

## Tanim-bary Rituals among the Betsimisaraka in Andasibe

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### Abstract

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The Betsimisaraka farmers of Andasibe differentiate two forms of rice agriculture, *tavy* (swidden) and *tanimbary* (irrigated). The rituals that protect a farmer and his family are different for *tavy* and *tanimbary* agriculture. The necessity for different ritual activities is due to *tavy* having “dry” and *tanimbary* having “wet” ecosystems, both of which contain different plants with different spiritual properties. The farmer must focus his rituals toward the specific spirits that inhabit each ecosystem. In sum, this article summarizes farming ritual requirements of the Betsimisaraka in Andasibe, their causes, significance and repercussion of the loss of spiritual knowledge that must be understood in the process of agricultural development and forest conservation in Madagascar.

### Texte intégral

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In June and July 2004, ethnographic interviews conducted in and around Andasibe with members of the *Betsimisaraka* on the rituals associated with *tavy* (swidden rice agriculture) discovered that there are similar rituals done when the farmers are pursuing *tanim-bary* (irrigated rice agriculture). The purposes of rituals with *tavy* and *tanim-bary* are the same, to ensure a successful rice crop and protect the farmer and his family from harm. There is variation in what farmers reported as the correct rituals for *tanim-bary*. Much of this variation correlates to the landscape’s properties (e.g., “dry” land and “wet” land). Since the collection of *tanim-bary* rituals was secondary to the collection of quantifiable data on the variation of *tavy* rituals, it is unknown what consensus may exist with the farmers of this region. What follows is a discussion of the most common responses from the farmers regarding rituals performed during *tanim-bary* and concludes with a short discussion of the relevance of these findings for agricultural development in the Andasibe region of Madagascar.

When farmers discuss the rituals that they perform during *tanim-bary*, they begin by describing the differences with rituals performed during *tavy* and *tanim-bary*. The first distinction that was made by the farmers was the difference between why the rituals were different between *tavy* and *tanim-bary*. As one farmer explained, “*tavy* is done in the forest and *tanim-bary* is only done where there is grass and no trees.”

In areas where there are no trees and only grass, there are no plants that contain spiritual powers that can harm the farmer and/or his family. In forests, two plants [*ranalahy* (deer antler fern) and *vahimifehy* (knotted vine)] have specific spiritual properties that can result in illness or death of the farmer or one of his family members. It is believed that *ranalahy* houses deceased animal spirits. None of my informants, including the *mpanandro* (shamanic healer), knew how the animal spirits came to inhabit the *ranalahy*, but all knew that if this plant is cut down in preparation for agriculture, the result can be illness of the farmer or his family.

*Vahimifehy* can be any vine that is knotted and is believed to contain the spiritual power of *Andriamanitra* (God). According to a *mpanandro* in the Andasibe region, if this vine is cut or not respected (e.g., shaking or hitting the vine), the farmer can become violently ill and may die within minutes. In either case, if one of these plants is disturbed the farmer must pray and offer the following items on *ravinala* (traveler’s palm - *Ravinala madagascariensis*) or another broad leafed plant [e.g., *akondro* (banana) or *longoza* (wild ginger)] to appease the spirit: *tantely* (honey) and *vary fotsy* (cooked white rice). Since *tanim-bary* locations do not contain either of these species of spirit housing plants, rituals do not need to be performed that appease the spirits contained within them. The main difference between the two types of agriculture appears to be that *tavy* contains more varied and complicated rituals than *tanim-bary* since there are more spiritual plants that are found in forests than grasslands.

*Tanim-bary* is further categorized by farmer’s delineation of the land into two separate ecotypes of “dry” (e.g.,

valleys and flat fields) and “wet” (e.g., marshes) land. The farmers believe that both “dry” and “wet” land areas to share similar spiritual properties. In both “dry” and “wet” land, the farmers reported that they pray to *Andriamanitra* for a good harvest and enough rain. In addition, the *zanahary* (spirits from *Andriamanitra*) may inhabit both area types. Prayers and offerings are made to the *zanahary* by the farmers to ensure that the farmer does not become ill or injured while farming that location. The offerings that were commonly reported included the following: *tantely* or *siramamy* (sugar), *vary fotsy* and some type of alcohol [e.g., *toaka-gasy* (sugar cane alcohol), *betsabetsa* (rice/honey alcohol) or another alcohol that happens to be on hand].

