the work of memory in Madagascar

JENNIFER COLE—Harvard University

Human beings build their cultures, nervously loquacious, upon the edge of an abyss.

—Kenneth Burke, as cited in Kluckhohn 1942

This article is situated at the juncture of two discussions in contemporary anthropology. On the one hand, I am interested in the work of social memory, the means through which a group reconstructs, assimilates, and understands its past, and its role in the formation of the group’s contemporary identity (Connerton 1989; Halbwachs 1980; Shotter 1990). On the other hand, I seek to engage with discussions of the nature of colonial and postcolonial subjectivity, particularly as this topic has been raised in recent discussions on the nature of colonial rule and the cultural transformations associated with it (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Dirks 1992; Mitchell 1988).

I first became interested in these topics when I found myself confronted by a puzzle while conducting fieldwork among the Betsimisaraka of east Madagascar. Prior to my arrival I had read a great deal about the history of the region, which included colonization by first the Merina of central Madagascar (1820–95) and then later the French (1895–1960). Both groups had used invasive and strikingly similar techniques of rule, including taxation, forced labor, and resettlement of villages. The inhabitants of the region had taken a pivotal role in a violent 1947 anticolonial rebellion, in which 100,000, or 2 percent of the local population, had died (Tronchon 1986). Histories of Madagascar inevitably observed that the rebellion was the worst in French colonial history and that it left the inhabitants of the country so traumatized that little political activity occurred on the island between 1948, the year the rebellion ended, and 1960, the year that independence was granted (Covell 1989; Thompson and Adloff 1965).

According to much of the recent work on colonialism, the effects of this type of colonization were uniformly pervasive and lasting.1 In Colonizing Egypt, an influential work emblematic of the genre I have in mind, Mitchell writes that colonizing “refers not simply to the establishing of a European presence but also to the spread of a political order that inscribes in the social world a new conception of space, new forms of personhood, and a new means of manufacturing the experience of the real” (1988:xii). The implication is that colonialism transforms the societies in which it occurred in a lasting way. The centrality of the colonial period in shaping postcolonial consciousness is further elaborated by the Comaroffs, who describe how, in their

This article examines the practices through which the Betsimisaraka of Madagascar attempt to recode, assimilate, and contain the influences of the outside world. The Betsimisaraka endured colonization by the Merina and the French for 130 years. They rarely refer to this colonial past except on certain occasions when it is powerfully evoked. They prefer instead to commemorate ancestors. A processual view of remembering and forgetting productively complicates anthropological understandings of the colonization of consciousness and the consciousness of colonization, revealing how local cultural autonomy can be partially maintained through the work of memory. [Madagascar, memory, forgetting, colonization, Bartlett]
efforts to understand the southern Tswana past and present, they were repeatedly drawn back to "the colonization of [Tswana] consciousness and [the Tswana] consciousness of colonization" (1992:235). Again, the implication is that consciousness colonized in the colonial past pervades the postcolonial present. In short, anyone studying a postcolonial society might easily assume that the practices introduced from the colonial period were indeed successful in "manufacturing the experience of the real" (Mitchell 1988:ix).

Recent anthropological writings on social memory also give a role to colonialism, where colonialism figures as the content of diverse social practices. Whether studies of social memory privilege narratives (Dhaklia 1990; Valensi 1992) or other forms of material-social embodiment (Apter 1992; Sharp 1995; Stoller 1995) as key sites for the production of social memory, most of this work implicitly views the production of memory as embedded in narratives or in the bodily practices associated with ritual. This position is perhaps most forcefully promoted by Connerton, who argues that "images of the past and recollected knowledge of the past are conveyed and sustained by (more or less ritual) performances" (1989:40).

In Madagascar, the emphasis on historical memory expressed in ritual and memory's encoding of links to the colonial past are illustrated by recent work on spirit possession. Sharp persuasively argues that spirit possession rituals (tromba) act as the primary expression of a Sakalava mémoire collective, and that "possession as social commentary reveals an intense awareness of effects of outside forces on the local political economy" (1995:76). Lambek (1996:243) makes a similar point in his description of social memory among Antankarana. Their major ritual commemoration is conducted by the monarch and reenacts a historical incident when Antankarana kings, rather than submit to Merina encroachment, ran into the sea and died. In the present-day ritual, people plunge into the water while possessed but re-emerge alive. There seems little doubt that rituals are central to remembering, for as Young reminds us, "if societies remember, it is only in so far as their institutions and rituals organize, shape and even inspire their constituents' memories. For a society cannot exist outside of those people who do the remembering" (1993:xi). But what happens when anthropologists extend their gaze beyond ritual into everyday life? What modalities of social memory operate there? On these questions anthropological studies are relatively silent.

elusive memories

As a result of my reading, when I arrived in the field I was quite unprepared to find a world in which people behaved as if colonialism had never happened: neither omnipotent nor resisted, the colonial past was simply absent—or so it seemed to me at the time. It was not so much that individuals had forgotten the colonial past, but it was not evident in local discourse. People answered most of my questions about the colonial past with vague, slightly bored responses: "The French were here, they grabbed girls with young breasts," or "My mom had to work picking coffee for this French lady. They had these terrible, small yapping dogs. Really scary." So far as I could tell the colonial past was discussed only because of my continual prodding, and even then people seemed uninterested in the topic. In short, while individuals clearly retained private memories of the colonial past, these were not collectively formulated or expressed either in any obvious way (for example, in ritual commemoration) or as shared discourse. If Halbwachs (1980) was right in arguing that without sites of memory forgetting ensues, then in Ambodiharina the colonial period seemed well on its way to oblivion.

In contrast, local people were interested in reminiscences about their ancestors and the practices associated with their commemoration. As I listened to people talk about ancestors and cattle sacrifice (the major ritual through which people communicate with ancestors), I began to wonder if colonization by two different powers, the rise of nationalism, a violent anticolonial rebellion, and independence had ever happened. Sometimes it seemed that the only topics of
conversation were rice, cows, and ancestors—preoccupations that appeared to belie the momentous events and enormous changes that had taken place within what I considered recent memory.

In the anthropology of an earlier time, the explanation for such a phenomenon would have been simple. I could have interpreted the apparent lack of historical traces as an indicator of a "primitive" or "cold" society, where history was not important to local discourse (Lévi-Strauss 1966; cf. Rosaldo 1980). By the time I arrived in the field, however, the question was not so easily pushed aside in this way. After all, by 1992 nobody actually believed that people without a literate tradition also lacked history. A good deal of scholarship had painstakingly shown the different ways in which representations of the past were encoded and embodied, even if the past was absent from narratives as topic or chronology (Comaroff and Comaroff 1987; Parmentier 1987; Rappaport 1990). And so, when I first arrived in the field, I was faced with a perplexing contradiction: I knew that according to the historical record of Madagascar this area had been the arena of numerous historical processes and events that had active relevance in the present. Moreover, I believed that these events should have left some kind of trace in narrative or other (perhaps ritual) forms. Yet despite my commitment to searching for this history in unlikely places, it remained elusive. In other words, viewed from the perspective of everyday life, from the daily round of growing rice and appeasing ancestors, the events of the colonial past seemed to have been effectively erased. It was only much later, during a particular series of events, that memories of the colonial past resurfaced with tremendous force.

In this article I draw on insights from Bartlett (1995) and other psychologists to explore how a process-oriented approach to social memory might contribute to both contemporary understandings of how social memory works and its role in shaping postcolonial subjectivity. Motivated by the theoretical emphasis on colonialism and my subsequent anticipation that it would visibly affect subjectivity in the postcolonial present, the question I wish to pose is this: how do Betsimisaraka, who have clearly lived through a painful and traumatic colonial past, manage to focus on ancestors and associated rituals such as cattle sacrifice, virtually erasing from everyday view the colonial past and its implications of a postcolonial present? What triggers colonial memories to resurface? And finally, what might the relation between these two kinds of memory tell us about how social memory works, not only within ritual but also during the mundane practicalities of everyday life? I begin by describing official colonial history for the region before turning to the local construction of daily life.

official history

Their minimization of the colonial past notwithstanding, Betsimisaraka endured colonial conquest for a very long time. The process of colonization—which in many ways extends into people's relationship with the postcolonial state government—is relatively well documented both in the national archives in Madagascar and in the French colonial archives in Aix-en-Provence, where I spent two months perusing colonial reports for the area. In brief, the Betsimisaraka were first subjugated by the expansionist Merina of central Madagascar in a series of expeditions from 1817-23. The area where I worked was conquered in 1823 by a Merina army led by an east coast trader who had sworn fealty to the Merina king, Radama I. From this time on, local people were subject to a foreign power. Merina policy was aimed at developing the east coast and controlling the local populace through corvée labor and taxation (Esoavelomandroso 1979). Betsimisaraka from the coast were couriers for royal packages on the route from the coast up to the capital of Antananarivo. The labor was difficult, and the area in which I conducted my fieldwork was one of the hardest pressed. During certain seasons, those who served the corvée had barely enough time to return home before they were commanded to carry yet more goods. Months were lost carrying packages for the Queen, working for the upkeep of
her forts, or cutting trees—trees that Betsimisaraka were forbidden to fell for their own use. The forced labor was accompanied by heavy taxation.

