"Et Plus Si Affinités": Malagasy Marriage, Shifting Post-Colonial Hierarchies, and Policing New Boundaries

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Abstract • In 1999 and 2004, a debate exploded within the Malagasy expatriate community in France after Et Plus Si Affinités, a realist style documentary about arranged marriage between Malagasy women and French men, aired on local television. The series chronicled the adventures of three French bachelors who went to Madagascar to find brides. In this article, I use the reactions to Et Plus Si Affinités as a lens through which to examine changes in Malagasy sexual relations as they are inflected by relations between different ethnic groups in Madagascar, particularly how different groups have historically approached sexual and marital relationships between Malagasy women and French men. Drawing on this case study, I argue that studies of transnational arranged marriage need to attend more closely first to historical representations and the way they figure into transnational marriage, and second to how circulating representations mediate women's agency and their ability to achieve their goals.

Keywords • Madagascar, transnational marriage, métissage, agency, immigration

In 1999 and then again in 2004, a debate exploded within the Malagasy expatriate community in France after Et Plus Si Affinités, a realist style docudrama about arranged marriage between Malagasy women and French men, aired on local television. The series, which was presented in half-hour slots over a two week period, chronicled the adventures of three French bachelors who went to Madagascar to find brides. A French marriage agency, Affinités Plus, organized the trip. The film immediately touched off debates within the Malagasy on-line community. Although the debate raised many different issues, including gender relations between Malagasy men and women, Malagasy participants in the on-line debate expressed distress at the public display of these otherwise intimate transactions. Viewers expressed their anger in nationalist, anti-colonial, and ethnic terms; they also revealed a keen sense that their behavior was being judged by a Western audience.

In this article, I use the reactions to Et Plus Si Affinités as a lens through which to examine changing Malagasy sexual relations. These intimate bonds are shaped by historically constituted interactions between different ethnic groups in Madagascar; they are also shaped by how these different groups have dealt with sexual and marital relationships between Malagasy women and French men. I suggest ways in which this case extends contemporary analyses of transnational marriages. First, however, let me turn to the particulars.

Et Plus Si Affinités: The Participants and the Show

"Et plus si affinités" is a colloquial expression used at the end of personal ads to suggest that if the interested parties meet and get on well, there is the potential for a sexual relationship. The film project began when Gilles de Maistre, a popular French director and producer, was approached by the French-German television station ARTE, which is known for its tasteful cultural productions. De Maistre wanted to do a film on the problem of underpopulation in the French countryside and the plight of rural French bachelors who often go abroad to find wives. This topic recurs regularly in human interest reporting on French television, but de Maistre wanted to depict the topic in his own style. Inspired by the aesthetics of cinema vérité, his goal was to spend enough time with the couples so that they would forget the camera. Ideally, the camera would become invisible, allowing human folly, and the complexities of relationships in which each party wanted something different from the other, to emerge.

To obtain such proximity, de Maistre needed the couples to accept his presence. He contacted Muriel Fiez, the proprietor of the Affinité Plus marriage agency located in Le Mans, a city to the northwest of Paris. Although Fiez had initially arranged marriages locally, she had become intrigued by the possibilities of the Malagasy marriage market when a young Malagasy woman from the city of Tamatave contacted her to find a husband. Many of Fiez's French clients were men with rural livelihoods. They had trouble finding wives in part because young rural French women did not want to marry them, preferring to go instead to the city. Some men also had slight handicaps. A savvy businesswoman, Fiez figured that foreign women might be more forgiving of the men's drawbacks. She started to explore the Malagasy market. She put ads in the local paper Midi Madagasikara and made business connections with a travel agency that specialized in flights to Madagascar. Soon, she was inundated with requests from Malagasy women seeking to marry French men.

When de Maistre contacted Fiez about making the film, she was in the midst of arranging for three of her clients, Alain, Hervé, and Patrick, to travel to Madagascar to meet a group of women, among whom they hoped to find their brides. Alain was a carpenter, Hervé was a metalworker, and Patrick...
worked in a concrete factory. The reasons why these men want to marry Malagasy women are never raised in the film, which gives relatively little insight into the men's motives or intentions; actions speak here, not words. In my discussions with her, however, Fiez suggested that the men “want something different” and see Malagasy women as gentle, passive, and exotic. Each of the men had paid Fiez a fee. In exchange, she helped match their profiles to those of their prospective brides.

Like the men, the women shown in the film had also written long letters and filled out a complicated questionnaire explaining their motivations. I did not gain access to the particular letters written by Claudia, Jacque, and Danielle, the three women who feature in the film, but I did read many other letters given to me by Fiez. It is difficult to generalize about the women's motivations for seeking a French husband based on these letters. Responding to the question, “Why do you want to marry a European?”, women's answers ranged from one twenty-year-old who claimed that Malagasy society imposed too many constraints on individuals, to the response of a woman who wanted to gain French nationality because the French, more than any other nationality, “respected human rights,” and therefore treated women in a more egalitarian manner. The motive that recurs in almost all the letters, however, is the desire to build a loving household. Their vision of marriage is one that emphasizes the necessity of mutual respect and love in a companionate marriage. Their letters also imply a vision of love that emerges out of the reciprocal exchange of material support and intimate service.

In the three cases portrayed in the film, the women and men had already exchanged pictures and letters, and one man, Alain, had one particular woman, Claudia, foremost in mind. The trip was intended to enable the couples to meet and decide on a course of action; they only had a few days in which to do this. The film begins as the men set out for Madagascar, where they will stay at the prestigious Hotel Colbert, located in the capital city of Antananarivo. For many Malagasy viewers the location evokes a particular set of associations, because the Colbert is where some women in Antananarivo go to pick up foreign tourists, although this is never mentioned in the film. Once at the Colbert, the men are supposed to meet the particular girls who had especially appealed to them. Ideally they were supposed to interview all the potential candidates before settling on one.

