

## WORKING MIS/UNDERSTANDINGS: The Tangled Relationship between Kinship, Franco-Malagasy Binational Marriages, and the French State

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The experientially compelling nature of romantic love and companionate marriage notwithstanding, marriage is neither an entirely individual matter nor an entirely familial one. Rather, marriage has long been central to how states regulate their populations and constitute national belonging. The entangled relationship between marriage, kinship, and nation is particularly visible in France (Robcis 2013; Surkis 2006). During the past several decades, rates of marriage have declined among the majority of the population, replaced by *Pacs* (*Pacte civil de solidarité*) and informal cohabitation; France has one of the lowest marriage rates in northern Europe (Moore 2006). At the same time that marriage ratios have declined, heated public debate about marriage, sexuality, and intimate relations among gays and immigrants have exploded in the public sphere. In the spring of 2013, for example, France passed a marriage bill allowing gay marriage (*marriage pour tous*), amid considerable protest (*Le Monde* 2013). Similarly, forced marriage and polygamy have recurrently surfaced as topics of public concern and discussion, particularly following riots in 2005, which some high-placed French officials blamed on the practice of polygamy (Sciolino 2005).

These controversies index more than contested cultural practices. In the context of growing threats to French sovereignty—including increasing globalization, European integration, regional decentralization, and a visible Muslim immigrant population—these debates have also become the battleground on which

to determine who belongs to the nation and how. The “stakes are not only the sexual order,” Eric Fassin (2008, 104) noted with respect to public discussions about gay marriage, “but also the national family.” In a related vein, Mayanthi Fernando (2013) has argued that recent concern about Muslim women’s sexuality in the *banlieues*, neighborhoods that have become metonymic of Muslim migrants and disorder, registers the French Republic’s efforts to reassert sovereignty and restore authority. More generally, marriage, kinship and sexuality now constitute key sites for the construction and negotiation of the external borders and internal boundaries of French society (D. Fassin 2010).

The way love, marriage, and kinship figure in the negotiation of borders and the policing of French national identity is particularly visible in the case of binational marriages, what the French now refer to as *marriage mixte*. Since the decline in state-sponsored labor migration that occurred in the late 1970s, marriage and the right to family reunification have become one of the few ways for would-be migrants to secure legal entry and citizenship (Ferran 2008; for Europe more generally, see Beck-Gernsheim 2011; Bledsoe and Sow 2011; Charsley 2012; Fernandez 2013; Rytter 2012). Marriage not only enables the immigration of the foreign spouse; it may also enable the couple to invite other family members to immigrate to the couple’s country of residence.

In Europe generally, and in France specifically, efforts to limit immigration have produced a frenzy of legislation seeking to control binational marriage and subsequent family reunification (Charsley 2012; Ferran 2008; Fernandez 2013; Neveu Kringelbach 2013; Rytter 2012). New regulations make them ever more difficult to achieve, even as official pronouncements justify heightened control by demonizing binational marriages and family reunification as no more than clever ploys to gain citizenship (*Le Figaro* 2013). Some policy makers, citing contentious national statistics, also claim that immigrants use marriage as a way to import spouses from their countries of origin (Gaubert 2012; Tribalat 2009). They fear that insofar as such marriages enable the growth of separate, ethnic communities in France, they threaten the French Republican norms of universal, unmarked citizenship (Scott 2007).

In 2006, Pascal Clément, the minister of justice under then president Jacques Chirac, declared that “marriage has come to have enormous migratory stakes. Bringing a spouse to France is one of the major motives for requesting family reunification . . . we have to acknowledge that increasing numbers of cases of fraudulent marriages have been brought to our attention by mayors and consular officers” (cited in Robledo 2011, 1; translation mine). To prevent abuse and

reduce the number of visas granted, the administration extended the probationary period during which a foreign spouse is granted a temporary visa, making it harder for that person to work. The number of years before a foreign spouse can apply for citizenship has also been increased, and new laws make it harder for would-be migrants to come to France on a tourist visa and subsequently regularize their administrative status via marriage, a common practice in the past. In addition, the process of applying for visas and residency cards has become increasingly arbitrary, subject to the whims of officials who decide which foreigners are eligible for marriage on a case-by-case basis (Ferran 2008).

Government and popular discourse on marriage migration and binational marriage has generated two kinds of opposition, one between love and money, the other between “French” and “immigrant” kinship. Historically, both dichotomies emerged in the context of European colonialism and provided the grammar through which colonial powers defined themselves and later sought to manage their relations with their former colonies. As Jonathan Parry (1986) noted in his re-reading of Marcel Mauss, the ideology of a pure gift versus an intrinsically self-interested commodity, of which money is the quintessential example, emerged in tandem with the growth of capitalism and modern social institutions.

In a parallel vein, Elizabeth Povinelli (2006) has argued that during the nineteenth century, “socially exfoliating love”—as she describes the notion of romantic love between two sovereign individuals—grew in prominence throughout Europe. She contends that as marriage founded on romantic love became the dominant way of organizing intimate relations, other social arrangements premised on the more local, material, and potentially instrumentalist demands of kinship (what she calls “genealogy”) were projected outward onto the colonized world.

In the context of contemporary debates about binational marriage and immigration, these oppositions converge to imply that French people have families defined by love, while former colonial subjects, now turned would-be immigrants, have families determined by the pragmatic needs of genealogy. During my fieldwork with coastal Malagasy marriage migrants and their binational, bicultural families in southwestern France, however, it became clear that neither the binary contrast of love versus money nor the opposition between love and genealogy captured the complex processes I observed and participated in.