French colonization followed Merina rule in 1895. French officials were at some pains to distinguish themselves from their Merina predecessors. Their claim that they were liberating Madagascar from the rule of petty Merina despots and leading the diverse peoples of Madagascar toward enlightened republican government was an important element in their self-legitimation as colonial rulers (Fremigacci 1993). Yet because of financial constraints the French ultimately relied on many of the same structures of domination put in place by the Merina; the French administrator for the Mahanoro region even occupied the former Merina governor's house (Archives Nationales de Madagascar 1897). Like the Merina, French administrators were interested in extracting resources and labor from Betsimisaraka; however, unlike the Merina, French administrators made a concerted effort to transform what Bourdieu (1977) calls habitus, the local ways of perceiving and acting in the world. Their efforts at transformation included moving Betsimisaraka, who were used to living scattered in tiny settlements, each with a single lineage, into large multilineage villages. French administrators hoped this new settlement pattern would simultaneously increase social solidarity and facilitate tax collection and labor recruitment. Other tactics included trying to reshape people's relationship to the land by forcing them to remain in their villages rather than moving to the fields during the planting season and by introducing various perennials like coffee, vanilla, and breadfruit. These tactics had an effect on land tenure as well as people's experience of the landscape (Thomas 1996). In addition, French administrators attempted to build up a local elite, consolidating and restructuring the local system of authority. Finally, Catholic and Anglican missionaries sought to Christianize Betsimisaraka; the first church was built in Ambodiharina around the turn of the century.

In 1947 the area was rocked by rebellion. In Ambodiharina, the rebellion (which local people refer to simply as the “flight,” filofana) began when, in response to rebel attacks elsewhere on the island, French soldiers descended on the village and arrested everyone who was listed as a member of the Mouvement de la Rénovation Malgache (MDRM), a moderate political party that had advocated independence within the context of the French union. The roundup was followed by the arrival of rebel bands from farther south, whom villagers today claim forced people to join raiding expeditions against neighboring concessions, conscripting people into a rebel army modeled on French armies with generals, corporals, and a secretary. Their attacks on the concessions provoked quick retaliation as the concession owners (joined by local gendarmes) advanced, burning every building in Ambodiharina with the exception of the church. At this point villagers and rebels fled into the forest, heading south and west in order to escape French retaliation. During the next nine months, the rebel army continued its battle against the French while civilians, terrified of both the rebels and the French army, did what they could to survive. By the time the rebellion was officially declared over in December 1948, many local people had died. While official histories inevitably state that most deaths were due to exposure and starvation while hiding in the forest, the deaths emphasized by people I knew were those of older men who died in captivity, having been imprisoned as members of the MDRM. These deaths were perceived as socially disruptive in that they involved the sudden loss of raiamandreny—the primary elders responsible for mediating tensions among the living as well as villagers' relationships to the dead.

For 13 years following the rebellion the French reasserted a repressive administrative authority in the countryside and allowed little political activity (Raison-Jourde 1997). In 1960, under the aegis of the Parti Socialiste Démocrate (PSD), a party put in place by the French, Madagascar gained independence although France retained strong economic and political ties. For rural people, this transfer of power from the French to the PSD appears to have made little difference (Allen 1995; Althabe 1969). The regime slowly stagnated, and in 1972, in what many called a
second independence, Madagascar moved toward a socialist regime. With the election of Didier Ratsiraka in 1975, industries and concessions were nationalized.

At the time of my arrival in Madagascar in 1992, the Marxist regime of Didier Ratsiraka was still in place, though faltering. By then, the state was a withered institution, widely perceived as morally and financially corrupt and largely withdrawn from village life. The following story must be read at least partially against the breakdown of the state which characterized Madagascar in the early 1990s.

ancestral memory

As noted above, the history of outside domination is not the story Betsimisaraka tell when referring to the past. In Ambodiharina, as throughout Madagascar, the memory of ancestors is central to how people remember the past (cf. Delivré 1974; Feeley-Harnik 1978; Graeber 1996). The sentimental memories of ancestors, particularly of parents, are a palpable presence in everyday life. Not only do the dead move among and watch the living but communication between the dead and the living is thought to be a normal—indeed necessary—daily occurrence. For people with a bit of money, the photograph of a beloved mother, father, or grandmother may be displayed proudly on a wall. For others, memories of deceased parents are nourished in dreams. People often speak nostalgically about their dead parents and about small details of their daily lives, of the food they preferred and shared, and of the fields they once tilled. At the same time, these memories of intimacy are coupled with keen awareness of the dangers of ancestral power. Ancestors have the ability both to bless and curse. For Betsimisaraka, the ability to negotiate successfully and draw on ancestral power is the key to determining whether they live a happy, fulfilled life or whether their existence is fraught with pain and loss.

embodied past

The quintessence of the Betsimisaraka past, of history, is embodied in material sites like houses, land, tombs, and the bodily practice of taboo (Cole 1997b). The state of prosperity and fruitfulness, which most villagers cite as evidence of ancestral blessing, is a fleeting and desired state of grace. In order to obtain this grace, most Betsimisaraka must achieve the successful alignment of their own desires and motives with those of their ancestors—as if the actions and desires of previous generations become fixed commands by virtue of their death. Personal happiness and well-being hinge on the successful negotiation of ancestors' prior choices that impinge on people's ability to "seek" (mitady) and "make themselves living" (mahamelonatena). Ancestral memory is, above all, enabling in that it provides the generative force that allows people to achieve their desires; however, this kind of memory also constrains, for it demands that villagers constantly reconcile their own desires with those of their ancestors. They are often at odds.

This process of remembering the choices and actions made by ancestors is not the heroic history of events reflected in Merina and French archives, but rather the slow and always tentative process of etching individual desires, intentions, and relationships onto particular places, objects, and bodies. As people spread out over the land in their search for livelihoods, they imbue particular sites with generative power, first through their actions, and then by virtue of their death. In this way, the remembered goals and intentions of the actors become a permanent part of the landscape, both constraining and empowering the lives of descendants. The Betsimisaraka I knew explicitly linked the force that enables people to prosper with the maintenance of that force in daily practice—a practice villagers call mahatsiaro or fahatsiarovana (remembrance).
Two of the primary ways villagers are expected to remember ancestors are farming land chosen by their ancestors and occupying their ancestors’ houses. One child, usually a son, is required to live in the father’s house because, if left untended, the house has the potential to make the owner’s descendants sicken and die. People explained that this negative power came from the ghosts of the former inhabitants who would check the house every so often to make sure it was tended. If a visiting ancestor failed to find ashes in the hearth, it would come after the truant tenant, forcing him or her through illness to reinhabit the house. One old man explained that he never left home anymore to travel to ceremonies elsewhere, as he inevitably dreamed the ancestors were looking for him. Although he had built a huge fancy house with a corrugated tin roof, he did not dare inhabit it. When he tried, he fell sick and concluded that the ancestors wanted him in the original great house located a few feet away. And so, he explained, he never went anywhere at all but just guarded his ancestral charge.

The case of Letsara and his son, Razafy, provides another illustration. Letsara, the town accordion player, grew up at the height of the colonial period, when most of the fertile land to the west of Ambodiharina had been claimed by Creole settlers. As a result, Letsara had little choice but to make do with less fertile land close to home. Later, however, after the departure of the French, Razafy decided to take advantage of the newly open land and build a homestead out west. It was not long before Razafy fell repeatedly ill; he soon concluded that Letsara’s ghost was calling him home. Razafy abandoned his ambitions of colonizing the new, more fertile land and returned home to farm his father’s fields.

A second way people are made to remember their relation to ancestors, and therefore their past, is through the bodily practice of taboo. Many taboos are the result of historical accident, but the injunction to respect them becomes an enduring practice in people’s lives. For example, Tathen’s grandmother explained to me that her family was forbidden from building a house with a porch (laveragana), because her grandfather had once been hit by a beam while he sat on a porch. Perhaps more frequent were tales of how an ancestor had choked and almost died while eating a particular substance, then declaring that substance taboo for his descendants. For example, one family’s ancestor almost died while eating lango, a savory dish prepared by grilling immature rice; he had cursed his descendants saying that they too would die if they were foolish enough to eat lango.