Set in one of the rooms in the Colbert, the second episode portrays the men's meeting with the candidates, some of whom have risen before dawn to travel by bush taxi from the surrounding areas. We watch as Fiez introduces the women to the men. In one case, she tells Alain that an elegantly dressed woman waiting to meet Alain is forty-five years old, and he rejects her out of hand, telling the candidate that she is in fact more educated than he is and that as a result they would not be a good match. Eventually Alain meets Claudia, the woman he set his heart on. They begin their relationship. Muriel teasingly asks the girl, who is cool in the face of Alain's amorous attentions, “Are you in love?” She responds, “Not yet.”

Meanwhile, Jacque, who works as a salesgirl in a store, comes to meet Hervé. Fiez explains that at more than forty years old, Hervé is still a virgin and lives with his mother. At one point in the film, they call his mother and she scolds him for having forgotten his checkbook. Hervé asks Jacque why she wants to get married to a European and she explains her desires for a life free of the material worries that are such a pervasive part of daily life in Madagascar. Meanwhile, Patrick, the third man, disappears; Muriel has no idea where he has gone. It turns out he has met a woman, Danielle, who like Jacque also works as a clerk in a store. They meet in the hallway of the hotel and he instantly decides that she is the one for him. Patrick and Danielle leave the hotel together for the weekend and only rejoin the group—and the film—two days later.

As the film progresses, the three couples form. Hervé and Jacque seem genuinely happy and Jacque declares that she is in love; Alain seems smitten with Claudia, a sentiment that does not appear to be returned when Claudia gets mad at him for kissing her and smudging her lipstick. At one point, Patrick gets drunk and misbehaves, and Danielle, his potential bride, leaves in disgust. Fiez tells him that he needs to gain control of his drinking problem. Eventually, the men meet the women's families. In one particularly poignant scene, Jacque assembles her family so that Hervé can formally ask for her hand in marriage. In Madagascar, and particularly in the area of Imerina where the girls are from, the ritual involves a long speech in which the man “begs” for the wife, and the wife's family responds. Hervé, however, does not know the cultural forms, let alone Malagasy, and so in an awkward reversal, the girl's family makes a speech to him. He has no idea that he is supposed to answer, until Muriel nudges him and tells him what to say.

The three couples get married and the men return to France to wait for the processing of the brides' immigration papers. The film ends with the women's arrival, and their reactions to their new homes. When I spoke to de Maistre in 2006, Alain and Claudia had one baby and had recently gotten divorced; Danielle and Patrick were still together and had two children, and Hervé and Jacque were still together but had been unable to have a child. They had, however, moved out of Hervé's mother's house to establish their own household.

The Reaction

The film caused immediate controversy among the Malagasy community in France. In two of the chatrooms on women's issues, available through Wanadoo.mg and Madanight.com respectively, ferocious debates took place. Most of the people participating in the discussions clearly lived in France, but some lived in Madagascar. The chatrooms created an intermediate space in which people who had seen the film, but occupied different social locations both with respect to Madagascar and to France, could air their reactions and engage in debate. Three themes dominated the discussions: the representa-
tion of, and motivations of, the women; Fiez's role; and the motivations and responsibilities of Malagasy and French men.

Numerous Malagasy who live in France responded to the film by arguing that Malagasy women, and by extension Madagascar itself, had been dishonored by the portrayal of the women in the film. Naïvo, one responder, pithily summarized this side of the debate when she wrote:

I believe many of us followed the report on ARTE. How can we not react to what we saw, for Muriel’s business is demeaning to all Malagasy. I don’t blame the candidates—everyone has to make their own decisions. But it’s terrible the way she portrayed them. It’s utterly inappropriate.

Another Malagasy woman living in France wrote, “We’ve got to do something. Nobody knows a thing about Madagascar and now the whole country is talking about how easy it is to find a wife there. We’ve been shamed.” These assessments of the situation quickly met resistance from other women, many of whom either still lived in Madagascar or spoke for those who did. These women responded fiercely, telling Naïvo to mind her own business and that she should not criticize others’ attempts to improve their lives. One woman named Vony said bluntly: “Do whatever is necessary to eat!” and then added an explicitly ethnic dimension to the discussions when she commented, “Oh let those girls do what they need to. After all, we all know that it’s mainly northerners who behave like that.” Implicit in her statement is the Malagasy stereotype that girls from northern Madagascar, or coastal Madagascar more generally, are both sexually promiscuous and eager to forge relationships with Europeans. Another young woman wrote that she worked in one of the free trade zones near Antananarivo that had been established as part of economic liberalization. She and thirteen of her friends had created dossiers with Fiez in the hopes of finding a husband. They had entered into their contract with Fiez freely, in full knowledge, she said, of what they were doing. She concluded her message by addressing her compatriots living in France:

“You got over there [to France] easily, with scholarships and the like. So it’s easy for you to judge others, but we here [in Madagascar] have only one life to lead.” Other viewers, however, criticized Fiez, the director of the agency. Some women went so far as to accuse her of modern slave trafficking. Aurelie commented: “A shocking report. It is unconscionable to see modern slavery represented on television. Oh, those poor Malagasy women who are sure to live worse in France than they do at home.” While other women protested that the episode of “modern slave trading” went too far, Aurelie was not alone in objecting to Fiez’s behavior in the film. Referring to Fiez, one woman, Valiha, wrote, “I’m deeply revolted by this woman who talks to the men as if they were retarded, and treats the women like objects.” But most participants in the discussion were disturbed by Fiez’s role as an intermediary who profited financially from others’ misery. As one unnamed participant wrote, “She makes her living on the backs of lonely people . . . there are many who do the same; perhaps it’s simply human nature.”

Although the majority of viewers’ comments focused on the women in the film, men were not exempt: from criticism. At least one woman professed frustration at not being given more insight into the men’s motivations, remarking, “I’m perplexed . . . there is an encounter between two desperate people. Guys who are driven to the end of their rope by solitude or their mother, and who go to all ends to find a woman . . . They could have gone to the Ukraine but they go to Madagascar. Why not?” Yet another woman used the discussion of the film as a platform from which to criticize Malagasy men. She recounted,

When I saw the film I was incredibly sad, thinking about what made those women choose to do that. Those girls must think that France is paradise, and they’ll do anything to get there. It was like they were cattle for sale. But then you Malagasy men, you don’t respect your wives, you treat them like dogs! There are no words to say it! You cheat on them all the time. Only when you’ve really harmed yourself (by your own actions) will you realize. The men who respect their wives, there are few!

