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The *téléphone malgache*:

Transnational gossip and social transformation among Malagasy marriage migrants in France

ABSTRACT

Deepening poverty in Madagascar leads Malagasy coastal women to marry Frenchmen as a way to migrate to France. The *téléphone malgache*, an informal organizational and communicative structure, connects these marriage migrants to each other and to their families in Madagascar. Drawing from studies of gossip, on the one hand, and telecommunications, on the other, I argue that the *téléphone malgache* creates highly unstable social ties that regulate and transform Malagasy matrimonial migrants' relationships with one another, their French families, and their Malagasy families back home. I show how the relations that women maintain with one another in France and with their kin in Madagascar are aspects of a single process. Far from simply connecting people to their homelands, these relationships also shape migrants' integration into French society. [*matrimonial migration, gossip, social networks, secrecy, communication, Madagascar, Africa*]

I learned about the *téléphone malgache* by accident. A Malagasy friend, Nana, and I had spent the afternoon at another Malagasy woman's house in the small French town where the woman lived.¹ We chatted companionably with Claudette, our hostess. Claudette recounted her adventures with her ex-boyfriend in Madagascar and how she met and married her French husband. Despite the French state's efforts to limit immigration, which has made it increasingly difficult for foreign spouses of French citizens to obtain visas, Claudette had succeeded in using French family reunification policies to join her husband. By the time I met her, she had lived in France for several years, where she worked caring for elderly people. Nana and Claudette, who lived and worked in French families and sometimes felt lonely, were clearly delighted to find one another. They spent a good deal of the visit establishing that they were really from the same tiny village in northern Madagascar, despite having lived in many other places. Claudette promised that she would check on any possible kinship connections between them when she returned to Madagascar the following week to visit her ailing mother. She then made sure we stayed for a *goûter*, a late-afternoon snack. With evening coming on and a long drive back to our respective homes ahead, we left after eating.

Later that night, another Malagasy woman, Florence, called Claudette to chat. Florence, whom Nana and I had met at a party the week before, told Claudette she thought we must be journalists. Claudette began to panic. Fearing that we might use her personal information to jeopardize her marriage, as had happened to women like her in the past, Claudette called Hortensia, yet another friend, who tried to calm her. Hortensia, in turn, called Nana. To avert possible conflict between Nana and Claudette, she warned Nana that Claudette was distressed, a method of indirect communication that people frequently use when they know someone is angry and want to prevent conflict. Her warning, however, was too late. Nana called Claudette to reassure her but, unfortunately, was met with what is called a "paquet"—words so cruel and sharp that they wound the person who receives them, temporarily or permanently stopping all social interaction.

The affectively charged interactions and exchange of information and misinformation that took place among Nana, Claudette, Hortensia, and Florence immediately caught my attention during my fieldwork in the densely networked Malagasy marriage-migrant community in France. Women constantly used a variety of communicative practices to adapt to their migratory circumstances, connect with each other, and maintain ties with their families in Madagascar. From time to time, they also used a variety of other communicative practices to break these ties apart. I refer to this transnational communicative and social network as the “téléphone malgache.”

Although my interlocutors regularly lamented their reliance on the telephone, and although I once heard a woman refer self-critically to the “telephone gasy” (i.e., Malagasy telephone), “téléphone malgache” is not a developed local concept. Taking my cue from the use of the colloquial French terms *téléphone arab* and *radio trottoir* (sidewalk radio) to refer to the person-to-person spread of news and information, I use *téléphone malgache* to capture an informal social-cum-technological hybrid: both an actual telephone network made up of landlines and cell phones and a network of peers who also meet in person. Malagasy migrant women interact and share information across a variety of situations and in many different ways, using tools that range from telephones to old-fashioned face-to-face gossip to balls—all-night dance parties that women, their husbands, and their children attend. Cobbled together out of many different kinds of social relationships and contexts, using a variety of different communicative media, and criss-crossing from France to Madagascar and back, the *téléphone malgache* is a metonym for this migrant social world. It is also the social technology through which this world is created.

