`It's a boy', `It's a girl!'

Reflections on sex and gender

in Madagascar and beyond

Rita Astuti

Acknowledgements

The return visit to the Vezo village of Betania (July 1994) was supported by grants of the British Academy and the Centro Nazionale delle Ricerche (Rome). I wish to thank these institutions for their support. I am grateful to Nicole-Claude Mathieu for initiating these reflections on sex and gender; to Charles Stafford for seeing me through the various stages of thinking and writing about babies and sarin'ampela; to Maurice Bloch, Cecilia Busby, Janet Carsten, Jennifer Cole, Lorenzo Epstein, Mila Rosenthal and Jackie Spector for reading and commenting on earlier versions of this paper.

The very first thing I said when I gave birth to my son, on seeing him all wet and curled up on the floor, was: `it's a baby!'. Exhaustion and relief that the birth was over and that, finally, `a baby' had appeared, explain a great deal of my first and gender-less comment on him. But in choosing such a comment, I was also correctly responding to the ante-natal training I had received in London through books and courses designed by the Natural Birth Association, as well as implementing what I then thought was the lesson I had learnt from the Vezo of Madagascar,[1] the people I had lived and worked with for almost two years and who had repeatedly wished me, in their blessings, to return safely home and have plenty of children.

The training I had received in London was aimed at achieving a `natural' birth, one in which the woman does not require any form of medical intervention. Thus, as I was taught by my yoga teacher how to do without monitoring, drips, pain-killers, and so on, I was also advised to ask the midwife to refrain from telling me the sex of my baby. The explicit idea behind this request is that parents should be allowed to get to know their baby `in their own time', without the interference of medical personnel.[2] The interesting thing, of course, is that what (middle-class) parents trained for a natural birth[3] do <u>not</u> want to be told in order to have time to get to know their baby, is nothing other than its sex.

On reflection, these parents appear to be giving two contradictory signals: one is that they regard the sex of the baby to be so important that they want to be allowed to find out for themselves and in their own time whether it is a boy or a girl; the other is that, against the dominant `gender system of the west' as described by Errington (1990), they are actually attempting to question the overriding importance of the shape of their baby's genitals in defining what kind of person they have given birth to. Thus, when parents tell midwives that they do not care whether their baby is a boy or a girl, but just that it is healthy, they also seem to be trying to escape the strictures of a `gender system' in which a person, from the very beginning, cannot be anything at all if it is not sexed.[4]

My personal case fits well with this contradictory picture. There was never any doubt in my mind that I much preferred a girl to a boy, and what my eyes, if not my words, registered first of all was the shape of my baby's genitals. Against my preference for a girl, however, I also imagined that by asking the midwife to refrain from telling me the sex of my baby, I would not only challenge `the gender system of the west', but I would in fact succeed in adopting an alternative `gender system' -- and this is where anthropology comes into the picture. What I had in mind was a simplified version of the `Southeast Asian gender system': a system in which the difference between the sexes is downplayed instead of being culturally elaborated; in which the difference between people with male and female genitals is a difference which, in many contexts, appears to make very little difference; and in which gender relations are predicated on complementarity and similarity rather than on hierarchy and difference (cf. Errington 1990; Karim 1995a, 1995b; Carsten 1995b). More specifically, I had in mind the Vezo of Madagascar, whose `gender system' is, on the face of it, very Southeast Asian. From what I knew about the Vezo, I could easily imagine them to be like the Balinese who, when a child is born, make `no special point [...] as to whether the infant is male or female' (Errington 1990: 2, quoting Belo 1949). I thus tried, when I gave birth, to make no special point about it too.

The irony, however, is that when I returned to my adoptive Vezo village for a short period of fieldwork a year after giving birth, and I was positively encouraged if not forced by relatives and friends in my new role as a mother to find out all about Vezo pregnancies, how Vezo women deliver their babies, about breastfeeding, the disposal of umbilical cords, and so on, I discovered that the very first thing a Vezo mother is told by the woman who has helped her in the delivery is the sex of the baby: `it's a boy!' (lehilahy io!), `it's a girl!' (ampela io!).[5] Indeed, inside and outside the home where the delivery has taken place, this is just about the only thing which is ever asked and discussed about the new birth: whether the baby is a boy or a girl.

Needless to say, I was taken aback by my misjudgment, and by the realization that, in London, I had tried to be more Vezo than the Vezo themselves. And it is my `surprise' at finding the Vezo different from what I had imagined them to be, which generated the question I will be addressing in this paper: why do the Vezo make a special point about the sex of their new-born babies? This particular way of formulating the problem comes from the intersection of my personal experience in giving birth, and the new questions I was prompted to ask on my return to the field. But I have organized the paper around my surprise at finding that the Vezo departed from the `gender system' I had ascribed to them, because in this way the analytical effort is explicitly focused on the need to search and make room for inconsistencies and contradictions. And this means, among other things, that the `gender system of the Vezo' can be very different from our own, while at the same time being very similar indeed.

The argument is organized as follows. I start by reviewing the reasons why I thought that the Vezo might wish to ignore the sex of their new-born babies. I do this in the first three sections of the essay on Vezo identity, on the yet unformed and indistinct nature of small babies, and on the constitution of the Vezo person, both within and through its relations without. In every case, I shall conclude that it would make a great deal of sense for the Vezo to take little notice of whether their babies happen to be boys or girls. It is against this background that I return to my point of departure, namely the fact that the Vezo, contrary to my expectations, classify every baby, from the moment of birth, as male or female.

I will argue that in order to understand what is being said when the Vezo announce: `it's a boy', `it's a girl', we need to salvage, against recent and insistent calls for its dismissal (e.g. Yanagisako and Collier 1987, Butler 1990, Moore 1994), the old dichotomy between `sex' and `gender', originally used in anthropology to distinguish between what is `biologically intractable', to use Butler's formulation (1990:6), and what is culturally constructed. In the case of the Vezo, the analytical distinction between sex and gender resonates usefully with local

understandings of the person, which centre on the fundamental tension between what in the make-up of the person is fixed and `intractable', and what is processual and thereby `negotiable'.

To illustrate the tension between `sex' and `gender', I will introduce a new category of people, who, in a sense, are the alter-egoes of the new-born babies I discuss at the outset of this essay. These are men who, in the course of their childhood and throughout their lives, become `images' of women (sarin'ampela, men who are `images of women'); that is, men who choose to become women and shift their gender identity.[6] The reason for discussing sarin'ampela together with new-born babies is that these two stes of people illustrate the extremes in the dialectical interplay between sex and gender: while the first ones are all gender, even against their sex, the seconda ones are, as it were, all sex and no gender. However, the `intractable' limits to the transformation of men into women, as are expressed by my Vezo informants, will serve as a reminder that what babies are born with -- a sexed body -- can never be entirely re-constructed: hence, the un-resolved tension between sex and gender, between what is fixed and what is processual.