This time a number of men on the list responded in fury: “The least little thing and you women call us men dogs! Malagasy men are the scapegoats for everything,” remarked one man.

Perspectives on Mediated Marriage

Popular representations and academic writing offer divergent interpretations of the practices of arranged, transnational marriage, such as those featured in the film. Most popular representations depict brides as women from poor countries who want to marry men in wealthier countries in order to escape poverty. Consequently, these women are supposedly happy to marry the first European or American man who comes along. Reciprocally, men from Europe or North America are said to seek women in countries like the former Soviet Union or parts of South East and East Asia because they believe these women will be willing to assume more traditional gender roles. The implicit assumption is that men who seek out these marriages are unable to negotiate the gender equality allegedly expected by Western women. Whether describing the motivations of men or women, popular depictions undermine the legitimacy of these marriages by suggesting that they are marriages of economic or socio-emotional convenience.

Academic studies of marriage challenge these perceptions. In contrast to media portrayals of mail order brides as victims vulnerable to exploitation by conniving men, recent research argues for more complex interpretations, attending both to women’s agency and to the complicated ways in which these relationships undermine some social hierarchies and strengthen others. For example, Nicole Constable argues that marriages to women from Southeast or East Asia often support conservative ideas about gender and
family values, yet challenge conservative views about interracial relationships. Other work shows how Japanese women actively pursue marriage to American men in order to gain access to new forms of gender emancipation unavailable to them in Japan, even as they perpetuate older narratives comparing "backward" Japan to the "progressive" West. Sonja Luehrmann argues that, because women's reproductive labor is now one of the few commodities (other than oil) that the former Soviet Republics bring to an international market, the practice may contribute to shifts in gender relations in these places. As these authors suggest, transnational marriage creates new social, economic, and symbolic hierarchies in some cases. In other cases, including the one I consider here, it rearranges older colonially-based social hierarchies in new forms. Analysts must ask which hierarchies are being re-worked, how, by whom, and the implications of these changes for intimate relations.

These comparative examples suggest that, in order to understand Malagasy reactions to *Et Plus Si Affinités*, we need to examine contemporary marriages between Malagasy women and European men in sociocultural and historical context. Despite the sense of outrage with which many Malagasy expatriate viewers responded to the film, the practices it portrayed are not novel. Metropolitan Frenchmen, as well as Créoles from Réunion and Mauritius, have forged relationships with Malagasy women since at least the nineteenth century, a pattern echoed in many other French colonies. More generally, arranged marriages have been one of the most common ways of forming marriages throughout much of world history. In the context of contemporary Western ideology, which holds that people ideally marry for love and not money, arranged marriages between actors who are differentially situated with relation to economic and symbolic power simply make visible the contradictions—like the tension between self interest and altruism—inherent in all marriages.

When placed in the context of the sexual economy within Madagascar, the practices portrayed in the film are also not particularly disturbing. Over the last ten years, there has been a rise in the number of women seeking liaisons with Europeans and men from Réunion Island. Many of these women frequent night clubs in order to meet men. Although their goal is often to forge a long lasting relationship that may lead to marriage, many of these young women also engage in more casual kinds of sex-for-money exchange. When compared with this group of young women, the women portrayed in the film had several advantages. These women had engaged in correspondence with the men for months before they met them and they knew that the men wanted to get married. Once the couples had formed, they also had help from the director of the marriage agency in arranging their visas, a process that many Malagasy find costly and difficult.

Finally, while many viewers clearly thought that the representations in the film were exploitative, their reactions cannot be taken at face value. It is true that by focusing on the moment of the couple's formation, rather than the long months through which the men and women corresponded, the film makes both the men and the women appear easily available. Yet, it would be unfair to say that the film portrayed any of the participants in an explicitly demeaning light. Nor was Fiez's role particularly shocking: one can easily imagine a Malagasy woman, for example, playing a similar role of middleperson, and many marriage agencies in Madagascar are run by local women. Rather, because de Maistre followed the couple's actions, added no narrative, and only revealed the participants' subjectivities through minute gestures (for example when Claudia turns her lips away from Alain's kiss), the film encouraged viewers to add their own interpretations.

Given these contextual factors, the reasons for the Malagasy expatriate community's negative response clearly arise from sources other than those to which the community itself points. *Et Plus Si Affinités* was filmed in the national capital city of Antananarivo, the symbolic center of the Merina ethnic group, who were historically the most powerful group in Madagascar. Because of the location of the film, the physical appearance of the women, and their accents, all of the women portrayed in the film were easily identifiable to a Malagasy observer as middle-class Merina. Similarly, the majority of women who debated the show in line were also most likely Merina, as this is the group that has migrated to France in the greatest numbers.

The ethnic and class location of both women portrayed on the show, and the viewers who reacted to them, suggest that viewers' responses were shaped by changes taking place at two different, but related, levels: shifts in relations between groups within Madagascar, on the one hand, and shifts between Madagascar and France, on the other. First, the consternation expressed by many observers was connected to the fact that the film publicly displayed middle class Merina women deploying their sexuality in ways that are stereotypically associated with coastal women who have historically occupied a lower status within Madagascar. Second, although marriages between Frenchmen and Malagasy women have taken place for the last two hundred years, the film made these arrangements public in a way that middle-class Malagasy found shameful because in the contemporary moment middle-class Merina associate them with prostitution.

