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'The Vezo are not a kind of people'. Identity, difference and 'ethnicity' among a fishing people of western Madagascar

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**`THE VEZO ARE NOT A KIND OF PEOPLE'**  
**IDENTITY, DIFFERENCE AND `ETHNICITY'**  
**AMONG A FISHING PEOPLE OF WESTERN MADAGASCAR**

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**Abstract**

This paper presents a model of identity and difference alternative to ethnicity. It describes how the Vezo of western Madagascar construe their identity by transcending descent or descent-based features of the person. To be a Vezo is to have learnt Vezo-ness, and to perform it: identity is an activity rather than a state of being. Difference is construed by an analogous process of identification: others are different because they have acquired and perform another identity. Both identity and difference are not inherent in people, but are performative. [identity, difference, ethnicity, Madagascar, Vezo].

The Vezo are people who live on the west coast of Madagascar. They live near the sea, and they know the sea. In this paper, I analyze how they construe their identity, and how they make distinctions between themselves and others. As we shall see, the second aspect of this discussion is predicated on the first one, for the way in which the Vezo construe identity, is identical to the way in which they construe difference.

Although I will be discussing identity and difference between groups of people, this paper is not concerned with ethnicity. Borrowing from Linnekin and Poyer's recent discussion of cultural identity and ethnicity in the Pacific, I define ethnicity as a set of theories based on the proposition that 'people are as they are because they were born to be so' (1990:2). The advantage of this particular definition is that it captures, in very simple terms, what is common to the various and often contrasting theories of ethnicity as a cultural and/or sociological phenomenon; whether ethnicity is seen as a basic and irreducible primordial attachment (cfr. Geertz 1973, Isaacs 1975), as a biologically evolved phenomenon (Van den Berghe 1981), as a form of kinship reckoning (Keyes 1981) or as a dependent variable which only becomes salient under specific historical circumstances (cfr. Vincent 1974, Glazer and Moynihan 1975, Hechter 1986, Stack 1986). Whether it is interpreted as cultural totemism (Schwartz 1982), as a phenomenon of boundary maintenance (Barth 1969), or as a case of 'endurance' of a minority people within dominant nation-states (Spicer 1980, Castile and Kushner 1981), ethnicity is shown to be informed by the same idea, namely that people construe their ethnic identity through their common origins, and that through these origins, they come to share some sort of biological or cultural trait which is either inherent in the members of the ethnic group -- like blood or descent -- or is 'naturalized' and therefore made to appear inherent -- like language, religion or a specific kind of history.<sup>1</sup> It is this set of ideas which is expressed in the proposition that people are as they are because they were born to be

so.

As Linnekin and Poyer argue, this idea and the ethnic theory of identity that derives from it, should not be assumed to inform all theories of identity; thus, the analytical challenge raised by the volume on Cultural identity and ethnicity in the Pacific is to recognize the existence of other, alternative constructs of identity and difference; in other words, the goal is to investigate other people's ethnotheories, rather than to assume that these must be ethnic theories (Linnekin and Poyer 1990:5).<sup>2</sup> This paper aims to contribute to this project; it investigates the Vezo's ethnotheory, and shows that it is not an ethnic theory: the Vezo maintain that they are not what they are because they were born to be so. Their alternative model of identity and difference stresses instead that Vezo become what they are through what they do; both identity and difference result from activities that people perform in the present, rather than from a common or distinct origin they acquired at some point in the past.

Because of the nature of their identity, the Vezo have often been considered by various scholars something of an anomaly -- a group of people who did not fit into the 'ethnic map' of Madagascar.<sup>3</sup> As I read the relevant literature in preparation for fieldwork, I became increasingly attracted to the Vezo, who seemed to defy any attempt to impose 'ethnicity' to them. As a background to my own findings, let me briefly explain the 'problem' constituted by the Vezo population.

#### 'Ethnicity' on the West coast

On reading the accounts by early travellers or missionaries, or more recent reports by geographers, anthropologists or historians, one is struck by the insistence with which these authors argue that the Vezo should be regarded as a fishing and coastal people.<sup>4</sup> After spending a few days among the Vezo, I realized that this emphasis reflected a local

preoccupation. Any attempt on my part to learn new words related to fishing or sailing, for example, prompted my Vezo instructors to explain that the people who fish and sail are Vezo; similarly, when I showed a group of young men a map of the coastal region, they told me that all the people who live along the coast, near the sea, are Vezo. When I eventually learnt the words to ask who the Vezo are, what type of people they consider themselves to be, I was told that the Vezo are 'people who struggle with the sea and live on the coast' (olo mitolo rano, olo mipetsaky andriaky). Indeed any statement about a custom, an activity or an inclination reputed to be Vezo, would be prefaced by 'we people who live on the coast, do this and that...', or 'we people who struggle with the sea are used to this or that...', and so on. Similarly, I was repeatedly told that the Vezo's neighbours, the Masikoro, are people who live in the interior (antety), who cultivate rice, maize and manioc (mamboly vary, tsako, balahazo) and raise cattle (mihary aomby). And in this case, any statement about a custom, an activity or an inclination reputed to be Masikoro would be prefaced by 'those people who live in the interior, do this and that...', or 'those people who cultivate and raise cattle are used to this and that...', and so on.

Given the emphatic way with which the Vezo define themselves and their neighbours in terms of their occupation and their place of residence, the literature's preoccupation with these features is hardly surprising. Rather more unusual, however, is the attitude towards the Vezo's self-definition: for having recognized that the Vezo are people devoted to fishing and inhabitants of the coast, it is then usual to add that the Vezo are just a fishing and coastal people. Why just, the naive reader asks? what else could the Vezo be? The answer seems to be that the self-defining label 'Vezo' refers just to a mode of livelihood -- fishing -- which is in fact regarded as the only distinguishing feature of the Vezo; this is confirmed by the oft-mentioned fact that if a person leaves the coast to move to the interior, she ceases to be Vezo

and becomes Masikoro, a point to which I shall return further on. It has thus been concluded that the term 'Vezo' does not indicate a trait of identity that is fixed and immutable, for people can move and thereby change their livelihood. For this reason, scholars have agreed that the Vezo fail to be a 'genuine ethnic group' (une ethnîe véritable), a 'special race' (une race spéciale), or a 'distinct people' (une peuplade distincte).

Curiously, having come this close to describing an 'ethnotheory' of identity that is alternative to ethnicity -- namely, that Vezo people are what they do for their livelihood --, these ethnographers failed to recognize their own finding. In one case, the curator of the official ethnographic Atlas of Madagascar comes close to suggesting, like the judges in the famous Mashpee case (Clifford 1988), that since the Vezo are not an ethnic group, they do not in fact exist (Association 1969-70, fig.21).<sup>5</sup> Most ethnographers, however, have been rather less drastic. Assuming that the Vezo, like everyone else, must have an ethnic affiliation, they argue that if the Vezo as such are not an ethnic group, they must belong to another, broader ethnic grouping.