In this article, I analyze how the *téléphone malgache* works and what its consequences are as a loosely integrated system of social and communicative relations among Malagasy marriage migrants in France. I show how the *téléphone malgache* that migrants create in France interacts with a parallel but differently oriented set of social and communicative practices in Madagascar. Drawing attention to the relationships between Malagasy women, their French husbands, their peers in France, and their families in Madagascar, I argue that the *téléphone malgache* emerges from these women’s efforts to negotiate two different but interconnected sets of relations at the same time. Ultimately the *téléphone malgache* creates highly unstable ties between Malagasy wives, French husbands, and Malagasy kin that simultaneously regulate and transform Malagasy marriage migrants’ relationships not only with their kin in Madagascar but also with each other.

My argument is based on 12 consecutive months of research primarily in southwestern France and many years of prior research in eastern Madagascar.² During my fieldwork

in France, I followed the spreading tentacles of a geographically dispersed social network, visiting women at home, accompanying them to work, and socializing with them at balls and other Malagasy gatherings. I subsequently also made several trips to Madagascar with women who went to visit their kin, returns that took me, not unlike my informants, back to a place I had known before but with a new perspective.

I begin this discussion by considering the migrant sociality associated with the French state’s use of family reunification to regulate migration. I then examine coastal Malagasy conceptions of gender, personhood, and reputation to convey how Malagasy perceive the stakes entailed in women’s marriage to Frenchmen and their migration to France. The issues I discuss in these two sections set the stage for my consideration of the life women encounter in France—a life that is often quite unlike the one they anticipated or that their kin imagine. Finally, I show how the *téléphone malgache* emerges from the conjuncture of these factors, how it operates to mediate women’s relations with one another, and some of its intended and unintended effects on women’s migratory trajectories.

Migrant sociality and matrimonial migration circuits in contemporary France

Over the last 20 years, thousands of coastal Malagasy women have married Frenchmen and migrated to France. Malagasy women pursue this path because contemporary French immigration law combines with current demographic changes to make marrying a Frenchman one of the few ways that they can simultaneously enter the country, gain citizenship, and acquire a “social status” (*statu social*). Given current economic and social circumstances in Madagascar, marrying abroad and then helping one’s kin in Madagascar is also one of the few ways that these women can achieve relative financial success and the social belonging that comes with it. Through marriage, migration, and the creation of what I refer to as “matrimonial migratory circuits,” women hope to position themselves as important nodes in networks of material and affective exchanges that stretch from Madagascar to France and back. Women who achieve this goal enjoy privileged positions within their families and communities in Madagascar (see Cole in press). They quickly learn, however, that their dream is not, in fact, an easy one to achieve and, if achieved, not easy to sustain.

Malagasy women married to Frenchmen—whom Malagasy refer to as *vadimbazaha*—are hardly the only migrants who gossip with each other or who seek to control what others know about them (Mains 2012; Newell 2012; Pessar 1995). To elaborate the *téléphone malgache* as a heuristic device that might prove useful for the analysis of migrant sociality in other cultural contexts, I draw

together anthropological work on gossip with studies of new communicative technologies. Scholars have paid considerable attention to the social dimensions of gossip in migrant communities. Working in southern Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, anthropologists analyzed how new urban social norms and identities emerged as Africans adapted to city life (Epstein 1992; Gluckman 1963; Mitchell 1956). They soon found that gossip was central to this process (Gluckman 1963). Building on Max Gluckman's (1963) classic argument that gossip helps define the moral boundaries of a society, A. L. Epstein (1992) showed how gossip around a single event—a scandal over adultery—revealed emergent class-based norms. In a related vein, more-recent work on female migrants, whether involved in marriage migration or sex work, illuminates how women use gossip to police one another's behavior, sanctioning those among them who spend their earnings inappropriately or whose behavior threatens to stigmatize the wider migrant community (Brennan 2004; Faier 2009; see also Esprit 2003). These studies reveal gossip's important role in disciplining migrants, particularly in relation to existing gender norms, as well as how migrant women may use gossip to negotiate their situations “both to their advantage and their peril” (Faier 2009:196).

If this perspective reveals how gossip promotes some ways of behaving and censures others, it does not help us understand what happens when people live dispersed from one another and must rely on telephones to communicate. To capture this dimension of the *téléphone malgache*, I turn to recent work on new media and information technology in general and cell phones in particular. The Malagasy migrant women I knew mainly use landlines to call one another and their kin in Madagascar; doing so is far cheaper than using a cell phone. Nevertheless, recent work on cell phone use is helpful in drawing attention to the role of communication technologies and how people manage the perils and possibilities created by the rapid flow of information. Not only are communicative technologies like cell phones an important part of migrants' efforts to cultivate relationships with kin despite distance (de Bruijn and Brinkman 2011; de Bruijn et al. 2009) but they may also play an important role in maintaining secrecy (Archambault 2011, 2013). Telephones reveal and conceal in equal measure; they are powerful tools with the potential to disrupt existing hierarchies and social relations (Rafael 2003).