**Historical Contests: Marriage, Sexuality, and Ethnic Differences in Madagascar**

To illuminate the sensibilities that motivate these debates, I turn to the histories of Merina and east coast groups in Madagascar, how these histories position groups differently with respect to France, and how they relate to marriage and sexuality. Occupying the central part of Madagascar known as Imerina, the Merina are the most numerous and the politically dominant group in Madagascar and have, as a result, had a more ambivalent relationship with the French colonizers than other groups on the island. Over the
course of the nineteenth century, Merina kings and queens used technology acquired from the British to expand their armies and conquer two-thirds of Madagascar. They also embraced the forms of Christianity brought by the London Missionary Society. When the French conquered Madagascar in 1895, they justified their actions by claiming that they were liberating the coastal people from Merina feudal domination. French administrators initially sought to destroy the Merina kingdom, but soon found themselves forced to rely on Merina subaltern functionaries throughout the colonial period. In part because they were the inheritors of a pre-colonial kingdom that offered a recognizable model of state sovereignty, in part because they were more educated and Christian, Merina were more invested in the structures and opportunities brought by colonialism. Merina have migrated to France in greater numbers than people who come from the coast. In the past, they did so primarily through the avenues provided by education, a point to which I shall return.

Merina were also the group that most actively contested French colonial rule and provided the majority of nationalist leaders. It was students from elite Protestant Merina families who were implicated in a proto-nationalist secret society that was disbanded by the French in 1916. Merina also provided many of the most active political leaders to the political party that was later accused of organizing the 1947 anti-colonial rebellion. When General De Gaulle came to Madagascar on the eve of independence, his speech declaring that Madagascar would soon regain its sovereignty was made at the Rova, the Merina castle that overlooked the capital city.

In Imenara, where all of the women in the film came from, marriage was an important mechanism for caste and/or class reproduction. Historically, Merina society was divided into three castes: nobles, commoners, and slaves. These divisions still have social relevance. In the past, each caste was internally constituted by demes—in-marrying, land-owning groups which were ranked in relationship to the monarchy. In the context of rural society, whom one marries is dictated by rules of incest, which hold that one cannot marry a consanguine, and the desire to marry within the context of extended family, to avoid the dispersal of land. These two principles operate in tension with each other.

The degree to which parents try to control whom their children marry varies according to caste, class, and family circumstances. In traditional contexts, marriage was not always formally arranged, but it was quite common for “meetings” between potential spouses to be informally engineered by an intermediary. Parents would encourage some unions and discourage others.

There are numerous stories of young lovers presenting themselves before a parent, only to have one side of the family refuse the union. One story I was told by a man in his sixties whose mother came from the east coast, but whose father was Merina, gives the flavor of the tensions that often play out.

My mother’s older sister worked for a vazaha (European), and the vazaha decided to move to Flanaranisoa (a town in the southern highlands). They took my mother too. At that time my father went down there from Antananarivo seeking wealth. He was married on the red palaquin [a traditional mark of nobility], seeking cattle to buy and sell. He saw my mother and courted her hither and yon. My father went home to tell his father (in Antananarivo) about her. “Papa, there is a girl I love, she’s already pregnant.” My grandfather asked, “The child of whom? Where is she from?” And my father told him where she was from. “Then she’s a slave,” he said; “we don’t need any of that.” My mother was furious, and she returned home to the coast where my mother’s brother raised me.

Monsieur Grégoire finished his story by shaking his head and saying that some day when he got to heaven, he’d ask “le bon dieu” why he had dark skin (the mark of a coastal person, but also, because the Merina raided the coast for slaves, the mark of a slave) but straight hair, considered typical of both commoner and noble Merina. Since the mother’s family came from the coast, the father’s family, which was high-caste Merina, labeled her as of slave descent. The marriage was unacceptable as a result. Most Merina believe that marriage should take place among equals, or that the woman should marry up.

Despite these social machinations, people talk about marriage in terms of anajara, a word that means fate, lot, or portion, but is commonly used to describe one’s destined marriage partner. Both people in Imenara and on the east coast argue that marriage is determined by anajara, rather than parental involvement or personal choice. Drawing on her own experience, Ramarie, an older woman explained, “You don’t get the one you necessarily love—you get the one God has chosen for you . . . Few indeed are those who realize their dreams! You might like the boy over there, and never stop thinking about him, but it’s your anajara you will get!”

The traditional marriage ceremony, the vody-ondry, expresses this vision of marriage as an equal exchange of children. In the ceremony, the boy’s family presents itself at the bride’s household and “begs” for the girl using formal oratory. After marriage, the bride and groom usually set up residence in the groom’s household. With the adoption of Christianity in the nineteenth century, and through the experience of French colonial rule, it became a sign of status among urbanites to have three marriage ceremonies: the ancestral ritual, the civil recording of the marriage, which was required by law in order to receive pension or other benefits, and the church ceremony.

Christianity also partially transformed sexual practice. Malanjoana Rakotomalala has argued that people throughout Madagascar, including Imenara, distinguish between marriage and sexuality; parents exert control over marriage, not sex. This argument resonates with numerous historical and ethnographic texts that suggest that rural inhabitants enjoy considerable sexual freedom. Writing about nineteenth century Imenara, Predelli notes that Norwegian missionaries constantly lamented the fact that sex was not confined to marriage and that young women were free to forge sexual liaisons.
It is less clear whether once women were married they were free to commit adultery; the east coasters I knew argued that men could have—indeed were expected to have—sexual relations outside of marriage but that women were not.

Historical sources also indicate that Christian missionaries exerted considerable effort to make Merina women more chaste. They were partially successful: some urbanites have been deeply marked by traditional Christian morals. One recent researcher cites a doctor in Antananarivo who said that in some families, if a daughter became pregnant prior to wedlock, the family would disown her. This doctor's view reflects a particular class location, and appears to be in the minority. Nevertheless, it is clear that at least some urban Merina have a keen sense that female sexual restraint and modesty symbolize modern, respectable morality.

East coast history and cultural practice share both differences and similarities with that of Imerina. Where the Merina were integrated into a hierarchical precolonial kingdom, social structure among most groups on the east coast is decentralized. Prior to French colonization, each lineage head acted as an independent political leader. Alliances between groups were sometimes made for strategic purposes like access to ports, but they rarely formed a more lasting structure. Although the central east coast was forcibly incorporated into the Merina Kingdom during the nineteenth century, the people inhabiting the east coast continued to trade and forge alliances with Creoles from Réunion and Mauritius.