On these grounds, the Vezo have been assigned to the 'large Sakalava ethnic family' (Koechlin 1975:26), within which they represent a technologically-defined sub-group among others. Having thus attributed an ethnic affiliation to the Vezo, the fact that the label 'Vezo' seems to describe only what the Vezo do and where they live while it fails to reveal who the Vezo 'genuinely' are, ceases to be problematic.

Yet this solution in turn raises new problems. Firstly, the notion that the Sakalava are a 'genuine ethnic group' can be disputed.<sup>6</sup> The term Sakalava refers to the kingdoms in western Madagascar established through conquest by a foreign dynasty; to be Sakalava means, to this day, to be a subject of the Sakalava rulers. As recent work by Feeley-Harnik (1991) clearly shows, the Sakalava 'ethnotheory' cannot be assumed to be an ethnic theory, since it is not

based on a 'born to be so' condition, but is predicated on people's active and willing subjection to the monarchy, on their ritual work and on their political allegiance. Secondly, it is highly problematic to impute to the Vezo an identity, ethnic or otherwise, which they do not recognize as their own, and which, somewhat paradoxically, they have been systematically denied by the historians of the region. Thus, while my informants never defined themselves as Sakalava, and proudly recounted how the Vezo had never subjected themselves to the Sakalava kings and had taken to their canoes to flee all kinds of authority (see below), historians have argued that the Vezo were peripheral to the Sakalava kingdom because they failed to participate in the economic order dominated by animal husbandry imposed by the new rulers (Lombard 1988; Schlemmer 1980, 1983). In other words, it is argued that the Vezo, as fishing people, possessed a specialized system of production that situated them outside the Sakalava economic and political entity.

The Vezo therefore pose a seemingly insoluble conundrum for the literature: on the one hand, the ethnographers argue that they must be Sakalava because being 'people who struggle with the sea and live on the coast' is not enough to provide them with an ethnic affiliation; on the other hand, the historians have told us that they cannot be Sakalava for the same reason, namely that they are fishing people. The dilemma can, however, be solved if we stop imposing 'ethnicity' on the Vezo, and pay more attention to the Vezo's own definition of who they are. This means being willing to consider, rather than dismiss out of hand, that what Vezo people do and where they live is sufficient to define and constitute their identity and the difference between themselves and others.

This is what I set out to do in what remains of this paper. In the first part, I discuss how the Vezo construe identity as an activity rather than a state of being: the only way to be Vezo is to act Vezo. In the second part, I analyze the Vezo's version of a geo-determinist model of



identity: what people do and therefore are, is determined by the place where they live. In this context, I discuss the Lamarckian model of identity elaborated for Oceania by Linnekin and Poyer (1990), with special reference to the relationship between land and people. The third part considers how difference is construed analogically: people who differ from the Vezo do so through the same process of 'identification' that makes the Vezo what they are. In other words, people differ because of the different things they do. Finally, the fourth section discusses how the Vezo portray their place in the history of the Sakalava kingdoms -- one example of the Vezo denial of the determining power of the past over the present.

Let me clarify at the outset that I do not wish to imply that the Vezo are unique in the way they construe identity. I am certainly not the first to suggest or imply that the concept of 'ethnicity' is problematic in the Malagasy context.<sup>7</sup> This is hardly surprising if we consider how different the construct of the ethnic person is from the construct of the Malagasy person. While the ethnic theory of identity draws on the notion that a person is what it was born to be, and that birth into a group fixes its identity in time and space, Malagasy people share a concept of the person which, to borrow from Southall's definition of Malagasy kinship as 'cumulative kinship', can be glossed as 'cumulative personhood': 'something achieved gradually and progressively throughout life, and even after death, rather than ascribed and fixed definitively at birth' (Southall 1986:417).<sup>8</sup> The 'cumulative' process of becoming that I describe for the Vezo is thus an example -- possibly an extreme example -- of a feature shared by all Malagasy people and indeed, as Fox suggests (1987), by all Austronesian people.

### Identity as doing

In the early stages of my fieldwork, I asked questions and made remarks that often implied a

theory of identity based on the idea that people are what they were born to be. For example, I asked why villagers who had migrated from the south and were of Antandroy origin were considered Vezo; or I expressed surprise that people with a broad range of ancestral customs could all nonetheless be Vezo. Faced with these questions, my friends would answer: 'the Vezo are not a kind of people' (Vezo tsy karazan'olo).

The word karaza means 'kind', type, and indicates groups of objects, animals or people that share some essential characteristics (see also Bloch 1971:42-3). For example, fish is a 'kind' of living thing, and Spanish mackerel is a 'kind' of fish. The word raza, from which karaza derives, refers in turn to the ancestors, and in particular to the ancestors of a certain 'kind', those who are buried in the same tomb and are referred to as 'one raza' (raza raiky).<sup>9</sup> Membership of a karaza, whether of a class of objects, animals or people, is based on intrinsic rather than acquired qualities; neither 'fishness', nor a specific kind of 'fishness', can be acquired, learnt or changed -- a fish is born what it is. Similarly, a human being does not acquire, or learn, membership of a particular tomb or of the raza it contains, but obtains it through descent.

Consequently, the statement that 'the Vezo are not a kind of people', that they are 'unkinded', is meant to signify that Vezo people are not inherently such, that they were not born to be Vezo. It thus follows that people of Antandroy or of any other origin can be Vezo, because to be Vezo is not an issue of origin; and that people with different ancestral customs can all be Vezo, because Vezo-ness is not determined by ancestry.

Having learnt through my 'wrong' questioning that 'the Vezo are not a kind of people', I stopped assuming that people are Vezo; and I began to realize, through personal experience, that people become Vezo.

You, when you arrived here, people said: `Ha! this lady [madame] often goes out fishing', and now I say: `Haven't you become Vezo?' and yet you are a vazaha [a white] from far away. But if you go fishing every day here: `Ha! that lady is Vezo!' because you struggle with the sea, because you paddle the canoe, and you are Vezo.

Let's take for example a Masikoro who comes from the interior to live here in Betania, and then he marries here. He observes people's livelihood: there are no rice fields, people only go fishing, they only have fishing nets and only go out to sea. After all this, his brothers- or father-in-law might take him out fishing. There he is, his mind works hard: this is how one does this, this is how this other thing works! Yet his forefathers did not know about these things. He goes out again with his friends, and so on and so on, until in the end he knows: he becomes Vezo.

... one can't yet say that small children are Vezo, one can say that they are a little Vezo (...). These children you see, their school is there in the water. They learn how to swim; when they have worked on learning how to swim, when they have learnt and know how to swim, when they are not afraid of the water, then one can say that they are Vezo.