Reliance on telephones also characterizes a relatively new kind of migrant community. In recent years, scholars have turned to a variety of metaphors to analyze different types of migratory social formations. They have used terms like “Black Atlantic” (Gilroy 1993) to capture the cross-national exchange of people, goods, and ideas between Africa, England, and the New World or evoked the image of “care chains” to analyze the connections forged through transnational female labor migration (Parreñas 2001).

Still others have analyzed “long-distance nationalism” (Anderson and Kligman 1992)—how displaced populations participate in political movements or other efforts to build their homelands (see also Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001). Each of these perspectives seeks to illuminate the complex relationship between the material conditions that shape particular patterns of migration and the types of sociality these conditions preclude or enable.

In contrast to these other well-known examples, the *téléphone malgache* draws attention to the type of sociality that emerges in the context of the contemporary French migration regime as it converges with long-standing Malagasy gender ideals and patterns of communication. Since the 1980s, when the French government stopped labor migration, marriage and family reunification have become the primary ways to gain residence in France. Marriage accounts for the largest proportion of new French citizens every year (Comité interministériel de Contrôle de l'Immigration 2012). Since marriage is the weak link in the French government's efforts to control immigration, binational marriages of the kind I depict here endure intense scrutiny (*Cette France-là* 2010; Le Monde.fr 2009; Neveu Kringelbach 2013), even as migrant wives' race, education, and employment converge to slot them into the lower rungs of the French social hierarchy. Yet Malagasy women who marry Frenchmen want to be perceived as rich by their kin in Madagascar. They also want to use their position as wives to build networks and circuits of exchange that link them to home. Since women can only relocate through marriage, however, they live wherever they happen to find husbands, scattered across the small towns and villages of provincial France. To overcome their geographic dispersal and isolation, they rely on one another to gain information about French society and to run errands for one another that enable them to enact their projects back in Madagascar. But they also constantly worry that their connections with other Malagasy women expose them to jealousy and put them at risk. Although aspects of these communicative practices and ways of managing interpersonal relations have deep roots in coastal Madagascar, the *téléphone malgache* draws attention to the complex informational, technological, and social practices that accompany this dispersed type of matrimonial migration.

Attention to the social dynamics of the *téléphone malgache* fruitfully nuances more long-standing discussions concerning the way migrants simultaneously maintain their ties to home and rework their relationships in more than one society simultaneously (Faier 2009; Freeman 2011; Glick Schiller et al. 1995; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Lucassen 2006; Silverstein 2004). It does so by illuminating how social processes that begin in Madagascar change once women migrate to France, and how that change, in turn, produces effects that are felt in Madagascar. My analysis further suggests that in the

new social conditions created in France, the very social and communicative practices that women rely on to build transnational ethnically based communities may also split them apart. Such divisions, in turn, have implications for women's integration into French society, a point I return to in the conclusion.

Becoming vadimbazaha: Reputation, gossip, and the stakes of overseas migration

It would be difficult to overstate either the glory and social status bestowed on those coastal women who successfully marry Europeans and move abroad or the way their fame and reputation continue to shape the lives of their kin long after they leave home. Along Madagascar's northeast coast, a person's status and sense of self emerge partly from his or her position within a network of exchange. Ideally, adults are positioned at the center of, and hence can command, a socially valued network of material and affective resources. Ideally too they use those resources to support and "make living" (*mahamelona*) their many dependents (Cole 2010).

For many women, however, the opportunities to achieve this sought-after social position are few indeed. Madagascar has suffered prolonged economic hardship for more than 30 years. While, ideally, a man should marry, father children, and care for his dependents, poverty makes these goals increasingly elusive. Since women rely in part on their relations with men for material support, these circumstances exacerbate existing tensions in gender relations. They make it hard to sustain and grow families over time (Cole 2010). Though most women want to work, and many do find menial jobs, the weakness of local currency and the abundance of local labor mean that they rarely can earn a satisfactory income. Yet, as Malagasy emphasize, "Everyone wants to prosper" [*ny olona tia hanjary*]. They aspire not to subsist but to thrive.