After formal colonization in 1896, Governor General Joseph Gallieni established secular schools along the east coast in an effort to combat the missionary schooling that was so firmly implanted in Imerina. His goal was to create a class of subaltern functionaries who would be loyal to the French. The plan failed due to a lack of funding, and Victor Augagneur, the man who succeeded Gallieni as Governor General of Madagascar, closed most of the east coast regional schools in the early years of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, over time, and in part because of economic opportunities provided by the port at Tamatave, a small coastal elite formed. Historically, however, coastal people have been less able to use education as a means to achieve integration into metropolitan society than their Merina counterparts. They have continued to maintain active networks of exchange with Réunion and Mauritius islands.

Marriage practices further reflect the difference in political organization between the two groups. In Imerina, as I mentioned, endogamous castes are reproduced in part through marriage within the deme. By contrast, on the central east coast marriage is explicitly lineage-exogamous. In both cases kinship is reckoned bilaterally, but on the east coast the practice of kinship carries a strong patrilineal bias, so that people always claim that “the father’s side is stronger.” Where in Imerina a long-married couple might be buried together as a symbol of their unity, in general east coasters prefer to be buried in their father’s tomb no matter how long a marriage has lasted.

Requests to do otherwise are considered very unusual. These structural differences mean that, on the east coast, women are less integrated into their husbands’ families. The bride is not related to her in-laws through kinship and she retains strong material and emotional ties to her natal kin. Divorce is frequent as a result. Of the thirty people in their fifties whom I interviewed, the vast majority had been married more than once. Enduring marriages are highly valued, and social class and the desire to project a respectable image plays a role in whether women are willing to endure an unhappy marriage. Nevertheless, women on the east coast could choose to leave an unhappy marriage more readily than their counterparts in Imerina.

There are, however, a number of similarities between the groups at the level of everyday practice. Although older people along the east coast talked about the days of arranged marriages, only two out of thirty people in their fifties with whom I spoke had actually had one. In one case, the woman and her siblings had been orphaned, and her aunt and uncle arranged to marry her off quite young so that she could contribute to the upkeep of her siblings. Her husband, who was much older than she, retained control over the household finances, a practice that people view as abusive. As a result, she was able to use this as a legitimate excuse to leave her husband. But even older people argued that love was an important part of marriage and that “marriage can’t be forced” (isy azo atao forse). Like their counterparts in Imerina, they believe it can be surreptitiously encouraged. They send inquiries through their friends and kinsmen to find out whether their child’s beloved is of good character. Historically they even practiced a kind of trial marriage in which the new husband and wife went to live in each family’s house for a week or so, to make sure that the bride and groom got along with their prospective in-laws. One man in his late seventies recounted how in his first marriage he went to stay with his in-laws for a week, and heard his father-in-law chopping wood at five in the morning. Realizing that this was really a test of his character, he jumped out of bed and rushed eagerly to help his father-in-law with the task. As in Imerina, the official view of marriage holds that two families exchange children. Despite the patrilineal bias, people worry that, because women control the house and the household budget, they can favor their own kin over those of their husbands. Older people frequently mentioned that one of the explicit agreements they negotiated during their marriage ceremony was that women should not “favor only one side” (isy tia tamaina nazava ila).

Yet if east coast families try to ensure that wives are equally generous to their husband’s kin, they exert little control over female sexuality. In the countryside, I found that parents bemoaned the fact that their daughters bore children out of wedlock because it created another mouth to feed, but they often did so with a kind of bemused tolerance and they regularly cared for the grandchildren whose fathers rejected them. In the city of Tamatave, I often found that the parents of young women were happy when their daughters took lovers who then covered the young woman’s expenses. While families
who were deeply involved in evangelical churches tried to exert strict control over their daughter's sexuality, most parents turned a blind eye to their daughters' relationships with men, as long as they remained discrete.

Merina and east coast attitudes towards marriage with Europeans further reflect these differences in marriage patterns, as well as the contrasting ways in which these groups have been incorporated into broader colonial projects. Just as colonial policies with regard to European intermarriage with colonial subjects varied historically, so too have Malagasy practices of intermarriage, and the social formations they contributed to, shifted over time. During the French conquest of Madagascar in 1895 and subsequently, Governor General Gallieni encouraged French soldiers to marry local women by rewarding the soldiers with land. Jean Paulhan, who lived with a Merina family, reports that, in 1910, Gallieni urged soldiers to marry local women and have lots of children, since it was *mérissé* Malagasy who would control the colony and make it prosperous. Merina families reacted to their daughters' marriages with Frenchmen in different ways, depending on their circumstances. Some families viewed marriage to French administrators as a sign of social ascent. Jean Carol, for example, who lived in Antananarivo during the earliest years of French conquest, writes that Merina families were "flattered" to have their daughters create liaisons with Frenchmen. He observed that, "Several of our settlers in Tananarive have formed casual unions with local women, those easy marriages that custom permits and that the Hova [the term used to refer to Merina commoners] are the first to appreciate." Several years later, around 1908, Paulhan described an old woman who says that she hoped her daughter would marry a European so that she would live well.

Other evidence suggests a more ambivalent attitude. Although Merina women formed temporary liaisons with soldiers, and although the children of these unions were incorporated into Merina families, many families did not want their daughters actually to marry the Frenchmen. In the region of Alaora, a neighborhood close to the capital whose women were sought after by French soldiers and administrators, some noble families went so far as to send their daughters away so that they would not be taken by Frenchmen.

It is difficult to say which factors shaped the slightly more negative view of marriage with Europeans that appeared to emerge later in the colonial period and in the years just following independence. One possibility is that a growing nationalist sensibility among Merina made these marriages less desirable. During a political speech on the east coast, Alexis Bezaka, the regional director of the party that campaigned for independence after World War II, declared that,

The massive waves of French, Europeans, Asians and Indians are going to ensure the disappearance of our Malagasy race... because our daughters couple with foreigners. These unions give rise to *métis* who are no longer Malagasy. They seek our disappearance. Young girls, you work against your Nation when you unite with foreigners. Young men, guard the integrity of our race.