These seemingly trivial details are significant in that they represent the way people come to carry the community’s history within them. Remembering taboos is ultimately about remembering those ancestors who imposed them. Although some taboos can be removed in cattle sacrifice, it is always perceived as a risk, and it is not uncommon for people to attempt to abandon taboos and then take them back again in response to some clear sign of ancestral wrath. Thus, while people may not recall the exact reason a taboo came about, they are nevertheless forced on a daily basis to refrain from specific—and otherwise acceptable—actions. After all, it is considered a sign of status to have a house with a veranda, and lango is very good to eat. In other words, prohibitions reflect the personal experience, desires, and accidents—in short, the historical predicament—of those who come before. And they are inherited, for better or worse, by those who come after.

cattle sacrifice

These constraints would be intolerably oppressive were it not for cattle sacrifice, which mediates the relationship of the living with the ancestral past. From a local point of view, cattle sacrifice provides a mechanism through which people attempt to change their relationship to that past. Whatever kind of petition people might wish to make, they can do so through sacrifice. Examples of such petitions include begging ancestors for permission to inhabit a new patch of land or to remove a taboo that has grown too onerous. Through sacrifice, an act that people
call remembrance, people are able to renegotiate their links to the dead. Yet the activities associated with cattle are more than a form of ritual negotiation. As I have argued elsewhere (Cole 1997b), the narratives produced in Betsimisaraka sacrifice are the key to local understandings of history: they are the pivotal points at which ancestors and descendants wage their struggles, even while they affirm the outcome of those struggles. The narratives produced in sacrificial speeches (kabary) are central in the creation of local memory, a process in which forgetting and remembering are mutually constitutive.

Sacrifices operate as rituals of remembering on another level as well. The stories are a kind of memory narrative, but beyond this the ritual itself requires people to take an active role in remembering the social order. The family responsible for the sacrifice gathers around the supine cow, all of them facing to the east, the direction associated with ancestors. Only the ritual leader (tangalamena) may address God directly, calling out the ancestors’ names for all to hear. While most tangalamena memorize a short list of their direct ascendants, it is impossible for them to know the names of all the related branches of the family created through links of marriage. Yet neglecting to call an ancestor’s name during such a ritual is a terrible insult; I was told that if a woman’s husband’s family forgot to call her ancestors, her parents would be justified in insisting on a divorce. This tension is handled by producing remembrance through social interaction: while the tangalamena calls out the names of the ancestors, men and occasionally women from different branches of the group crowd in to whisper names of the ancestors so that no one might be forgotten.9 We might think of this as what psychologists term “voluntary remembering,” a reference to a social activity for which the explicit goal is remembering (Meacham 1977).

In local terms the most important meanings of memory are the active remembrance and longing expressed by descendants for their ancestors and—more dangerously, as it can cause death—by ancestors for their descendants. The word which is translated as remember (mahatsiaro, cf. page 614) literally means “to make not-set-apart,” which one could rephrase as “to bring together” (cf. Feeley-Harnik 1991a). According to the Betsimisaraka, to remember is, above all, to invoke powerful ancestral connections, whether to appease or profit from them. To forget implies the opposite. This active process of remembering is not perceived as an expression of individuality but the affirmation of relationships with others (cf. Lambek 1996).

elections and colonial memory

On this evidence alone, two explanations suggest themselves for the apparent erasure of colonial memories. First, following Freudian theory, it could be argued that the Betsimisaraka were so traumatized by the rebellion that they subsequently repressed the events from their memory or lived on in a state of dissociation such that these memories could not be accessed (Herman 1992; Kirmayer 1996). Aside from the methodological problems inherent in analogizing individual psychological processes to those of a group, the problem with this theory is that Betsimisaraka no longer seem traumatized, nor do they live in a state of dissociation. The society appears to function normally, and when asked about the rebellion, people are perfectly able to narrate their experiences,10 which suggests that theories of traumatic memory do not apply. Alternatively, Betsimisaraka theories of memory provide ways of thinking about the seeming lack of colonial memory. For the people of Ambodiharina, to remember is to draw a connection or link between themselves and the particular person or practice they remember. Considered as a whole, Betsimisaraka theory holds that to remember is more than simply to recall a specific event or fact. It means defining their place and position in the world, asserting links with particular people and places while rejecting others. Like Bartlett (1995), they believe that by remembering one set of relationships they forget or erase another. Their theory suggests that commemorating ancestors through ritual, which is deeply rooted in daily life, works to displace
local memories of the colonial past. Yet this displacement is never total, as events that happened some four months into my stay make clear.

The event that triggered remembering of the colonial past was the first postcolonial democratic elections held in the late fall of 1992 and winter of 1993. These elections were called just as the country was emerging from ten months of civil unrest and a prolonged civil strike, coordinated by the Forces Vives (Héri'velona, or Vital Forces), a coalition of parties opposed to the Vanguard of the Malagasy Revolution (AREMA). The strike, which had effectively paralyzed the country, was aimed at the president, Didier Ratsiraka. Ratsiraka had governed the country since 1975, leading Madagascar from relative prosperity to dire poverty; the strike was intended as pressure for a new constitution. Accordingly, during the elections the constitution was to be ratified by referendum. In addition, it was determined in the capital that elections scheduled for 1995 (this was 1992) would be held three years ahead of schedule. People in the capital—the geographic base of the Vital Forces movement and the political and symbolic center of the Merina people—spoke with excitement about the upcoming changes. Ratsiraka had ruined the country's infrastructure and was hopelessly corrupt, they said. He would surely lose. A new, more open, more democratic, and significantly more prosperous Madagascar now would be possible.

The majority of Betsimisaraka villagers in and around Ambodiharina, however, did not see things this way. Didier Ratsiraka, a métisse (ethnically mixed) Merina-Betsimisaraka, identified himself as allied with the Betsimisaraka. His ancestral homeland, Niarovany'ivo, was located not far from Ambodiharina. Ratsiraka made the most of his ethnic association, emphasizing it whenever possible. When Ratsiraka's family held a tomb opening, the ritual in which descendants announce to their ancestors that they have built them a new tomb, villagers claimed he behaved just like a “real” Betsimisaraka. They told me, approvingly, that Ratsiraka had followed ancestral custom to the letter, sacrificing numerous cows, eating happily off the traditional eating mat (fandambanana), even using the traditional palm-leaf spoon (soroka). Moreover, Ratsiraka was savvy about the timely use of gifts and the cultural practice of exchanging gifts between superiors and inferiors.

By clever deployment of his ethnic affiliation, combined with political manipulation, Ratsiraka attempted to turn political and social divisions to his own advantage. Important for my purposes is the fact that those divisions had been created by the Merina conquest in the 19th century and further solidified during the colonial period. Ratsiraka thus presented himself as an ethnic Betsimisaraka who would save other Betsimisaraka—and by extension all coastal peoples—from the predations of the powerful Merina who had enslaved them during the 19th century and would again (or so pro-Ratsiraka forces intimated ominously) were they given the opportunity by this election. Such were the stakes in the election as presented to villagers throughout southern Betsimisaraka country by AREMA officials, an interpretation that was readily taken up by most villagers.11

local reactions

Given the history of Merina colonization, and the way such tensions became amplified during the campaign period, it is not surprising that people throughout the district of Ambodiharina were frightened of the upcoming elections. Many villagers were persuaded that if Ratsiraka lost the elections, Merina would re-enslave Betsimisaraka as they had done in the 19th century. As the elections approached, the situation intensified. Villagers were bombarded with government propaganda concerning the meaning of the new system of democracy that they planned to implement, with its implied government intervention in local affairs. In this context, other, more terrifying, colonial memories came to the fore. Rather than interpreting the political changes as a step toward a modern democracy in an independent nation, Betsimisaraka throughout the
region explicitly associated the elections with colonialism and the brutal repression of the 1947 rebellion (Cole 1997a). Through the selective prism of local memory, rural Betsimisaraka likened the government (expending great effort to portray itself as an enlightened force for shaping the future) to the hypocritical and ultimately violent colonial regime of the past.

The memories evoked by the election and referendum were visceral, painful, and frightening for the Betsimisaraka. They focused on the failed rebellion of 1947 and the former Malagasy political party formed during colonization (MDRM). Among the generation of people who had actually lived through the rebellion, the explicit association between the rebellion and the elections was ubiquitous. For example, during the election campaign I once asked Rasena, a man in his sixties, what happened in 1947, and he began his narrative thus, "Well, in '47 it started with the Europeans [vazaha], like what's happening now, everyone fighting for seats [miady seza]." He described a situation that was eerily similar to the buzz of political activity going on in the village during my residence.