This essay analyzes the predicaments in which marriage migrants and their families find themselves. I focus especially on the perspective of Malagasy wives. Theirs, however, is only one of three viewpoints necessary to illuminate what is

happening: theirs, their husbands', and that of French immigration law and administration. Consequently, while foregrounding women's experiences, I include all three perspectives to better elucidate the stakes of contemporary binational marriage.<sup>1</sup>

One might expect that marriage between people with different conceptions of family would prove difficult even under the best circumstances. In the case of marriages between Malagasy women and Frenchmen, gross economic inequality between France and Madagascar magnifies these distinctions. And the French administration's deliberate efforts to police binational marriage further complicates the contrasting understandings and social and economic imbalances potentially already present in these unions. In part, such policing occurs when the government seeks to create and mobilize difference, establishing distinctions between French and immigrant ways of marrying and creating families to shore up the boundaries of French identity. I show how as actors attempt to manage their binational marriages, they become drawn into this process, inadvertently naturalizing a hierarchical relationship between France and Madagascar.

### **ALL TRUTHS ARE NOT WORTH TELLING (Toute vérité n'est pas bon à dire)**

Let me begin with a conversation I had one day with two Malagasy women, Vola and Nana, who had both married Frenchmen and moved to France.<sup>2</sup> While we sat and flipped through old photo albums featuring numerous weddings between French men and Malagasy women, First Communion parties, and baptisms at the local Catholic church, Vola recounted with evident pride how she had helped four of her sisters come from Madagascar to France. At the time, just after the turn of the millennium, it had still been possible to come on a tourist visa, marry a French citizen, and petition the French state for a change of visa status, which is what these women did.

As she continued her story, however, it soon became clear that to bring her sisters to France, Vola had to do more than find them husbands. She had also had to negotiate with her own husband, Pierre. Not only did she need Pierre's consent to bring another guest into the household that they shared with his elderly mother but the French government also required his signature on the housing certificate (*certificat d'hébergement*) needed to authorize a tourist visa. A sociable man, Pierre had welcomed the first three women who came. Yet as one and then another and then yet another arrived, filled the bath tub to the rim with piping hot water, and ate expensive packaged food out of the fridge without regard to cost, he

began to complain. Meanwhile, Vola's relatives in Madagascar continued to implore her for help. They told Vola that they had suddenly become aware of another sister, her father's child out of wedlock. Reporting that the girl had started frequenting two well-known nightclubs, and fearing that she was on the slippery path to prostitution, they begged Vola to help her. Sensitive to the need to solidify her status among her family in Madagascar, Vola decided she would try to bring the girl to France. By now, however, Pierre was tired of the impositions. He began to protest, arguing that surely they could not support so many people. In response, Vola drew on the language of kinship that she hoped would persuade him: the girl was her sister, so it would be morally wrong not to assist her. Pierre acquiesced.

It was when I asked Vola if she had ever explained to her husband how she was actually related to the girl that Nana turned to me and said in French, "All truths are not worth telling." I pushed Vola on whether she might not elaborate—after all, her husband seemed like a kind, open-minded man. Her response was curt: "You know the French, for them, family means your mother, your father, your husband, your children, that's it. You're lucky if even a sibling counts."

Vola's statement "you're lucky if even a sibling counts" reveals her familiarity with French immigration law, which only deems children and spouses eligible for family reunification (Ferran 2008). Though Pierre's views did not perfectly replicate those instantiated in French legislation (after all, he allowed Vola's three sisters to come knowing they would likely overstay their tourist visas), Vola knew that as resources became scarce and tensions grew, he was likely to find the claims of a full sister more compelling than those of a person to whom, from his perspective, she was only tenuously related. Rather than elaborate the fine points of Malagasy kinship, Vola likened her relationship to the girl to a French notion of kinship she thought more likely to elicit Pierre's sympathy; obligations to a full sister trump those to an illegitimate half sister.

Vola's and Nana's adoption of the French aphorism that "all truths are not worth telling" might be taken to suggest that the government's fears are well founded. Certainly, women find the promise of French citizenship and the ability to improve their own and their families' lives one of the marriage's attractions. Yet this interpretation fails to recognize a number of important points. To start with, many of the men who marry Malagasy women do not have an easy time finding wives; in many cases they rely on these women's productive and caring labor for their own physical and economic well-being. Moreover, not only do many of these marriages last a long time—far longer than the approximately five

years that it takes to acquire French citizenship—but in many cases the French husbands and Malagasy wives are involved in various kinds of complex, joint projects, including rearing children, caring for elderly parents, running businesses, and building second homes in Madagascar. The combination of mutual need, sustained day-to-day interactions, and shared long-term projects suggest something rather more complicated than the commodification of marriage and citizenship.

### WORKING MIS/UNDERSTANDINGS AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF MARRIAGE MIGRATION

I use the idea of a *working misunderstanding* to analyze these complex cultural processes, a term that I borrow from the legal anthropologist Paul Bohannan (see also Livingston 2007 and Tsing 2005 for the equally useful term *productive misunderstanding*). Bohannan (1965) used a “working misunderstanding” to capture the slippages and disjunctions between how Nigerians and British colonial officials, whose relations were mediated by different legal regimes, sometimes produced commonly acceptable outcomes. In his framing, the working misunderstanding typically referred to an oppositional encounter between two groups, a view no longer tenable without attention to the multiple cross-cutting interests that characterized both colonizers and colonized (Comaroff 1989; Stoler 1989).