Another possible explanation for negative views of intermarriage is that families feared that those married to Europeans and those who were not would become adversaries. Writing in 1930, a professor at the elite Lycee Gallieni described the father of one of his students who had refused several offers of marriage to his daughter. The man, he claimed, wanted only a Malagasy as a son-in-law. Among the Tsimahafotsy, a commoner group from central Merina, marriages with Europeans were viewed ambivalently: they were potentially a mechanism of social ascent, but were generally discouraged both because of nationalist concerns and the sense that the couple would be incompatible. The gesture of one Tsimahafotsy woman, who married a European but built a separate tomb for herself and her spouse rather than incorporate him into the family tomb, encapsulates this ambivalence. One Merina woman in her early fifties remembered that, during the seventies when she and her friends were getting married, marriage to a European signaled the failure to find a suitable Malagasy. "We used to say that those women who married Europeans did so because they couldn’t find a Malagasy," she remarked when I asked her about intermarriage.

If the practice of marrying Europeans has been viewed with ambivalence in Merina, it has been a well-known, respected institution along the east coast of the island since at least the eighteenth century. The eighteenth-century French slave trader, Mayeur, reported that east coast parents would come and offer their daughters to visiting Europeans, an observation that was corroborated by many others. In words that echo some of the stereotypes leading French men to seek Malagasy wives, French explorers and merchants were advised that "The Malagasy woman... is sincere, and more attached to your interests than she is to her own. She will only act for and with you. And you will establish, between yourself and the *Madiennes* [sic], a link that only death will interrupt... you will find friendship, protection, confidence. Under this aegis you can walk [here]... in all confidence." The women who forged these enduring liaisons were locally referred to as *vadinibaza*aha, a term which means "the spouses of Europeans."

French explorers and would-be colonists might have applauded the selflessness of east coast women who favored their husbands' needs over their own, but these girls were neither the passive pawns of their parents' strategizing nor of the French men's wishes. Recent historical research shows that the spouses of Europeans were leaders in their society who benefited substantially from these relationships and used them for their own ends. As I mentioned earlier, the precolonial Merina kingdom conquered the central east coast of Madagascar from 1820 until the French conquest in 1895. As a result they were able to seize control of the trade that took place in ports like Tamatave. Coastal women who formed liaisons with Creole settlers in this context often inherited from these men; when their rights were challenged, they were protected by the Merina state courts. These women also played an important role in representing Merina state power to the French.

"Et Plus Si Affinités"
formed a part of formal state processions and were allowed to fly the Merina flag as a signal of their relationship to the monarchy.

By the late 1930s the French position on intermarriage had moved from encouragement to worrying about how these liaisons would impact French prestige. Local women, however, still viewed marrying Frenchmen as a desirable strategy for social success. This was particularly true given that, if the woman bore children and the Frenchman recognized his paternity, the child might have a right to French citizenship and the benefits it entailed. As one inhabitant of the east coast told the colonial commission on métis children:

To have a child by a white man is a precious advantage, because it allows the woman to hold onto her man whether he wants her to or not. When that child turns out to be a girl, if she is beautiful, when she's older she too will find a European to marry, and continue to help her mother.97

Similarly, along the east coast, Créole farmers, who were often regarded as second class French citizens by metropolitan administrators, continued to marry local women as they had prior to colonization. When Malagasy were forced to work on settlers' plantations, Créole men sometimes offered peasants protection by hiding them from labor recruiters. Peasants who became connected with these men through the intermarriage of sisters and daughters often had more resources than others, causing conflict within families. As a result, these marriages were coveted yet also regarded with ambivalence. Wryly acknowledging that intermarriage with Créoles brought both opportunities and disadvantages, one old man told me, “We used to long to marry our daughters off to vaza ha but it would only get us into trouble.”

These divergent histories of intermarriage make two important points. First, they suggest that historically, coastal people have been far more open to intermarriage with Europeans, although this pattern might be comparatively recent and connected to the Merina's role in the nationalist movement. Second, at least for people living along the east coast, marriage with Créoles from Réunion and Mauritius or with Frenchmen was part of a strategy of integration into a wider Indian Ocean network of exchanges that has always transcended the national boundaries of Madagascar. It is no wonder, then, that nationalist political leaders like Bezaka, whom I mentioned earlier, singled out coastal women who married vaza ha as traitors to the Malagasy nation.99

**Prostitutes or Spouses of Europeans?: The Impact of Neoliberal Economic Reform on Intimate Relations**

While the history of intimate relations between Merina and Betsimisaraka women and French men suggests some of the reasons for viewers' emotional reactions to *Et Plus Si Affinités*, it is equally important to examine how this earlier history has been reinterpreted in light of recent changes in the sexual economy in Madagascar. During the early 1990s, and following almost fifteen years of state socialism, Madagascar embraced economic liberalization, which resulted in the privatization of industries, increased access to foreign media and commodities, and, for the lucky few, new economic opportunities. Increasing economic disparities also accompanied these changes, however, both within cities and between the cities and the countryside. If the economic reforms since the early 1990s have made the urban population more aware of Western wealth and lifestyles, they have also made these lifestyles increasingly beyond most people's reach.

One effect of these changes is that many urbanites believe that leaving Madagascar is the only way to find happiness and to ensure one's future. In some respects, people's desire to go to France in search of upward mobility is nothing new. During the colonial period it was considered a privilege to go to France to study, and fellowships from the French government were a coveted sign of social status. Because of their better access to schooling, it was mainly Merina who obtained these opportunities. Nevertheless, people's attachments to their ancestral homeland, and particularly the ideal that one should be buried in one's ancestral tomb, still ran deep and ultimately, many of these early migrants used their French diplomas to gain positions of power in Madagascar. This association between education in France and the assumption of an elite position in Madagascar continued during the neocolonial period of the 1960s and throughout the socialist period of the 1970s, when urbanites would bribe officials so that their children might get a fellowship to study in the Soviet Union or Czechoslovakia. At the same time, people also continued to see education as the best route to upward social mobility within Madagascar.