Let me add a note of caution before proceeding any further. What set this essay in motion was the realization that the first thing the Vezo mention about a new-born child is its sex. As it happens, the fact that they do so is interesting and intriguing for me: it creates an analytical puzzle which I set out to resolve. However, I do not wish to suggest that by announcing or asking about the sex of their new-born babies, the Vezo attribute ontological priority to sex over everything else that they do not announce and do not enquire about. It could indeed be argued, as I shall do later, that the Vezo dwell on the sex of their babies because this is the only feature which, at birth, can be discussed, in the absence of other distinguishing features of the newly born but yet unformed person which will require time to develop. But there are also cases when even the question as to whether the baby is a boy or a girl becomes irrelevant, and is only asked as an afterthought, if at all. This is when the most important thing that can be said is that `the

baby was not OK' (tsy nimety ny zaza), and that, unfortunately, the mother has not managed to keep it (tsy nahazo). In a sense, then, when people announce that a baby is a boy or a girl, they are also stating something far more crucial than its sex: that the baby, thanks to Ndrañahary (God), is alive.

The non-essentialist nature of Vezo identity

During my first period of fieldwork among the Vezo, my informants, who later became friends and relatives, took the initiative of teaching me what it means to be Vezo. The thrust of their lesson was that Vezo identity is not a fixed state of being which people are born into, but is a way of doing which people perform in the present and which makes them Vezo contextually and contingently. To be Vezo means to know how to swim, fish, sail, make canoes, and so on; in more general terms, the Vezo define themselves as `people who struggle with the sea and live on the coast', thereby stressing that it is what they do and the place where they live that makes them what they are.[7]

The non-essentialist nature of Vezo-ness, an identity that does not stem `from within' (from blood, or bones, or any other inherited substance), but is acquired `from without' (from one's interaction with the environment, defined in its widest sense), explains why any stranger can be transformed into a Vezo, while Vezo people can be transformed into something else (typically into their neighbours, the Masikoro): for in both cases, what one `is' depends on what one does, rather than being predicated on inherent qualities of the person.

The fact that Vezo-ness is not inherent in the Vezo person does not mean that it is less identifying or differentiating. The list of Vezo `ways of doing things' (fomba) as opposed to Masikoro `ways of doing' the same thing in a different way, is almost endless -- how women

braid their hair, how men wear their blanket, how children dis/obey their parents, how people walk, how softly or loudly people speak, for how long corpses are kept in the village before burial, how much or little money people are able to save, and so on.

The significant point, however, is that Vezo and Masikoro people become different from one another by doing all these different things, rather than being different prior to doing them; the absolute difference between Vezo and Masikoro lies in the different things they do, and not in the people themselves. For the Vezo difference, like identity, is performative, not essentialist; so that, prior to the enactment of their respective identities (their different `ways of doing things'), Vezo and Masikoro can actually be assumed to be identical people.

Elsewhere, I have used this argument to make the point that Vezo-ness is not an ethnic identity, for it is not based on intrinsic, in-born, natural or naturalized traits of the person (Astuti 1995b). In the context of the present discussion, the most striking expression of this alternative theory of identity is the Vezo's perception of the making of their body.

It has been argued by those who regard ethnicity as a `primordial' attachment, that the body is the most obvious and uncontroversial locus of one's identity. This is because one's body, from the moment of conception, encapsulates one's true heritage, all of that which comes, uncontaminated, from one's ancestors: `in the streams of the blood' as Morgan would have put it, or `in the genes' as contemporary writers are now able to say. Thus, a `primordialist' like Isaacs writes that `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).

This `ethnic body' is an obvious and perfect example of `mythologizing' (à la Barthes), a case of making appear natural what instead is cultural and historical (cf. Errington 1990:15). The Vezo

offer an obvious and perfect counter-example: for them, the body is most definitively a cultural artefact, and not a biological given.

In this respect, the Vezo body is just like Vezo identity: it is made processually through practice, its distinctive features being the contingent result of one's activities, rather than the predicted outcome of one's inheritance from the ancestors. The Vezo are proud of what they call `the signs that one is Vezo' (famantaram-Bezo); these are traces which their activities at sea leave on their body, such as the whitish scars that the fishing line leaves on men's fingers and, sometimes, on their waists; or the lack of a callus at the base of the thumb of women's hands (Masikoro women develop this from the daily pounding of maize or rice); or the particular build of men's bodies (small hips, broad shoulders and the absence of over- developed pectoral muscles) and women's bodies (slim and tough), that comes from sailing (as opposed to cultivating), and from eating a lot of fish (as opposed to a lot of starch). Another significant `sign' of Vezo-ness is not so much `on' the body as in the movements that bodies make, in particular in the way people walk. The Vezo adopt a special technique in walking so as to avoid getting stuck in the sand, and it is their distinctive rotating movement of feet and hips that is yet another `sign that one is Vezo'.

What is significant about all these different `signs' is that they are on people's body only as the result of their active and sustained engagement with the environment. This means that people are not born with a Vezo body (as they might be born short or tall, with darker or lighter skin, with a squint eye or a club foot), but only acquire such a body -- a significant marker of their identity -- through the practice and enactment of Vezo-ness.

Now, if Errington (1990:15) is right in saying that one of the most important sets of meaning which bodies are asked to bear in any given culture, is the culture's gender ideology and its `mythologies' of the person (by which she means the process through which cultural and

historical differences between men and women are made to appear natural), the fact that the Vezo `de-mythologize' their bodies, and their identity more generally, can also be expected to make a difference to the way they think of gendered bodies and identities. In other words: the non-essentialist nature of Vezo identity and the resulting features of the Vezo person and body -- made from without rather than determined from within -- can be expected to offer an ideal background for thinking of gendered bodies and identities in similar non-essentialist terms. A background against which people could easily be imagined not to be born gendered but to become so, in the same way in which they are not born but become Vezo by, among other things, fabricating for themselves a Vezo body.

This prediction is not simply the result of abstract reasoning. It is noticeable, for example, that the way the Vezo talk about the difference between men and women resonates with the way they talk about the difference between Vezo and Masikoro, in so far as the emphasis is always on what men and women do, rather than on what men and women inherently are, prior to what they do.

> But then: if people are not born Vezo; if bodies are perceived as artefacts rather than as natural givens; and if, following the same `de-mythologizing' approach, gendered identities and gendered bodies are also not simply and `naturally' born as they are, but are created, `culturally' and `historically' through practice -- then it would make sense for the Vezo to take no notice of whether their babies are born male or female.
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> It would make sense. But, as we know, this is not what they do. Instead they exclaim: `it's a boy!', `it's a girl!'.

Are babies fully human?

