



Collective and single burial in Madagascar

Mike Parker Pearson, Denis Regnier

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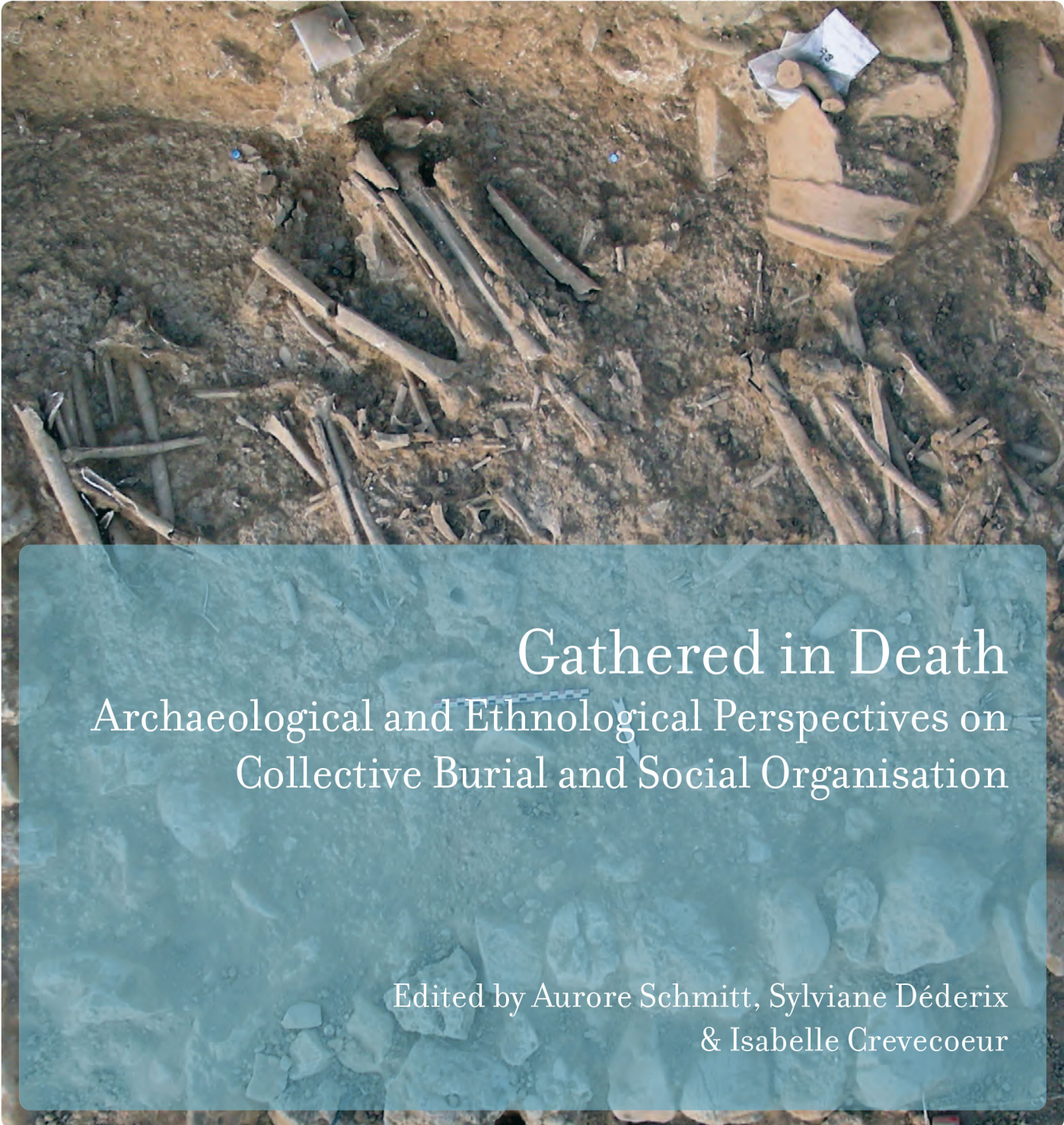
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Gathered in Death

Archaeological and Ethnological Perspectives on
Collective Burial and Social Organisation

Edited by Aurore Schmitt, Sylviane Déderix
& Isabelle Crevecoeur

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Contents

Gathered to their Fathers...	17
<i>Jan Driessen</i>	
1. Introduction	21
<i>Towards a Theoretical and Methodological Framework for the Study of Collective Burial Practices</i>	
<i>Sylviane Déderix</i>	
<i>Aurore Schmitt</i>	
<i>Isabelle Crevecoeur</i>	
2. Collective and Single Burial in Madagascar	41
<i>Mike Parker Pearson</i>	
<i>Denis Regnier</i>	
3. Houses for Bones	63
<i>Collective Disposal of the Dead among the Uut Danum of Borneo</i>	
<i>Pascal Couderc</i>	
4. Current Collective Graves in the Austronesian World	85
<i>A few Remarks about Sumba and Sulawesi (Indonesia)</i>	
<i>Christian Jeunesse</i>	
<i>Anthony Denaire</i>	
5. Who is Who in the Grave?	107
<i>A Cross-Cultural Approach</i>	
<i>Estella Weiss-Krejci</i>	
6. The Social Implications of Death in Prehistoric Malta	125
<i>Caroline Malone</i>	
<i>Rowan McLaughlin</i>	
<i>Bernardette Mercieca-Spiteri</i>	
<i>Eoin Parkinson</i>	
<i>Ronika Power</i>	
<i>Jay Stock</i>	
<i>Simon Stoddart</i>	
<i>Jess Thompson</i>	
7. 101 Ways of Creating Collective Burials	141
<i>The Exceptional Cretan Tombs in the Context of the 3rd Millennium BC Mediterranean</i>	
<i>Borja Legarra Herrero</i>	
8. Counting Individuals, Reconstructing Groups	159
<i>A Critical Review of Bioarchaeological Data from Middle Helladic and Mycenaean Graves</i>	
<i>Nikolas Papadimitriou</i>	
9. The Value of Recent Biochemical Analysis for Collective Burial Sites	189
<i>Mélie Le Roy</i>	
10. What Defines a Collective Grave?	195
<i>Archaeological and Ethnological Perspectives on Collective Burial Practices</i>	
<i>Aurore Schmitt</i>	
<i>Sylviane Déderix</i>	

2. Collective and Single Burial in Madagascar

Mike Parker Pearson
Denis Regnier¹

Introduction

Madagascar is sometimes referred to as the ‘Island of the Ancestors’ because of the proliferation of elaborate mortuary practices and ancestor beliefs amongst its people (Mack 1986). As the fourth largest island in the world, its population of over 20 million inhabits tropical and sub-tropical environments that range from rainforest to semi-arid desert. Although Madagascar was settled only in the last two or three millennia, it has a rich mix of ethnicities deriving from Austronesian and African ancestries, with later additions principally from Arabia, South and East Asia, and Europe (see Radimilahy & Crossland 2015 for a recent overview of archaeological research). The 18 ethnic groups officially recognised by the Malagasy state are augmented by other, smaller ethnicities. Each has been associated with a particular region and with a distinct set of burial practices (Decary 1962), but large-scale internal migration in the past century has blurred and altered many of these neat designations within what is a complex and changing situation.