While “dry” and “wet” land share some common spiritual characteristics, they also have distinctive spiritual features that necessitate specific rituals. “Dry” land is the location in which the *razana* (ancestors) are believed to be the occupants and owners of the land. To pursue any form of agriculture on dry land, the farmer must pray and make offerings to the *razana*. The offerings that were commonly reported included the same as those used for the *zanahary*. Before any digging of irrigation canals is begun, the farmer will place some or all of the aforementioned offerings on a broad leaf and pray to the *razana*. The “dry” land is also the potential home of *vazimba* (spirits from god, but less powerful than the *zanahary*). The *vazimba* naturally occur in the water, but those who have moved to inhabit “dry” land are more powerful and can cause much harm to the farmer and his family. The *vazimba* on “dry” land have mirrors and knowledge of *fanafody* (Malagasy medicine). These items are used by the *vazimba* on “dry” land to communicate with and affect humans. If a farmer does something that is *fady* on their land, such as defecating, they can kill him in seconds. If “dry” land *vazimba* are thought to inhabit a parcel of land that the farmer wishes to use, he will consult with the *mpanandro* to receive instructions and *fanafody* to remove the spirit from that location.

In direct contrast to “dry” areas, “wet” areas are the natural habitat of the *vazimba*. The usual offerings that are given to the *zanahary* and *razana* suffice to ensure that the farmer does not become ill. None of the farmers claimed to pray and make offerings to the “wet” land *vazimba* when farming “wet” areas, but another spiritual force does require special care. Several female informants explained that if a child dies before it is one year old or by miscarriage, the infant’s linen wrapped body is buried in a marsh. If the child dies on Tuesday morning, it is *fady* to bury it immediately, but one must wait until Tuesday afternoon. The informants and *mpanandro* explained that if an infant dies before its first birthday, it must be buried in a marsh so that the mother remains “wet” (fertile). If the infant is buried in a coffin on “dry” land, as custom dictates for adults and children over one year old, the woman will become “dry” (infertile) and not able to bear any more children. The degree of moisture of the infant’s burial place correlates to the ability for women to bear children. The importance of this burial rite for agriculture is that no farmer in the Andasibe area will knowingly pursue *tanim-bary* in one of the four marshes used to bury infants because they may become ill and their crops likely fail due to the malicious infant spirits. For example, one informant told me of an immigrant farmer who attempted to grow rice on one of the burial marshes. The farmer and his wife became ill and only twenty percent of their crop succeeded. Both the man and his wife sought the help of the *mpanandro* who gave them *fanafody* that restored their health, but their crop was almost entirely lost.

All of the abovementioned rituals must be performed before the irrigation canals are dug for the *tanim-bary*. In addition, about one-half of the farmers reported that the rituals only needed to be done the first time the area was prepared for *tanim-bary*. The other farmers stated that the rituals must be completed each time the land was prepared for *tanim-bary*. Two informants related that special offerings might need to be made if they pleased the ancestor’s spirit. Neither of the informants was able to tell me how they came to know what the individual ancestor spirits liked, but did report offering coffee and/or tobacco on several occasions.

The importance for the description of these rituals above at length is twofold. First, the ethnographic documentation of agricultural rituals among the *Betsimisaraka* is generally lacking in anthropological literature (for one exception, see Razafiarivony 1995). Second, several institutions and agencies are currently exploring possible methods of instituting a change of agricultural practices in the eastern regions of Madagascar, but have not studied the socio-cultural consequences of such a change (for full review of the stakeholders and their positions, see Hume *in press*). Their goal is to end the practice of *tavy* and introduce irrigated agricultural techniques to the area. Without an understanding of the *tanim-bary* rituals described above, the transition will be difficult, as marshes plowed for agriculture will not be considered by the local farmers as sanctified and safe to farm. One can imagine that an area prepared by heavy machinery for *tanim-bary* without the benefit of adhering to the appropriate rituals required by the land given to local

farmers would be refused because of the believed presence of *zanahary*, *razana*, *vazimba* or infant spirits. Because these spirits have not had offerings and prayers made to them and will cause injury or death to the farmer and/or his family, few farmers would willingly work the land. Only by a study of the ecology, economy, agriculture and ritual beliefs of the area may a development program address the issues, from the technical to the spiritual, which can enhance the probability of the success of the planned change.

### **Bibliographie**

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### **Pour citer cet article**

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