Something I learned from talking to pregnant women, to women who had given birth several times, to midwives, and to old ladies surrounded by shoals of grandchildren and great-grandchildren -- all of whom were acutely interested in the way I had given birth, how I breast-fed my baby, and how I looked after him -- is that new-born babies are so incomplete, so fused with their mothers, so malleable and so vulnerable, that they can barely be considered fully human beings. In this sense, at least at one level of discourse, people not only are not born Vezo: they are also not born human.

During my second stay with the Vezo, as a mother who had left her one-year old son in Italy and was visibly missing him, I was often reminded by my Vezo friends that I should stop thinking about him so often; people explained that if I kept being so upset, he would certainly fall seriously ill. I took this counsel for what it seemed to be: yet another version of the idea that if you talk about someone in her absence, her ears will burn, or that if you think a lot about her, she will sneeze incessantly. In fact, the statement referred to something far more specific, to the peculiar relation between a mother and her baby, which made my son vulnerable to my moods even at a distance.

One way of describing this particular relation is to say that the boundary between mother and baby is rather fuzzy and ill-defined, so that it is not always clear where one begins and the other ends. The fusion between mother and baby is most obvious during pregnancy when the two often act as one person, the mother for the baby and the baby for the mother. For example, the baby will make the mother crave special foods or will will `make trouble' (miola), kicking violently and making the mother bleed, when the father comes home after sleeping with a lover;

only when the father, advised by a diviner, admits his fault and pays the wife a fine does the baby quiet down.

While during pregnancy the mother is a vehicle for the baby's desires, and the baby guards the mother's interests, at the moment of birth it is of great concern that the separation between mother and baby and between the mother and the placenta, take place swiftly and successfully. Once more, the baby may `make trouble' and refuse to emerge, if the father has `dirty things' (raha maloto) to confess. The main anxieties, however, are aroused by the placenta, which is considered the eldest sibling of the baby and is referred to as a `killer' (mahafaty io): the stuff which kills women if it does not detach itself properly and completely.

The wound left on the mother by the birth of the placenta is likened to the wound left on the baby's body, the navel; both are referred to as fery. Both bodies are in danger of being penetrated by `air' (iliran'tsioky), an event which can result in death. To avoid this, mother and baby have to be kept hot and wrapped up securely in several layers of clothes and blankets. During the first few weeks after the birth, the new-born baby is hardly visible, buried as it is in a bundle of synthetic blankets, themselves part of the bigger bundle enveloping the mother. Remembering how complicated it had been for me to accept that my new-born son was no longer a part of me, I understood how much more gradual the baby's detachment from the mother must be in circumstances in which for weeks after the birth the two are still effectively fused in the same womb-like bundle of heat and sweat. In a sense, the separation which has occurred at the moment of birth is also the cause of that prolonged symbiosis, for it is the lack of strong and clearly defined bodily boundaries (which the baby never had, but which the mother has lost as a result of giving birth) which requires mother and baby to remain fused with each other.

Another reason why mother and baby must be close to each other[8] at all times during the first

couple of months after the birth, is that the baby is so susceptible to outside influences that its face will change completely if left alone for even a few minutes. My Vezo friends could hardly believe that I had dared put my son in his cot, in a separate room, soon after his birth; with Vezo babies, I was warned, this would be just impossible: didn't I see how their eyelids often tremble, or how their eyes roll sideways? This happens every time an angatse (a rather ill-defined kind of spirit, of which there are always many around) flies over the baby and frightens it. The problem is that if the baby is left alone, any passing angatse will be able to get hold of it (again, in a rather ill-defined manner), which will result in a change of features. Angatse are able to re-shape the face of an unprotected baby[9] because babies are still extremely malleable and plastic;[10] they gradually become less so with time, so that when they are old enough to sit up by themselves, their eyelids will no longer tremble, their eyes will no longer roll, and their features will no longer be in danger of transmutation.

The possibility that a spirit might take hold of new-born babies is just one example of their vulnerability. Babies are soft and weak (malemilemy), and boneless (taola tsy misy)[11], and their ability to survive and to hold on to life can never seem to be taken for granted. People seem only too aware of the many things that can go wrong in a baby and which, in the absence of western medicines (aolim-bazaha)[12], can easily result in death. And if a three-day old baby is resilient enough to survive several days of `surprising' (mahatseriky) internal bleeding even without the help of western medicines, it will still be exposed to the possibility of acts of reprisal from easily angered ancestors -- it being much easier for a vengeful ancestor to kill off a `boneless' baby than a strong and `fully-boned' adult.

It is precisely at the time of their death, that babies' malleability and vulnerability turns most clearly into an assertion of their less-than-human status. For babies who die before they are one year old are not buried in their parents' ancestral tomb, but are laid without a funeral in an unmarked grave in the forest. Although I was once told that there would be no point in burying

boneless bodies in tombs whose purpose is `the gathering and preservation of bones' (fanajaria taola), the most common explanation for excluding small babies from ancestral tombs is that they are not yet people/ human beings, they are `animals' (mbo tsy olo fa biby[13]).

It is perhaps too easy to take this statement excessively literally. I do not think that any of the people I talked with ever wished to suggest that their babies (or my son, for that matter) were `animals'. If babies were said to be biby, what was being said was that nobody could predict their chances of becoming human beings: a chance to acquire bones and clear (if perhaps only temporary) bodily boundaries; a chance to consolidate their facial features; and a chance to become strong and invulnerable to angatse, and a little more resilient to bad-tempered ancestors.

This, however, should not be taken simply as a commentary on the uncertainty of survival; it is also an acknowledgement of the relative insignificance of birth in the making of full human beings. From a different perspective, I am restating a point previously made by Bloch (1993) about birth among the Zafimaniry of Madagascar: namely, that in this part of the world -- as also occurs in Austronesia[14] -- birth is a relatively unimportant event for `creating' the social person (1993: 120).[15] What is born among the Vezo is merely a potential person, still closely fused with its mother, in need of constant protection from outside influences, still wholly pliable and, especially, utterly vulnerable -- a biby who `is', but who still has to become. The significant point is that everyone's attention, among the Vezo as much as among the Zafimaniry, is focused on this crucial process of becoming, rather than on the somewhat incidental moment of birth.

> But then: if birth is relatively insignificant in the creation of the person; and if what is being born is a shapeless being, a weak and vulnerable creature who is

uncertain to survive and may or may not become human -- then it would make sense for the Vezo to take no notice of whether their still unformed babies happen to be born male or female.

It would make sense. But, as we know, this is not what they do. Instead they exclaim: `it's a boy!', `it's a girl!'.