During the second half of the 20th century, Malagasy funerary practices attracted widespread interest from social anthropologists. Raymond Decary’s (1962) island-wide review was followed by regional case studies that devoted much attention to funerary practices, notably those of Maurice Bloch (1971) amongst the Merina, Richard Huntington (1973; 1988) among the Bara, Conrad Kottak (1980) among the Betsileo, Lotte Schomerus-Gernböck (1981) among the Mahafaly, Gillian Feeley-Harnik (1991) among the Sakalava, Rita Astuti (1995) among the Vezo and Georges Heurtebize (1986; 1997) among the Tandroy. More recent work includes Karen Middleton’s (1997) study of one of the smaller ethnicities, the Karembola, located between the lands of the Mahafaly and the Tandroy in Southern Madagascar. John Mack’s (1986) overview still forms a valuable guide and introduction to the variety of Malagasy funerary practices.

The remarkable variability of contemporary mortuary practices across Madagascar includes many instances of collective and single inhumation. Cremation is becoming popular among urban populations but is a recent introduction; inhumation, whether single or collective, is the traditional mode of burial. There are other shared traditional themes amongst the variability. Throughout Madagascar, mortuary rites are times of cattle sacrifice for feasts for the mourners. Strong concepts of pollution are considered to surround death and the dead, and separation of the dead from the living, as well as the regeneration of life after death (Bloch & Parry 1982) are key aspects of these rites.

1. Regional variations: from the highlands to the south coast

A useful way of examining differences between collective and single burial, to understand why each of these practices might be favoured in certain regional socio-economic contexts rather than others, is to compare neighbouring regions where collective and single burial are found. This is developed in the second half of this paper with studies from Southern Madagascar of collective rites among the rice-cultivating Betsileo and of single rites among the cattle-

¹ Mike Parker Pearson (Professor of Later British Prehistory at UCL Institute of Archaeology) first carried out fieldwork in Madagascar in 1989, focusing on Androy and the extreme south in 1991-2003, funded by the British Academy, the National Geographic Society, the Natural Environment Research Council, the Society of Antiquaries, the British Institute in Eastern Africa and the Nuffield Foundation. Denis Regnier (Lecturer at the University of French Polynesia) carried out fieldwork in the district of Ambalavao (extreme south of Betsileo country) for 25 months in 2008-2010, with subsequent field visits between 2012 and 2015, funded by the London School of Economics, the University of London, the Wenner-Gren Foundation and the European Research Council. During the writing of this paper, Denis Regnier benefited from a Postdoctoral Fellowship of the *Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique* (F.R.S.-FNRS) at the *Université Libre de Bruxelles*.

pastoralist Tandroy (also known by the more traditional name of Antandroy). By way of introducing these opposed case studies, it is useful to review them within their wider geographical context (**Fig. 2.1**). They can be placed along a cultural 'gradient' that broadly runs from collective rites in the central highlands to the north to individualising rites in the south and south-west coastal lands. This gradient also maps onto one that runs from rice cultivation in the central highlands and the east coast to cattle pastoralism in the extreme south and south-west of Madagascar.

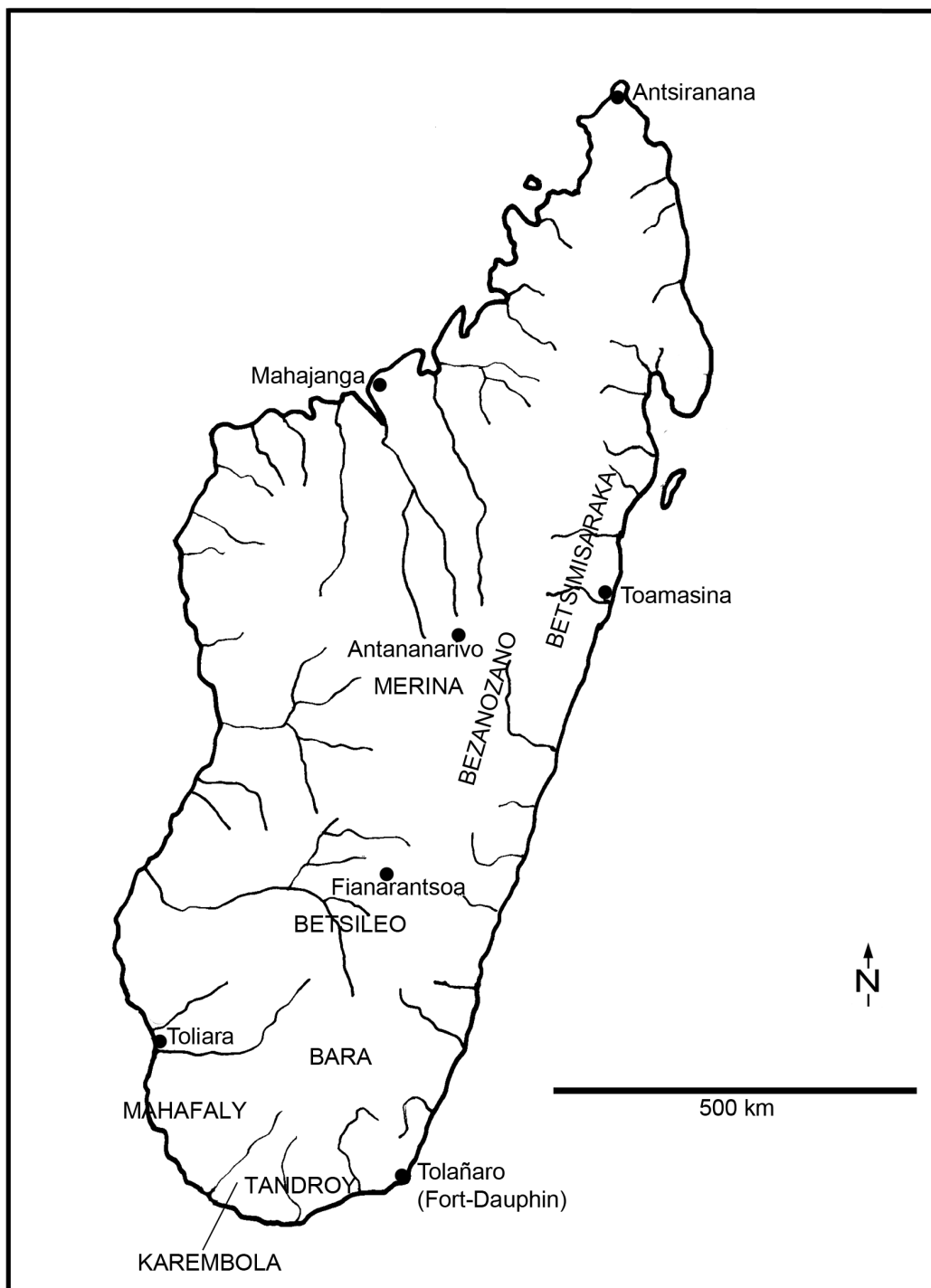


FIG. 2.1 MADAGASCAR, SHOWING THE TRADITIONAL REGIONS ASSOCIATED WITH THE ETHNIC GROUPS MENTIONED IN THE TEXT (M. PARKER PEARSON)

1.1. Imerina

Imerina is the region where Antananarivo, the capital, is located. The people of this region are traditionally the Merina, subjects of an early state that formed in the 18th century (Campbell 2005). Although single burial has become popular during the 19th-20th century, particularly with the influence of Christianity, many adhere to the traditional practice of multiple burial in collective tombs built of stone and mortar. The remains of the dead, wrapped in shrouds and mats, receive secondary burial rites during festivities known as *famadihana* – when corpses are removed from the tomb and danced around the village, rewrapped and returned to the tomb amid feasting and celebration (Bloch 1971; Graeber 1995). This ‘turning of the bones’ may take place within 3 to 15 years of the death of the most recent occupant of the tomb. The dead still retain their individuality at these events, as individual corpses are remembered, though as time passes once-wrapped corpses turn to bone and eventually lose their identity, becoming disarticulated and forgotten – which commentators sometimes wrongly describe as turning to ‘dust’. Their remains may become mingled with more recent dead or incorporated into a multiple *razambe*, i.e. ‘great ancestor’ (Larson 2001: 124-125). Ancestral remains are also transferred from old tombs into new ones.