Today, however, these mechanisms for social advancement no longer work for two separate but related reasons. First, rising anti-immigrant sentiment in France in the last several years means that it is difficult for would-be student immigrants to obtain visas. Second, within Madagascar there is a widespread sense that education is no longer useful because even people who have a college degree might end up without work, or find work at a lower level than their educational degree might lead them to expect. It is difficult to say whether or not this claim is empirically true. What is certain is that young people seek other routes to social success. Young unmarried women, and even older divorcees, believe that finding a European to marry offers the surest route to social and economic success.

Not surprisingly, given this pre-colonial and colonial history, young women from eastern and northern Madagascar have embraced the possibilities of intermarriage with Europeans most wholeheartedly. It is fitting that the woman who first asked Fiez to find her a French husband, thereby making Fiez aware of the potential of the Malagasy marriage market, was from Tamatave. One young man I met during my fieldwork in Tamatave explained the practice of young women seeking European husbands this way.
There is a song by Doctor J.B. called "Love for self interest." His song is really true! Nowadays, if one girl studies and one girl marries a European, it is the girl with the European husband who wins. Because the girl who marries the European can own a cement house, a car, and go in planes frequently. So she can really show off in front of the poor students who are still in school!

Or as another young woman who had married a German explained:

We all know that if you marry a Malagasy you'll suffer, unless maybe you both have big diplomas and great work. But I only have my CEPE (grammar school) diploma, and so it is better for me to marry a European and leave my suffering. I look at my friends who've been married to Malagasy men for years, and I outstrip them in terms of possessions: none of them have cars, and I have one. I've been overseas and they haven't. I know how to speak German, and they don't know any language but Malagasy.

The odds of finding a European to marry might be slim, but stories like these have not just inspired songs; they have also driven young Malagasy women to seek Europeans. Women use a variety of means to achieve their goals. Much of the time these practices are informal, including going to nightclubs and restaurants where young women seek to meet European men—practices that sometimes shade into prostitution. There are also various shoe-string operations in which a woman or couple, usually with kin living in France or Belgium, sets up a matrimonial agency. They collect the names of bachelors seeking wives from their kin in Europe, and then provide those names and addresses to local women for a fee. With the spread of the internet, formal marriage agencies like Fiez's have emerged that promise to match prospective brides and grooms. In 2003 there were already several small-scale matrimonial agencies in Tamatave, run by local Malagasy who had transnational connections. By 2005, a much larger one had opened in Tamatave run by a woman from Réunion Island. (See Figure 1).

When young women are successful they gain economic stability and social prestige. In some cases, they become the pillars of their family, arranging for their younger sisters and cousins to meet foreign men in turn. When girls fail, however, they often become financially vulnerable and can easily slip into prostitution. Although not all women who use marriage agencies to find European men are also going to nightclubs or engaging in prostitution, many young women are. Consequently, the behavior of those who use marriage agencies is inevitably read against this wider framework.

It is in light of these practices that one can make sense of the woman who remarked, in response to *Et Plus Si Affinités* that, "All the girls from the north of Madagascar do it." She might just as well have said "All the girls from the east of Madagascar do it." Either way, the implication is that girls from other parts of Madagascar do it, but Merina girls don't. And at least since the rise of the nationalist movement, it appears that Merina girls haven't. Or more accurately, they haven’t done so in the publicly valorized ways characteristic of east coast practice.

During the early 1990s, some young, middle class women in Antananarivo sought European mates through discrete informal lists that circulated among acquaintances, much as I described for Tamatave. The daughter of the family I lived with met the French man she eventually married in just this manner. Nevertheless, the contemporary public representation of these practices remains largely negative. A recent article cited on the Malagasy discussion group Madanighi; entitled "Interculturalité: Les agences matrimoniales sont mal vues," reported disapprovingly on one marriage agency, Madagascarbrides.com, run by a British man married to a Merina woman. The article cited a woman who worked for the agency as saying, "Our service isn't always appreciated. One time, we were distributing flyers in the street and people told us we were engaging in human traffic, and that we were fostering prostitution, and that we were bringing Europeans with AIDS into the country. People incriminate us because they don't understand. It’s really a question of mentality." In using the expression "a question of mentality" the woman implies that people who don’t appreciate a marriage agency designed to marry Malagasy women to European men are not sufficiently modern or
sophisticated. But the article remained largely disapproving, concluding that, despite the woman's protestations, it was clear that “every culture in the world, in all periods of history” were against interracial marriage, thereby neatly erasing over a hundred years of complex history in Madagascar generally, and in Antananarivo in particular.

Given this context, it is perhaps not surprising that, within Antananarivo, coastal women are repeatedly portrayed as more sexualized and loose than Merina women, a representation that must be interpreted both with reference to the complex and varied practices I've sketched out, and within the context of Merina social and economic dominance within Madagascar. Among women who engage in transactional sex-for-money practices within Antananarivo, the group of women who occupy the highest rung are those women who go to nightclubs and bars, not so much to feed themselves, as is common among the lower categories of sex workers, as to find a European husband. Despite the fact that many of these women have one Merina parent and have spent most of their lives in Antananarivo, they are all perceived by others as “coastal.”

Conclusion: Shifting Postcolonial Hierarchies, Women's Honor and the Perils of Public Mating

Talk about sex has always been linked to talk about society because how people marry, have sex, or reproduce is the arena in which the most intimate aspects of human existence intersect with the wider demands of culture and economy. In colonial contexts, sex provided both a powerful metaphor for colonial domination and an important disciplinary practice through which colonial rule was enacted. The new privations and opportunities offered by the contemporary globalizing world economy are destabilizing the social hierarchies forged under colonial rule. At the same time, representations of intimate relationships circulate with both increasing rapidity and breadth. New fora for discussion, like chatrooms, potentially increase the range of sites at which changing intimate relations can be discussed.

Part of what shocked the primarily Merina expatriates who watched the film was that the girls who sought to find husbands via the marriage agency were not the poorest of the poor. Rather, they were middle class Merina. When one of the commentators in the chat group said “Let a girl eat,” what she meant was “let a girl benefit.” Starvation is not the issue. Rather it is access to the benefits of modernity that matters. Western scholars might emphasize that European wealth and Malagasy poverty are both equally modern, but from the point of view of the women in the film, as well as the women in the chatroom, the benefits of modernity are located in France, not Madagascar. While middle class Malagasy viewers might be used to the idea that poor women in Madagascar prostitute themselves, or that coastal women seek European men to marry, there were clearly many people who thought that it was shameful for their own, Merina daughters to be publicly displayed as making themselves available through a marriage agency.