Un-gendered persons within and without

So far I have discussed only what mothers do with their babies, while completely ignoring the position of fathers. This reflects what the Vezo regard as the fundamental difference between men's and women's contribution to the making of children: that men simply `throw away' their semen inside the woman's body, while women are left with the hard work (asa mafy) of carrying and nourishing their babies, both before and after birth. Although men, thanks to their semen, are said to be the `origin' and `source' of pregnancy (lehilahy ro fotoran' ateraha), women, thanks to their physical effort, are considered `the real source - origin - hence the owners of the children' (ampela ro tena tompony).

I have discussed elsewhere the complicated ritual process through which the difference between men and women in procreation is transformed into sameness, thereby creating a system of relatedness in which gender difference makes no difference: a bilateral system in which relatedness traced through women and through men is absolutely identical, in which women's children and men's children are the same, and where being born by a woman or by a man has the same effect in creating relations between people (Astuti 1993).

A crucial aspect of this transformation of difference into sameness is the fact that the Vezo are remarkably uninterested in translating their (admittedly rather vague) theory of procreation into a model of the person where gender differences are traced `within' bodies rather than `between' them (as in Moore 1993 and 1994). In other words, women's and men's different role in the creation of children are not used, as they are in other parts of the world, to draw a distinction between female and male substances.[16]

In this respect, the Vezo could not be more different from the Melanesians, whose model of the `partible' person is predicated on the possibility of sorting out a whole history of past relations which have `conceived' -- and are `de-conceived' by the repeated actions of -- each person (Strathern 1988). In Melanesia, since each constitutive relation is gendered, the resulting person is not only `partible' but androgynous: made up of both male and female relations. In substantive terms, this means that, as in Tubetube, the person is composed of female bones (formed by the maternal breastmilk) and male flesh and blood (formed by paternal foods and substances) (Macintyre 1989: 138); or, as with the Mekeo, it is composed by an equal share of male-derived blood (semen), and female-derived blood (`womb-blood') (Mosko 1983: 25). The crucial fact is that at any point in time (and, most dramatically, at the moment of death), what is female and what is male is clearly distinguished and distinguishable within the person.

Busby (1994) has recently noted that because in Melanesia the separate gendered substances brought together in procreation remain thereafter identified with `partible' and distinct parts of the body, the resulting person, whether a man or a woman, remains `a mosaic of male and female substance' (1994:12). As Busby notes, this means that while `there is an equivalence of men and women as both mosaically constructed, at the same time there is a radical distinction between (gendered) male and female substance' (1994:12-3, emphasis changed).

Busby emphasizes how in Melanesia there is a `sense of the contingency of gender as related to

men and women' (1994:13). This stems from the fact that men and women are essentially similar in their androgynous make up; it is only as a result of `cultural work' (for example, initiation ceremonies) that the sexes can be separated. Of equal significance, however, is the other and complementary point noted by Busby, namely the radical distinction between male and female substance.

It is on this point that the Vezo differ most markedly from the Melanesians. There is no sense in which the Vezo person could be imagined as androgynous (or in which gender differences could be imagined as being traced `within' bodies), because the Vezo do not draw the radical distinction between male and female substance which underlies the androgynous character of the Melanesian person. Gender among the Vezo appears to be far less contingent and fluid than in Melanesia,[17] but this is so, paradoxically, because deep down in its make-up -- in the bones and in the flesh, in the blood and in the marrow -- the Vezo person is not gendered.[18]

In some respects this is also what happens in South India where, as Busby points out, male and female substances are merged and are thus indistinguishable in the final substance of the body (1994: 12). In the Dravidian system people, like the Vezo and in contrast with the Melanesians, do not divide up the body internally into distinct male and female parts. However, they do distinguish relationships on the basis of the different ways in which parents of each sex transmit their male or female substance to their children. To take the primary example,[19] mothers are considered closer to their daughters and fathers to their sons, because daughters have received from their mothers the female substance (milk) which they will in turn transmit to their own children, while sons have received from their fathers the male substance (semen) which they will in turn transmit to their own children. The significant point is that although in this system people are born with their male and female substances fully merged in a unitary body, the relationships in which they are involved are marked categorically by gender:[20] because of the substantially different ways in which men and women are related to their children.

Here the similarity between Vezo and Dravidian examples ends. For in the case of the Vezo the emphasis is on the sameness of the relationship that each parent has with the children of either sex.[21] It is true that women, because of their hard work, are considered `the real source - origin - hence the owners of the children', and that un-married men -- who throw their semen away and have nothing more to do -- may not even become fathers of their offspring.[22] But if a man accepts (and is accepted) to join his wife in generating children and in creating new relatedness, then they will do so together with no distinction being drawn between them:[23] they jointly create a system of relatedness in which the difference between them makes absolutely no difference.

It is for this reason that, in light of the comparison with Melanesia and South India, the Vezo person turns out to be strikingly un-gendered: not only un-gendered within, but also in its relations without.

> But then: if the Vezo person is un-gendered within, deep down in its constitution, and is un-gendered without, in the relationships it has with the people who have generated it and in the relationships it will generate in its turn -- then it would make sense for the Vezo to take no notice of whether their new-born babies are male or female, since this will make no difference to their place in the network of relations that has produced them and which they will contribute to produce.
>
> It would make sense. But, as we know, this is not what they do. Instead they exclaim: `it's a boy!', `it's a girl!'.

And so: why do the Vezo make a special point about the sex of their new-born babies?

If I were to ask one of my Vezo friends this question, I would most probably be answered with another question: don't you, white people, also make a special point about the sex of your new-born babies? And I would have to concede that, yes, of course, in most cases we do, even if sometimes we pretend that we do not. In fact, I would also have to explain that most often than not we are rather anxious about the sex of our babies because we have a clear preference for either boys or girls. I never felt that this was of great concern for the Vezo, whose only worry seems to be to have large numbers of children of both sexes, in whichever order they come.[24]

Thus, against the background I have just sketched out, the fact that the Vezo at the moment of birth say: `it's a boy!', `it's a girl!', takes on a rather specific meaning.

If I were to ask what the statement means, I would probably get no answer at all in the case of men; women would explain, with a rather puzzled look on their faces,[25] that they mean that boys have a penis (misy latake), girls a vagina (misy lity). And this is, on the face of it, all that there is to it. Except that, by saying that some babies are born with penises and others with vaginas, the Vezo effectively say that babies are born sexed. To say this, I suggest, is to say very little and a great deal at the same time.