To find a better way to build a life for themselves, many women seek husbands through matrimonial agencies that they find on the Internet. Others meet Frenchmen who travel for work or vacation to Madagascar (see Cole 2010). Still others turn to their female kin already living in France, who then run ads soliciting prospective husbands in local newspapers or look for suitable candidates among their friends. Typically, a couple corresponds via the Internet, later graduating to phone calls, Skype chats, and visits. When a woman succeeds in finding a Frenchman to marry, her family usually greets the news with joy. As one man, whose daughter had married a *vazaha* (foreigner, especially French) remarked to me, "Here, we think if it is *vazaha* it is good." His remark illustrates the enormous value that Malagasy attribute to European, particularly French, practices, commodities, and ways of behaving, an appreciation of foreign relations and practices that long predates French colo-

nization (Ellis 1862). But, as in many places in Africa, the value of foreign connections has grown as local opportunities and the power of local currencies have diminished (Newell 2012; Piot 2010). A woman's family reacts with delight to the news that their daughter has found a *vazaha* because they know that they will now be related to someone who has gone "overseas" (*andafy*), with all of the wealth and glory that such social connections bring.

Family members in Madagascar often think, or act as though they think, that women who marry Frenchmen and move to France automatically become rich. They expect women who live abroad to help them in many concrete ways—by paying for younger siblings, nieces, and nephews to attend school; building houses for aging parents; paying for medical costs; and sending money home for other purposes. Of all the possible ways of displaying both success abroad and commitment to one's kin and home, building houses remains the most visible and significant (see also Graw and Schielke 2012).

While material exchanges play a pivotal role in establishing a *vadimbazaha's* value and importance, gossip and reputation also shape how a woman's position radiates into the wider community. Malagasy say that a person who accumulates wealth and social status is *malaza*, or famous. Notably, the root of this word, *laza*, means "declaration," alluding to how fame travels by word of mouth. A powerful person may also be said to have "long hands" (*lava tanana*)—that is to say, a long reach, enabling him or her to influence others. As the close association of fortune, fame, and the ability to influence others suggests, the value of a family member who lives in France extends beyond material contributions.

For many people-in-the-town (*olona antanana*, that is to say, those who remain at home and have not migrated), the very fact that they have kin who live in France helps them negotiate local social relations, since one's kin's reputation also constitutes one's own. People-in-the-town know that someone with a mother, daughter, or girlfriend living in France can make things happen—whether by paying for school fees or, perhaps, paying off a judge in a land dispute. Fame commands respect and cooperation. When a woman goes back to Madagascar to hold an expensive ancestral ceremony, a classically *laza*-producing event, her kin often use the occasion to ask for financial help. But they also seek to display the woman's wealth and power as proxies for their own. In one case, a woman's aunt invited large numbers of guests to her returning niece's cattle sacrifice ceremony, driving up the cost of the event, much to her niece's dismay. When the niece complained to her sisters and brothers, a family friend intervened, remarking that the aunt in question was old, alone, poor, and vulnerable. She defended the aunt's right to invite numerous guests, saying that if people in town saw that the old woman did indeed have powerful, wealthy kin, they would be kinder and more

helpful to her in the future. Perhaps the next time the aunt went to fetch one of the numerous administrative papers required by the government in this former French colony, the official in charge would remember who her niece was and treat the old woman with more respect. If properly managed, a vadimbazaha's good fortune radiates out to encompass her kin.

The effort that women invest in finding vazaha and getting to France, the way their kin admire them, attributing to them life-transforming powers, and the general conviction among people-in-the-town that everything in France is better make women who marry and move abroad acutely aware of how others see them and of what they say about them. Women know that success breeds jealousy and that others may secretly want them to fail. Since reputation extends a woman's social reach and helps her accrue wealth, others may try to hurt her through malicious gossip (*fosafofa*), thereby diminishing her social efficacy. They may even try to foil her plans through acts of sabotage (*sabotagy*). Such knowledge exacerbates women's anxiety. Women who move abroad have reached the pinnacle of success. Consequently, they have farther to fall. The stakes are high.