The colons came with the government, not just the district chiefs but the colons too. They descended on Ambodiharina, writing people down, electing people. Then the Many Spears [Marosalohy] arrived, came from the south. The Malagasy had no weapons, just sticks, spears in their hands. But the Europeans [vazaha] came and captured everyone—took everyone on the list, the elders in the town, and threw them into prison. The MDRM were all in one room. Not just here, but all over the country, they threw them into prison. Maybe 800 people were crushed in there together and they all died. Only those graced by God escaped.

The same kinds of memories linking democratic elections to the rebellion were echoed by Jonah, a man in his early seventies. I asked him why he refused to participate in any of the political meetings that were held in the village, as various representatives of the different parties came through to woo the villagers. His answer was straightforward:

We saw politics kill. All of us old people have seen politics kill—everyone who entered the MDRM was thrown in prison and killed. Now it's for the youth to do. Those MDRM, they opened an office. You paid taxes, got a card. It was that list used by the government to call the MDRM. When the political parties came by last week ten younger men volunteered to set up an office. Kids! Haven't seen anything. They gave their names and that is all it takes if something goes wrong. All the [male] elders here [raiamandreny], they were almost captured. The only thing that saved them was not having an ID card. And '47 will come again! Chaos! All these parties tugging at each other so only the people will suffer.

The older men were not alone in associating the current political move toward democracy with the earlier formation of the MDRM and the subsequent rebellion. Women also made the connection, and like the men equated the social chaos that occurred during and after the rebellion with the "chaos" of choices offered by the newly introduced system of democracy.

Moreover, many people made the connection between the growth of the MDRM, the party that had advocated Malagasy independence, with the subsequent rebellion and its repression, and this connection added to the fear. The role of the MDRM in causing the events, together with the idea that it was all an elaborate ploy to kill Betsimisaraka, was articulately stated by Ramarie:

We used to have MDRM here, but then they were all taken by the government during the time of the chaos and killed. All dead. Even my father was captured. . . . Then they [the French] came back later and caught everyone who had joined the MDRM. Yet those people had been forced to join! It was not their heart's will [sitra po], they were forced! It was all a lie.

What the elections revealed was that while memory of colonialism was virtually absent from everyday life, it was clearly and powerfully evoked by the practices of government officials promoting a new democratic order when they once again started taking an active interest in Ambodiharina.

**parallel worlds?**

Extending our gaze beyond the rituals that commemorate the ancestors and other practices of daily life to the memories of the rebellion evoked by Betsimisaraka participation in the
election, we might see villagers' memories of the past as split between two opposing systems. There is a world of cows and ancestors, a Betsimisaraka world largely unconcerned with the events of the outside world. These memory narratives, publicly performed in a speech prior to the sacrifice of the cow, enshrine a particular version of each family's—and the village's—history (cf. Cole 1997b). Further, these memory narratives—which focus on such details as where people live and farm and what they can and cannot eat—echo and reinforce memories mapped onto the landscape as Betsimisaraka move over time from house to rice field and back, and eventually toward the tomb, where their bones, in turn, exert power on the living.

My early readings led me initially to hear Betsimisaraka memories of the past as either fully ancestral or fully colonial, produced respectively through rituals associated with cows or a state-created ritual of election. But that condition, where Betsimisaraka and the outside world exist as parallel, rarely intersecting realms, has never and does not now exist. If anything, the separation of those domains was more complete in the early 1990s than at any previous or subsequent time because of the withdrawal of the state then. And yet parallel worlds are, I think, what many Betsimisaraka deeply desire. I see their own cultural work of separation in their recurrent attempts to identify and treat local and French behaviors as incommensurable. French intrusions continue to pervade the core of village life, but their effects are not, as Mitchell (1988) implies (and French administrators hoped), to transform people's experience and perception of the world. Rather, Betsimisaraka are keenly aware of the differences between local and European practice and seek to differentiate the two where possible. In addition, villagers act as if the village and the outside world were two separate coexisting worlds each with its own customs, practices, and beliefs. I describe this cognitive strategy as the creation of parallel worlds. My own early impressions are one index of its efficacy.

For example, when people came back to the village after the rebellion of 1947, they found that it had been burned to the ground. For these southern Betsimisaraka, burning is the worst possible kind of annihilation. It destroys the generative, ancestrally produced power that inheres in houses and other sacred objects and on which the social order is based. Many of the villagers believed it was a local person who had sold out to the Europeans for protection and later led the band of Creole settlers who burned their town. When villagers returned to the town after their sojourn in the forest, they actively sought to re-create the separation—as they saw it—of the two worlds whose confrontation had destroyed the village. The survivors killed a cow, enacting the proper, ancestrally determined ritual action needed to cleanse the village, restore generative power, and make it habitable. As Soavelo, a tiny white-haired old woman, explained,

> We killed a cow to cleanse the burned town. And we invoked the ancestors and said that if a Malagasy, master of the ancestors here, led Europeans to burn the town, then here was the cow that would judge him [before God]. But if the Europeans' force which makes him a European [mahavazaha an'azyla] made him burn the town, well then, there was nothing we could do.

What is significant in her account is that in it villagers explicitly reveal their clear distinction between two moral systems. On the one hand, people sought to cleanse themselves of the pollution caused by burning the town and thus to distance themselves symbolically from the horrible events of the rebellion. On the other hand, the cleansing itself was thought to apply only to the local inhabitants: if one of the ancestors' children, as villagers frequently referred to themselves, caused the burning of the town, then that individual would be judged before God. Alternatively, if Europeans had independently decided to burn the town, well, that was quite simply beyond the villagers' jurisdiction. What this implies is that, at least in this case, Europeans are incommensurable with Betsimisaraka, and so the technique of judging through cows will not work if applied to a European.12

Similarly, villagers distinguish between ancestral knowledge and the kind of knowledge acquired through school, the institution of the state. Jonah elaborated on the point as he sought to convey the type of knowledge necessary for a successful leader of the ancestral cult. "There
is fahahendraina (from the word hendry, which means good, prudent) and fahaizana (skill, acquired in magic or books). One is what you need to carry the ancestors, the other is for things about paper. Sometimes you need ancestral customs, at other times you need European customs. They’re not the same.” 13

The separation that villagers seek to achieve between the village and the outside world is clearly impossible to maintain all the time. As an oft-cited Malagasy proverb declares, “It is not the land that moves but living people” [tsy tany mandeha fa olombelonaj. Not only have Merina and French come to Ambodiharina and inflicted their cultural practices and methods of control on local people, but local people have long moved beyond the village in their attempts to make a living. Even the cattle that people use to reconstitute their relationships to ancestors, to build up a local world, inevitably also link that world to regional and national markets. People have to move beyond the village quite frequently in order to obtain the cash to buy cattle.14 What this means is that the parallel worlds are always already compromised; separate worlds is a cognitive and emotional stance that villagers use to separate themselves from the outside, rather than an actual state of affairs. As regrettable as this interaction has been for the Betsimisaraka, such points of contact are revealing for analysis. It is during the moments of crossing borders from one world to the other (as the Betsimisaraka see it) that the work of both remembering and forgetting becomes apparent.

In his essay on the politics of ritual, Bloch (1992:31–32) suggests that there are basically two kinds of response to sickness caused by the intrusion of alien elements. In the first kind of response, the society seeks to restore the person to well-being by expelling the intrusive elements. The second response, normally invoked when expulsion proves ineffective, is to accommodate the intrusive forces by actively incorporating them into the self. It is tempting to see Betsimisaraka responses to colonial conquest as expulsion, given that they tried to drive out Merina colonizers in 1895 and the French in 1947; however, I believe that their long-term strategy is primarily incorporation.15 After all, the Betsimisaraka never had enough power to expel either the Merina or the French, and while Betsimisaraka sought to maintain parallel worlds, colonial and postcolonial regimes did not permit this. Because the French were committed to transforming Betsimisaraka life in a particular direction, their policies reached far into everyday life. Betsimisaraka responded by incorporating foreign elements into their very selves. At the same time, however, this tactic of incorporation did not leave the incorporated elements unchanged. As the Comaroffs observe, colonized peoples everywhere have sought to seize the colonizer’s symbols, “to question their authority and integrity, and to reconstruct them in their own image” (1991:xii), and through them to fashion new forms of consciousness. As I show in the following pages, the work of memory is integral to this process. Examining a range of cases of interworld contact (from those that are less intrusive and easily assimilable to those that are tremendously intrusive and cannot be incorporated) reveals clearly how the recasting and incorporation of outside elements is partial and variable and how memory and forgetting are achieved.