It is to say very little, because to be born with a penis or a vagina is in no sense the end of the tale. The most significant part of the story will unfold as these babies grow up and gradually acquire what, at birth, they still lack: a `gender'. This will happen through the process of acting as a boy or a girl, and of learning and doing boys' as opposed to girls' things -- a process similar to the one through which they will also acquire Vezo identity. Boys and girls are said to be just the same (mitovy avao) in their character and disposition (fanahy), and in the ways they do the

things appropriate to a baby (fomban-drozy): crying, sleeping, sucking, peeing and pooing, and so on. The only difference occurs at the moment of birth, when boys appear facing downwards, and girls appear facing upwards. This is because boys must avoid looking up at their mother's vagina, which will be taboo (faly) when they grow older; but girls have none of these problems, since mothers and daughters are made in the same way (sambility iaby, they all have the same vagina). As they come into the world, boys and girls behave in a manner that is appropriate to their gender, and they do so as a matter of fact, although nobody quite knows how it actually happens! Later on in life, these boys and girls will have to become wise (miha-mahihisty) in order to behave in discriminating and appropriate ways according to their and other people's gender. And as they become wise, they also become increasingly different. They play different games, do different things, learn different tricks, forge different friendships, and have different nocturnal lives: the boys wandering around the village wrapped up in their blankets, waiting to be let in by one of their lovers; the girls, inside their houses, deciding who, if anybody, they want to let in. It is this playing, doing, learning, knocking on and opening of doors, which transforms what at first were sexed babies into gendered persons.

From this perspective, the previous point that the Vezo could ignore the sex of their new-born babies because they are babies are shapeless, unformed, weak and vulnerable, can be turned on its head. For to say that a new-born baby is a boy or a girl, that it is sexed, that it is born with a penis or a vagina, is actually the only thing that can be said about it: the only thing which is given and fixed at the moment of birth, when everything else has still to be made and created processually through time and `wisdom'.

And yet to say that babies are born sexed is also and at the same time to say something far more significant. By attributing a sex to their babies at the moment of birth -- a sex in the absence of gender -- the Vezo construe sex as a fixed and `intractable' trait of the person, even of such un-formed persons as their babies are perceived to be. By making a special point about the sex of

their new-born babies, the Vezo acknowledge that sex, contrary to gender, is not and does not need to be made, but is given.

If we refer back to the several good reasons why the Vezo could be expected to ignore the sex of their new-born babies, the fact that they do not reminds us that the processual nature of gender identity co-exists with the fixity of sex -- with the `intractable' fact that some babies are born with penises and others are born with vaginas.

Thus, although it was factually wrong to imagine that the Vezo would take no notice of the sex of their new-born babies, it was nonetheless analytically appropriate to be surprised that they did. For there is a real inconsistency here between what is fixed and what is processual: an unresolved tension between sex and gender.

The existence of a tension, and the fact that it remains unresolved and unresolvable, becomes clearer if we turn our attention away from new-born babies towards the sarin'ampela, towards people who, by acting and doing, acquire a gender which contradicts their (fixed) sex. As already suggested, babies and sarin'ampela illustrate two opposite extremes in the dialectical interplay between sex and gender; it is with this contrast in mind that I present my still tentative understanding[26] of what it means to be born of one sex and become an `image' of the opposite gender.

Sarin'ampela: men who are `images of women'

I first heard about sarin'ampela when I met one in a Masikoro village during an expedition to the interior. She[27] was sitting among a group of women gathered around her hotely: a little table on which she had laid a few pieces of boiled manioc, some rice cakes, and a couple of small

cups with which clients could drink coffee. The Vezo friends I was with told me that she was a sarin'ampela: a `man' who is `an image of a woman'.

Sarin'ampela are `men' who `like women' (tia ampela). `Liking women' in this context is different from `looking for or wanting them' (mila ampela), which is what other men do when looking for sexual partners; sarin'ampela `like' women in the sense that they would prefer to be women. When they put this into practice, this results in the creation of an `image': the `image' of the woman they would like to be.

My informants described how one starts becoming a sarin'ampela from an early age. As young children, sarin'ampela prefer to spend time with girls rather than with boys, and learn to braid their friends' hair, carry water on their head, search for head lice, and so on. As adults, their identity is defined most crucially by the fact that they perform `women's jobs' (asan'ampela) and adopt `women's ways of doing things' (fomban'ampela).

Sometimes my (mostly female) informants mentioned that sarin'ampela have sex with men, although there was a certain degree of confusion about this, especially as to whether sarin'ampela have sex among themselves or with other men who are not sarin'ampela. In all cases, sexual preferences seemed strikingly unimportant in defining what kind of people sarin'ampela are. Although it does not mean that sexual preference is irrelevant or secondary to the experience of sarin'ampela,[28] it is nonetheless significant that, unanimously and consistently, my informants agreed that practicing of a `woman's job' or adopting a female `way of doing things' are of primary importance in transforming a man into `the image of a woman'.

Despite the crucial importance of sarin'ampela's productive activities in creating this `image', it is rather difficult to specify what it is exactly that sarin'ampela do. This is because the definition of men's as opposed to women's jobs is highly localized and rather fluid. As one moves along

the coast, people's livelihood varies greatly: in one place, people specialize in line fishing and sell their catch at the market; in another, they employ fishing nets and barter dry or salted fish for maize and manioc with the Masikoro; in yet another, they rely on the seasonal catch of lobsters sold to outside traders; and so on. In each case, the specification of men's and women's jobs will vary: for example, in one setting men's job is to fish and women's job is to trade at the market; elsewhere, both men and women are involved in net-fishing, women are mainly in charge of drying and salting the catch, while men do most of the travel inland for bartering.

The distinction between men's and women's tasks is nonetheless never rigid: where the men's job is to fish, women join in when necessary; where the women's job is to dry and salt the catch, men can be asked to help. Similarly, although cooking and fetching water for the kitchen are everywhere `women's jobs', men can also perform these tasks and do so more than occasionally.[29]

When it comes to `ways of doing things' (fomba), male and female disctinctiveness is more marked. For example, women carry heavy loads on their head, while men will always carry them on their shoulders; women let their hair grow and have it braided, while men have theirs cut short; men and women tie their sarong differently at the waist, and men never wear it, as women do, high around their chest; when women are in groups, chatting and gossiping among themselves, they can be heard making a distinctive kind of laugh (mitohake, generally understood to be occasioned by sexual joking), which is never heard among men.

Hence, whereas men who perform `women's jobs' -- selling fish at the market or washing clothes -- are not regarded for this reason alone as sarin'ampela, men who carry a bucket of water on their head or do mitohake with other women will most certainly be considered such. However, these actions alone are not enough; they must be accompanied by a clear and unambiguous performance of recognizable `women's jobs'. Sarin'ampela cannot simply intrude

incidentaly upon the women's domain of activities, as other men do. In order to be credited with their identity, they have to present a much more coherently gendered `image' than is ever the case with other men or women.