Despite legitimate criticisms, Bohannan’s term has merit.<sup>3</sup> In what follows, I make complex, cross-cutting interests and tensions central to the concept by attending to the entangled relationships among French law and public discourse, French husbands’ vernacular practices of marriage and kinship, and the marriage and kinship practices of Malagasy wives. To signal these cross-cutting interests, I use the term *working mis/understanding*. Working mis/understandings between people holding differing amounts of power, such as colonial subjects and colonizers, are never perfectly symmetrical. Nor are the relationships between Malagasy women and their French husbands. Malagasy women start as astute observers of French family life and want their French husbands and the wider community to accept them. By contrast, their husbands, who enjoy a position of relative power, have less incentive and fewer opportunities to fully understand either their wives’ ways of building and conceptualizing family or their motivations. Nevertheless, insofar as they are engaged in joint projects of family formation, these husbands and wives must coordinate their actions. To do so, Malagasy women and their French husbands use their knowledge of French kinship and

Malagasy culture to effectively translate their notions of family for one another, in the shadow of state categories.

Malagasy wives view kin relations expansively, often seeking to grow social networks that stretch from Madagascar to France (Cole 2014). French husbands have a more restricted vision of who counts as kin, focused primarily on the nuclear family. They often seek to limit the connections that their wives want to build, expecting their wives to prioritize their relations with their conjugal, rather than their natal, families. As men and women seek to negotiate their different visions of family, French immigration law and public discourse intervene to further complicate their efforts. Fearful that they will be accused of using marriage to obtain citizenship and its material benefits, Malagasy women need to explain their ongoing commitments to their Malagasy kin in ways that their husbands and French families will recognize and interpret as morally legitimate. To do so, these women play strategically on ambiguities in Malagasy kinship, selectively emphasizing certain aspects and downplaying others to represent their claims in a way their husbands will understand. Men may respond inclusively, as their wives wish them to, but they do not necessarily do so in the same terms that their wives present. Instead, they interpret their wives' kinship practices through their own frameworks for understanding family life, cultural difference, and historical change. The working mis/understanding they create frequently reproduces and naturalizes the hierarchical relationship presumed to connect France and Madagascar. Paradoxically, it reinforces cultural boundaries even as it enables the movement of people, goods, and ideas between the two countries.

Attending to the working mis/understandings that characterize Franco-Malagasy marriages illuminates some of the complex cultural processes that shape contemporary cross-border marriage and migration. Scholars generally agree that marriage, love, and sexuality have all become part of the language and practices of border control in contemporary France (Ticktin 2009; E. Fassin 2010; Fernando 2013; Maskens 2013; Neveu-Kringelbach 2013). Meanwhile, studies of so-called mail-order brides in other parts of the world have debunked the stereotype of gold-digging wives by demonstrating the complex blend of affective and pragmatic interests that characterize binational marriage, much as any other (Constable 2003; Zelizer 2005; Parreñas 2011). They have also examined the agentic ways that marriage migrants negotiate their circumstances, despite powerful social and economic constraints (Constable 2003; Faier 2007, 2009; Freeman 2011). By showing how spouses' efforts to actively negotiate their relationships in the context of state regulation occasionally produce the commodification of intimacy that

state officials imply are intrinsic to these marriages, the working mis/understanding illuminates the interconnected nature of these different processes. These points only become clear, however, when scholars studying marriage migration expand their analytic framework to move beyond the unit of the couple to consider the other kinds of relationships and complex socialities that are all, so to speak, in the marriage bed.

### **CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY: Malagasy Women and French Men**

Why do coastal Malagasy women and French men seek one another out as marriage partners? In part the answer lies in the way economic hardship and dwindling opportunities in Madagascar converge with the need for care among an aging, semirural population in France. Ongoing poverty in Madagascar has torn at families' efforts to sustain themselves. Along the east coast, men are expected to support women financially, while women, in turn, are supposed to use the resources they acquire in part from men to sustain networks of their own. As a result, economic hardship has exacerbated long-standing tensions in gender relations (Cole 2010). In response, coastal women have increasingly sought to marry foreign men. Most women find their husbands either through personal connections or Internet marriage agencies. Women often engage in Internet correspondence with several different men, hoping that a marriage will eventually work out. Alternatively, they may beseech a sister, aunt, or cousin who lives in France to find a French husband for them, either among their friends or by placing an ad in a local newspaper. They hope that these relationships will allow them to achieve the standards of valued feminine adulthood to which they aspire. Most families greet the news of a daughter's prospective marriage to a European with joy because they expect the attendant resources and opportunities to flow to them, at least in part. When women are successful, their marriages position them as important nodes in networks of material and affective exchange.

Not unlike their wives, the French men, too, see marriage to a Malagasy woman as an opportunity to reposition themselves within existing networks of exchange, though they imagine the nature and patterning of those exchanges differently. Although Franco-Malagasy couples live scattered throughout France, they tend to concentrate in semirural areas like the country's southwest or Brittany. The southwest, of course, is where [Pierre Bourdieu \(2008\)](#) famously analyzed the plight of rural bachelors trapped on their farms while young women flocked to the city. Based on research carried out in the 1960s, his poignant analysis revealed how rural French men, typically younger sons, were unable to



attract wives and thus could not marry and reproduce, becoming a casualty of France's economic modernization. Today there are far fewer family farms than when Bourdieu did his research. Nevertheless, the men who marry Malagasy women are in many ways the sociological descendants of his informants. Most of them come from modest backgrounds; a few are peasants, but many are low-level government employees, small business owners, or artisans.