Early written accounts document secondary rites at least as early as the 18th century, but Larson has argued that there may have been more emphasis on primary burial (in which the corpse remained undisturbed in the tomb) until the mid-19th century when secondary treatment became more popular, only becoming standardised as *famadihana* during the late 19th century (Larson 2001). Less is known about the changing balance between single and collective burial over the long term. Kings of Imerina were traditionally buried singly as were some of their courtly retainers; some of the largest tombs around Antananarivo today are those of singly buried politicians of the late 19th and 20th centuries (**Fig. 2.2**). The view that the Austronesian-derived Malagasy brought collective burial with their migration from South-East Asia – anthropologically hypothesised rather than archaeologically demonstrated – has led scholars to infer that this practice was always present and dominant in highland Madagascar (Metcalf & Huntington 1991: 108-109).



FIG. 2.2 THE TOMB OF RALAMBO (1575-1610), KING OF IMERINA. HE AND OTHER MEMBERS OF ROYALTY WERE BURIED SINGLY IN CONTRAST TO THE DOMINANT TRADITION OF COLLECTIVE BURIAL AMONGST THE MERINA (M. PARKER PEARSON)

1.2. Betsimisaraka

Collective burial with secondary rites is found widely in the Madagascar highlands and also eastwards to the lowland tropical coast amongst groups such as the Bezanozano in the highlands and the Betsimisaraka along the coast. Amongst Betsimisaraka communities, single burial in an earth grave or simply leaving the coffin on the ground may be followed by exhumation of the bones, collectively stored in large ossuary-like wooden coffins. Tombs are often arranged in pairs, with men's bones kept in one container and women's in another. In the Foulpointe region of Betsimisaraka, a slightly different form of collective burial – without secondary rites – is also found (Parker Pearson 2006: 188-189). The corpse is buried in a large wood-lined trench covered with logs; the next body is added by moving the logs aside. These collective burials in log-covered trenches are covered by roofed wooden structures which may also cover single burials in wood coffins alongside, in a sharing of the two rites.

The use of wood for Betsimisaraka tombs is unusual in Madagascar where stone is otherwise preferred as a medium of permanence that represents and even embodies the ancestors (Parker Pearson & Ramilisonina 1998). The reason for this aberration is quite simply that stone is scarce on this lowland coastal plain; the problem is solved by selecting wood from harder species of tree to stand in for stone. Where stone does occur in this region, particularly as large granite boulders, tombs may be made in their basal crevices. New tomb styles now include roofed buildings made of imported stones and cement.

1.3. Betsileo

The people known today as the Betsileo number over two million and occupy a large territory in the southern highlands of Madagascar, south of Imerina. The name 'Betsileo' for the people living in the southern highlands is recent and, although it might have been already in use a bit earlier (Crossland 2014: 296, n. 79), it is only after the conquests of Merina kings in the early 19th century that it became widespread. Until then, this region comprised several petty kingdoms.

Most scholars draw a distinction between the north and the south of Betsileo country because of their different histories. Northern Betsileo includes the regions of Manandriana, Ambositra and Fisakana, which are located north of the Matsiatra river. This area was once part of the sixth division of Imerina before it was later annexed to the Betsileo province and administrated by the Merina governor of Fianarantsoa. Except for the region of Manandriana, which has a long history, the area now called Northern Betsileo became densely populated and politically organised only under Merina rule in the 19th century (Kottak 1980: 304-305; Freeman 2001). As a result, its inhabitants are something of a mix between Merina and Betsileo.

The region south of the Matsiatra River, by contrast, had an important political and economic history long before Merina annexation. For this reason, the region is sometimes called in the literature the 'historical' Betsileo. Yet, although the Betsileo as an ethnic group is by and large an invention of Merina administration that was subsequently taken on by French colonial rulers, today all the people from the northern and the southern parts of the territory call themselves Betsileo. Nonetheless, the people who live in the extreme south of the Betsileo region (and who will be the focus of the case study below) acknowledge that their *fombandrazana* ('ancestral customs') differ much from the Northern Betsileo. This is particularly true of burial practices, secondary rites and tomb architecture. Northern Betsileo tombs, for example, feature nicely carved wooden posts called *teza* (Gueunier 1974) that are rare in the South (Dubois 1938: 676). The Northern Betsileo perform a *famadihana* ceremony like the Merina, but many of the Southern Betsileo, by contrast, tend to regard it as a 'foreign' custom and cling to their own funerary ceremonies, to which we will come back.

Today, the majority of Southern Betsileo are rice-growing peasants living in villages and hamlets in the vicinity of their fields. People also raise cattle (*omby*) but they do so in a smaller proportion than their southern neighbours, the pastoral Bara. Yet, in the fairly recent past, cattle raising was more important since rice cultivation did not occupy the central economic role that it now has in Southern Betsileo. The local economy shifted to intensive rice-growing agriculture under Merina rule during the 19th century, not least because the Merina directly encouraged rice cultivation (Regnier 2012: 49-50).

1.4. Bara

The Bara live in the region south of the Betsileo but north of Androy, the region of the Tandroy. Like the Betsileo they cultivate rice but they also raise large herds of cattle. Their marriage practices are strongly endogamous, with preference for marrying first or second cousins (Huntington 1988: 78). The dead are buried in caves, rock shelters and the overhangs of cliff faces and large boulders. The corpse is either buried under a stone cairn in the bush (Acquier 1997: 144) or brought in a coffin to a cave. In both cases it remains as a single burial until the flesh has decayed. The bones are then removed and cleaned, to be placed in a collective coffin within a cave. These larger wooden coffins are often decorated. One or more of these contain the remains of the males of the patriline, placed in the northern part of the cave, and the other(s), arranged to the south, contain the bones of women and young children (Huntington 1973; 1988: 28-46).

In the northern part of Bara country, where Richard Huntington (1973; 1988) carried out his research, Bara funerary practices resemble those of Betsileo interment within collective tombs. In the southern part they are sometimes more similar to Tandroy burials within single free-standing stone-built tombs.

1.5. Tandroy, Mahafaly, Karembola & Southern Bara

Historically, Tandroy have occasionally used rock shelters for burial since at least the 18th century (Parker Pearson 2010: 483) but there is evidence that single graves, placed either alone or in flat cemeteries, date from the 11th-15th centuries onwards throughout Androy (Parker Pearson 2010: 476-481). Although the name of the Antandroy was not recorded until the early 18th century, their pastoralist way of life in the semi-arid south can be traced back at least 700 years. It is thus likely that single burial has always been the dominant funerary mode in this region.

Funerary practices in the early 18th century are recorded as consisting of single burials inside rectangular wooden palisades, a practice continued today (Parker Pearson & Godden 2002). This tradition has been overshadowed by the building of large rectangular stone tombs built over the grave pit or over the coffin placed on the ground. This monumental tomb tradition started in the mid-19th century and spread throughout the extreme south of Madagascar, not only among Tandroy but also among their western neighbours, the Karembola (Middleton 1997) and the Mahafaly (Schomerus-Gernböck 1991), both principally cattle pastoralist societies like the Tandroy.