The fact that a white anthropologist, a Masikoro and little children become Vezo when they fish, paddle a canoe, or swim in the ocean is a consequence of the `un-kindness' of the Vezo; their identity is not a state of being which people are born into, but is a way of doing which people learn and perform, and which renders them Vezo (mahavezo). Thus, small

children cannot be said to be Vezo because they cannot yet perform the activities that render people Vezo -- they do not know how to struggle with the sea. Strangers, on the other hand, whose forefathers knew nothing about the sea, or even someone as alien as a white anthropologist, can be said to be Vezo if and when they learn the ways of the sea. A frequent expression used to refer to what children, strangers and anthropologists do in the process of becoming Vezo, means literally 'to study and to learn Vezo-ness' (mianatsy havezoa). Above all, people learn 'to struggle with the sea' (mitolo rano), a struggle that gives them their livelihood. People learn how to swim, to build canoes, to sail, to fish, to cook, eat and sell fish; when the Vezo talk about what they learn -- a discourse which can't be reproduced here -- they do something more than stating the obvious, namely that people who draw their livelihood from the sea must know how to exploit it skilfully. Rather, when the Vezo say that by learning the ways of the sea a person becomes Vezo, they outline a fundamental trait of Vezo identity. This is that Vezo-ness is not an inherent, categorical attribute of Vezo people; it is the fact that Vezo-ness is learnt, in other words, that sustains the statement that 'the Vezo are not a kind of people'.

We should ask at this point how people learn to be Vezo. Keeping in mind that I am not describing how a person (a child, a foreigner, or an anthropologist) actually learns how to become Vezo,<sup>10</sup> but the way the Vezo themselves describe this process, we can turn for an answer to Rolpha, an old man who was born and still lives in the coastal village of Lovobe. Rolpha's forefathers came from Bekoropoka, a village in the interior. When they moved to Lovobe, Rolpha explained, they were Masikoro because they had previously lived in a Masikoro village. Following their move to Lovobe, however, they learnt to go out to sea and became Vezo. When I asked Rolpha who taught his forefathers to be Vezo, he answered as follows:

When they first came here, of course, this place was already Vezo. So when they came here, they just took up learning; this is not difficult to do. Even little children, when they learn, learn quickly. This is because there are no papers involved, one gets no diploma; there are no diplomas for these things. When one learns how to paddle, however, one knows how to move on a canoe. This is how one learns about the canoe. Thus our ancestors knew; and we learnt in their steps. For one does what one's parents did; as whites say: `tel fils tel père' [sic]. And so, what one's father did is what one does also. This is how things go. We learnt about the canoe and we know about the canoe; our grandchildren learn about it also. This is how things go.

Here Rolpha was addressing what seem at surface to be two distinct issues, how non-Vezo become Vezo and how the children of Vezo parents become Vezo themselves.

Let us take the second point first. Children and grandchildren follow their parents' steps and become, rather than being already, what their parents and grandparents were before them. Vezo-ness, in other words, is not inherited; it has to be learnt in order to be transmitted over the generations. Turning now to the first issue, we find that Rolpha's description of his ancestors' transformation into Vezo seems to underestimate the difficulty of learning to be Vezo for a former Masikoro; we would guess that learning from scratch how to dig a canoe, sail or fish is rather more challenging than Rolpha suggested. In fact, Rolpha completely ignored the learning process, or rather he ignored its duration over time.

In this, Rolpha's attitude was quite typical. Whereas all my Vezo friends seemed willing to recognize the time involved in learning and becoming Vezo (‘... and at the end, when he knows, he becomes Vezo’), they tended to put forward a very different representation, one in

which learning comes as an abrupt transition (a 'jump' rather than a process) from a state of not-yet-knowing to a state of full knowledge. Rolpha himself suggested what causes this 'jump', when he stated that his ancestors were Masikoro because they lived in the interior, and explained that they began to learn and master Vezo practices as soon as they settled in a Vezo village. In other words, the learning process appears to be triggered by the transition from one place of residence to another; and since a movement through space tends to be fast and abrupt, the learning process is similarly portrayed as an abrupt and easy 'jump'.

When Rolpha suggested that where one lives determines what one learns -- in the interior, his forefathers had learnt to be Masikoro, on the coast they learnt to be Vezo -- he was making more than the common sense observation that people who live off the land learn about rice, maize and manioc, while people who live off the sea learn about fish and canoes. For by determining what people learn, the place where one lives is actually what 'renders the Vezo Vezo' (mahavezo ny Vezo): 'all the people who live near the sea are Vezo', because 'being Vezo is a consequence of where one is, of the place where one lives'. This sort of geo-determined identity takes us back to the notion that 'the Vezo are not a kind of people': Vezo-ness is not derived from inherent qualities of the person, but is grounded in the place where people happen to live.

In the next section I shall analyze the nature of the relationship between people and place; here, I wish to discuss a point that remained implicit in Rolpha's account. Rolpha told us how his forefathers learnt to paddle the canoe; what he did not say, however, is that, having learnt to do so, his forefathers became Vezo when they paddled the canoe; that is, that to be Vezo is to act Vezo. We saw earlier that children are Vezo when they swim in the ocean; that a Masikoro is Vezo when he goes fishing; that I was Vezo when I fought the sea. Throughout my stay with the Vezo, I witnessed a constant stream of commentary on the

making and undoing of Vezo-ness: when a child carries the paddle of his father's canoe on his shoulder, he is told that he is `very Vezo' (fa Vezo mare iha); when a man makes a mistake while sailing in rough wind, his companions chide him that he must have become a Masikoro (fa mihamasikoro iha?); when a woman, whose forefathers were Antandroy, mistakenly eats a crab's heart, which the Vezo avoid because it causes allergic reactions, she is asked, after recovering from a severe asthma attack, whether she has become Antandroy (ka miha-Antandroy iha?); but when the same woman saves a canoe from capsizing by plunging into the water to grab hold of the outrigger and then skilfully changes the position of the masts, she is recognized as being `a very Vezo woman' (fa Vezo mare ampela io).

These and many other examples I could provide may seem rather odd. We may wonder whether the Vezo are unsure about who they are; or whether the incessant commentary about being Vezo when they sail skilfully, and Masikoro when they make a blunder, shows that being Vezo or Masikoro is actually a rather trivial matter. In fact, neither suggestion is correct: the Vezo are neither torn by an insoluble identity crisis, nor do they consider their identity as being an unremarkable incident of their lives. The point is rather that for the Vezo -- people who are not a kind of people -- `being' Vezo is an activity rather than a state of being.

Malagasy is a language that lacks the verb `to be'. In Vezo, to say that a woman is beautiful, one says `soa (beautiful) ampela io (that woman)'; however, to say that she `is' Vezo, one says `fa Vezo ampela io'. Here the particle fa conveys the notion of an accomplished act, as in fa vita, it's finished; fa matanjaky iha, you have gained weight; fa maty, it's dead, broken, done in. While being beautiful is a quality and a state of being, `being' Vezo is the result of an activity. If we think of `being' Vezo as an activity, a way of doing, it becomes easier to understand how a person can `be' Vezo at one moment and

Masikoro at the next -- for a person `is' what she does.

Clearly, when the Vezo say that someone is Masikoro because of a mistake in sailing, they are aware that the change in what he does and is able to do is of a different nature from the transformation undertaken by Rolpha's forefathers; the first may last a moment, the second may last over many generations. And yet, the sailor and Rolpha's forefathers share the common experience of `being' Vezo (or failing to `be' so) through performance.