What Bourdieu's examination of marriage strategies in the southwest omitted was that even in the 1960s the potential marriage market extended beyond metropolitan France, even if such unions were rare at the time. Starting at the turn of the century, the *Chasseur Français*, a hunting magazine for men and one of the first magazines to run *petites annonces* (personal ads), circulated throughout rural France, the overseas departments, and the colonies. Many older men remember learning about Madagascar in school, since it is a former French colony. Others learn about Madagascar either on the Internet, through television shows, or through tourism.

These husbands generally complain that changes in French society have made French women "egotistical" (*trop égoïste*) or "too individual" (*trop individuelle*), by which they usually mean that women are too materialistic and no longer interested in fulfilling traditional gender roles within the household, a complaint that echoes those leveled at modern French women after World War I (Camiscioli 2009). They usually turn to Madagascar hoping that Malagasy women are more likely to accept a modest income or are more willing to adopt traditional gender roles than their French peers. One man recounted how numerous potential marriage partners had told him that they would only marry him if he agreed to leave his farm, while he specifically sought a woman who tolerated hard work. Another, who had been widowed and then eventually married his much younger Malagasy girlfriend (who had divorced her first French husband), quipped that he would no longer need to go to a retirement home in his old age. His remark was made in jest, but given that most Malagasy women are much younger than their husbands and that they often find work in retirement homes caring for elderly French people, it might well become a reality. This man also speculated that his children were relieved that he had not married a locally born French woman, someone more likely to know about, and to claim, her legal rights in the marriage.

As this final remark makes clear, Malagasy women and French men hold unequal positions with respect to French citizenship, knowledge of French social life, and the material resources that they bring to their marriages. Nevertheless, these alliances potentially hold complementary rewards for both parties. Women

ideally gain companionship, citizenship, and practical help from their husbands to grow and sustain their family relations in both France and Madagascar. French men, in turn, gain lively, hardworking wives who willingly engage in more traditional forms of gendered care, including looking after their aging in-laws. Insofar as these marriages concern the mutual fulfillment of complementary needs, they resemble any other. But these French men and Malagasy women also have somewhat different understandings of family and the kinds of obligations that tie kin together. These contending visions of who counts as family and what kin relations entail contribute to a complex set of hurdles they must overcome.

### STATE INTERVENTIONS: Gray Marriages and Clarifying the Couple

One of the reasons that these partly overlapping and partly different notions of kin and family create tensions, however, is that the French administration employs particular notions of kinship, marriage, and family, in combination with particular bureaucratic practices, to regulate immigrants' ability to enter and settle in France. As Vola's bitter remark, "You're lucky if even a sibling counts," implied, French law restricts the kin relationships eligible for family reunification to persons related through birth or marriage. Many administrative practices also generate a culture of suspicion regarding these marriages, thereby demarcating them from other marriages and further contributing to the perception of difference (on the culture of suspicion, see also [Maskens 2013](#)).

The administrative practices surrounding so-called gray marriage (*mariage gris*) offer one striking example of how the French state intervenes in the intimate lives of binational couples. First popularized in 2009 by Eric Besson, then minister of the newly created Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Co-Development under President Sarkozy, the term *gray marriage* appeared as yet another category to capture the nuances of fraudulent wedlock, generating further concern about the practice. Whereas in the "white marriage" (*mariage blanc*) the two parties mutually agree to marry so that one of the spouses may obtain citizenship, in a gray marriage one person takes advantage of the other, luring them into marriage by pretending to be in love. Naturally, it is the foreign spouse who is presumed to trick the French partner.

In 2010, mayors, whose duty it is to perform civil marriages throughout France, received notices alerting them to the dangers of gray marriage and marriage fraud. One circular emphasized that since marriage was supposed to be premised on the desire to share family life, marriages contracted with an eye to

practical benefits like citizenship, inheritance, or a professional advantage constituted marriages of convenience (Ministère de la justice et des libertés 2010). Note that according to the circular, marriage is “primarily” about “living together and sharing family life.” Though it is hard to imagine a family in which people do not share resources or enjoy “practical benefits,” the official French definition renders practical benefits a secondary effect.

Although these new laws and directives are not always uniformly interpreted or applied (Spire 2005), mayors and consular officials have stepped up their efforts to determine the real nature of binational couples’ intentions. Binational couples wishing to marry and reside in France must painstakingly document the “will to share family life” by providing concrete proof of their relationships, including shared electricity and phone bills, phone records, love letters, and the like. French officials may ask binational couples where the couple lives, how they met, the composition of the spouse’s family, information on where the spouse comes from, and what they do for a living. Immigration police may also cite suspicion of marriage fraud to justify entering and searching people’s homes. Mayors, meanwhile, have been known to use gray marriage as a pretext to refuse to perform a marriage that they disapprove of, while consular officials may invoke the suspicion of a gray marriage as justification for refusing a visa.

Bureaucratic efforts to prevent gray marriages, and the state’s reinforcement of a narrow (one commentator even referred to it as “skimpy”) definition of the nuclear family, institutionalize suspicion of foreign spouses and of so-called mixed marriages. Particularly in binational unions between African women and French men, the state’s discourse authorizes the view that these marriages represent an inappropriate commodification of intimate relations. Though only rarely verbalized, the discourse exacerbates existing xenophobia. By emphasizing the self-interested, materialistic intentions of migrants, it fosters the fear that the foreign spouse will trick the French one, perhaps claiming an inheritance that rightfully belongs to other French family members, and then use the newly acquired French citizenship to bring over other people from the country of origin, forming a separate community within France. Were a younger Malagasy woman to seduce, marry, and abandon a hapless French farmer, it would hurt the man and the family in question, to be sure. If the woman then brought over a Malagasy husband or other family members to build a separate Malagasy ethnic community in France, it would violate French Republican norms (Scott 2007).