Doing is therefore essential to how sarin'ampela's identity is defined --whether it be how they tie their sarong, or how they make a living. This raises an important point about the processual nature of gender identity among the Vezo. For it is clear that the existence of sarin'ampela, like that of the famous American Indian `berdache', is predicated on the distinction between what Whitehead called `anatomy and physiology' on the one hand, and `behaviour and social role' on the other (1981: 86): in Vezo terms, between what people are born with -- a penis (misy latake) or a vagina (misy lity) -- and the `image' they construct for themselves. This distinction and, most crucially, the fact that one's `image' can be at variance with one's sex, account for the way some people become sarin'ampela: they do so by creating their gender against their sex.[30] Sarin'ampela are unique only in so far as the `image' they create for themselves is at variance with the shape of their genitals; if it were not for this, they would be like any other Vezo person, actively engaged in the process of gender creation. What sarin'ampela do is what all Vezo people do: having been born sexed, they become gendered by way of acting and doing. In this respect, the example of those few men who become `images' of women proves that `gender' is for all Vezo people, whether sarin'ampela or not, no more and no less than an `image' -- something that is created through what one does and does not do; something that one becomes.

If the example of the sarin'ampela highlights the performative nature of gender identity among the Vezo, it also raises the question of how far the disengagement of one's gendered `image' from one's sexed body can be sustained.[31] When discussing sarin'ampela, my friends would often remind me, with the help of vivid gesturing, that although these men perform women's jobs and adopt women's `ways of doing things', they still nonetheless have a penis between their legs: they carry water and firewood on their head, `kanefa, misy latake io' (and yet there is a

penis down there); they go to the market to sell fish, `kanefa, misy latake io' (and yet there is a penis down there); they wear earrings, `kanefa, misy latake io' (and yet there is a penis down there); and so on.

The fact that, as with the American Indian `berdache', `the sheer fact of anatomic masculinity was never culturally "forgotten"' (Whitehead 1981: 86), but was in fact insisted upon (at least by my informants, whose `image' did not contradict their anatomy), made me ask how far sarin'ampela are actually able to claim that they have become women. In a context where death is ritually constructed as the limit of a person's transformability (Astuti 1995a), one way of formulating this question is by asking what happens when sarin'ampela die.

My informants had no doubts: sarin'ampela will never be treated as women when they die. There are three instances when the sex of the deceased clearly affects funerary procedures. The first is when the body is washed, dressed, and laid on the bed where it remains during the wake; the second is when the body is put inside the coffin before being carried to the cemetery. In both cases, only people of the same sex as the deceased are allowed to handle the corpse. The third instance is when the deceased is buried in either male or female sections of the tomb: a man among men, a woman among women. People told me that no living woman would dare handle the corpse of a sarin'ampela as if it were `really' that of a woman, `for there is a penis down there' (ka misy latake io). And it was similarly suggested that there would be no question of burying a sarin'ampela in the female section of the tomb, for this would cause serious trouble with the ancestors, who would want to know why the body of a man was buried among the women.

During funerals, then, the `image' of sarin-ampela is un-done and fundamentally negated.[32] At this point no living person is prepared to recognize the `image' of a woman in the body of a man: regardless of how much sarin'ampela are transformed by what they do and by the way

they act, the shape of their sexed body (the existence of a penis) remains unchanged.[33] A fundamental distinction seems to be drawn here, between a person's `image', which is changeable and transformable because it is constructed through practice; and a person's sexed body which is unchangeable and fixed -- from birth, through to life and beyond death. On the basis of this distinction, the corpse of a sarin'ampela is treated for what it is: a sexed body, albeit dead.

On `sex' and `gender'

Throughout this essay, I have used the dichotomy between `sex' and `gender', at times explicitly, at other times implicitly, to refer to the difference perceived by the Vezo between what people are born with and the identity they create for themselves through their lives. I began by outlining why I originally thought that the Vezo might wish to ignore the sex of their new-born babies, and I sketched a `gender system' in which gender identity is performative and non-essentialist. Against this background, I suggested that when the Vezo announce the sex of their babies, they complement (rather than contradict) their `gender system' by acknowledging the `intractable' nature of sex. In the Vezo `gender system', the fixity of sex co-exists with the processuality of gender. The same conclusion was drawn from the discussion of sarin'ampela. Whereas the sarin'ampela's gender is constructed, like an `image' fabricated through a careful choice of `jobs' and `ways of doing things', the fixity of their sex determines them in the way their transformation is perceived by other people, and in the way they are treated at their death.

The validity of the dichotomy between `sex' and `gender' has, it is true, been radically challenged. Yanagisako and Collier (1987), for example, have advocated the analytical disengagement of gender from sex. They have argued that we should question what we have always taken for granted, namely that gender, as we have `invented' it, is the cultural

elaboration of sex: of the biological difference between men and women. Thus, while gender was originally a liberating category, for it freed `culture' (gender constructs and gender relations) from biological determinism, Yanagisako and Collier suggest that we should now make the further step by defining gender as `pure' difference, no longer connected to, as the cultural elaboration of, biological difference. And although Yanagisako and Collier admit that it is impossible to know what gender would mean if it were to be disconnected from sex (1987:34; cf. also Errington 1990, Stolcke 1993, Howell and Melhuus 1993), they also believe that the only way to explain, rather than assume, the difference between men and women, is to transcend the dichotomy between sex and gender.

From a different perspective, Judith Butler (1990) has also argued that we should dispense with the distinction between sex and gender. `Sex' and `gender' can exist as two separate analytical entities only if they differ from one another, in other words, only if `sex' can be shown to be `natural', given and intractable, and `gender' to be cultural, constructed and variable. Butler's argument, inspired by Foucault, is that `sex' only appears to be natural, given and intractable as a result of a specific discursive practice which constructs it in this way. And this in turn means that `sex', instead of being the raw material over which culture imposes its meaning, is in fact as culturally constructed as gender. Hence, `the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all' (1990: 7).

Henrietta Moore, combining both of the above positions, has also urged feminists and anthropologists to free themselves of the sex/gender dichotomy (1993, 1994). It has been too easy (ie under-theorized) to go around the world searching for the many ways in which `sex' is culturally constructed and is transformed into gender. For Moore, as for Yanagisako and Collier and for Butler, `it is the pre-existing categorization of sex [...] which is the stumbling block' (1994: 23). On the one hand, it prevents us from asking, instead of assuming, how different cultures actually construct the difference between men and women, and on the other, it blinds

us to the fact that the categories of sexual difference are as culturally variable as gender constructs.

Why, then, have I chosen to rescue the old dichotomy between `sex' and `gender'? At one level, my answer is a localized one: I wish to retain and to use this dichotomy because it captures, if only approximately and rather clumsily, a prominent cultural theme which engages the Vezo of Madagascar.