Many aspects of Tandroy life, including funerary practices, are consciously perceived as 'oppositional' to the dominant Malagasy culture of the central highlands. They consider non-Tandroy to be *vazaha gasy* ('foreign Malagasy') and assert their distinctive identity through dialect, domestic architecture, cuisine and economy as well as through their distinctive tombs and extravagant mortuary rites.

2. Southern Betsileo collective and individual burial practices – a case study

Like their Merina, Zafimaniry, Tanala and Bara neighbours, the Betsileo usually place their dead in collective tombs, since they hold that after death people must be reunited with their ancestors and placed with them in a *tranon'ny maty* ('house of the dead') during elaborate mortuary rituals (Kus & Raharijaona 1990: 26; Raharijaona & Kus 2001). Under certain circumstances, however, the Betsileo also bury their dead in individual graves, either temporarily or definitively. The choice of a person's burial mode and place is, in any case, so important that it must always be made by family heads and negotiated between the descent groups to which the deceased belongs.

2.1. Types of collective tombs

Betsileo *fasandrazana* ('ancestral tombs') can take different forms. The missionary and lifelong ethnographer of the Betsileo, Henri Dubois (1938: 667), made a useful distinction between two basic types: collective tombs

built in rock crevices, and graves dug in the earth. The first type, called *vazoho*, takes advantage of the natural crevices found abundantly in the rocky landscape of the Southern Malagasy highlands. Ancient *vazoho* tombs can still be spotted today on the cliffs that sometimes overhang Betsileo valleys. Crevices are closed by a wall of piled stones. The cattle bucrania placed on this wall immediately after a burial or funerary ceremony served to signpost the existence of an ancestral tomb as much as to indicate the wealth and prestige of the family. A steep and almost inaccessible cliff seems to have been the preferred burial site of nobles (*hova*), as documented by the famous account of the burial of Rajoakarivony, prince of Isandra, whose inhumation in an individual tomb required a great amount of time and energy (Sibree 1898; Dubois 1938: 703-715; Razafintsalama 1983; Rahamefy 1997). *Vazoho* tombs were also used for collective burial and did not constitute a privilege of the nobility since *olompotsy* ('commoners') built them in the extreme south of Betsileo country (Dubois 1938: 668) (Fig. 2.3).



FIG. 2.3 AN ANCIENT VAZOHÔ TOMB BUILT IN A CLIFF CREVICE. ITS RELATIVE ACCESSIBILITY MAKES IT LIKELY THAT THE FAMILY WAS OF OLOMPOTSY ('COMMONER') RATHER THAN HOVA ('NOBLE') STATUS (D. REGNIER)

Fasantany ('earth tombs') are another kind of Betsileo tomb where the dead are placed in a cavity a few metres under the ground. This is achieved by digging a trench steadily downwards to an adequate depth. A rectangular vault with a roof-like ceiling is then carved out in the earth. The depth and size of the vault can vary greatly, depending on whether the tomb is for ordinary or high-status families. The vault of noble *fasantany* could be five metres long and three metres high (Dubois 1938: 672). However, there is never more than one funerary chamber since the tomb is supposed to be analogous to the traditional single-room Betsileo house. Most ordinary tomb vaults only contain a small shelf in the north-east corner, reminiscent of the shelf found at the same location in Betsileo houses (Regnier 2014a), and sometimes stones that delimit the *farafara* ('beds')

for the dead. Those of nobles may contain columns sustaining large stone slabs that form the ceiling of the vault and other stone slabs that form a number of beds along the walls.

The dead are placed either on these stone beds or directly on the ground, side by side first and, when no space is left, piled upon each other. It seems to be a commonly accepted rule today among the Southern Betsileo that the dead of opposite sex should not be placed on the same bed because of the incest taboo (Regnier 2014b), but this could be a recent development since Dubois (1938: 672) reports that, on the contrary, the pile of dead on each bed was a mix of both sexes, with the eldest ancestor of the branch placed at the top. After a burial, the vault is closed with a large flat stone and the trench is refilled with earth, which will thus have to be removed again at the next opening of the tomb. The location of the vault is indicated by a construction called *aloalo* (not to be confused with the eponymous wooden posts found among the Mahafaly, in the south of Madagascar) and made of stones piled on the ground to form a parallelepiped-like structure above the underground cavity (Fig. 2.4). The size of the *aloalo* can again vary enormously depending on the status of the family. On one side of the *aloalo*, stones are placed along a line that indicates where the trench was dug and thus where the entrance to the tomb is to be found (Fig. 2.5).

When a *fasantany* is emptied, typically after transfer of the dead into a new tomb, the *aloalo* is usually left as a memorial. This is particularly important for local families because it provides support for their historical claims to land. The presence of ancestral tombs in a region is, indeed, the best evidence that a family belongs to the local *tompontany* ('masters of the land') and that the place is their *tanindrazana* ('ancestral land') (Regnier 2017) (Figs 2.6-2.7). In order to indicate that a collective tomb is empty and abandoned, and perhaps also as a means of ritual precaution against death, the Southern Betsileo leave the trench open and plant a tree in it that blocks the entrance of the vault.



FIG. 2.4 A *FASANTANY* ('EARTH TOMB') IN THE HILLY LANDSCAPE OF THE EXTREME SOUTH OF BETSILEO COUNTRY. THE STRUCTURE MADE OF PILED STONES (*ALOALO*) IS LOCATED ABOVE THE SUBTERRANEAN VAULT IN WHICH THE DEAD ARE PLACED (D. REGNIER)

2. Collective and Single Burial in Madagascar



FIG. 2.5 ANOTHER VIEW OF THE *FASANTANY* SHOWN IN **FIG. 2.4**. THE LINE OF STONES AT THE FOREFRONT INDICATES WHERE TO DIG THE TRENCH TO REACH THE ENTRANCE OF THE VAULT (D. REGNIER)



FIG. 2.6 A *FASANTANY* (EXTREME RIGHT OF THE PICTURE) IN THE CLOSE PERIPHERY OF A VILLAGE. THIS PICTURE ILLUSTRATES THE TYPICAL SOUTHERN BETSILEO NEXUS OF A KIN-BASED HAMLET, IRRIGATED RICE FIELDS, A STONE-BUILT *VALAN'OMBY* ('CATTLE PEN') PARTIALLY DUG INTO THE GROUND AND AN ANCESTRAL TOMB (D. REGNIER)

In addition to the two types already identified by Dubois, a third type of Southern Betsileo tomb, arguably an intermediary type between *vazoho* and *fasantany*, seems to be more common today than it used to be in the past. These tombs are called *fasa vodivato*, literally ‘bottom-of-a-stone tombs’. The builders of such tombs make use of the many boulders present in the local landscape (Fig. 2.8). Unlike cliffs, boulders rarely provide crevices that can be enlarged to form a vault but they can be opportunistically used to make the ‘ceiling’ and part of the ‘walls’ of a collective tomb (Fig. 2.9). A *fasa vodivato* thus typically requires both digging the earth beneath the boulder and removing parts of the rock to fit a vault (Fig. 2.10).