To clarify what I mean by `being' Vezo through performance, let me draw a comparison between the performative nature of Vezo identity and the kind of `monism' discussed by Parry (1989) for Hinduism, or exemplified by Errington's ethnography of the Luwu of South Sulawesi (1989). As argued by Parry, what `the ideology of fluid substance implies is nothing less than that the disintegration of the self results from stepping off the tried and tested tracks of the established pattern of caste interactions' (1989:513-14); in other words, people's conduct is important and relevant in so far as it `protects' qualities that are inherent in them (or in so far as it sustains and reinforces an ideology which assigns inherent qualities to people). In a different context, Errington describes how nobles in Luwu are such because of an invisible and inherited substance, `white blood'. Since `white blood' is invisible, it can only be `read' through people's conduct (the person's stance, demeanor, self-control, entourage, etc.); it is one's conduct which demonstrates one's inner self. The point of contrast with the `protean representation of the person' (as in Parry 1989) I am presenting for the Vezo, is that here `conduct' is what actually creates the person, and the type of person that one is; in other words, the performance of certain activities does not constitute the visible manifestation of people's Vezo-ness -- which would imply that the people are Vezo prior to such performance -- but constitutes the very and only experience of `being' a Vezo person.



Let us now briefly return to the two contrasting representations of the process of learning Vezo-ness. I mentioned earlier that in certain contexts people acknowledge that to learn how to sail or to build canoes may take a very long time. In the case of swimming, moreover, people recognize that if a person was brought up in the interior and came to the coast as an adult, she may never learn the skill; she can nonetheless become Vezo by learning and performing other tasks, including sailing and fishing. In this representation, a person's past impinges on her actions in the present. As we know, Rolpha's view is quite different. We can assume that Rolpha was fully aware that his forefathers learnt to be Vezo with time and effort; but in the context of our conversation, he was trying to make another point: that his forefathers became Vezo because 'the Vezo are not a kind of people'; in other words, that his forefathers, like any other person, could shed the past and become Vezo by acting in the present.

### The place where people live

When the Vezo say that they are people who live on the coast (olo mipetsaky andriaky), they provide more than a description of the environment in which they live; they also outline a theory of how they came to be what they are, since what people do, and therefore 'are', is determined by where they live. In this, the Vezo ethnotheory of identity seems similar to the Lamarckian model of identity elaborated by Linnekin and Poyer (1990) to account for cultural identity and difference in Oceania. The Lamarckian model (in contrast to the Mendelian model, that is ethnicity) is predicated on the principle that 'acquired characteristics are heritable'; this principle addresses two related issues. On the one hand, the fact that characteristics are acquirable means that the environment, broadly defined, determines people beyond their genetic substance; this in turn implies that people are

malleable and transformable. On the other hand, the fact that acquired characteristics are heritable, means that people pass on to future generations not their genetic substance, but rather their lived relationships with the environment. From this perspective, Lamarckianism provides a theory of ontogeny which postulates that people are not born what they are, but are made by what they do, by how they behave, and by the environment in which they live.<sup>11</sup>

In Vezo terms, 'Lamarckian' people are 'un-kinded'. But does this mean that the Vezo ethnotheory of identity is Lamarckian? To answer this question, I shall first briefly discuss how the Vezo construe the relationship between the place where people live and what people do in that place; by way of comparison, I then turn to the Kainantu of Papua New Guinea (1990).<sup>12</sup>

If it is true that certain people are associated with certain places -- the Vezo with the coast, the Masikoro with the interior, for example -- the Vezo also recognize that certain 'ways of doing things' (*fomba*)<sup>13</sup> are associated with certain places. This applies at the most general level to 'the customs of the people of the coast' (*fomban'olo an-driaky*) as opposed to those of 'the people of the interior' (*fomban'olo an-tety*); but it also applies to more localized customs associated with specific localities along the coast. In both cases, while the association between place and 'ways of doing' is enduring, the association between people and 'ways of doing' peculiar to a place is entirely contingent: 'ways of doing things' stick to people and are dropped as individuals move from place to place.

The best example of the contingency of customs concerns the different ways the Vezo position the masts of their canoe. In Betania, one of the two villages where I did fieldwork, both masts are placed in the mast-step at the bottom of the canoe's hull. In the second village, Belo, only the shorter mast is placed in the mast-step; the other mast is tied to the first one with a kind of slip-knot (*dinikily*). People in both places were willing to explain the

advantages and inconveniences of each system, but everyone rejected my suggestion that the use of different techniques was the result of different sailing conditions in the two areas. They insisted instead that it was just a matter of people in Betania and in Belo being used to different systems. Here 'to be used' (*fa zatsy*) to something means, in effect, to have become used to it; my informants claimed, somewhat tautologically, that people become used to sailing in a certain way because they live in a place where that way of sailing is what people are used to. When someone moves elsewhere, they adopt whichever way of sailing the people in the new place are used to.

In the light of this and other similar examples, the terms 'stick' and 'drop' that I use to describe the relation between people and the 'ways of doing things' associated with where they live, are meant to stress that the link between the place of residence and the way people become by living there is not of essence; it cannot be so because it is mediated by the process of 'getting used to things'. Like Rolpha's forefathers who became Vezo by moving from the interior to the coast, so any person who moves through space 'jumps' into new 'ways of doing' and easily adopts them. For this reason, what people do and therefore 'are' cannot be assumed to be fixed, for the capacity to 'jump' into new 'ways of doing' presupposes an easy disengagement from what people did and were in the past -- a past which, as we saw earlier, has little consequence for the present.

Let me now turn to the Kainantu. As argued by Watson (1990), the Kainantu have a Lamarckian theory of identity, which not only accounts for the way one is, but also for the way other people are: 'other people do other things'. During his fieldwork, Watson discovered a taro field in a most inconvenient and unlikely place: on the top of a rocky cliff (1990:29-32). When he asked why the field's owner, who was unknown to his informants, had gone to the trouble of making a field on top of a rock, he was told that the person must

have done so because his ancestors taught him to do so. When Watson asked the same question to someone who belonged to the same phratry as the field's owner, he discovered that the latter belonged to a group of immigrant refugees. Together with the curious practice of growing taro on top of rocky cliffs, the new informant suggested, the members of this group 'had doubtless brought some of their old ways with them' (1990:31).

The reason why people who move from place to place 'bring their old ways with them', can be found in the nature of the link between land and people discussed by Watson. In good 'Lamarckian' fashion, the Kainantu stress the role of the environment in creating identity. Like the Vezo, they distinguish between kinds of technical knowledge required for different environments; these distinctions account for example for the difference between grassland people and forest people. However, while the Kainantu maintain that people are different because they do different things, they also stress that other people do certain things in a different manner, because 'their fathers/ ancestors taught them so' (1990:29). As Watson explains,

the ancestors' legacy is transmitted through growing up in a particular community where, thanks to the peculiar [magical] powers of its members, a unique competence is instilled in the young, infusing them and forming them after the community's own local character. Indigenous identity is partly a question of belonging to the country itself, imbibing the local waters and ingesting the foods that spring from the local soil (1990:34-5, added emphasis).