Encountering France

Most Malagasy women soon discover, however, that life in France does not meet their expectations. Perhaps the most obvious disappointment is that the men they have married, who seemed rich in Madagascar, given the relative power of the Euro in relation to the Malagasy ariary, are not particularly rich in France. Many of them are low-level government employees, peasants, and artisans. The men have jobs but not necessarily glamorous ones. They are almost always older. Some are aging rural bachelors, men who have inherited farms and need help to work them (Bourdieu 2008). Many are divorced or widowers seeking to found second families. Often, these men have not fared well on the local marriage market either because of their employment, their age, the idiosyncrasies of their looks, or some combination of the three. Like their Malagasy wives, if for different reasons, they too have chosen to search for spouses far away from home (Constable 2003; Faier 2009; Freeman 2011).

Not surprisingly, women also quickly find that their French husbands have their own pronounced ideas about what family means, how households should be run, and how money should be managed. Although the French state requires a couple to establish a shared bank account to prove the legitimacy of the marriage, men sometimes control money more tightly than women would like. Malagasy brides also often encounter the widespread sentiment that they are lucky to have made it to France from such a poor country. They should therefore, the thinking goes, be happy

just to have a roof over their heads and food to eat; any effort to obtain more can immediately be perceived as overly acquisitive, making French family members suspicious. At the same time, most Malagasy women expect to manage the household accounts. Seeing it as part of their gendered right as women, they are particularly sensitive to this issue. Faced with constant suspicion, they have to negotiate carefully how their husbands, in-laws, and neighbors see them. They cannot be perceived as asking for things too often or asking for too much.

Malagasy wives are fiercely proud and do not want their husbands to complain about them or their families' requests for help. As a result, they are quick to look for work outside the house. They soon learn that the only way to earn money of their own is to take jobs that are both low paying and low status. Most Malagasy women who enter France as marriage migrants have only a few years of high school education, perhaps less. Even those who have attended college or passed the baccalaureat, the French exam that grants a high school diploma, quickly discover that their degrees are not recognized in France. Women who marry farmers may work on the farm. Most others find employment cleaning offices, hotels, and schools or caring for elderly people. In the latter case, by far the most common job, women have to toilet their charges, a job that they find polluting. Neither the work nor the pay meets their expectations of what paradise should be like.

The gap between women's expectations and the reality of their social position, their desire to succeed, their acute awareness of their kin's expectations, and their keen sensitivity to the politics of reputation all contribute to their tremendous fear of losing face. I have often heard women anxiously discuss what they think others will say if they do not succeed in building a house in Madagascar: "What, she went all that way and got nothing?" One woman held her hands to the sides of her head in a gesture that means one's head is about to explode from unbearable shame and said, "Your head would be like that." At least one woman's much-discussed suicide was widely attributed to her despair at having failed to amass any wealth despite years of living abroad. Days before she took her husband's pistol and shot herself in the head, she was reported to have said that she did not know which way to turn: She was unable to either retrace her steps or advance. Narratives I gathered from women who lost their status as vadimbazaha through circumstance, whether because their husbands divorced them and they could not manage to stay in France or because they were widowed, suggest that kin are often cruel in the face of failure.

The necessity of having *copines*

Women's need to appear wealthy to family and friends in Madagascar while living comparatively modestly in France

and their desire to simultaneously succeed in France and fulfill the expectations of their Malagasy kin prompt them to turn to their fellow migrants for assistance. Anthropologists have long pointed to the central importance of peers in migrants' ability to adapt to new contexts (Constable 1997; Epstein 1992; Mitchell 1956; Ong 2003). In this case, women cobble together a wide range of different relationships—some with kin, some with friends or other acquaintances—to meet their needs. I group these different types of relationships under the general rubric of *copine*, the French word for “friend” or “pal” that vadimbazaha often use to refer to one another. Although it might seem odd to extend the word *copine* to include the occasional sister, in Malagasy people sometimes refer to siblings as “friends of one stomach” (*namana kibo'ireky*), and the word *friend* is also often used to refer to one part of a generative pair (Feeley-Harnik 1991), suggesting the contextual blurring of family–friend distinctions.