The specter of gray marriage, improper kinship, and failed integration haunt the efforts of Malagasy women and French men to build families. Although most

of the Malagasy women I worked with had already gained citizenship, they nevertheless found that their French husbands, in-laws, and the wider community often still judged their motives with suspicion. Their ideals of what it means to be married, their belief that husbands *should* give them gifts or money to show love and respect, and their desire to help their Malagasy kin because that is how one expresses love and accrues moral value in the wider Malagasy community may all be met with disapproval. French men, meanwhile, figure ambivalently both as gatekeepers and as dupes. They are gatekeepers because French law requires them to sign the foreign spouse's visa papers or other legal documents and because they are expected by those around them to make sure their wives adopt French norms. They are potential dupes because they choose to marry and invest resources in women who they may find appealing, but whom many believe will only trick them and take their money. Indeed, public sentiment and discourse portray a Frenchman's choice to marry a Malagasy woman as a foolhardy mistake. Men who want to marry Malagasy women resent the obstacles that the French state puts in their path. Often, however, they cannot quite shake the fear that they are perhaps being tricked.

### **WORKING MIS/UNDERSTANDINGS: An Anatomy**

It should be clear by now that French law's narrow definition of what constitutes a legitimate marriage and which kin should be eligible for family reunification conflict with Malagasy women's ideals of what it means to be a good wife, mother, sister, or daughter. Although many of the French husbands' notions of family differ from those imposed by French immigration law, the French state's version of marriage and family, which emphasizes romantic love and the nuclear family, nevertheless aligns better with their vision of correct kin practice than it does with those held by their Malagasy wives. As a result, women find themselves forced to frame their relationships with their Malagasy kin in ways that they hope their husbands will recognize and perceive as worthy of support. To examine this process further, I explore how women interpret their kin practices for men and how men, in turn, respond.

### **Malagasy Wives' Interpretations: Flexible Kin Categories and Tradition**

When Vola's kin in Madagascar asked her to help her half sister, Vola faced a dilemma. Coastal Malagasy kinship is bilateral, so children ideally maintain ties with both their mother's and their father's families, though people place more

weight on kinship traced through men. In daily life, the relations that matter most are typically those formed by the siblings born to a couple, who have in turn grown up, married, borne children, and succeeded in uniting their descendants around them. Divorce is frequent, and both men and women often marry and have children with more than one partner. Since children belong to both their mother's and their father's families, any individual has a lot of choice in terms of which kin relations to cultivate. Moreover, Malagasy kin categories only distinguish between people of different generations, the sex of the speaker and of the person referred to, and immediate affinity (Bloch 1971), making it easy to assimilate almost anyone to the category of either a parent or child or a sister or brother.

In theory, people equally recognize all kin with whom they share ascendants, though in practice this is never the case. To make distinctions among kin implies exclusion, lack of care, and the withholding of support; it is not only rude but also morally suspect. Josefina, a Malagasy woman who had been married to a stonemason, made the relationship between the use of particular kin terms and people's social commitments clear by comparing how she thought about her own Malagasy family connections with what she interpreted as French practice. We had been talking about a female relative, and I kept trying to figure out how Josefina was actually related to the woman in question. Exasperated by my queries, Josefina remarked, "In France you know, people say *onton* [uncle], *fils de tonton* [my uncle's son], they say *cousin éloigné* [distant cousin]! That is like saying that your family is far away! But I call her my close kin. She is like my sister. French people would say she is my cousin, not my sister, because she doesn't have the same mother and father as me, but our grandmother is the same." I intervened here, "What, why can't you call her cousin?" Josefina wrinkled her nose at me with distaste: "It makes distinctions. You don't distinguish among kin like that—it's rude. We're not like the French who talk about distant cousins." Similarly, another Malagasy woman complained, "Those French, for them, kinship must be *direct* [inserting the French word into Malagasy]. Others, such as your brother, do not count."

Although Josefina and Vola exaggerate the degree to which Malagasy never "make distinctions," their complaints regarding their husbands' and in-law's propensity to draw attention to invidious differences among kin capture what Malagasy view as the French preference for restricting who counts as family to a small, primarily nuclear core. Their husbands mainly agreed, although they did occasionally make allowance for parents-in-law. Many French husbands empha-

sized that for them, family usually referred to their parents and siblings and then their spouses and children. As François explained when I asked him which relatives he included when he used the term *family*, “Well, there are two, the one you grow up with and the one you marry into—your spouse and children.” I pushed him further, asking about cousins. He insisted that really only first cousins mattered, a view that corresponded with what I saw among those families who still farmed, where it was usually immediate family, first cousins, and hired laborers who helped with harvests.

But what François’s depiction of who counts as family obscures, is that in many cases these men live either with, or very close to, their parents, usually their mothers. Historically, throughout much of the southwest, the youngest son (often the only son) was supposed to take care of his aging parents in exchange for inheriting the family farm, while his sisters were given their share of the inheritance as part of a dowry at marriage (Bourdieu 2008). Today, as the economy grows more service oriented and the population ages, the burden of care still often falls on the sons. Sometimes the parents live alone, while their children and their families live nearby. In other cases, however, a mother may continue to live with her son and his wife; she may even control some aspect of the family finances. Men also often marry late, in their thirties and forties, and their mothers sometimes continue to care for them in intimate ways—buying their underwear, for example, or bringing over groceries—long into adulthood. Most Malagasy women are prepared to care for their in-laws, proudly noting that they came from a culture where the elderly are respected, but they rarely tolerate their mother-in-law controlling the household finances. They usually find the intimate connection between mother and son (evidenced in the purchase of underwear) strange, if not repugnant, interpreting it as a partial usurpation of their role. As these details about French mothers-in-law suggest, family reunification law’s emphasis on the nuclear family foregrounds some relationships within French families and occludes others.