There is no doubt that `sex' and `gender' are analytical categories that would make no sense to my Vezo friends. When I write `sex', they talk about penises and vaginas; when I write `gender', they talk about how men and women tie their sarong, about different ways of carrying heavy loads, about the nocturnal movements of young men and the choice girls have of opening doors or keeping them shut.[34] Yet, the difference anthropologists have perceived between what is biologically given (according to their definition of biology) and what is culturally constructed (according to their definition of culture), is not so remote from the difference the Vezo perceive between what it means to be born with a penis or a vagina, and what it takes to become a woman, a man, or a sarin'ampela, as the case may be. In this respect, our `sex' and their penises and vaginas share a fundamental feature -- that they are fixed and `intractable'; while what our `gender' shares with their ways of tieing a sarong, of carrying heavy loads and of behaving at night, is that they are processual and negotiable features of the person.

The Vezo, as other peoples in Madagascar, are deeply engaged by the co-existence of fixity and processuality which marks their existence. When defining and shaping their identity, the Vezo are caught between two conflicting ways of being (Astuti, 1995a). One is Vezo-ness, which is created contextually by acting in the present, the other is descent, which comes, unchanged and unchangeable, from the past; one is processual and is created during one's life, the other is fixed and is experienced in death. In their rituals and in their fraught interactions with the ancestors,

the Vezo negotiate the boundary between life and death, between processuality and fixity, between what human beings create and make of and for themselves in the course of their lives, and what they are given as irreducible and unchangeable features of their personhood. The Vezo have not found any easy solution to the tension between these two fundamental aspects of human existence.

In this essay, I have discussed another version of the same unresolved tension. It is that `gender' identity is created processually and is acquired through practice, but that people are born, live and must also die with a fixed `sex'. To retain and to understand this particular `problem', we must be able to distinguish, as the Vezo do, between the fact of being born with a penis or a vagina, and the process through which one becomes a man, a woman or a sarin'ampela. One easy and convenient, if only approximate way of retaining this distinction is to mantain the dichotomy between sex and gender.

While suggesting that we should continue to use this dichotomy because it applies rather well to the Vezo, I wish in fact to claim something rather more than this. In so doing, I aim to extend Michael Lambek's recent argument (1994), which goes very much against the contemporary trend in anthropology, that we should salvage another currently unpopular dichotomy: that between mind and body. Lambek suggests that far from being the expression of a peculiar western obsession, `what we call the mind/body problem (at its most general level, whether a valid distinction can be made between the mind and body) may be but one particular historical expression of and for what is at root a universal existential conundrum' (Lambek 1994:3). Thus, while `mind' and `body' are obviously not universal categories, the conceptual distinction drawn by the Cartesian terms between two incommensurable areas of human experience appears to be so, rooted as it is in our embodied existential condition.

It is possible similarly to claim that the distinction between sex and gender, while clearly

pertaining to the western tradition and a product of a specific `discursive practice', captures a different version of the same `universal existential conundrum': the unresolved tension between what, in the nature of human beings, is processual and transformable and what is instead fixed and unchangeable. Thus, if Butler is right in claiming that the pre-discursive nature of sex is the effect of a discursive practice, in other words that `sex' looks `natural', fixed and unchangeable only because it has been constructed in this way,[35] I would suggest that this discursive practice is not peculiar to the west (although its specific and abstract form clearly is), but is shared by the very many people throughout the world who, like the Vezo, have discovered the limits to the transformation of their sexed bodies.[36]

And I should perhaps point out, by way of conclusion, that Thomas Laqueur, whose work has been widely and enthusiastically used to make the point that sex is discursively produced, is a prominent member of this same group of people. For although his book Making sex does indeed provide an excellent example of the discursive construction of the sexed body, by demonstrating that -- I quote -- `the content of talk about sexual difference is unfettered by fact, and is as free as mind's play' (1990: 243), Laqueur is also at pains to draw and to retain a clear distinction between `language' and `flesh', between `the body / and the body as discursively constituted, between seeing / and seeing-as' (1990:15). Just like the Vezo, Laqueur draws a distinction between what is constructed and what is given, between `images' and `flesh'. And like the Vezo, who are unable to treat the corpse of a man -- with its `unforgettable' penis -- as if it were that of a woman, Laqueur is unable to reduce the dead body he finds on the dissecting table to a cultural construct:

> `For all my awareness of how deeply our understanding of what we saw was historically contingent [...], the flesh in its simplicity seemed always to shine through' (1990:14).

NOTES

1. The Vezo are fishing people who live along the western coast of the island.

2. In the hospital where I received ante-natal care, I was not given the choice of finding out my baby's sex through scanning (parents are not told the foetus' sex, allegedly so that no one would use this information to terminate the pregnancy if the baby was not of the desired sex). In any case the rather predictable advice of the Natural Birth Association was to avoid scanning as much as possible and to postpone finding out the sex of the baby until the birth, when this can be done `naturally' rather than through the aid of technology.

3. Who are by no means representative of attitudes to birth and sex in the United Kingdom.

4. I would like to thank Lucy Davies, an independent midwife, for discussing these issues with me.

5. Throughout this paper I shall use `boy' and `girl' as an approximate translation of the terms used by the Vezo. In the Malagasy language, there are no distinct terms for `boy' and `girl', but only ungendered terms such as anaky (son / daughter), zaza or aja (child). When people want to specify that a child is a boy or a girl, they `genderize' the term anaky by adding that it is male or female (anaky-lahy, anaky-vavy or anaky ampela). In some cases, when the child's gender is the primary focus of the conversation, people refer to the child with the gendered terms used for adults: a `man' (lehilahy, johary), a `woman' (ampela).

6. For the purpose of this paper, I will limit myself to the discussion of sarin'ampela (men who become `images of women'). I will not deal with the case of sarin'johary (women who become `images of men'), whom the Vezo say are only known to exist among the Masikoro, their neighbours who live in the interior. When asked about sarin'johary, my informants would define them in the same way as sarin'ampela: people of one sex who have become of the opposite gender through doing certain things and acting in a certain way (see below). They also recognized, however, that it is much easier for a man to become a woman than for a woman to become a man. My data at present do not allow me to address the question of why, here as elsewhere (cf. for example Whitehead 1981 on the American Indian `berdache', or Atkinson 1990 on the Wana), there is a marked prevalence of male to female gender shifting.

7. For a fuller discussion of Vezo identity, see Astuti 1995a.

8. More specifically, the baby must always be facing the mother.

9. A few days after the birth, on a propitious day chosen by the diviner and in the presence of all their relatives, mother and baby are allowed to step out of the house for the first time. After this, the mother will be able to leave the house to relieve herself, and during these short absences she will make sure to leave the baby next to a sharp piece of metal or a special medical wood (sañatsy) which are said to keep angatse away at least for a little while.