incidental forgetting

For the inhabitants of Ambodiharina, the points of intrusion that seem to have been most easily incorporated are those that can be assimilated into village history and geography in a locally meaningful way. As we have seen, one of the major ways that history—construed as prior ancestral choice—acts to constrain descendants is by rooting them in particular places. The need to remember ancestors, which here translates as the need to inhabit particular sites of land, meant that people were not free to move around. Yet one of the most important ways that both Merina and French sought to transform Betsimisaraka habitus was through disrupting their spatial relationships to each other. As I mentioned earlier, French administrators made
Betsimisaraka change their patterns of settlement from small hamlets with only one lineage to large multilinage villages. As a result, the demand to respect French orders came into conflict with the need to respect ancestral demands. Betsimisaraka responded, in this case, by incorporating Merina and French interventions into ancestral history and practice. Movement per se was not new to colonial conquest and was thus easily incorporated into local cultural forms. So for many of the ancestries in the region, the recitation of an “arrival” history to Ambodiharina simply includes forced resettlement in the colonial period, at the same time that it retains the memory of ancestral movement. In their efforts to construct the continuity of their own ancestral histories, they have incidentally incorporated, and thus subordinated, the French colonial period to their own historical narrative. Their successful incorporation of colonial events into local narratives in such a way as to foreground local experience partially explains the “absence” of colonialism that initially confronted me.

Likewise, many ancestries responded to forced resettlement by absorbing the colonial intervention into prior notions of community, incorporating the town-as-colonial-creation into older forms of community integration created in ritual. When the Merina and the French conquered the area, they built a road that runs down the coast, dividing the town in two. According to Halbwachs (1980), the built environment should serve as a mnemonic for memory. But even a landmark like a road that splits the town arbitrarily with no respect to ancestral locations is not sufficient to guarantee memory since objects and places can fit equally well into different stories. In the case of the road that divides Ambodiharina, people were able to reconstruct and subvert its meaning in such a way as to reinforce local ways of coordinating ritual, and hence political, relations between ancestries. Formerly, I was told, each family had its prayer post and great house (trano be), with smaller houses grouped around the great house. When the French came they created a road that ran down the middle of the town, dividing it into two halves. Now, throughout Betsimisaraka country, when one ancestry throws a sacrifice, it needs another ancestry to act as respondent or witness to the event. This is a tremendously important function. Without witnesses, villagers say, it is as if the sacrifice has never occurred: any given ancestry requires non-kin in order to assure the efficacy of the event. In Ambodiharina, villagers incorporated the town-as-colonial-creation into this very process: in order to coordinate which ancestry provides the speechmaker for any given event, villagers now rely on the layout of the town created by the French. Thus when one of the ancestries from the west side of town holds a sacrifice, one of the groups from the east answers, and vice versa. This suggests that what began as techniques of rule—the colonial resettlement of villages and the penetration of the road—has been subsumed into older forms of community integration and incorporation. The road that divides the town not only tells the story of foreign conquest and domination, but also a story of ancestors and their continued power and ability to bless their descendants and make them prosper.

**deliberate forgetting**

The story of the road and its incorporation seems to have been incidental to the local goal of coordinating interfamily relations. Other practices suggest a more explicit attempt on the part of local people to rework the way the outside world figures in local memory. A major mechanism that appears to enable the incorporation of various elements is “washing,” a ritual process that symbolically removes the “foreign” and retains the “local.” Washing is applied to both objects and people, as they cross the border between the outside world and the village.

A particularly clear example of this kind of incorporation is revealed through the local history of commodities. In the early years of colonialism, the French sought explicitly to create a money economy among the Betsimisaraka. The basic premise on the part of the French was that the irresistible attraction of novelty for the Betsimisaraka, combined with their need to provide
money for taxes and new patterns of settlement, would naturally strengthen social bonds in the configuration they desired and lead the Betsimisaraka to adopt the money economy. By the mid-1930s, a full 35 years after French colonization, most administrators in the region remarked that the commodities on which the Betsimisaraka had grown reliant were dismally few. Some sixty years later when I came to the field, Betsimisaraka remained marginal to the national economy.

Contrary to colonial assertions, new needs and practices were acquired. Let me give just one example that illustrates both the tendency to create distinct worlds and the secondary move of incorporation when the attempt to maintain separate worlds inevitably breaks down. Today, if Betsimisaraka are lucky enough to build a house with a corrugated tin roof, a sacrifice, called "entering the house" (idiran trano), is necessary. The invocation of the ancestors on this particular occasion explicitly notes how the house is made differently from Malagasy custom. The owner uses floor boards to build the walls and trees frequently brought in from other parts of the country to build the frame. Finally, corrugated iron for the roof and the nails are imported—or at least used to be—from abroad. As Ramaro explained,

Let's say I covet that house with the corrugated iron roof over there. I covet the functionary's house over there. I decide to make one too. I take the corrugated tin from over seas, I take the nails that come from overseas, I take the palm thatch and floor boards. But those things—they are not the same. You take the European and you take the Malagasy and you mix them. You make the European and the Malagasy like kin so they will not fight and harm the people who live in the house.

In short, to prevent the inhabitants of the house from suffering, possibly dying, the house is "entered" by ancestors. What was once the opposite of the ancestral—the colonial functionary's, perhaps the district officer's, house—is made ancestral and thus acceptable for ordinary people to inhabit. The work of selective assimilation is implied on another level as well. The name for one of these rituals of transformation is an idiran trano, or alternatively, fafy trano. Fafy is the word used for any ritual of cleansing, whether it be a breach of ancestral custom that must be "erased" or a fight between members of the village: in Renan's (cited in Anderson 1991:5) terms, it is the forgetting that allows the creation of an acceptable social community.

Villagers accepted items that they considered to be quintessentially European. Incorporating them through rituals like house entering, which essentially required begging permission from ancestors, meant that rather than creating new dependence on the French, these commodities symbolically reaffirmed people's prior links to their ancestors. In local terms, they remembered one set of relationships while washing away another. Further, this connection was visually marked by the cranium and horns of the cow, which the owner of the house would proudly nail to the northern edge of the roof. No longer the symbol of an alien rule, the house now stood for the owner's ancestral connections. The assertion of whom these houses commemorated carried dense political meanings as well. The local definition of a slave is a person who is dependent on someone else's ancestors; by rejecting links to the French, Betsimisaraka symbolically asserted their continued autonomy, despite the overt fact of political domination by outside powers.

Another way in which villagers attempt to recode the meanings associated with the outside world and obtain their ideal of parallel realms is by "washing" those people who had returned from beyond ancestral land (tanindrazana). Villagers distinguish between people who have lived their whole lives within the village and those who returned only late in life. Local ideology holds that customs inhere in places, and that if you live in a place long enough you take on its way of life (see Astuti 1995). In keeping with this emphasis on customs associated with particular places, I frequently heard villagers observe that contact with the outside world could change people. For example, I once asked Jonah why he had been picked as ancestral leader in his mother's house when in fact he had two older living brothers who, by dint of their age, ought to have been chosen. He explained that those who went away to teach or join the army often became cruel and brutal, and were sometimes judged unfit for ancestral kinds of
work. But even if deemed inappropriate for delicate ancestral work, people who have lived outside the village are still ritually washed of the metaphoric filth of the outside on their return, in order to regain symbolically their place in the village.

Many circumstances and events might call people away from their ancestral homeland and out into the wider world. Of these many circumstances, demands from the French colonial, and later the Malagasy national government, signal confrontation with forces that stand for all that is quintessentially unancestral. Typically, this interaction with outside power takes two forms: inscription into the army or imprisonment. Both prison and military service share the common feature that men are forced to leave their ancestral homeland and participate in a social order with different codes of behavior and premised on a different kind of moral order than that at home. People who go away to live in Tamatave as domestic servants and young people who leave to go to school do not need incorporation, but those who are exposed to violence and the forcible neglect of taboo do. What this suggests is that in cases of symbolic or actual violence, movements from the village and back again are interpreted in such a way as to reinforce the symbolic distinction between the village and all that falls outside it. Villagers claim that the practice of ritually cleansing themselves after a time away started during the colonial period when prisoners were supposedly made to clean toilets and engage in filthy, degrading activities. When they returned home they would cleanse themselves in the sacred water of the river mouth, the same water in which spirit-possession initiates from a neighboring town would purify themselves monthly in a special ceremony. Now those in need of purification, such as returned convicts, no longer bathe in the salty water of the lagoon; rather, they are symbolically cleansed with the blood of a cow. The national government arrests and imprisons Betsimisaraka for a variety of reasons, including theft, illegal burning of fields, fistfights, and occasionally murder. Typically, the speechmaker at a cleansing ceremony will not mention the cause of imprisonment. Rather he might say: “Razafy went to prison as the government forced him, but he has returned and we wash his skin.”