In keeping with the Malagasy emphasis on siblings, and the moral imperative to treat them equally, Vola believed that since she had already helped three of her sisters come to France, she was obligated to assist this last one too, especially since the girl appeared to be in a vulnerable situation. But Vola also had a choice, and she knew it. Malagasy often use kin terms according to how they wish to transform particular social situations (Bloch 1971). Vola could choose to define the girl as a close relation (a sister), thereby emphasizing their similarity and paving the way for her to come to France. Alternatively, she could choose to

portray the girl as an accidental half sister she barely knew, thus emphasizing their difference and blocking the girl's chance for entry. Though the exact terms of this choice are specific, Vola had likely made analogous decisions about how to frame kin relations before. Vola and Josefina complained about French peoples' propensity to use kin terms to make distinctions and withhold resources, but in some circumstances they, too, used kin categories to create distance—just not in the same ways. They strategically selected categories to grow some connections and diminish others; if they had it their way, they would include their sisters and marginalize their mothers-in-law. In this case, Vola categorized the girl as her sister not only to help the girl but also to gain the respect of her Malagasy kin and grow her Malagasy network within France. She claimed that the French term *sœur* (sister) and the Malagasy term *rahavavy* (sister) referred to the same semantic field, even though she knew that *rahavavy* covered a wider range of kin than her husband would have recognized as *sœur*. She built a working mis/understanding premised on the gap between Malagasy and French definitions of the term *sister* to smuggle in—literally—a relative whom she deemed important but whom Pierre would almost certainly not have counted.

Not only do women need their husbands to recognize their kin's claims; they also occasionally need to gain a husband's support for their participation in ancestral ceremonies in Madagascar. Most of these women still see the ancestors as an important source of blessing; they fear that failure to participate in these rituals will incur ancestral wrath and compromise their position with living kin. Yet asking husbands for financial support can be difficult given that French men are not always sympathetic to the needs of extended Malagasy families and may further dismiss women's desire for participation as frivolous or unnecessary. Therefore women often invoke a vague notion of tradition to justify their requests.

Josefina made this aspect of the working misunderstanding particularly clear one day while we were preparing lunch. She recounted how a few years earlier, her deceased grandmother had appeared to her in a dream, a sign that she was upset that Josefina had left for France without supplicating the ancestors at their tomb. As a result, Josefina had felt compelled to perform a cattle sacrifice on her most recent trip home. To gain her husband's consent for the journey, and to get him to give her some of the money she needed to buy a costly bull in preparation for the ceremony, Josefina simply told him, "I need to do our traditions." She continued, "Even me, I don't explain to Eric, because he doesn't want to believe. Malgache don't explain too much to Europeans [*vazaha*]. All of us, with our husbands, we don't explain. They won't look or care [Tsy jiren-

drô]. Me, I believe in things [Je crois les choses]. Countries are different [Les pays ne sont pas pareils] . . . here it's not like that, but there it's like that." Hoping that her husband would understand and respect her request, Josefina simply referred to tradition.

Though these rituals are traditions in the sense of practices inherited from the past, they are not exactly tradition as French conventional understanding would have it. What most women do not say, but what any Malagasy knows, is that these rituals perpetuate the power of the past in the present, enlivening and renewing people's contemporary kin connections. When women contribute to a sacrifice or when they help their families rebuild their ancestral tombs, they reenergize the power of their kin connections, as well as the social status of the men who control access to the ancestors, including their brothers. Among coastal Malagasy, a preference for sons to remain close to home converges with Malagasy men's fear that French women will exclude their kin to produce a pattern where it is almost always sisters who marry and migrate to France and brothers who stay in Madagascar. Sisters, in turn, are expected to help their brothers. French husbands often protest if brothers, particularly, demand support beyond what they find acceptable (recall one woman's bitter comment about how brothers do not count for French people). French men's belief that men should work and not accept handouts makes Malagasy brothers' expectations of their sisters' help all the more suspect. But ancestral rituals and the material investments that accompany them ensure the periodic flow of resources from sisters to brothers or from migrants to those remaining at home. Consequently, a sister's return and reinvestment in ancestral rituals may build her brother's or another male relative's power and authority in terms of local Malagasy social relations.

#### **FRENCH HUSBANDS' INTERPRETATIONS: The Way We Were**

When women strategically define half sisters or cousins as sisters or gloss their participation in ancestral ceremonies as tradition, they seek recognition from their husbands for their ways of building families and nurturing social relations. When they are successful, their husbands respond positively. Many men readily adopt their wives' Malagasy children from previous relationships, participate in their wives' efforts to marry off their sisters to other Frenchmen, perhaps sifting through piles of responses to matrimonial ads to see if the respondent is satisfactory husband material or not, or contribute to the support of their in-laws in Madagascar. In short, they help their wives achieve the goal of becoming someone who can "give life" (*mahamelona*) to others in Madagascar. However, even when



men respond positively, they do not always interpret their wives' explanations according to the frameworks offered by their wives. After all, husbands have their own cultural schemas for understanding large families or what it means to participate in traditions. The way they do so obscures some of the ways that these women "give life" to them as well.