By absorbing these substances, people 'come to have the land in them'. At the same time, 'the land ... comes to have people in it', for the landscape bears the heritage of the ancestors -- in their gardens, their animals, their food and their water, their knowledge, skill, immunities, competence, power (1990:35).

The terms used by Watson to describe how the Kainantu come to acquire their identity -- to instill, to infuse, to imbibe, to ingest -- are quite foreign to the Vezo. The reason is that Vezo people never 'come to have the land in themselves': they adopt the 'ways of doing' of the place where they live, but when they move, they do not take their old ways with them.

The contrast here is between people like the Kainantu who are 'un-kindred' at birth, but who gradually acquire, or absorb, characteristics of permanent 'kindred-ness' akin to descent,<sup>14</sup> and people like the Vezo whose identity does not become a permanent feature of the person, but remains contingent on what the person does in a certain place and at a certain point in time.<sup>15</sup> Vezo-ness, in other words, is not 'instilled' or 'infused' in the person; Vezo-ness is better thought of as a shape that people take -- but it is a shape that never hardens.

This is more than a play of words. Vezo-ness shapes people's bodies, leaving deep albeit impermanent traces on them. My informants called these traces the 'signs that one is Vezo' (famantaram-bezo).

The hands of men are scarred by Vezo-ness. When a particularly large, heavy and strong fish bites on the hook, the nylon line cuts the men's fingers. This rarely causes an injury, for their hands are very thick-skinned, but the fishing line will leave a white scar, and a sort of streaked callus will gradually develop. Fishing lines leave other, more noticeable scars on the men's waists. When a fishing team decides to move elsewhere to find a better location, both men paddle the canoe and let their fishing lines trawl in the water behind. In order not to miss a bite while they paddle, the men tie the lines loosely around their waists. If a fish does bite, the line will tighten around the men's waist and burn a red line in the skin. As the skin heals, the sharp red lines slowly turn into whitish scars.

These scars were often displayed for my benefit. When Vezo men told me that 'the Vezo are not a kind of people' and explained that one is rendered Vezo by one's activities at sea,

they would bring their hands forward and, slightly twisting round, point to the scars on their waist. The scars on their body were the `signs that one is of Vezo'.

If I asked women whether there were `signs of Vezoneess' on their hands, they would suggest that I look at the hands of Masikoro women, which have a callus at the base of the thumb from the pounding of maize and rice. For the Vezo women, it was the lack of a callus on their hands that shows that they are Vezo.

Another way of recognizing Vezo men and women is by the way they walk and move their body. Because they live on the coast, they are used to walking on the sand. To do so effectively, however, requires a special technique: to avoid getting stuck in the sand one must grasp it with one's toes, while at the same time making a slightly rotating movement with one's heels. When people who are not accustomed to walking on the sand come to the coast, they look clumsy and quickly loose their breath. On the other hand, when the Vezo visit the interior and walk on hard ground, they tend to grasp the ground as if it were soft sand and get blisters as a result. Thus, while my friends were quite impressed that I learnt to walk properly on the sand, they became enthusiastic when after my first visit to the interior my toes got covered with blisters!

By displaying their scarred hands while stating that `the Vezo are not a kind of people', the Vezo show themselves to be malleable people who have been shaped by what they do. Yet, although the scars people display mark them profoundly, they are also impermanent. Thus, my informants remarked that when they resume fishing after the long period of inactivity during the wet season, their fingers are soft and more easily hurt. Once, during a rice shortage, the women in my village were forced to buy maize which they had to pound every day. They showed me their hands, remarking that they were becoming Masikoro: at the base of the thumb, a blister was starting to develop into a callus. If a Vezo spends some time

in the interior, the blisters on her toes will gradually harden into a sign of Masikoro-ness. In other words, like Vezo-ness itself, the signs that Vezo identity leaves on the body are performative -- a body becomes recognizable as a Vezo body only through its activities in the present.<sup>16</sup>

### Difference by analogy

So far I have argued that 'un-kindred' people like the Vezo 'are' what they do, depending on where they live. I will now show how the difference between people -- Vezo and Masikoro -- is similarly construed as a difference in activities and location in space, not as a difference in 'kind'.

I already quoted a number of examples in which a child, a sailor, a woman were said to be Vezo, very Vezo, or Masikoro, depending on what they performed at a specific moment in time. When I first arrived among the Vezo, I was struck by the range of behavioural traits that were recognized as being either Vezo or Masikoro: the way a man wears his blanket, a person talks,<sup>17</sup> a child answers when ordered to fetch water, women's hair is braided, distance at sea and inland is perceived, funerals are conducted and so on. In all these instances, a person 'is' Vezo if she behaves Vezo-like, she 'is' Masikoro if she behaves Masikoro-like. This minute differentiation of behaviours into Vezo and Masikoro, which is often a source of crowd amusement and of mild harassment of the Vezo-turned-Masikoro, is derived from a far more basic contrast between two distinct types of livelihood (fiveloma); as we already know, the Vezo are people who struggle with the sea, the Masikoro are cultivators.

In order to analyze the nature of this contrast, I shall first explore how the Vezo define their livelihood. When asked what the livelihood of the Vezo is, people say that it is the canoe (laka ro fivelomam-bezo). One interpretation of this is to take the canoe as a

metonymy for fishing, for it would seem obvious that it is fishing that constitutes Vezo livelihood. However, this view is both linguistically and analytically problematic.

On the linguistic side, although the Vezo employ specific terms to describe various kinds of fishing they practise, they possess no generic term for fishing as such. To denote what they do 'to keep themselves alive' (velomampo), the Vezo use the term mitindroke, which means 'to look for food' (mila hany) or to forage. This term is generic, in that it does not specify the identity of the forager, what kind of technology is employed or even the kind of food that is sought. Mitindroke can refer equally to people fishing in their canoes, to a person hunting tenrecs or searching for honey in the forest, or to the pigs endlessly rooting for food in the village sand. Mitindroke denotes the gathering of any kind of object that provides a source of livelihood.

The term mitindroke is analytically significant because it describes the livelihood of the Vezo without referring to their productive technology and activity, fishing; mitindroke, in other words, describes generic (rather than technologically-defined) features of foraging. Moreover, it is on the basis of these generic features that the Vezo draw the contrast between their mode of livelihood and that of the Masikoro. Thus, while a person who 'looks for food' goes out today (androany), sees things (mahita raha) and collects a little something (mahazo raha kely kely) every day (isanandro isanandro), an agriculturalist must wait (miamby) for her products to grow (raha mitiry); at the end of the productive cycle she will reap a large crop (mahazo vokatsy bevata). People who 'look for food' do not have land (tsy mana tanimbary, tsy mana baibo); cultivators, by contrast, possess land which comes to them from the past (avy bakañy bakañy).