Many of the women who applied to the agency knew that others would disapprove of them. When responding to the question about whether she wanted to continue to live in Madagascar or move to France because she wanted to marry a Frenchman, one of Fiez’s candidates explicitly stated that she wanted to move to France because “in Madagascar people will look down on you if you are with a European.” The unspoken corollary is that people will think that the girl engaged in prostitution—or at the very least untoward behavior in a nightclub—in order to find him.

The rush to find Europeans to marry has come about because where once schooling was the primary way that Malagasy could gain social and cultural capital, now marriage is. As a result, young women from central Madagascar are adopting strategies of intercultural marriage once associated primarily with east coast women. The sense of class outrage is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by Yony, who first defends the women in the film, sympathizing that “yes a girl’s got to eat” but who then goes on to make a much more direct slur against coastal women than did the commentators from France. She expresses both outrage at Malagasy in France who have the audacity to judge those who still live in Madagascar, yet she still defends the idea that Merina women (like herself) would never stoop so low. Once the privileged collaborators in the construction of Malagasy nationalism and modernity, middle-class Merina women now appear so desperate to leave the country that they marry the first Frenchman who comes along.

The film thus implies that older forms of Merina privilege have been, if not erased, at least eroded. Whether this is true or not is hard to say. A recent study of the seven major cities in Madagascar found that, in terms of schooling and basic measures of standards of living, the city of Antananarivo lagged slightly behind the northern city of Diego-Suarez and was roughly equivalent to the east-coast port of Tamatave. What seems likely is that for middle-class urbanites, recent social and economic changes have made the differences in wealth between groups in Madagascar relatively small in comparison to the gulf that separates all middle-class urbanites in Madagascar from their peers in France.

The sense of outrage experienced by many Malagasy viewers was made all the more visceral by the acute sense of shame caused by the circulation of these images to an international audience. The immediacy of the television show, combined with de Maistre’s careful filming of people’s interactions with one another—for example the downcast eyes and modest, almost embarrassed demeanor of many of the young women—enabled viewers to share in these women’s dilemmas in ways that other media might not have.

Ideally, of course, one would like to know more about French reactions to the film in order to understand more fully what marriage with former colonials means to French men and women. Nevertheless, my analysis of the
Malagasy side—the tangled history of interethic and colonial practices of intimacy on the one hand, and audiences’ interpretations of *Et Plus Si Affinités* on the other—extends recent academic writing on marriage in two respects.

First, it complicates prior arguments about the role of arranged marriage in sustaining or reconfiguring social hierarchies by demonstrating the importance of placing the shifting uses of intimacy within an historical trajectory. Second, and more importantly, it shows how the circulation of representations of these women—whether in television shows like *Et Plus Si Affinités*, or more frequently newspaper reports and magazine articles—inadvertently mediates women’s agency. While prior research has been quick to emphasize that these women are not mere pawns, they have failed to take into account the way circulating representations affect women’s ability to enact their goals, becoming part of people’s efforts to navigate and constitute new kinds of boundaries. In a world where representations circulate with increasing rapidity, analysts must take into account not only what people think they are doing, but the ways in which their actions become mediated by the circulation of images that have longer histories, and over which contemporary actors exert little control. Groups have long used sexual alliances and marriage strategies to create and maintain distinctions. Yet it is rare for people to understand fully what the constraints and consequences of their actions might be. As Foucault reminds us, “people know what they do, and they know why they do what they do, but what they don’t know is what they do do.”

This point becomes even more salient when we consider the ways in which differently positioned actors deploy images of women to police certain kinds of boundaries.

A comparative example helps to illuminate the wider social stakes. During the nineteenth century, social commentators in Britain used the image of the barren prostitute to guard shifting boundaries between home and economy, public and private, and self and society. “Society seemed to be in unprecedented danger from the marketplace, . . . and the sexual body bore the widespread anxieties of this danger.”

Given the history presented here, it appears that people deploy the image of the Malagasy bride both to contest and to patrol the increasingly rigid boundary between France and its former colonies. The French colonial project, albeit hierarchical, was nevertheless incorporative. In colonial times, Madagascar was part of France, and marrying Malagasy women—whether in Toamasina or on the east coast—gave French and Créole men access to local networks. Some elite Malagasy could go to France to acquire a French degree, yet return home and occupy the upper echelons of the colonial hierarchy in Madagascar. Today, however, the gap between France and its former colonies has grown wider and the incorporative vision has given way to “fortress Europe” characterized by ever more restrictive immigration laws. As Malagasy debate the practice of marriage, they also discuss which kinds of incorporation into the metropole are morally legitimate for which kinds of subjects. The analysis that I have presented here reminds us that the women who move between these worlds walk a fine line separating their chance for progress from their risk of falling from grace. This predicament is a result of the uneasy separation between France and its former colonies.

Notes

1. The research on which this article is based was generously funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. I gratefully acknowledge Jessica Cattelino, Judy Farquhar and Daminly Rutherford for their comments on earlier drafts.
2. In 2004, a series of sequels were shown which followed the couple’s progress.
11. I use east coast practice to stand in for coastal practice more broadly. Within Madagascar, it appears that women from the North and the East of Madagascar are the most active in seeking European husbands. I focus on the east coast because this is the area in which I have conducted fieldwork.


22. There was a popular Malagasy song in the 1960's whose lines went "Marriage today can't be forced" (Fanambadiana ankehitriny sas tsy atao forse): personal communication, Malanjaona Rakotomalala.


32. Ibid., 193.


34. Cited in ibid., 109.

35. Dominique Bois, "Tamatave, la cité des femmes": Rantoandro, "Hommes et réseaux."

36. Chapus, "Déclin du Prestige Européen à Madagascar."