For example, men often interpret women's kin practices by likening them to what French family life looked like in the past. Recall that many of these men are fifty, sixty, or even seventy years old. Not only do most come from modest roots but many of them grew up right after World War II, at a time when France was far less wealthy than today. Many husbands recall closer relations with cousins, aunts, and uncles in the not-too-distant past of their own childhoods. They assume that economic hardship promotes kin connections while affluence encourages separation. One man, who had been married to his Malagasy wife for twenty years, made this point clear to me when I remarked that many women insisted that French people were individualistic and uninterested in kin. "No, you see, they have only come recently, so they only see how we live now, but when I grew up, we were with my cousins all the time. They lived right near our farm. And my grandmother, in the country, she didn't have running water, just like in Laurelie's [his wife's] mother's village." Similarly, reflecting on his wife's stories of family life in Madagascar, Pierre remarked, "It's like when I was little, my parents and I, we lived with my grandparents." He then went on to say that during his youth, they had not lived as separately from their family as people did now, and that his parents had raised a poor cousin. By recalling a version of what French families used to be like fifty years earlier when they were young, and relating it to present Malagasy kin practice, these men construct a template for interpreting their wives' current concerns sympathetically.

Men's responses to women's invocations of tradition reveal a related, albeit somewhat different dynamic. Both [Anne Allison \(1994\)](#) and [Rhacel Parreñas \(2011\)](#) have shown how Japanese businessmen who feel emasculated at work may turn to hostess clubs to reassert a sense of masculinity and class superiority. Though these Frenchmen occupy a different position in the social hierarchy than their Japanese counterparts, they share with them an awareness of their own comparative marginality. During several of the dinners at Pirette's house after the grape harvest, her husband and his cousins, who had come to lend a hand, told me that nobody handpicked their grapes anymore and that their way of life was "dying out." Pirette's husband and three of his cousins had all married women from either Madagascar or Cuba, in part because they needed women who would

tolerate life on the farm: they were keenly aware of their comparatively marginal social position within France and of the fact that for many they embodied a relic from the past.

Much as Japanese men enjoy the aggrandizement provided by hostesses, French men may enjoy supporting their wives' continued engagement with tradition because of how it enables them to shore up a fragile modern subject position through their spouses. By occupying the role of the generous patron, the man also occupies a superior, more modern position in relation to his wife. Some sought to rationalize their wives' desire to participate in ceremonies by taking a quasi-Durkheimian position. They argued that their spouses' wishes to participate in ceremonies resulted from social pressure; husbands may bow to the demand to make their wives happy, but they see the practice as irrational. One husband, who clearly thought he had helped his wife one too many times, expressed frustration that his spouse continued to be so concerned with Madagascar after having lived more than half her adult life in France. When she announced her family's request for help, he responded, "Oh, you Malagasy, you are just so complicated. You waste our time [on silly things]. Learn how to live! You are in France. Forget Madagascar. Don't complicate your life. Always thinking of Madagascar. You live in France. You are French. So live here." He eventually agreed to participate, but only grudgingly. Others, however, showed more enthusiasm. When Alain helped Pirette with money to carry out a sacrifice to inaugurate her house, for example, he enjoyed performing the role of an open-minded patron who supported his hardworking wife in turn. But he might have been less likely to do so had she elaborated on how his money was also helping her male kin at home.

### **BREAKDOWN: The Reappearance of State Categories**

We have seen how the working mis/understanding that men and women create fosters connections and the movement of money, goods, and people from France to Madagascar and vice versa. At the same time, however, it reinforces the differences thought to distinguish the two countries. Consequently, when a working mis/understanding breaks down, the state's categories of marriage fraud (re)appear as powerful explanations of the difference already assumed. The painfully harsh notions of love versus money and conniving migrants displace the subtler ways of framing kin practices that real women and men have built in their day-to-day relationships.

A story recounted by Eudoxie, a woman who was married to and had two children with Jean-François, a man twenty years her senior, reveals how the

dichotomies of love and money, central to narratives of marriage migration, emerge in moments of conflict. Eudoxie and Jean-François lived off of his retirement and the stipend the French state gave to Eudoxie for caring for her mother-in-law, who stayed with them. Jean-François collected cars and loved to race. One day, without having discussed the matter with his wife, Jean-François announced that he wanted to sell the house in Madagascar at the same time that he sold off one of their sports cars, so that he could buy a tow truck for hauling other cars. Owning a house in Madagascar, preferably a big, modern house built of cement, is by far Malagasy women's most sought-after symbol of success, and obligatory for any woman married to a Frenchman. Eudoxie knew that if she sold the house, her family and neighbors in Madagascar would assume that it was because of financial difficulties; Eudoxie found the mere thought of being—or appearing to be—in such circumstances deeply shaming. Furious that Jean-François had sold the sports car without consulting her and anxious about the prospect of losing the house, Eudoxie accused him of selfishly thinking only of his pleasure and not of the family's well-being. In the ensuing fight, Jean-François accused Eudoxie of wanting him only for his money, bitterly remarking, "Your mask has fallen." The implication was that her well-managed façade had been ripped away to reveal the materialistic and conniving migrant lurking beneath.

I quote the argument that followed, repeated to me on the phone moments after it had occurred, because it makes the terms of the marriage unusually explicit, revealing how the state's efforts to regulate migrants and the discourse of gray marriage help produce the working mis/understanding through which marriages often operate. When Jean-François observed that her "mask had fallen," Eudoxie replied:

Why would I have stayed with you all this time? You're crazy. You only think of your pleasure, while I have done everything for you. I'm still young. I can still find another husband. You think I'm going to be your nurse in your old age? It's not Eudoxie who will be mistreated by a European [*vazaha*]! It is not Eudoxie who will be commanded. It is not Eudoxie who will be treated as the second. It is not Eudoxie who will be treated like a slave. My sins? I send a little money to Madagascar, I buy clothes, but I don't spend that much. How can you say my mask has fallen?