From this contrast, we can desume that the livelihood of the Vezo is characterized by the unmediated acquisition of objects that exist independently of the person who seeks and



acquires them.<sup>18</sup> This acquisition occurs on a clearly specified time-scale: 'looking for food' is a day-by-day affair and does not involve the transmission of property over time. Finally, Vezo livelihood is a small-scale, individually-based activity. So now we understand why the canoe is the livelihood of the Vezo. Vezo canoes last at most two years; they are light, flexible and fragile; they are built by only a few people at a time and sail no more than two; even the most successful catch can be no larger than what the canoe's narrow hull can carry back to shore. The canoe's physical structure reflects and incorporates all the characteristics of the livelihood of the Vezo: it is flimsy, short-lived and small-scale.

The Masikoro, of course, do not have canoes (tsy manan-daka); a favourite joke of the Vezo is that if a Masikoro were to dig a canoe, he would end up with a cow's canoe (lakan'aomby) -- in other words, with a cattle trough. What is more, if a Masikoro were to try to sail out in the ocean, his canoe would capsize and he would drown. The Vezo, on the other hand, do not have fields (tsy mana tanim-bary, tsy mana baiboho); if they did, they would be wasting their time (tsy misy dicany). As my informants explained, the reason for this is that when a rice or maize crop is almost ripe and the fields need constant supervision to scare off the birds, who can destroy an entire harvest in a few hours, the Vezo will guard the fields for a few days; but as soon as they hear that the fish are biting well at sea, they will take off to fish for the day. On that one day, their harvest will be totally destroyed and all their efforts will have been in vain.

This story portrays the difference between the livelihood of the Masikoro and the Vezo in terms of occupational incompatibility;<sup>19</sup> but the two are incompatible from another perspective also. We have seen that one feature that distinguishes agriculture from foraging is their different temporal scale; the former requires waiting and planning, whereas the second is present-oriented, based on the daily acquisition of small things to be consumed

immediately. The Vezo emphasize this difference in strategy by portraying themselves as lacking wisdom (*tsy mahihitsy*): they `make a lot of money but they don't know how to `manage' it [lit. make it work]' (*zahay Vezo mahazo vola maro ka tsy mahay mampiasa vola zahay*). While they `find money in the sea' (*mahita vola añaty rano*), they are unable to save it: what they earn, they spend.

There is, indeed, a remarkable degree of complacency about the Vezo's lack of financial wisdom. Sometimes they compare their eating habits to those of invisible forest creatures called *kalanoro*. To `eat like a *kalanoro*' (*atao sakafon' kalanoro*) means to eat up all the good food one has prepared for lunch, with no thought for the evening meal; then `in the evening there is no food and one just sits around' (*lafa hariva, laoke tsy misy, de mipetsaky avao teña*). Among the Masikoro, the Vezo are reputed to eat high-quality food; conversely, the Masikoro are known to have plenty of staple food (rice, maize or manioc), but to be `poor in side-dishes' (*mijaly laoke*), and to eat only leaves (*ravy*) or grass (*akata*), i.e. cultivated or wild vegetables. The contrast between the Masikoro's plentiful staple food and the Vezo's tasty side-dishes highlights the difference between the wisdom of the Masikoro, who must wait for their harvests and plan expenditure over the long term through saving and short-term culinary deprivation, and the Vezo's lack of wisdom which allows them to enjoy luxury short-term consumption. Expressed in these terms, the two economic strategies appear clearly incompatible.

The one cannot be combined with the other; the same person cannot be simultaneously engaged in cultivation and in fishing, and cannot adopt planning and saving while at the same time enjoying short-term consumption; similarly, people cannot simultaneously be living in the interior and on the coast.<sup>20</sup> The Vezo seem to regard the difference between themselves and the Masikoro in terms of absolute and mutual incompatibility.<sup>21</sup> However, this

incompatibility between the two modes of livelihood implies nothing about the people who practise such different activities, with such different strategies and in such different places. That is to say that the absolute difference between Vezo and Masikoro lies in the things they do, and not in the people themselves.<sup>22</sup> My informants stressed that Vezo and Masikoro activities -- including how women braid their hair or men wear their blanket -- are done by different people; this, however, does not mean that such people differ before they act as Vezo or Masikoro.

In his discussion of totemism as an alternative mode of classification to ethnicity, Comaroff remarks that within the totemic mode people are divided into 'units within a common humanity'; while collective identities are defined 'in contrast to one another', the various units portray themselves as 'similar yet different' (1987:304).<sup>23</sup> Although I have no evidence to suggest that the Vezo conceive of an abstract humanity, existing prior to the specific place it occupies and to the specific activity that keeps it alive, the Vezo appear indeed to regard the Masikoro as 'similar yet different'. We have seen why the Masikoro are absolutely different; the reason why they are also similar, or identical to the Vezo, is that the identity of the Masikoro is produced by a process analogous to that which produces the identity of the Vezo. For the Vezo, the Masikoro are different because, like themselves, they 'are' what they do -- they are rendered different by their different livelihood, by the different place where they live, by the different skills they learn as a consequence of where they live, and by the different 'signs' marked on their bodies.

If difference is constituted through analogy, we may argue, with Wagner (1977), that what is differentiated must be assumed to be the same. In the context of his analysis of Daribi kinship, Wagner argues that if we assume, for analytical purposes, that kin relationships and

the kin identified through these relationships are basically alike, and that the difference between them must therefore be actively created, the only way to create difference is by analogy, since what is differentiated is originally assumed to be the same.<sup>24</sup> With the Vezo, I would argue that the reason why difference cannot be analytically assumed, is that it is not established through 'kinded-ness': if people are not born to be what they are, we cannot assume either that they are born to be different from others. Instead, difference, like identity, is created out of 'un-kindedness' as a difference in practice.

### Fleeing from the past

In my analysis of Vezo identity, I have emphasized how the past seems not to impinge on the present. People are not determined by their ancestry, by their origins, by their heritage; they learn to 'be' Vezo, but the process of learning has no duration as it happens in a quick and easy 'jump' out of what one knew and was in the past; they are determined by the place where they live, but they can move to a new place without bringing their 'old ways' with them; they are shaped by their activities in the present, but no traces are left by what they did previously.

In this section, I explore a more active denial of the determining power of the past. I consider the typical Vezo narrative about their relationship with the Sakalava kings who, up to the colonial period, ruled over the whole of the western region of Madagascar. As we shall see, this narrative is both a refusal of the 'ties of bonds' imposed by kings and, more generally, a refusal of an identity rooted in 'history'.

When I asked whether the Vezo had formerly been subjects of the Sakalava kings (nanompo mpanjaka ny Vezo?), the stock answer I received was that after the white man arrived in

Madagascar there had been no more kings (mpanjaka tsy misy), the implication being that there was little point or interest in talking about something that no longer exists. Despite this, most of my informants took pride in repeating what has become a stereotypical tale of an act of defiance: 'if the king came to the coast the Vezo would just take to sea, because they couldn't be bothered to wait at the village to meet him' (de lafa niavy andriaky ny mpanjaka, de roso an-driva ny Vezo, ka tsy nahefa mipetsaky an-tana mandramby azy). Rather than in the story's historical accuracy,<sup>25</sup> I am interested in understanding what the Vezo claim to have fled from. For this, I turn to the (failed) encounter between the mpanjaka and his Vezo subjects in order to ask: what did the mpanjaka do when they came to the coast?