Purification through sacrifice is necessary if the man is either to become a leader of the ancestral cult or to be buried in the ancestral tomb. So too Betsimisaraka require men who return from the army to reassume their ancestral taboos publicly in sacrifice. Like prisoners, they have endured the forcible neglect of taboo and participated in a system that is antithetical to ancestral power. In keeping with local belief that custom inheres in land, it is thought logical that an army recruit will follow the “laws of government” while away. Upon return, the traditional order must be marked. As Gabe, a former soldier, explained,

In the army there are no taboos (tsy mba misy fady). Betsimisaraka are prohibited from eating goat and hemp, but once you get there you all share the same meals. But when I went home my father slaughtered a cow: “this child has been in the army and has transgressed and we wash his mouth with the blood of the bull. From now and forever he shall follow the customs of the ancestors.”

In short, through washing achieved in sacrifice, villagers reconstitute boundaries between themselves and the outside, as the traveler is “washed” of experiences in the outside world and made to remember his or her place in an ancestrally conceived and constituted order.

Taken together, the evidence illustrates why, for most of the time I lived in Ambodiharina, the colonial past did not seem to be an important presence. People concerned themselves above all with commemorating ancestors, so that events and practices associated with the colonial past had been long incorporated into an ancestral idiom that greeted me the day I walked into Ambodiharina. As the inclusive idiom of ancestors and cows filters new practices and objects, they lose their former meanings and are interpreted, at least in the context of everyday life, in local terms. Through these practices the signs of the outside world are in effect reworked and given new meanings, although the traces remain everywhere apparent.
Incidental remembering

Although washing attempts to recode memories associated with the outside world, the movement between the village and the outside world acts as a cue to these very same memories. For example, one of the few times I actually heard people refer spontaneously to the rebellion apart from the election was when Jacoba, a man who was enrolled in Ratsiraka’s special army, the R.Z.P., came home on leave. Jacoba apparently arrived in town late at night and was unable to cross the river to get home. As he looked for somewhere to stay the night, he heard the strains of music from a spirit-possession party taking place nearby. Thinking he could spend the night at the party, he joined the revelers. What happened next remains unsubstantiated, but Jacoba claimed that the people drugged his drink, knocking him out; he was found later that night wandering in a daze near the church, his pockets emptied of the considerable amount of money he had been carrying. Jacoba remained in the hospital for a day before his kin brought him to Ambodiharina. Upon his arrival in his ancestral great house, people gathered to welcome him back. Jacoba, no longer sick, was now the prodigal returning son: he was made to tell of his encounters with the outside world again and again. This included not only his escape from the scheming faux-tromba practitioners but also his adventures as a member of Ratsiraka’s special army.

In this context, two old ladies, crushed toward the back of the house, joked about the rebellion: “you remember how we escaped from those soldiers?” they reminisced. What is interesting about this example is that it is clearly the outside world—and particularly Jacoba’s involvement in the army—that cues people to remember the rebellion. But in this case, Jacoba’s successful escape and return, his reincorporation into local life, suggest that it is local people who control the context. The overwhelming mood was one of successful incorporation and endurance despite threats from the outside. The remembering that took place was incidental to the explicit goal of the social interaction: the reincorporation of the soldier into his natal land after a long trip away was thus woven into local narratives.

A second example of how contact with the outside world cues memory is evident in the reactions that my presence sparked, especially initially. When I first arrived in the village people thought I was the child of a former settler, come back to claim my heritage. Initially an unpleasant reminder of the potential intrusive power of the outside world, I too was eventually incorporated. Rather than define me as the latest incarnation of a historical series of dominant outsiders, people chose to define me in terms that were more general and more local; moreover, they did this quite self-consciously. “She is someone’s child,” they would say, or “She is young and a student and alone and Malagasy children too go abroad and so we must care for her and help her finish her story as we would want for our own children.” In so doing they were able to re-create me as a human being, a vulnerable, dependent one at that. Yet occasionally, by my very presence, and the fact that I could never be totally incorporated, I could not help but spark people’s memories of that other world from which I had appeared. This was particularly clear when, one day, while chatting with Ramarie, a woman of about fifty, and her bossy daughter-in-law Beberi, Ramarie began to mock the behavior of a former chef de canton (district officer) during colonial times. With a wink at me and one eye on Beberi, she gestured and shouted, wiping her hand across her brow like a white man suffering in the heat of the tropics. Imitating the administrator as he forced people to row across the river in even the most treacherous weather, she shouted, “Allez cochons, allez” [Go on, beat it pigs]. In this case, remembering the chef de canton and his inappropriate behavior was meant as a negative example of how one is not supposed to behave: remembering is used as a means to strengthen local ideals. I cued the memory and it was a lesson for me. At the same time it allowed Ramarie subtly to admonish Beberi for her imperious and antisocial behavior.
It is clear from these examples that the creation of parallel worlds and the maintenance of incorporation as a means of controlling and reshaping French presence and its legacy in the postcolonial state of Madagascar works only some of the time. The election reminded people of their defeat at the hands of the French, a defeat that for many villagers symbolized their powerlessness and marginalization in the contemporary world. As one older man put it at the time, explaining their marginality and weakness in the present as a result of their defeat in the past, "They interrogated us with guns to our throats. Most people can’t tolerate that, you know. And that’s what makes us sickly now—we suffered too much then, it was just too hard."

Why were the elections able to spark such affect-charged remembering of the colonial past? And how does the kind of remembering that took place during the elections differ from the remembering provoked by the returning soldier? Elections stimulated people in Ambodiharina to remember colonialism and the rebellion on two levels. First, there is the general context of the reimposition of the state. Since the Merina conquest in the 18th century through the neocolonial regime of the 1960s, Betsimisaraka have experienced the state as a foreign predatory power. The Betsimisaraka experienced the shift to an ineffective Marxist regime in the 1970s, however, as a slow and welcome withering of state power and the withdrawal of the state from local concerns. There was no municipal doctor, children attended school sporadically, and people had not paid taxes for a very long time. The political changes that took place during my fieldwork abruptly shifted local relations to the state as it once again began to take a more active role in local affairs. This included the sudden enforcement of long-neglected laws on burning dry rice fields, as well as attempts to take a census count, which most people interpreted as a prelude to increased taxation. This shift was thus interpreted as a menacing return of the state, as most people wanted outside intervention kept to a minimum (see Cole 1997a).

A second set of cues that spurred people to remember colonialism in connection with a new election, however, lies in people’s interpretations of what caused the rebellion of 1947. Colonial reports from 1948 remark that throughout Betsimisaraka country, people were reluctant to vote in new elections because they associated the electoral activity of the MDRM with the subsequent rebellion. Still other reports from the same period remark that Betsimisaraka blame the Merina for causing the rebellion. And so it remains to this day. For most people, state-orchestrated political activity in the form of parties circulating through the village, handing out flyers or calling meetings, evoke a dormant fear that the government will drive them out into the forest, causing many deaths. While the Betsimisaraka have absorbed and erased many of the customs imposed by the Merina and the French, the savagery of the rebellion and its association with state rituals like elections remains unassimilated. A local official was right when he ruefully observed, "What is terrible is that the Betsimisaraka respects the force that we represent, not the beneficial concepts and practices that this force should permit us to realize" (C.A.O.M. 1948). It could be argued that the French bequeathed a good deal to Madagascar, particularly to the urban elite. One might also argue that the enduring legacy on much of the east coast is fear: fear of force and fear of the state.25

Yet this fear does not pervade daily life, nor every interaction with the outside world. There is an important difference between the kind of remembering that took place when the army officer returned home and the kind of memories that the election evoked. In the first case, which I have termed incidental remembering, Jacoba’s arrival inspired some people to reminisce about their successful escape from French soldiers. Because villagers were able to control the local context they could confidently assert their ability to negotiate the outside world. Jacoba’s return became part of a larger story of continued local resilience in the face of outside threats. In the case of the elections and involuntary remembering, however, it was fear and memories of villagers’ defeat that came to the fore. The activity of voting and the fear and impotence
associated with the rebellion became entwined. As a result, Betsimisaraka interpreted the activity around the elections through the trauma of the rebellion and the fear and suffering it engendered. It is tempting to see their interpretation as mistaken given that the new elections were intended to usher in an enlightened democratic regime. Yet in some respects, their interpretation was uncannily perceptive. The elections of 1993 were not a prelude to a rebellion and state violence, to be sure, but they did signal a change in state policy that allowed former colonizers, or their heirs, to return to Madagascar, and in some cases to reclaim land that had been nationalized in 1972.