In this fight, the specter of the marriage migrant who cares only for her own interests and those of her native family looms large. But so, too, does the largely unspoken idea that men use these marriages to arrange for care in their old age

on the cheap, a “practical benefit” that neither French mothers-in-law nor state officials or the husbands themselves ever seem to question.

### **CONCLUSION: Marriage Migration and Postcolonial Relations**

As the argument between Eudoxie and Jean-François illustrates, official discourse shapes family life long after citizenship has been acquired. Cultural economies of kinship, intimate relations, and state regulatory practices all intertwine to shape the process of marriage migration and the subsequent patterning of social relations that emerge. By promoting discourses like that of the gray marriage, certain groups within the French administration contribute to a French culture of racism and xenophobia that constitutes a politics of tradition every bit as important to these marriages and the projects of female migrants as the demands of the Malagasy ancestors. They do so by creating the categories and setting the terms with which migrants—and even the French men who want to marry them—must continually negotiate. As a result, they become part of how these couples imagine their relationships to one another. In the Franco-Malagasy case, Malagasy wives navigate between the state’s terms, their own visions of what it means to be a good mother, daughter, or sister, and their French husbands’ notions of what constitutes family life. They strategically play on the ambiguities that are central to their ways of reckoning kin relations, framing their kin practices in terms that they hope their husbands will recognize as legitimate. Their French husbands, however, use their own interpretive schemas, likening their wives’ ways of practicing family to the French families of their youth or to their ideas of what tradition entails. Together, they produce a way of interacting that satisfies (Simon 1957), producing an imperfect but workable outcome that enables women to honor their commitments as daughters, sisters, and mothers in Madagascar and care for and contribute to their French families as well, bridging and sustaining both rural French and coastal Malagasy social worlds.

The emergent blend is not a happy masala, nor is it a household-level multicultural formation in which each party has equal claims to its cultural traditions and conceptions of kin. Rather it appears more like an informal version of the older graduated forms of citizenship that used to exist within French colonies, where different groups had different rights and were hierarchically linked to one another. This conclusion coincides with a growing consensus among scholars that the French state’s efforts to limit immigration from the former colonies has contributed to new, stratified ways of categorizing the population and granting

citizenship that are evident across a variety of different state institutions and contexts (see Bertaux 2013; E. Fassin 2010; Mbembe 2009; Ticktin 2011).<sup>4</sup>

When we add the working mis/understandings through which Franco-Malagasy marriages operate to these observations, it suggests that this dynamic of unequal incorporation may also be reproduced even when men and women deliberately try to build relations across state-imposed divides, revealing how men and women inadvertently contribute to these processes. Both parties play on gaps between official French, vernacular French, and coastal Malagasy understandings and valuations of kin relations or the meaning of tradition. But the models of relatedness and tradition that men reach for first also reinscribe a developmental historical trajectory in which the kinds of kinship practiced by contemporary Malagasy appear as an outdated version of what family life used to be like in France. The direction in which these translations occur contribute to what Johannes Fabian (1983) termed a lack of co-evalness, reinforcing the evolutionary, colonial hierarchy in which France always figures as more modern than Madagascar. As a result, Malagasy women can only gain recognition of their norms when they remain positioned in the past; they are unlikely to be considered both modern and Malagasy, and they certainly cannot be both Malagasy and French.

By reinterpreting relationships in terms of much older, long-standing ideas about culture and evolution, the working mis/understanding that Malagasy women and French men forge with one another further naturalizes some of the structural inequalities already inherent in these binational relationships. For the moment, the terms of recognition and belonging are neither egalitarian nor entirely inclusive. But from the perspective of the women who come to Europe, unequal connection informed by a colonial, evolutionary hierarchy is far better than having no connection at all.

#### ABSTRACT

*Marriage migration and family reunification have become one of the few ways for migrants from former French colonies to gain legal entry to France. As a result, love, marriage, and kinship have become central to the politics of contemporary border control. Based on extensive research with Franco-Malagasy families in southwestern France, this article examines how couples negotiate the complexities of their binational relationships in the context of state-fostered xenophobia and suspicion. I suggest the analytic of a working mis/understanding to capture how these marriages operate. While at one level the working mis/understanding enables Malagasy women and French men to bridge their different notions of kinship, at another level it naturalizes a long-standing colonial relationship between France and Madagascar. I further*

consider how the sociocultural dynamics of the working mis/understanding illuminate how state regulations produce the commodification of intimate relations allegedly intrinsic to these marriages. [marriage; citizenship; politics of immigration; working misunderstanding; kinship; France; Madagascar]

## NOTES

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1. Yet a fourth perspective, one that I do not include here, is that of the children produced in these marriages, as well as that of children from the prior marriages of either spouse. I hope to address the issue of children and their conceptions of kinship and belonging in future publications.
2. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.
3. Bohannan's latter characterization of the colonial encounter as a kind of miscommunication has drawn criticism (Hoppe 1996), because his choice of metaphor can obscure the power relations that underpinned the colonial situation.
4. Writing about the unintended consequences of the illness clause, an addition to French immigration law that allows a person with a serious, life-threatening illness to stay in France, Ticktin (2011, 156), for example, argues that the law "create[s] and maintain[s] a racialized post-colonial nation-state, where minorities are named and rendered visible in French society primarily by taking on the form of gendered and racialized victims."

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