As my informants recounted it, the mpanjaka came for two reasons. First of all, they came to collect tribute, in the form of typical Vezo goods like sea turtle and certain especially prized fish;<sup>26</sup> but they also came to 'survey people's ancestors' (mitety raza), that is, to ask people who their ancestors were and where they came from.

Giving tribute to a mpanjaka was a way of showing allegiance and of proving to be a subject (manompo azy); hence, when the Vezo took to sea instead of meeting the mpanjaka's demands, they were effectively refusing to recognize subjection. But why did the mpanjaka want to 'survey people's ancestors'? And why were the Vezo anxious to avoid being questioned? Whereas the first question went unanswered, the reply I was given to the second one was that 'the Vezo do not like ties and bonds' (tsy tiam-Bezo fifeheza).

In order to pursue these issues further and to clarify what is implicit in these statements, I shall briefly turn to the literature on the Sakalava kingdoms, in particular to the analysis of relations between the monarchy and its subjects. Although there are significant differences in approach between scholars like Lombard (1988), Feeley-Harnik (1978, 1982, 1991), Baré (1977), Schlemmer (1983) and Fauroux (1980), a theme that is shared by all these studies is

that which might be glossed as the 'politics of identity'. Very schematically, this consisted in the creation through conquest of a new social and ritual order in which formerly independent and now subject people were defined through criteria that referred to, and were centred around, the monarchy. The area in which this re-definition of identity occurred was history (tantara).<sup>27</sup>

Like other people in Madagascar, the Sakalava distinguish between two types of narration about the past. Angano<sup>28</sup> are tales about plants, animals, and people that are stated emphatically to be untrue (i.e. to be lies, mavandy) by both the narrator and the listeners; their main attribute is their timelessness (Feeley-Harnik 1978:410). By contrast, tantara are true stories about the past, typically about the ancestors, which are tied through time to the present: they relate 'a succession of events that actually happened, and rank them in time from past to present' (1978:411). As Feeley-Harnik notes, 'history [as tantara] is not evenly distributed because to have it is a sign of politico-religious power and authority' (1978:402). Thus, while 'the only tantara of significance to Sakalava as a whole is the history of the Sakalava monarchy, from its origin to its present-day location' (1978:411), the only tantara of significance to individual Sakalava is that which recounts how they and their ancestors came to be associated with the monarchy as nobles or workers (1978:404, 411). It is only through this association that people are placed within 'history' (that is, within royal history) and are defined as subjects and members of the kingdom.

We can now return to the Vezo who fled with their canoes when the mpanjaka came to the coast to 'survey their ancestors'. In view of the unequal distribution of 'history' between royals and subjects and among different subjects, we are now better able to appreciate the deep political significance of the mpanjaka's questioning. To ask people who their ancestors were and where they came from was to ask them about their tantara; the mpanjaka's survey of

the `history' people claimed for themselves through their genealogies was a means of re-defining those `histories' as a fragment of his own, royal, history. Because `history' was carried in one's genealogy, `surveying people's ancestors' was a means to transform previously autonomous people into subjects of the monarchy by subsuming them into the general history of the kingdom. By taking to the sea with their canoes, by refusing to pay tribute and to disclose to the mpanjaka who their ancestors were and where they came from, the Vezo were avoiding to be so subsumed. Because under the Sakalava the only `history' available became royal history (which attached people to a sequence of royal events unfolding from the past to the present), the Vezo's refusal of `Sakalava history' was also a refusal of `history' as such.

As the Vezo remember it, the flight from the mpanjaka constitutes a clear assertion about their past and present dislike for `ties and bonds'. This in turn can be read as a powerful statement about their identity in the present. We just saw that a consequence of the Vezo's real or imaginary flight was to deprive them of `history'. Feeley-Harnik notes that to have no history, or to have `lost history' (very tantara) (1978:411), has disastrous consequences, because `severed from his past, a person has no identity in the present' (1978:411). This of course is true only if a people's identity is constructed by reference to the past; it applies only if people are what their `history' makes them, by virtue of what their ancestors were and were recognized to be through the mpanjaka's questioning. Once we admit that identity need not be defined by the past, the Vezo's flight from the mpanjaka's questions achieves not a loss of identity, but rather a defiant assertion of an alternative mode of defining identity, a mode in which people `are' what they do in the present rather than being determined by their own or someone else's `history'.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have analyzed the Vezo 'ethnotheory' of identity and difference; I have discussed how Vezo people -- who are not what they are because they were born to be so -- come to be what they are, and how other people come to be different from them. In the course of my analysis, the profile of the Vezo person has also emerged. We have seen a person who instead of being is becoming, who instead of knowing is learning; a person who is undetermined by the past, because only its activities in the present are relevant to what that person 'is'. What one was before can be shed in an instant: by making a mistake in sailing, or by eating a crab's heart; by moving one's home from the interior to the coast, or by changing one's livelihood from agriculture to fishing. The Vezo person has no 'history' -- a chain of events that explain how the present has come to be what it is through actions in the past -- for the past is constantly shed as one moves from one context to another, from one moment to the next. Elsewhere (Astuti 1995) I have described the Vezo person as 'transparent', for it is a person that lacks the residues deposited by the passage of time, a person with no intrinsic essence to it. Vezo-ness itself is not and does not become such a residue or essence, since it is made anew and from scratch every day, through every act performed in the present. Vezo-ness is not inherent in the Vezo person; hence, if one were to search for Vezo identity 'inside' the person, one would be unable to see it. To see what a Vezo person is, one would have to look 'outside' it, at what it does in the present -- one would only be seeing a moment in an unceasing process of transformation.

Vezo-ness is this process of transformation. It is an identity that unfolds through time, rather than being fixed in time. The passage of time is crucial to the realization of Vezo-ness and to the constitution of the Vezo person, for it is only through time that a person can act Vezo and can become Vezo. On this point -- the particular way of 'being in time'<sup>29</sup> -- I wish



to return to the ethnic theory of identity with which I began to highlight what I consider to be the fundamental contrast between 'ethnic people' and people like the Vezo. That contrast, I suggest, is between people who have a past and are outside the present, and people who do not have a past, and live entirely within the present. Let me explain.

Ethnicity has been described by Keyes (1981) as a form of kinship reckoning; it is said to be derived from a cultural interpretation of descent. Thus, 'people are differentiated with reference to descent by virtue of assumptions made about the cultural legacy one gains from one's parents and, through one or both of them, through one's ancestors' (1981:5). What is significant here is that the ethnic-cum-kinship group and its cultural legacy share with the descent group what Fortes has described as 'its continuity, or rather its presumed perpetuity in time' (1970:79). An ethnic group, like a Tallensi lineage, is 'a temporal system in equilibrium'; 'its constitution and dimensions at a given time represent a phase of a process which ... has been going on in exactly the same way from the beginning of [the] social order and is continuing into the future' (1970:41). An ethnic group, like a Tallensi lineage, has a past, a present and a future, but it does not need to participate in the actual passage of time to realize its existence. Rather, time is obliterated by the pretence that the essence of the ethnic group remains unaffected by the passing of the generations; this is because each generation has received that essence from the previous one, and is thus merely one of a long chain of substitutions. The present is thus seen as (or is hoped to turn out to be) simply a replica of a permanent and unchanging past. For people who are what they were born to be the present may constitute a menace to the continuity of their identity and its presumed perpetuity; otherwise, if it is not entirely superfluous, the present is just a pretext to enact what one was, is and will be outside time.