Women find one another and build their networks in France in many different ways, including word of mouth, chance encounters, and kin networks. Any prospective migrant leaving for France goes armed with the names of people living abroad whom her kin and friends know. One woman, for example, became close to her father's ex-mistress after moving to France, treating her as a mother figure. Other women I knew met in the LeClerc supermarket. Recognizing hometown connections—even connections made through shared residence—women who meet in France quickly adopt the terms *older sister* and *younger sister*, proleptically projecting their desire for an enduring relationship into the future. Still others seek ways for their female kin from Madagascar to join them in France, usually by finding Frenchmen for them to wed.

Copines help each other succeed in France by teaching one another how to manage problems with their French husbands or in-laws, where to apply for state aid, what one's inheritance rights are under French law, or where to go to find the ingredients for Malagasy food. In the early 2000s, when it was still possible to go to France on a tourist visa and then look for a husband, Hortensia, the woman who had called Nana to warn her that Claudette was upset, had helped many women find husbands who would enable them to stay in France. She did not just take women to marriage agencies or help them fill out bureaucratic forms. She also advised them whom to accept and whom to reject. As she remarked to one young arrival who balked at the old, rather unglamorous men that her search had turned up, “Even if his breath stinks, and he's dirty, take him, you can clean him up later. Later, you'll fix him up.” Hortensia knew that looks were not what mattered and that to successfully carve a niche for oneself, one needed a man with a regular income and not too many prior family commitments. One woman even laughingly remarked that the telephone was like a “Malagasy social worker” be-

cause people used it so often to get advice about how to live overseas.³

Copines also help one another manage their projects in Madagascar. Women often carry goods, medicine, money, and documents for one another back and forth between Madagascar and France. When one woman needed her original Malagasy birth certificate for a divorce, a copine who had traveled back to Madagascar stopped in the remote town where the record was kept to fetch it. Copines are also essential if a woman wants to do something secretly. One woman relied on her best friend to go in her stead to the Western Union office to send money home, because she did not want either her French husband or her Malagasy kin to know that she still supported her Malagasy lover. Given the importance of copines, it is no wonder, as one of my informants remarked, that losing one is equivalent to losing your gold jewelry. Like the distinctively patterned gold jewelry by which women sometimes recognize each other as Malagasy, copines are precious and highly valued.

Unequal outcomes: The unbearable unfairness of migration

What the comparison to gold jewelry obscures, however, is that women's relationships with their peers, including their sisters, are deeply ambivalent and riven with tension. The tension that characterizes vadimbazahas' relationships with one another in France is an aspect of social life that they bring with them from Madagascar. In part because there are few fixed hierarchies along much of Madagascar's northeast coast, there is also an undercurrent of competition that runs through many relationships, prompting people to copy one another, adopt new practices, and embrace change (Cole 2010). Moreover, since success implies personal power, women compete with one another all the time. However, aspects of the way that migration transforms women's relationships with one another exacerbate the competitive tendencies that already exist.

To start with, women believe that marrying a vazaha and moving to France elevates them with respect to their Malagasy kin and equalizes their positions with respect to one another. I once asked a migrant friend if she and another migrant woman, with whom she was close, had been friends back home. She just shook her head, struck by the wondrousness of it: “Faustine was the wife of a doctor there. I just worked at the factory packing the vanilla. But here it's like we're all the same.” She knew that in Madagascar, the wife of a doctor, who had servants at her beck and call, would be unlikely to associate with a lowly vanilla sorter. Moving to France leveled the playing field between them so the women could be friends. Similarly, another woman once observed, “Oh, at home, some people had this, some people had that, but here we are all married to Frenchmen, we are all the same.” At one level, this woman's remark is

a statement of fact, since, from the perspective of French society, Malagasy women appear similar. At another level, it is a statement of aspiration.

Yet, even as women emphasize that moving to France renders them equal, after relocating, they try to reestablish hierarchical relationships with respect to one another. In a manner reminiscent of host-guest relationships in Madagascar, where masters-of-the-land (*tompontany*) occupy a superior position in relation to those who come later (Feeley-Harnik 1991; Sharp 1996), women often expect those who migrate after them to respect and obey them. Most women want to build a network of people around them, re-creating in France at least some of the warmth and sociality that they associate with Madagascar. They also want their fame to spread and to be known back in Madagascar as people who help others, positioning themselves as elders within the community. But women also expect the help they extend to others to be repaid with respect and social loyalty, at the very least. The demand for loyalty is particularly strong when a woman has helped another woman—perhaps a sister, cousin, or friend—come to France.

