender difference is also created out of

ungenderedness. The strongest claim for gender difference, that men are not like women because they cannot have babies, is sustained through a similarly powerful claim of gender identity, which is that Vezo men can become pregnant, even if only by eating dirty food and through feeding.

The clash between difference and identity that we find at the heart of the ritual is not -- as we might wish -- ever solved, but is acted out in circles. Among the Vezo, the ritual tells us, gender is not a difference and is a difference; gender is and is not an attribute of Vezo persons. The images that emerge from the ritual -- genderedness and ungenderedness -- are both available and are equally powerful; they reinforce rather than contradict each other.

I stated at the beginning of this paper that it was meant as a contribution to reflecting on gender through notions of multiplicity and contradiction. By way of conclusion, I wish briefly to return to Yanagisako and Collier (1987) and to their reference to 'the next puzzle we must generate and then solve', namely 'the difference between men and women'. To approach this puzzle, they suggest that 'rather than taking for granted that 'male' and 'female' are two natural categories of human beings whose relations are everywhere structured by their difference, we ask whether this is indeed the case in each society we study and, if so, what specific social and cultural processes cause men and women to appear different from each other' (1987:15). In particular, they argue that 'instead of asking how the categories of 'male' and 'female' are endowed with culturally specific characters [as Ortner and Whitehead (1981) did], thus taking the difference between them for granted, we need to ask how particular societies define difference' (1987:35).

Yanagisako and Collier's chief preoccupation is rightly to 'question whether the particular biological difference in reproductive function that our culture defines as the basis of difference between males and females ... is used by other societies to constitute the cultural categories of male and female' (1987:48). In other words, we are asked to abandon what Errington (1990) has called 'the gender system of the West'.

My analysis in this paper expands and somewhat modifies Yanagisako and Collier's argument.<sup>15</sup> Through Vezo kinship, Vezo ideas on procreation, the fear that men may become pregnant with food, and the ritual that overcomes this fear, I have shown that in Vezo discourse

and experience difference co-exists with undifferentiation. More significantly, I have shown that difference and undifferentiation are mutually constituted. In this context, it would be mistaken to ask what specific social and cultural processes cause Vezo men and women to appear different from each other, if we do not also ask what causes them to appear the same.<sup>16</sup>

What I am suggesting, therefore, is that to take difference as our next puzzle can be mistaken, if we do not also make undifferentiation a part of the question. When we approach the study of gender we should be asking if, when, to what degree, and in which contexts men and women appear to be different, but we should also be asking what makes men and women appear to be the same. By combining these questions we may be able to grasp the complexity of a world in which difference creates its absence, and in which undifferentiation creates its opposite.

## NOTES

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2. The meaning of this term is discussed below.

3. See Strathern 1992 and Errington 1989:237 ff.

4. I have benefited from discussions on this point with Emily Martin and Henrietta Moore.

5. Dadilahy's descendants draw upwards from themselves many paths of ascendancy, and they do so simultaneously; this means that they do not select one among the many available. The process by which they draw themselves to an ascendant (rather than from an ancestor) has therefore different implications from those discussed by Errington 1989.

6. The Vezo' view on this point contrasts with that reported by Feeley-Harnik (1991:218) for Sakalava commoners in the Analalava region (north-western Madagascar).

7. After a plentiful meal, the Vezo say that they are vintsy, filled and

satisfied; the term voky is not normally used in this context. The term hanimboky would appear to emphasize the swelling of the stomach rather than repletion.

8. Vaginal mucus is also referred to as tain-lity, lit. vagina's excretion. The fact that vaginal mucus is regarded by the Vezo as the same sort of fluid as male semen may seem less surprising when we consider that in the western tradition the male and female seed were not imagined as sexually specific until 'the discovery of the sexes' in the eighteenth century (see Laqueur 1990).

9. 'Male pregnancy' has been reported by Meigs (1976) for the Hua of Papua New Guinea, for which kupa is 'the condition of being pregnant but unable to give birth' (1976:397); accordingly, women who experience conception outside the womb also become victims of kupa. According to Meigs, Hua men appear to possess a will to believe that they are fertile; as will become clear in what follows, hanimboky among Vezo does not reflect such a will on the men's part.

10. The position in which the woman's kin find themselves with respect to the intruder can be best described with the image of a little boy, who falls ill with hanimboky because he sleeps with his mother while she has sex with someone other than the boy's father; in such a case the boy is nearly literally at one with the woman's body, for he sleeps curled up behind his mother's back (miroro amin'lambosin'neniny). It is remarkable that in this case the proximity between the woman's and the child's body is such that there is no need even of 'dirty food' for the boy to fall ill with hanimboky; it is as if the lover's sperm directly impregnated the little boy. As with 'dirty food', however, if the woman slept with a daughter



behind her back, 'it wouldn't matter' (tsy mañahy) and hanimboky would not ensue.

11. If a married woman has an extra-marital affair and feeds her husband with 'dirty food' associated with her lover's tangy, the husband will get hanimboky. The reason is that an extra-marital lover treats the woman's husband in the same way as a husband-to-be treats the woman's kin (he 'does not see him' and treats him as an extension of his lover). There is, however, an important difference between the two situations. In the case of the woman's male kin, the danger of hanimboky can be terminated by performing the marriage ritual. By contrast, the betrayed husband is defenceless against his wife's 'dirty food'; his only available defence is to dissolve the marriage before catching the disease. It is probably because a 'vaccine' against hanimboky exists in the first instance, while it does not in the second, and because people are more interested in the 'vaccine' than in the disease itself, that my informants discussed hanimboky in the context of the creation of affinal relations rather than in the context of marital betrayals.

12. See Astuti 1991, ch.3, for a discussion of the hierarchical dimension of marriage exchange.

13. Although Vezo marriage is extremely unstable (Astuti 1991, ch.3), relations of affinity created by marriage are far stronger. According to a pattern found throughout Madagascar (Southall 1986:419), if children are born in wedlock, affines who have become longo of the children remain affines (mbo atao rafoza, mbo atao velahy, 'they're still called parents-, or siblings-in-law') even if the marriage breaks up.

14. Among the Vezo, men become masters of the children as a result of a

ritual they must perform (soron'anake) for their first-born child. As argued in Astuti 1991, through the ritual of soro a father acquires the children's bones, rather than the children's flesh or their mouth (tsy mivily vavany, tsy mivily nofotsiny, fa taola iñy ro nivilin'olo, one doesn't buy the child's mouth or the child's flesh; what one buys are the child's bones). While through the ritual of soro a father acquires the right to bury his children in his tomb, soro does not affect the children's position in the filongoa experienced by the living (soro and descent among the Vezo are discussed in Astuti 1991, ch.6.).

15. See Errington (1990:26ff) for a critique of Yanagisako and Collier's attempt to dissociate the study of gender from sex.

16. Although sameness may be more difficult to study than difference, as suggested by Atkinson 1982 and 1990, the two must be examined through their reciprocal articulation and constitution.