According to oral accounts, most of the tombs built until the 19th century in the extreme south of the Betsileo region were *fasantany*, although some noble families and wealthy commoners had *vazoho* in cliffs. At some point, however, people’s preferences shifted from *fasantany* to *vodivato*. When asked about the reasons for this change, people explained that most *vodivato* tombs are located away from the villages, under a boulder and hidden in the mountains, and so thieves cannot find them easily. During the 19th century, under *pax Merina* and later French colonisation, the level of insecurity decreased, perhaps accounting for this change in tomb architecture. At that time, the Southern Betsileo also significantly changed their settlement patterns, moving from fortified villages on hilltops to hamlets close to the rice fields in the valley bottoms (Regnier 2012: 49-50).

In the past, one of the greatest fears of Southern Betsileo groups was that thieves could open their tombs at night and steal the *lamba mena*, the precious silk cloth that was used to wrap the dead. During at least the last two centuries, the Southern Betsileo region was indeed reputed for producing expensive *lamba mena* that made prestigious burial shrouds (see an example in Mack 1986: 73). This fear of tomb robbers may provide an explanation for the Southern Betsileo practice of burying the dead in inaccessible places, either deep in the ground (*fasantany*) or high on a cliff (*vazoho*). Prestige associated with tomb-building practices thus consisted in a family’s capacity to build tombs that were almost inviolable by common means.

The vaults of *Vodivato* are more easily accessible than those of *vazoho* or *fasantany* but the use of concrete, introduced during the 20th century, significantly improved their degree of inviolability – in the past, the stone walls were cemented with a mix of earth and cattle dung and it was easy to remove stones to break into the vault. Even though the traditional *lamba mena* is today most frequently replaced by a less valuable cotton cloth imported from Asia, fear of tomb violation remains omnipresent among the Southern Betsileo. People are now anxious that *mpangalatra taolana* (‘bone thieves’) might open the tombs to steal the ancestors’ bones, since a persistent rumour has it that the *vazaha* (‘foreigners’) buy them at high price to make powerful medicine (Freeman 2004).

Other local explanations for the shift from *fasantany* to *vodivato* tombs stress that the ancestors’ bones are drier and cleaner in *vodivato* than in earth tombs, and that *vodivato* tombs are easier to build, because in the most rocky places good spots with adequate boulders are easy to find, whereas it is not easy to dig the earth to any great depth. During the 20th century, the *hova* (‘nobles’) increasingly built *vodivato* tombs under boulders, instead of *vazoho* in cliffs. The progressive impoverishment of the Southern Betsileo rural nobility after the 1896 abolition of slavery (Regnier 2014a) explains this change in their burial practices. Whereas, in the pre-colonial era, nobles owned numerous *andevo* (‘slaves’) who carried out the perilous operations of tomb-building and burial on a high cliff, the descendants of these nobles now often find these operations too difficult and too costly.

2. Collective and Single Burial in Madagascar



FIG. 2.7 A CLOSER VIEW OF THE *FASANTANY* SHOWN IN FIG. 2.6. THE BUCRANIA OF SLAUGHTERED CATTLE AND THE WOODEN STRETCHER THAT SERVED TO TRANSPORT THE DEAD ARE PLACED ON THE TOP OF THE *ALOALO* AFTER EACH FUNERAL (D. REGNIER)



FIG. 2.8 *FASA VODIVATO* ('BOTTOM-OF-A-STONE TOMB') BUILT WITH STONES AND CONCRETE UNDER A BOULDER, AND PAINTED WITH BRIGHT COLOURS (D. REGNIER)



FIG. 2.9 *VODIVATO* TOMBS MAKE OPPORTUNISTIC USE OF BOULDERS IN THE LOCAL LANDSCAPE. THE GROWTH OF THE VEGETATION AROUND THIS TOMB SUGGESTS THAT IT HAS NOT BEEN OPENED RECENTLY (D. REGNIER)



FIG. 2.10 A GROUP OF MEN ARE REPLACING THE DOOR OF A *VODIVATO* TOMB AFTER A BURIAL (D. REGNIER)

2.2. Social organisation and the choice of the tomb

The basic units of Southern Betsileo social organisation are the tomb-centred, named local descent groups (called '*foko*' or '*firazanana*'). Membership of these groups is cognatic, optative and non-exclusive, but shows a strong patrilineal bias since most people prefer patrilocal post-marital residence and they are most often buried in their father's tomb than in others (Kottak 1980), even though they have the right to be buried in any of the tombs of the descent groups to which they belong. Marriage rules entail both endogamous and exogamous principles. The Southern Betsileo have a strong preference for marrying persons of equal rank (Regnier 2012: 196-197), where rank is defined by ancestry and a rule of hypodescent (Regnier 2014b; 2015b). In the past, this preference seems to have often led people to marry members of their own descent groups. At the same time, however, the Southern Betsileo strongly dislike marrying close cousins (Kottak 1980: 201). Unlike the Merina, they do not practice *lova tsy mifindra* marriages (*i.e.* marriages arranged between close cousins in order to keep the land within the family). The closest marriage partners that they usually find acceptable are fourth cousins, *i.e.* cousins who share a common great-great-great-grandparent, although if this common ancestor is a woman their descent from the same *tampo* ('womb') might still be considered as an obstacle. In order to allow the union of two partners who are considered to be too close kin, however, the Southern Betsileo can perform a ritual with cattle sacrifice that 'removes' the kinship link between the two persons and thus lifts the incest taboo.

One of the problems generated by the bilateral kinship system of the Southern Betsileo is what can be called the problem of the 'ownership of the dead': which side will take the corpse – that of the deceased's father or mother? Who will become the *tompom-paty* (literally, the 'master' and 'owner' of the corpse) – the head of the paternal or the maternal descent line? In some Malagasy groups, there are rules prescribing which side will receive the dead. Among the coastal Vezo (Astuti 1995), for example, if the father has done the ritual of *oron'anake* (an offering to the ancestors of the mother), the child will be buried in the father's tomb. In this case, it is the father's patrilineal family elder who becomes the 'owner of the dead' (*tompom-paty*) and will organise the funeral. A child whose father has not done the ritual of *oron'anake* will be, on the contrary, buried in its mother's father's tomb. Even so, there are often disputes over the dead and their place of burial (Astuti 1995: 92-98). Beaujard (1983: 446-456) also describes *ady faty* ('fights over the dead') among the Tanala, who are close neighbours of the Betsileo. Such conflicts are likely to arise among the Tanala, the Vezo, the Betsileo and other Malagasy groups precisely because of the great emotional importance attached to both the flexibility of bilateral kinship during life and placement in an ancestral tomb after death.

In the Southern Betsileo region, there is no such ritual as among the Vezo to determine which side has the right to claim the deceased. And, although a patrilineal bias exists, it is not as strong as among the Northern Bara, the neighbours of the Southern Betsileo, where adults are always buried in their fathers' tombs, even though deceased young children are sometimes given out by the father's family to the mother's family (Huntington 1973: 72-73). In consequence, Northern Bara adults know in which tomb they are going to be buried. The Southern Betsileo, in contrast, are always aware of a relatively large number of tombs within which they might be buried, without knowing with certainty which one it will be. One of our informants, for example, has 'close links' with nine tombs, which consist of the eight tombs where his eight great grandparents were buried as well as a new tomb built by his maternal grandfather. Of these nine tombs, seven are located close to the village where he lives. When asked where he thought he would be buried, he responded that only five of the nine tombs were really plausible. He then gave his order of preference, but stressed that he could not know in advance where his corpse would reside. Although this relative indeterminacy of people's place of burial could potentially lead to serious disputes when someone dies, this is, in fact, rarely the case. How do people, then, decide which local descent group will 'own' the dead in its tomb?