Psychologists have shown that recall of traumatic events may be cued by experiencing the emotions which the original events produced, while others point to the importance of occasions for evoking memory (Gergen 1994; Leys 1996; Middleton 1997). The context created by the dense network of associations I have described here—the active presence of state officials linking the political experience of the elections to their subsequent death and defeat at the hands of the French 50 years ago—forced Betsimisaraka to remember, on a cognitive and emotional level, what they would otherwise prefer to forget: that they are indeed a twice colonized people and that to this very day they remain marginalized in the contemporary world.

**postcolonial consciousness and the work of memory**

Perhaps because so much of the work on social memory has been done in relation to the Holocaust or other contexts where memory becomes an important site in the struggle for moral accountability, particularly in relation to the state, memory is privileged over forgetting, and retention and stability are privileged over loss or change (Langer 1991; Perelli 1994; Werbner 1995; Young 1993). Valensi (1992) encapsulates this idea in her discussion of memory and mourning when she writes that at some point the vanquished must come to terms with their own defeat. They must transmit the memories of defeat to generations that never saw or were affected by the events at stake. To forget the victims of violence, she argues, is to inflict that violence a second time. The idea of the redemptive power of history is apparent in other debates as well, including discussions of traumatic memory (Herman 1992; Leys 1996).

For many of the inhabitants of Ambodiharina who lived through the rebellion, memories of 1947 were hardly something they sought to reclaim as a form of empowerment or resistance; more than one person I asked about the events told me the rebellion would be better left forgotten. In addition, the stories people told during the elections involved the unresolvable question of why some live and others die, and why it is that some people have more power to inflict harm. In this sense, memories of the rebellion have strong parallels with what Langer called “humiliated memories,” memories that “represent pure misery . . . even decades after the events it narrates” (1991:77). While it might be tempting to equate the pattern of memory containment described here with something akin to the repression of individual trauma, I have argued that the psychodynamic explanation at the very least needs to be enriched by taking into account the cultural practices that do or do not occasion memory. I have illustrated that Betsimisaraka cultural practices frame and constrain the colonial legacy in a particular way.

The Betsimisaraka case also makes clear an important difference between memories of colonization—the road and resettlement of the village, for example—and memories of actual violence such as the rebellion. Anthropologists have become keenly aware of the importance of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1977) and particularly how colonization is a struggle not only over material resources but over semantic and symbolic practices as well. As Dirks observes, colonial conquest was based on the power of military arms, as well as complex cultural technologies, and was itself a “cultural project of control” (1992:3). Relying on Foucault’s (1982:212) vision of power as productive of new forms of subjectivity, scholars have tended to emphasize how colonial discourse produces new kinds of subjects and does symbolic violence
to old forms of community and identity; however, they have given little attention to the lingering effects of physical violence (Dirks 1992; Mitchell 1988; Vaughan 1991). Betsimisaraka practice proved remarkably resilient against great opposition. If anything, they were able to incorporate new practices into local custom, and symbolic violence occurred in both directions, as Betsimisaraka bent and shaped new practices to previously existing local schemas (see Larson 1997). The physical violence of the rebellion, however, is dealt with through a different sort of memory process. Unable to assimilate the violence into local forms, it remains an experience apart, encapsulated in memory, until contemporary events draw it forth.

The emphasis on remembering characteristic of discussions of memory in the context of national politics has been supplemented by discussions like my own that emphasize the importance of forgetting (Battaglia 1992; Carsten 1995; Taylor 1993). What is revealed in the Betsimisaraka material, including their theory of memory, is that remembering and forgetting are processes that mutually constitute memory. Earlier I stated that perhaps the discourse of cows and ancestors somehow blocks the memory of the rebellion as it selectively recasts the memory of outside influences on daily life. A fuller account indicates that it is more accurate to say that ancestors and cows provide the default schema through which the outside world is filtered, so that the Betsimisaraka may forget some events and appropriate others, giving them new meaning (re-membered). In 1932 Bartlett described the processes through which this occurs—the incorporation and washing—and contemporary work on remembering echoes his claims (Neisser 1982). Bartlett argued that social groups provide a basis for remembering by "providing the setting of interest, excitement and emotion which favors the development of specific images and secondly by providing a persistent framework of institutions and customs which act as a schematic basis for reconstructive memory" (1995:255). Particularly relevant to the example discussed here, Bartlett adds that when two groups come into contact, there is inevitably a process of transformation that includes processes of assimilation, simplification, and elaboration before a particular cultural practice or object settles down. Bartlett called this process conventionalization. Looking back at the examples of remembering and forgetting provided earlier, it is possible to see this process taking place, both in the corrugated tin-roof houses with their cranium and horns proudly declaring the strength of a given ancestry, or the explanations of moral accountability for the rebel I lion, which is even now blamed on the Merina, the old enemies, and not the French. Looking at Betsimisaraka everyday life, it becomes clear that the processes of remembering and forgetting are both integral to processes of historical transformation.

An equally important issue raised by this material, but one I have only touched on here, is the process of encoding and accessing memories and the role of social events in occasioning them or blocking them. Bloch (1993) has argued that we need to distinguish between memory and narratives. What is told about the past at any one time is not entirely representative of memory. Certainly, his thesis seems to be borne out here, for to say that memories are encoded only in narratives is to suggest that they can be infinitely manipulated within the rules of discourse and that they are equally accessible all of the time (Gergen 1994). What Betsimisaraka data suggest is that not all memories are equally salient all of the time, and that the process of remembering and forgetting is tied to the very flow of social life and local people's attempts to control it. Perhaps these observations offer a key as to why ancestral history remains central to Betsimisaraka experience while they systematically attempt to reconstitute and reimagine the colonial past. Ancestors, though difficult and dangerous, are amenable to ritual negotiation. In contrast, the colonial past and postcolonial present are not: they represent Burke's abyss (cited in Kluckhohn 1942), over which local people continue to exert very little control.

These observations on the work of memory have implications for the significance of the colonial period and the shaping of postcolonial identities. One of the striking characteristics of the anthropological literature on colonialism is that most studies rely primarily on historical
records. For the most part, these scholars agree that the colonial period was crucial to the
formation of contemporary postcolonial identities. As Dirks observes, “The sedimented effects
and legacies of colonial power are now attested to by a great variety of writings . . . that reveal
the extent to which colonialism lives on in postcolonial societies and psyches” (1992:7). Despite
general agreement that colonialism remains important, however, there is little empirical work
demonstrating the precise ways in which the colonial past lives on in people’s consciousness.
The data presented here extend writing on colonized consciousness by demonstrating how
memory is a key structure that mediates precise ways in which the colonial past impacts the
postcolonial present.

Although I have focused primarily on the consciousness of colonization, consciousness of
colonization and the colonization of consciousness are two sides of the same coin, and both
need to be understood as heterogeneous, partial processes. What seems clear from the
Betsimisaraka case is that colonization of consciousness entailed a slow shift in the importance
and perception of certain local constructs, rather than the replacement of Betsimisaraka
concepts with those of the French. Indeed, perhaps one of the most important transformations
that occurred for Betsimisaraka during Merina and French colonization was to alter people’s
attempts to control their relations with the outside world (Cooper 1994). This distinction
between the two realms maps easily onto what the Comaroffs identify as a key effect of
colonization—the “objectification of ‘the’ culture of the colonized in opposition to that of the
whites” (1991:18). In Betsimisaraka daily life, however, this distinction quickly breaks down
because Betsimisaraka memory practices enable them to continually incorporate Merina and
French culture as they renew themselves in response to outside pressures. Inevitably, this
incorporation remains partial. As should be clear from the examples presented here, and
contrary to my initial impression, Betsimisaraka have not erased the colonial past. Rather,
through the work of memory, they have recast its meaning and reworked its signs and practices
so that many of the events of the colonial past can also invoke an ancestral narrative; conversely,
ancestral narratives have the power to evoke the colonial past. Through the work of memory,
Betsimisaraka have managed to weave together a double history, either strand of which may
come to dominate experience depending on the context. Particular kinds of activities provoke
and make consciousness of the colonial past socially relevant; memory is always “occasioned”
(Middleton 1997).