With the Vezo, we are faced with a completely different scenario. The Vezo have no

past, or rather they do not identify one as the source and explanation of what they are in the present. When they say that they are not a kind of people, while displaying the deep but impermanent traces that their activities leave on their body, they remind us that having a past, a heritage, a tradition makes no difference to the realization of their identity. Vezo-ness is not an essence that always remains the same and which embodies both the past and the future; Vezo-ness exists only in the present, where a person has to move, to learn, to be shaped and scarred, in order to `be' Vezo. Since the Vezo must act in order to `be', they shed all pasts; free of the `ties and bonds' imposed by history, they remain securely inside the present.

## NOTES

1. Heritage or tradition as discussed in Handler and Linnekin 1984.
2. The similarities between this quest and that for a cultural analysis of kinship are obvious. In fact, Linnekin and Poyer discuss the similarity between Western theory of ethnicity and 'American kinship' as analysed by Schneider (1968); it appears moreover that Schneider's argument that 'nationality' and 'kinship' are similarly structured (1977), explains why, as argued by Keys (1981:6), ethnicity can be thought of as 'a form of kinship reckoning'.
3. Cfr. Covell 1987 and especially Alvarez ms., on the 'invention' of Malagasy ethnic groups to meet the needs of French colonial policy, the so-called 'politique des races', a precondition of which was the existence of discrete indigenous groups, whose leaders the French administration could use to gain control over the local population.
4. For bibliographical references and a more detailed analysis of the literature, see Astuti 1991.
5. A significant difference with the Mashpee case, however, is that the virtual deletion of the Vezo from the ethnic map of Madagascar (the editor of the country's ethnographic atlas rather grudgingly records a small Vezo settlement around the town of Tulear, because the Vezo have been registered as an 'ethnic' group in the statistics) has so far had no adverse economic or political effects; similarly, at the individual level, deciding whether a person is Vezo or not has none of the implications (in terms of access to land) discussed by Linnekin for Hawaiians (1990:153-54).
6. This point was suggested by one of the anonymous reviewers.
7. See Southall 1971 and 1986 (on how to distinguish common and differentiating features among Malagasy groups); Huntington 1973 (on varying degrees of discreteness of ethnic labels); Eggert 1981 and 1986 (on the Mahafaly); Lambek 1992 (on negative definitions of group identities); Hurvitz 1986 (on the definition of embouchures culture); Bloch 1995 (on the Zafimaniry).
8. For an example of the irrelevance of birth in creating social persons in Madagascar, see Bloch 1993 on the Zafimaniry.
9. For more details on this point, see Astuti 1995, ch.6.
10. In other words, I am not claiming to be doing what, for example, Borofsky (1987) has done very successfully for the Pukapukans (South Pacific).
11. Linnekin and Poyer (1990:8-9) draw a suggestive parallel between Lamarckian cultural identities and Sahlins' 'performative structures' (1987): cultural identities 'are made as well as born'; they are constructed out of practice.
12. In the continuum from 'more cultural and less ethnic' to 'less cultural and more ethnic' identities along which the ethnographic examples presented in Linnekin and Poyer (1990) are

ordered, the Kainantu feature as the most extreme case of Lamarckianism.

13. The term fomba refers to ways of doing anything, including a certain way of fishing, cooking, eating, talking, offering food to the ancestors, marrying, giving birth, etc.

14. See Watson 1990:39-40 for his discussion of the ethnic dimension of Kainantu identity. For a more general discussion of descent within Lamarckian models of identity, see Lieber 1990.

15. I could have drawn a similar contrast with Pomponio's ethnography on the Mandok islanders, 'a Lamarckian case with a Mendelian twist' (1990:43). Once again, the contrast lies in the way the link between people and land is construed. Although Mandok are made what they are by the place where they live (the sea as opposed to the bush), their perceptions of their 'essential identity' is informed by the idea that 'despite the fact that they originally migrated from primarily bush locations, through subsequent generations the Mandok seem to have absorbed the autochthonous essence of a maritime habitat' (1990:52; added emphasis), elsewhere referred to by Pomponio as 'marigenic substance'.

16. Compare this with the view that 'primordialist' Isaacs (1975) has of the body: 'the new baby's body itself, all the shared physical characteristics of the group acquired through the long process of selection, through what René Dubos has called the 'biological remembrance of things past'... comes through the parental membranes to give each new person the original shape of his or her unique self' (1975:31); 'the body is the most palpable element of which identity -- individual or group -- is made. It is the only ingredient that is unarguably biological in origin, acquired in most of its essential characteristics by inheritance through the genes' (1975:36).

17. Vezo and Masikoro speak the same language; the Vezo, however, are recognized to speak more softly and slower than the Masikoro.

18. I have discussed elsewhere (Astuti 1995, ch.3) the Vezo's representation of the sea as an ever abundant container of fish.

19. My informants did not use this term; I employ it as short-hand for the kind of oppositions they drew between Vezo and Masikoro activities.

20. Individuals or groups who contradict this postulate by engaging in both kinds of economic pursuit are considered to 'be' Vezo or Masikoro contextually.

21. One may note in passing that the incompatibility between Vezo and Masikoro also establishes their mutual dependency: the Vezo need the Masikoro to provide them with agricultural products, the Masikoro need the Vezo to provide them with fish.

22. I wish to thank Marilyn Strathern for suggesting this point to me.

23. 'Totemism' as defined by Comaroff is clearly different from 'cultural totemism' as defined by Schwartz (1982); in the latter case, 'cultural totemism' is a domain in which 'ethnic groupings [are] conceived of by men as if these groupings were species' (1982:127).

24. See Wagner 1977:624-25 for a discussion of the transformation of Lévi-Strauss's model of totemism based on homological equivalence into Wagner's use of analogic equivalence.

25. The Vezo have indeed often been portrayed in the literature in the act of fleeing with their canoes from kings and enemies. See Koechlin 1975:46-8, 64, 95 for comments on the mobility of the Vezo as a means of avoiding political control. Similarly, Grandidier A. & Grandidier G. 1908-28, 1:376 n.4 noted that prior to French colonisation the Vezo were frequently pillaged by the Sakalava kings (see also Grandidier A. 1971:14), and that when they had reason to fear a raid they did not hesitate to migrate. Walen (1881-84:12) wrote that because the Vezo were few and weak they were unable resist the Masikoro attacks; if conflicts arose between the two, the Vezo took to their canoes and fled.

26. See Fauroux 1975:78.

27. This is insightfully explored by Gillian Feeley-Harnik (1978).

28. Also known as tapasiry.

29. I borrow this expression from Bloch's analysis of Sadah and Philipino 'different ways of being in history' (1992).

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