Concerns about practicality, financial costs and the preferences of the deceased may influence negotiation but, above all, family elders try to keep good relations with their affines. This means that, after the two sides have expressed their wish to bury the dead in their tombs and to organise the funeral, one side will eventually accept to give up and leave the ownership of the dead to the other. When this negotiation is over, another similar negotiation may also take place at a higher level in the genealogy, between local descent groups of father's father and father's mother, or between those of mother's father and mother's mother. A similar practice of 'sharing the dead' is also found among the Tanala (Beaujard 1983: 440-441). People consider it important that a kind of balance should be maintained and that each group should have a share of the dead children of a married couple.

2.3. Individual burials, repatriation and *vadipaïsa*

Different circumstances may lead the Southern Betsileo to bury their dead in individual graves, either definitively or temporarily. Some people, for example, can be banned during their lifetime from the tomb groups to which they belong because they have misbehaved. Serious misbehaviour includes, for example, marrying a slave descendant. Unions of this kind are strictly forbidden for commoner descendants, who think that such a mismatch risks polluting their ancestral tombs because former slaves and their descendants are considered to be deeply unclean (Regnier 2014b; 2015b; Regnier & Somda in press). To be banned from the ancestral tomb is arguably the most serious social sanction for the Southern Betsileo. In such cases, families usually organise funerals for the person but bury the corpse outside the ancestral tomb, in an individual grave, with no hope of being reunited with the ancestors unless their descendants build a new tomb and transfer the ‘banned dead’ to it.

Another case of individual burial applies to people who have died from a contagious illness such as plague or leprosy. In this case, the dead might be repatriated to an ancestral tomb after some time, when their bones are considered to be ‘dry’ and provided that the risk of contagion for both the living and the ancestors is deemed to have disappeared. Babies and very young infants (usually up to one year or so) cannot be buried in the ancestral tomb since it is believed that they are not yet proper persons. They are called *zaza rano* (‘water children’) and are buried in humid soil close to the rice fields, so that their bodies can quickly decay and disappear.

One of the most frequent cases of temporary burial occurs when people cannot easily be brought back to an ancestral village where they have a collective tomb. There are usually two reasons for such a situation. Either the repatriation is considered impossible due to time constraints, for example because the place of death is very remote, or because the family does not have the financial means for the repatriation of the dead and/or the organisation of the funeral. In both cases, kinsmen or the local village council (*fokonolona*) when no relative is present, inhumate the dead individually in a coffin. More rarely, the coffin is placed in the collective tomb of a local acquaintance, in which case the dead is considered to be a *vahiny* (‘guest’) in the tomb. A specific type of funeral called *vokapaty* is then organised later on in the absence of the corpse – thus without burial – at the dead person’s village. Only one or more years later will kinsmen exhume the ‘dried’ bones from the individual grave, place them in a special wooden coffin small enough to be easily transported, repatriate them to the ancestral village and bury them in the collective tomb, accompanied by several days of feasting. Individual burials are crucially important for the Betsileo who have migrated to other regions of Madagascar but still bury their dead in Betsileo country (Regnier 2017) (**Fig. 2.11**).

The dead of the Southern Betsileo also circulate from tomb to tomb when old tombs are replaced by new ones or when a branch of a descent group decides to build their own ancestral tomb. In the first case, the transfer concerns all of the dead; in the second case, only a few dead are taken out from the tomb. Both cases are called *vadipaïsa* and they are the greatest funerary ceremonies in the extreme Southern Betsileo highlands.

The replacement of one tomb by another usually occurs when the old tomb is in a very dilapidated state or cannot accommodate more dead because it is full. Such a *vadipaïsa* does not pose any particular problems for the family, except that all the adult group members have to contribute to the building of the tomb if they want to be allowed to be buried in it. The construction of a new tomb by a branch of descendants, however, is more problematic, as it entails the definitive fission of the tomb group (*i.e.* the descendants of the great ancestor of the tomb) and, for this reason, it is usually difficult to initiate (see Regnier 2017). A branch may want to build a new tomb for a variety of reasons, including family disputes, migration or economic achievement (**Fig. 2.12**). When the new tomb is built, the general rule is that only the descendants of the most remote ancestor in the tomb can be buried in it. It is therefore necessary, for those who construct the new tomb, to transfer as many dead as possible from the generations above them – parents, grandparents, *etc.* – so that the new tomb becomes properly a *fasandrazana* (‘ancestral tomb’). Since the bones of these ancestors have to be taken out from different tombs, this requires the permission of each *tompompasana* (‘master of the tomb’), which can be sometimes difficult to obtain. A further problem is that the ancestors’ bones are not always distinguishable from one another in the tomb – the dead often being piled on each other – in which case their transfer is impossible.

2. Collective and Single Burial in Madagascar



FIG. 2.11 TEMPORARY INHUMATION OF A WOMAN WHO HAD DIED AWAY FROM HER BETSILEO HOMETOWN IN 2009. HER FAMILY HELD A CHRISTIAN FUNERARY CEREMONY AND USED BRICKS AND CONCRETE FOR HER GRAVE. TEMPORARY BURIALS, HOWEVER, MAY TAKE A MUCH BARER FORM: THE DEAD CAN BE BURIED IN THE EARTH WITH LITTLE CEREMONY AND THE PIT COVERED WITH STONES COLLECTED IN THE SURROUNDINGS. THE DECEASED WOMAN'S BONES WERE EXHUMED FOUR YEARS LATER, IN 2013, AND REPATRIATED TO AN ANCESTRAL TOMB IN THE REGION OF AMBALAVAO (D. REGNIER)



FIG. 2.12 GATHERING AT THE OCCASION OF A VADIPAISA IN 2009. THE BUILDING OF THE NEW TOMB HAD BEEN INITIATED BY A MAN WHO HAD MADE MUCH PROFIT IN THE CATTLE TRADE. THE TRANSFER OF ANCESTORS INTO THE NEW TOMB WAS CELEBRATED DURING SEVERAL DAYS OF FEASTING (D. REGNIER)

3. Tandroy individual burial practices – a case study

The Tandroy are patrilineal, patrilocal and polygamous cattle pastoralists with a reputation for toughness, plain-speaking and aggression. Unlike their neighbours, the Bara, they are exogamous, preferring to marry not even distant cousins but partners outside the lineage (*famasora*) and clan. Clans are ranked hierarchically, with a royal clan (Andriamañare) at the top of this hierarchy and descendants of slaves at the bottom. Tandroy traditionally live in small, rectangular wooden or mud-walled houses arranged by seniority within villages or hamlets (Acquier 1997: 128-129). Tandroy tombs are famous for their unusually large size, built of stone and set with impressive standing stones. Visitors have often marvelled at the contrast between these enormous tombs built for one deceased individual and the tiny houses inhabited by entire families (Fig. 2.13).

Tandroy mortuary practices have fascinated travellers and ethnographers for over 300 years, providing a remarkable sequence of European written accounts (e.g. Drury 1729; Defoort 1913; Decary 1930; 1933; Frère 1958; Guérin 1978; Heurtebize 1986; 1997) that can be compared against oral history (Heurtebize 1986) and the archaeological and material record (Parker Pearson 1999a; 2010). Whilst tombs in the highlands are always referred to as ‘houses’ (*trano*), among the Tandroy they are ‘stone pens’ (*valavato*). These are large rectangular vertical-walled, flat-topped monuments, sometimes with a small concrete house-like or coffin-like situated on top in the centre of the tomb. This metaphorical description presumably derives from the fact that their size and shape are broadly analogous to the wooden-fenced cattle pens within each settlement, a similarity strengthened by the placing of cattle bucrania on top of the tomb.