A Final Reflection

The Betsimisaraka are a people whose name means literally “they who will not be rendered
asunder.” This name is not without its ironies, for not only have Betsimisaraka never actually
formed a polity, but Betsimisaraka have in fact been socially disrupted, relocated in villages,
forced off land, and made to adopt foreign customs of an alien rule for the last 150 years. Outside
entities have “split them apart” many times. And yet, people often told me that they never had
a king because they were “too feisty,” a statement that conveniently erases their nearly 70-year
history as subjects of the Merina kingdom. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I sought to
understand how the Betsimisaraka villagers I lived with dealt with persistent outside domination,
and the consciousness, colonial or otherwise, that they experienced. My answer is that these
Betsimisaraka, at least, have developed mechanisms through which they are able to re-member
themselves again and again, whenever the power of the outside world is not, as Jonah put it,
holding a gun to their throats.

How to endure is a key existential matter for people everywhere, one that requires anthropologists to see not only how societies and bodies remember, but, equally important, how they forget and go on to forge viable practical models to help them endure (Wikan 1996:285). As Wikan points out, anthropologists have a job to do not just in studying oppression, but in

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recognizing resilience and strength as well (1996:285). Understanding the specific mechanisms that form social memory is fundamental to this process. From my observations, I see three basic mechanisms that make endurance for the Betsimisaraka possible: an attempt to maintain parallel worlds, an absorption into local structures that obliterates the distance between self and other that would make memory of colonialism possible (in other words, the group has been quite literally re-membered), and the encapsulation of the memory of the rebellion in the image of the elections. If forgetting is understood as part of the process of remembering, as I have illustrated, then this article argues that for southern Betsimisaraka, it is through the work of memory—remembering and forgetting—that local cultural autonomy is maintained.

notes

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1. For exceptions see Cooper 1994 and Mbenbe 1991.
2. Bourdieu defines habitus as the “lasting, transposable dispositions, which, integrating past experiences functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions” (1977:82).
3. For a discussion of this process during Merina colonization of the east coast, see Esavelomandroso 1979.
4. I arrived in Ambodiharina during the period of transition, when political changes occurred that would replace Ratsiraka with the opposition candidate Zafy Albert. Zafy was elected president in February 1993. In late December 1996 still other elections were held, returning Ratsiraka to power.
5. These communications often include rituals associated with houses, tombs, and fields. For example, people often have small private sites such as a sacred tree or stone at which they invoke ancestors and seek their advice and blessing. More elaborate ceremonies that establish contact between ancestors and descendants take place during tomb replacement ceremonies and during the fulfillment of vows.
6. Another important "site of memory" is, of course, tombs. For a discussion of the relationship between tombs and the local construction of history, see Cole 1996.
7. Graeber notes the tendency for taboo histories to "poke fun at their ancestral protagonists" (1995:265), which is also true of Betsimisaraka. While people took the taboos seriously, they also implied that the ancestors were somewhat unreasonable for having imposed them.
8. Some people request release from their mother's ancestors so that they do not need to follow their taboos; however, other people I knew hotly contested this practice and suggested that to do so was to fail to honor the very person who had given birth to them.
9. My understanding of local genealogies is that they are rather truncated and usually extend only to the eight ancestors (valo ha), who comprise all people. Thus, in addition to remembering, there is clearly a great deal of forgetting that occurs.
10. Betsimisaraka clearly were traumatized, however, at the time of the event. One administrator, in the year following the rebellion, noted that the locals were "filled with lassitude, their faces still haunted by their sufferings," while another noted how their work had a depressed quality. Both observations suggest an emotional tone that is characteristic of trauma victims (see Herman 1992).
11. For a discussion of the exceptions—those villagers who were Forces Vives—see Cole 1996.
12. As confirming evidence of such differences, many Betsimisaraka believe that Malagasy love magic (fanafody gasy) does not work on Europeans. Many a woman had sought to conquer a European man, I was told, but few succeeded. Mysteriously, when applied to Europeans, the magic did not "take" (tsy mandaitra). On the other hand, Betsimisaraka explicitly state that if a European were to live, marry, and die in the area, and take on Betsimisaraka customs, he or she would "become" Betsimisaraka (fasa gasy).
13. When Malagasy customs (fomba gasy) are explicitly opposed to European customs (fomba vazaha), it reflects the outcome of the colonial encounter which, as in so many similar situations (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 1992), made people define more rigidly what their customs were.
14. I wish to thank Gillian Feeley-Harnik for raising this point with me.
15. While it would be easy to see the rebellion as an attempt to expel the French, this interpretation is hard to reconcile with my informants' explicit emphasis on the fact that they had either been tricked into rebelling or forced by the rebel army. Perhaps a more likely example of expulsion is the 1895 rebellion that took place to the west of Mahanoro. Esavelomandroso (1985) suggests that the residents rebelled during the time of transition from Merina to French rule. Their goal was to rid the area of the Merina.
16. This process of directed forgetting is alluded to in a different context by Feeley-Harnik (1991b:47).
17. In fact I was told that if an idiran trano (house cleaning) were not carried out, the unfortunate mix of European and Malagasy elements would “fight” (miady) the inhabitants of the house, who would surely sicken and die.

18. It is tempting to see the practice of fary rano (in Merina, tsodrano) as directed ancestral forgetting. As Graeber points out (1995), blessing and cursing are two sides of the same process, an interpretation that fits well with Betsimisaraka practice.

19. As in other parts of Madagascar (cf. Bloch 1971; Graeber 1996), there is considerable tension between those who remain in the ancestral homeland (tanindrazana) and those who leave in search of wealth, only to return late in life. Because Betsimisaraka tend to migrate less than Merina, the phenomenon is less pronounced for them.

20. I should stress that lifelong residency in the ancestral village is not sufficient grounds by itself to become leader of the ancestral cult; an immense amount depends on personality, particularly the ability to restrain anger. Thus, one man I knew who was structurally ideal for the position was repeatedly denied it because he was a drunkard and often lost his temper.

21. “Manaraka izany dia, i’Zafilahy moa dia zandry nisy zavatra nahazo an-azy amin’ny tsy fidiny natan’Adriamanitra olomebony tsy misolofaka ambonin—tany fa ambonin’tany misolofaka ny, mitanany fanzankana takany izy ka raha natanonany’ny fanzakanana takany izy dia fahasera tsy fihodinana, azahlahy akany ka hanasa hoditra e!!” [Along with that, well, something harmed Zafilahy, it was not his choice but living people make mistakes on earth. The government locked him up and so we wash his skin.]

22. I was told that army officers ask their new recruits what their taboos are and then force them to break them because officers believe soldiers who defy the ancestors will become fierce. It also, of course, suggests that new recruits accept one system of authority in lieu of another.

23. The particular nature of this memory process is highlighted if we contrast Betsimisaraka sacrificial practice with that of the Dinka (Lienhardt 1961). Lienhardt argues that Dinka seek to control past experience by denying that it happened as it did and instead asserting the existential truth of what they wish had occurred. In contrast, Betsimisaraka acknowledge either lapses or breaches of ancestral tradition, but attempt to pledge a restoration of the newly modified social order. Seen comparatively, then, Dinka attempt to erase the past where Betsimisaraka recast its meaning and its moral significance. (I wish to thank Richard Werbner for bringing this comparison to my attention.)

24. It is possible that Jacoba fabricated the story of the faux-tromba and the stolen money as a way to hide his income from his family, who were sure to lay claim to it once he arrived in the village. If so, his plan failed, as the family diviner determined that the primary reason for Jacoba’s illness was that his dead mother was demanding a sacrifice in return for Jacoba’s success. In the end, Jacoba made arrangements for the sacrifice to take place the following year. When I returned in 1997, he had completed the sacrifice as promised.

25. Initially I wondered, given the history of exploitation that Betsimisaraka have suffered at the hands of the state, if their fear did not coexist with anger. Curiously, I have found that anger is an emotion that tends to be downplayed although I assume it must exist. The name Betsimisaraka use to refer to the village collectivity (fokon’olona) is “the many who are not angry” (be tsy vinitra), and in numerous situations they deny feeling anger and instead emphasize their weakness and fear. This emphasis on weakness and fear may be tied to their history as a devolved polity, subject for the last century to outside powers.

26. The name Betsimisaraka is a political slogan used to refer to a group of northern ancestries who banded together for political purposes in the 18th century. Its use was expanded to include the people inhabiting the region to the north of Mananjary during the Merina conquest of the area in the 19th century. It is important to emphasize that Betsimisaraka are a heterogenous lot and my argument is only meant to apply to those Betsimisaraka living in the Mahanoro-Vatomandry region. I suspect that Betsimisaraka in the Marolambo region, for example, which suffered relatively little settler implantation and appropriation of land, might have a very different memory of colonialism.

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