10. As they were when still in uterus. Many factors can influence and contribute to shape a fetus: if a person sits behind the back of a pregnant woman, the baby will in some ways resemble that person; if the mother takes a dislike for some one (normally a close relative) when pregnant, the baby will most probably resemble the detested one; if a lover has sex with a pregnant woman, he will `steal' (mangalatsy) some of the features of the baby's face, which will resemble his instead of his father's; if a white person spends a lot of time with a pregnant woman, the baby will have very light skin (a desired quality, especially in girls).

11. Depending on the context, people also say that small babies do have bones, but that they are extremely soft and not yet fully formed (taola fa misy avao, fa malemy, tsy henja).

12. I was often told that the reason white women are free to disregard all the restrictions (faly) which affect Vezo women after delivery is that they have access to strong and effective medicines. For example, white women and their babies need not be kept hot and wrapped up in layers of blankets because a `good injection' (pekira soa) the mother receives immediately after giving birth safely seals her and the baby's body, freeing them from the danger of being entered by `air'.

13. `Animal' is only an approximate translation of biby, which has a wider range of meaning than the English term. Biby designates what is not human, including animals, people who behave inhumanly, ancestors, and various creatures of the sea and forest.

14. As pointed out by Fox 1987; see also Carsten 1995a.

15. In contrast to the general assumption in traditional kinship studies that birth and biological parentage are the determining factors in creating relatedness and personhood.

16. I believe this would apply to the whole of Madagascar. The obvious exception can be found in Huntington's analysis of the Bara (1988), a pastoralist group in the south of the island. Huntington derives Bara notions of the make-up of the person directly form their theories of procreation (semen and bone are male; blood and flesh are female), and he proceeds to claim that `for the Bara, male and female are the primary categories of human existence' (1988:16). The problem with this interpretation is that there is in fact no evidence that the Bara costruct of the person may be grasped through such a simple and rather crude translation of their understanding of physiological reproduction (which in any case is probably far more tentative than Huntington makes it out to be).

17. Although, as we shall see later, gender for the Vezo is also the product of `cultural work' of a different kind.

18. In this respect, as I noted elsewhere, the Vezo person remains whole and undivided (Astuti 1995a: 92).

19. From which, as demonstrated by Busby (1994:2-7), the distinction between cross-sex and same-sex cousins also follows.

20. Hence Busby's point that in South India gender is `more categorical' than in Melanesia.

21. And in the next generation, on the sameness of the relationship between cross and same-sex cousins, who are all considered as full siblings.

22. Children born out of marriage (which can occur either before or well after their birth), are considered to be related only to their mother and not to their `biological' father (tsy mana baba, the child does not have a father).

23. This assertion is correct with a proviso: that a distinction between mother's and father's side will be made at the time when the children's place of burial is decided upon, for they will be buried either in mother's or in father's tomb. It is only in death, in other words, that a categorical distinction between mother's and father's side becomes not only relevant but unavoidable (see Astuti 1995a: ch.6).

24. Of a woman who has had first a girl and then a boy, or vice versa, people say that `she knows how to give birth' (mahay miterake ie). The standard form of blessing, given to both men and women, is `that you may have sons and daughters' (teraky anaky-lahy, teraky anaky-ampela).

25. In many instances, when discussing sexual matters, I felt that my informants had to make an effort to believe, or pretend, that I did not already know the answer to the questions I asked them. Thus, when I returned to the field as a mother, one of my woman friends jokingly told me that either she was the one responsible for teaching me how to have babies, or that I must have known about it already!

26. The main limitation in my enquiry is that I never directly talked to any sarin'ampela; I therefore present here the `image' of an `image': what my informants (especially women) who are not sarin'ampela make of this category of people. Sarin'ampela (or sarim-bavy, as they are known in other parts of Madagascar) have been mentioned and described in several early accounts by travellers and colonial administrators; a useful review of this literature can be found in Allibert (1994).

27. In recognition of her change of gender, I shall use `she' when referring to a sarin'ampela.

28. On the other hand, it is equally possible that the fact of having homosexual relations is not enough to be defined as a sarin'ampela; it is possible, in other words, that there are many more homosexual men than there are sarin'ampela.

29. Canoe-making is a significant exception. All stages of this activity are very clearly defined as exclusively men's job: women can be present (tsy falin' ampela, it is not prohibited to women), but they never participate in the actual construction.

30. I borrow this formulation from Mathieu's (1991) discussion of the contrast between `identité sexuée' and `identité sexuelle'. The former is a type of `naturalistic' identity whose primary referent is `sex', while the latter's primary referent is `gender'. Thus, while in the first instance a person's gender must adapt to its sex (and if it does not, sex will be refashioned to fit gender), in the second one a person's gender can be at variance with its sex.

31. In Mathieu's terms (1991), the question I am raising here would be: how rigid is the boundary between models of `identité sexuée' (where sex determines gender) and models of `identité sexuelle' (where gender can contradict sex)? (see note **27).

32. My informants' assumption was that sarin'ampela would like to be treated as women when they die, but that this treatment is denied them. Since I never discussed this matter with sarin'ampela directly, I do not know whether this assumption is correct.

33. As far as I am aware the Vezo do not speculate, as the Wana are reported to do (Atkinson 1990), about the possibility that by changing one's gender one may, as a result, also change one's sex. Interestingly, in the case of the Wana, people only contemplate the possibility that women may acquire a penis when they become men, while they never consider the opposite instance: for no man in becoming a woman would be so foolish as to sacrifice his penis, which is said to be `hard and brave' and which, as Atkinson puts it, is `a badge that empowers its owner to exceed the limits of Wana communities to confront the dangers and to obtain the advantages that lies in the realms beyond' (1990: 93).

34. One could argue that the term `sary' (image) used in sarin-ampela, comes very close to the meaning of the term `gender' as the `cultural construction of sex'. As I pointed out above, in the case of sarin'ampela, the Vezo explicitly and linguistically recognize that a person's gendered identity is an `image' -- constructed through a careful choice of behaviour and productive activities. For `sary' to be translated as gender, we would need the Vezo to use this term when talking about `straight' people and what they become by acting and doing as men and women.

35. So that many of the facts that appear (in the western as well as in other people's discursive practices) to be `natural', can be shown not to be so. Cf. for example Tabet 1985, who has shown how women's reproductive functions are socially, and often violently, manipulated; she argues, therefore, that there is no such thing as `natural fertility', but only a variety of techniques deployed to achieve `forced reproduction'.

36. There are cases in which these limits are overcome, and genitals are altered and refashioned. However, cases like that of the hijra in India whose body, if not born hermaphroditic, is re-

shaped through castration and the copious loss of `male' blood to create a person who is `neither man nor woman' (Nanda 1990), only confirm the `intractability' of sex by showing how much harsher it is to alter one's sex than it is to alter one's gender. For there is no doubt that it is much easier for a Vezo man to change his gender and become the `image' of a woman, than it is for a hijra to bring the shape of his body in line with its `neither male nor female' gender.

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