FIG. 2.13 THE LARGE STONE TOMB OF FITOHISA (RE-NAMED MANDIKARIVO AFTER HIS DEATH) AT TSIOMBE, ANDROY. HIS TOMB TOOK FOUR YEARS TO BUILD AND IS COVERED WITH THE BUCRANIA OF 180 CATTLE (M. PARKER PEARSON)

There are many standard features of a Tandroy funeral. The corpse resides in the house before burial, attended by close kin and by a *tsimahaivelo* ('he who does not know the living/life'), a 'funerary priest' who has a relationship of indebtedness to the host family. The body may stay there for weeks or even months as preparations are made for the funeral, which may attract hundreds and even thousands of people. On the day of the burial, the coffin is carried on a bullock-cart or by hand to the place of burial, generally in the 'wilderness', away from the places of the living. Once the deceased is in the ground, the house is burned down. Everyone aspires to a monumental stone tomb, which is built in the months and years after burial, but, particularly in the stone-less regions, many follow the more ancient practice of burial in traditional cemeteries in sacred forests (Ramilisonina 2003) within rectangular palisades of

wooden stakes. For those able to afford a stone tomb – normally built out in the open – the deceased is buried below ground or on the ground surface and then covered by the stone cairn. In the following months, four walls are built around the cairn. In the case of a male burial, the tomb is given a pair of standing stones – *vatolahy* or ‘man stone’ – at the front (east) and rear (west). Cemeteries of stone tombs develop in south-north lines, with men’s tombs in the east and lines of women’s tombs to the west of them.

Tandroy tombs face east – the direction of the ancestors – whilst seniority runs south-north (the opposite to the north-south axis of seniority followed elsewhere in Madagascar). The auspicious direction of the east is also employed to mark gender difference, in that men are buried to the east of women, either in separate tombs or, in cases where deceased wives and female dependents are buried within a man’s tomb, as secondary insertions into the already-built structure. This use of directionality to distinguish the sexes, combined with women not being marked by standing stones, is further enhanced by the fact that women’s tombs are generally smaller than those of men and tend to have fewer cattle bucrania. Once built, tombs are never visited except for burial or for *fafa* (a cleaning ceremony in which the tomb is weeded and restored, normally brought on by dreams about the deceased). They are the undisturbed resting place of the dead, buried singly, whose remains will never be subjected to secondary rites of reburial. The tomb is a permanent structure built for eternity, in contrast to the transitory house that lasts normally less than a human lifetime. Whilst this contrast between permanent stone tomb and transient house is a tradition found throughout Madagascar wherever stone is available, it finds its most extreme expression amongst the Tandroy and other pastoralists of the south. The deceased are also given a new name in death by which they will be forever remembered. Tombs also fix the ancestors in the landscape, in contrast to the ever-shifting settlement pattern of mobile pastoralism. They represent a sterile permanence in relation to the dynamic flow of human reproduction.

Whether the place of burial is in a sacred forest or in a prominent stone tomb, such locales are subject to taboos (*fady*):

- No urinating or defecating.
- No gathering of fruit or firewood.
- No approaching the site except for burial or for ritual cleaning (*fafa*) of the tomb.

In addition, tombs are also places of sterility that can be upset by male potency – animals sacrificed at the tomb (normally cattle at burials and sheep at *fafa*) should be castrated.

Change through time

Tandroy burials were not built of stone before the 19th century, the moment when standing stones were first employed as grave markers. Prior to that, Tandroy single burials were enclosed within stake-built palisades (*tseke*). These are described in *Robert Drury’s Journal* (1729), an account of a shipwrecked English mariner enslaved by the Tandroy between 1701 and 1710/1711. Although probably ghost-written by Daniel Defoe, the account is a largely accurate and reliable account of life in early-18th century Androy (Parker Pearson 1996; Parker Pearson & Godden 2002). By ca. 1850, fully stone-walled tombs were being built for single burials of men and women on the north-west frontier of the Tandroy kingdom, where Tandroy were expanding northwards, leading to clashes with Bara herders over grazing rights. These tombs were small structures, no bigger in plan than a Tandroy house, with standing stones at each end giving the appearance of the end posts of a ruined house (**Fig. 2.14**). By the end of the 19th century, tombs had reached larger sizes comparable to the *valavato* of today.

There is no evidence that Tandroy burials have ever been collective. The earlier stone tombs appear to have been built entirely for single individuals, many of them dwarfing the small wooden houses inhabited by the living. During the late 20th century, however, a new tradition developed, in which the tomb might contain burials of multiple family members to form a small cemetery of a man, his wife/wives and young dependents. Thus many tombs each house a collectivity of dead even though they are buried singly.

Changes in funerary practices are on-going. In 2000, an unusual funeral was held for a former president of a local council in Androy. Rather than be buried in a standard Tandroy tomb, Tsiloza, before his death, had made a series of requests:

- He was to be buried in a Merina-style collective tomb, to be built near the local town.
- He was to keep his ‘life’ name in death.
- The tomb was not to be subject to the normal *fady* (taboos) of Tandroy tombs.
- People could approach it and sit by it, and gather firewood or fruit in its vicinity.

Tsiloza had wanted to change attitudes and perceptions both among and towards the Tandroy. By adopting a new, highland-style form of tomb, he was sending a message that Tandroy should align themselves with the more powerful political forces in Madagascar. Whether his tomb will initiate a long-term trend or become an unusual anomaly among the single-burial tombs of the Tandroy remains to be seen (**Fig. 2.15**).



FIG. 2.14 THE TOMB OF MASIAKE AT FARITSOKE CA. 1850, ONE OF THE EARLIEST STONE TOMBS IN ANDROY. THE DECEASED IS REMEMBERED AS A LINEAGE-FOUNDER WITHIN THE AFOMAROLAHY CLAN (A MIDDLE-RANKING CLAN BELOW THE ROYAL ANDRIAMAÑARE CLAN) (M. PARKER PEARSON)



FIG. 2.15 THE FUNERAL OF TSILOZA AT ERADA, ANDROY, IN 2000. HE WAS BURIED AT HIS OWN REQUEST IN A MERINA-STYLE TOMB. THE INSCRIPTION ABOVE THE DOOR READS “*HO MATE TIKANĖ*” (ALL OF US MUST DIE) (M. PARKER PEARSON)

4. Discussion

The evidence of Malagasy mortuary practices makes a strong case for differences correlated with type of subsistence practices. Collective burial is dominant in regions where rice is cultivated whilst single burial is ubiquitous among cattle pastoralists. This correlation could be merely fortuitous – that is, there need be no systemic relationship between mortuary practices and economy. Or it could be the result of different ancestral origins – those of primarily Austronesian descent continue the South-East Asian practice of collective, secondary burial while those of primarily Bantu/Swahili descent continue the single-burial practices of African pastoralists. To avoid such theories that deny either systemic inter-connectedness or agency and historicity, we could choose a third possibility relating to control of restricted resources.

One of the few generalisations about human behaviour to survive relatively unscathed from the 1970s New Archaeology's quest for law-like predictions is the Saxe/Goldstein Hypothesis #8 (Saxe 1970; Goldstein 1980; Charles 1995). This posits that permanent, specialised, bounded areas for the dead are likely to indicate rights of the living over control of crucial but restricted resources legitimised through descent from the ancestors. Whilst this approach can be criticised for its deterministic materialism (Parker Pearson 1999b: 136-139), it does seem to provide an insight into a strategy, commonly adopted in many times and places, of using the dead to lay claims to land (Morris 1991). Of course, 'crucial but restricted resources' need not refer solely to the realm of subsistence and foodstuffs but might also include, for example, the dead themselves and the fertility that they control, as can be argued for Merina mortuary practices (Parker Pearson 1999b: 138-139).

We can modify this hypothesis to suggest that collective burial may be an ideological strategy which helps to keep valued agricultural resources such as rice fields within descent groups, thereby preventing the dispersal of those fields among many other kin groups, as might occur in more mobile communities with individualised places of burial. Collective burial might then be a useful strategy for endogamous groups to reinforce the ideology of descent and thereby retain those resources. Where resources are not concentrated in particular niches or locales or otherwise scarce, then exogamous descent poses no threat to their dispersal.

A similar argument was used by Maurice Bloch (1975) to explain why the mobile swidden-cultivating Zafimaniry of highland Madagascar have no rigid marriage rules, in contrast to the Merina; their extensive agriculture, he argued, makes the Zafimaniry less concerned about ownership passing to 'outsiders' through inheritance. In this scheme, Merina notions of land as property are more developed. That said, this contrast does not translate entirely satisfactorily in terms of burial practices. Zafimaniry bury collectively and not singly, although there is an individualising aspect to their mortuary practices. The bones of the dead are kept collectively in large wooden coffins but individuals are commemorated with their own stone monuments: conventionally a standing stone for a man and a stone slab set on three stones (representing the hearth) for a woman.

Whilst the Tandroy and other cattle-pastoralists of the semi-arid south of Madagascar are exogamous, almost all of the rice-cultivating groups discussed – Merina, Betsileo, Betsimisaraka, Bezanozano and Bara – have endogamous marriage practices (which sometimes include marrying close cousins) with bilateral as well as patrilineal descent. Most of these groups have a more developed sense of the ancestors providing fertility than among the Tandroy. As a result, multiple interactions with collective ancestral remains (even though this is unpleasant and highly polluting) are required to achieve this, in contrast to the Tandroy practice of single burial and subsequent avoidance of the dead.

The Southern Betsileo are an exception to the contrast between endogamous rice-farmers and exogamous cattle-pastoralists; they do not marry close cousins. The closest marriage partners that they accept are fourth cousins. Although not as exogamous as the Tandroy, they have patterns of marriage and descent that – unlike the endogamous practices of the other rice-cultivators mentioned above – do not result in keeping land together across the generations. We have no explanation for why this might buck against the wider pattern but it provides a warning that no hard and fast rules can be expected.

Yet, the Betsileo have cultural practices other than cousin marriage to keep land within the family. Among siblings, it is frequent that one or two brothers are chosen to keep (and cultivate) the paternal land, while the other brothers are advised to try to find new land to cultivate elsewhere or other means to make a living. Married sisters, too, are usually expected to relinquish their rights to paternal land to their brothers because, after marriage, they will follow their husbands, who are supposed to have enough land to feed them and their

children (either in their paternal village or elsewhere). Only when they divorce or become widows can these women claim a (usually small) part of the paternal estate. Thus, on the whole, and in spite of the exogamous and bilateral aspects of Southern Betsileo kinship, land is not much dispersed since, in practice, it is often passed on to only one or two male children.

It is certainly possible that these distinct divergences in Madagascar between collective and single burial could derive from the culture-history model – that different ancestral Austronesian and Bantu/Swahili origins have determined contemporary mortuary practices. But this interpretation would fail to explain why they have apparently continued unchanged. In fact, they almost certainly have changed. For example, Bara ancestry is entwined with that of the Tandroy (Heurtebize 1986) and both are cattle pastoralists of primarily African descent. Yet the Bara also cultivate rice on land which is crucial but restricted. The culture history model thus does not explain why Bara practise collective burial. For the moment, however, we can only glimpse something of the deep history of different funerary traditions within Madagascar. As archaeology reveals more about the long-term past, so we will gain a better idea of how the island's rich mosaic of mortuary practices have changed over the millennia.

Conclusion

Within Central and Southern Madagascar, rice cultivators practice collective burial whilst cattle pastoralists adhere to traditions of single burial. Elaborating on the Saxe/Goldstein hypothesis, we can suggest that collective burial in these instances materialises often endogamous and tightly knit descent groups as a strategy to control scarce and restricted resources, notably the land on which rice can be grown. This is not to be taken necessarily as a law-like generalisation but rather as a strategy which can be adopted to best manage those resources. Nor is it necessarily a simplistic equation of collective burial with agriculturalists and of single burial with pastoralists (though see below), but rather a suggestion that, where resources are particularly scarce, collective burial serves an ideology of insiders marking their descent group as distinct from others and protecting rights to resources within that group. Those scarce and critical resources need not always be related to subsistence and rights over the best agricultural land; they can also include human fertility, as gifted from the ancestors in the case of the Merina, or bloodlines and politics, as in the case of the Habsburgs and other royal families of early modern Europe.

We finish with a potential application to prehistory. Some of the best known examples of collective tombs are those built by the earliest farmers throughout Atlantic Europe, from Iberia to Southern Scandinavia. These Neolithic tombs with chambers containing collective burials, both articulated and disarticulated, are well represented in Britain and Ireland, where they were built and used largely between 3800 BC and 3400 BC. Yet this tradition of collective burial in Ireland and mainland Britain ended centuries before it did in Atlantic Europe, where tombs for collective burial continued in some regions to be built and used into the early third millennium BC. It was not until *ca.* 2800 BC in Northern Europe that single burial rites became common, now thought to have been introduced by westward-migrating mobile pastoralists (Haak *et alii* 2015). Our case study from Madagascar, discussed above, offers a possible explanation of why collective burial largely came to an end in mainland Britain and Ireland around 3400 BC, centuries before this mass migration. After 3400 BC, traditions of single burial of inhumations and cremations developed throughout Britain and Ireland (Parker Pearson *et alii* 2009) coincident with a transition from mixed agriculture to pastoralism as suggested by the palaeobotanical record (Stevens & Fuller 2012; 2015; Whitehouse *et alii* 2014). One area of Britain that shows no such decline in cereal cultivation is Orkney, a group of islands off the north coast of Scotland. Intriguingly, this period between 3400 BC and 2800 BC is the very moment that collective tombs flourished on Orkney islands. Thus the switching from collective to single burial traditions in the British and Irish Neolithic does indeed correlate with an inferred transition from more intensive modes of cereal cultivation to more extensive modes associated with pastoralism and potentially greater mobility.

The broad contrast between collective burial and intensive subsistence practices and between single burial and more mobile, extensive agriculture in Madagascar cannot be entirely explained by different marriage rules, that is between endogamy and exogamy. The Southern Betsileo are certainly rice-farmers with collective burial rites but they are exogamous insofar as they do not marry close cousins. Yet the overall pattern of burial rites

varying with the degree of mobility and intensiveness of subsistence practices still holds true and does provide a relational analogy that can be applied to our current understanding of Neolithic and Chalcolithic societies of Northern Europe, including Britain and Ireland. Most excitingly, developments in the analysis of ancient DNA now allow archaeologists to explore the degree of relatedness among occupants of Neolithic collective tombs (e.g. Alt *et alii* 2016), thereby allowing us to test such analogies with prehistoric data.

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2. Collective and Single Burial in Madagascar

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