Nadine and Priska's friendship helps illustrate these points. Nadine and Priska grew up together in a midsized town in an area of northeastern Madagascar from which many vadimbazaha hail. Nadine's older sister had moved to France in the early 1990s, part of the first wave of women to find French husbands through a marriage agency. Years later, she arranged for Nadine to join her. But, despite her sister's help, Nadine did not have an easy time. To stay in France, she needed to marry a Frenchman. Her sister found her a man who lived near Strasbourg, and she went to stay with him, with the understanding that they would marry. Nadine, however, was unhappy, complaining constantly to her sister that she wanted to return to the south where she knew more people. Exerting her authority as the elder sibling and firstcomer to France, her sister told her to stay put. Unwilling to listen to her sister, Nadine left the man in Strasbourg and eventually found someone else to marry. Her new husband, however, was controlling, and his parents, displeased that he had married an African woman, made Nadine's life unbearable. Nadine eventually left the marriage and spent time living in low-income housing. Although she was not at risk of being expelled from the country, her situation was far from stable, and she was unable to accumulate wealth or send money home, as she wished. Only several years later did she meet and marry a man who happily shared her enthusiasm for Madagascar, enabling her to invest in and make frequent trips home.

Nadine's friend Priska, who followed Nadine to France several years later, had a much easier time. To start, she married a young Malagasy man who had gained French nationality because his mother had married a vazaha and

brought him to France as a child. Nadine, who lived near the Franco-Malagasy family, had shown the young man Priska's picture, sparking the relationship. Smitten, he went to Madagascar, married Priska, and brought her to live in France. As it happened, the young man had a good job working in the army: He and Priska lived comparatively well. Priska's happiness was marred, however, by the fact that her Malagasy mother-in-law continued to manage Priska and her husband's financial affairs. When Priska and her daughter needed things while the husband was away, he told his mother to buy them, rather than giving Priska direct access to the money, a practice that Priska detested. Nevertheless, by cleverly managing the money that her husband sent home, Priska began to amass the funds needed to renovate her mother's house in Madagascar. It was clear to Nadine, and many other Malagasy women in the community, that Priska was a lucky little upstart. She had hardly suffered in her effort to establish herself in France, and the way things were going, she was likely to surpass Nadine in terms of her success back in Madagascar. The friendship began to sour.

Nadine's and Priska's trajectories, and their friendship, illustrate the contradictory ways that the vicissitudes of migration exacerbate tensions in women's relationships. Despite the collective fantasy that moving to France and acquiring French citizenship erases insidious differences, vadimbazaha who make the move are not all the same: Even in France, some have more than others. Though both Priska and Nadine relied on their relations with men to move to France and stay there, chance determined whom they married. And as chance would have it, Priska's path was easier than Nadine's. Some husbands can afford to pay for yearly return trips to Madagascar or help pay for lavish villas. Some cannot. Some husbands agree to adopt their wives' children from prior marriages or patiently help their wives find husbands for their sisters so that they too can move to France. Some do not. Women are painfully aware of minute differences, carefully cataloguing who has which kinds of wealth and what kinds of opportunities. In some cases, a husband's generosity, kindness, and financial means meet his wife's aspirations. In other circumstances, a woman may find herself bitterly wondering why her neighbor or school friend got lucky and married a kind, generous Frenchman while she did not. Moving to France flattens out many differences. It also makes those that remain particularly painful.

Women respond to these circumstances, unsurprisingly, by seeking to increase their chances of success. They often do so by turning to magic, which they hope will enable them better to control their husbands or others around them (see Gardenier 1976; Graeber 1996). People often use the phrase "to bind" (*fiezana*) to refer to the effects of love magic, since it makes the bewitched person obey the desires of the spell caster. The names and properties of two

of the best-known forms of love magic clearly illustrate these effects: “Right in front of your eyes and yet you don’t see” (*masobetsymahita*) blinds the ensorcelled to the actions of those around them, and “always agrees” (*maneiky be*) causes the bewitched person to say “yes” to whatever the spell caster wants. When a husband is endlessly willing to help his wife’s family or fails to see that his wife’s frequent travels to Madagascar are trips to meet a lover, people naturally assume that he is acting under the influence of such charms. While references to magic or medicines usually refer to the use of charms to increase one’s luck, they also indicate intense competition and jealousy and thus evoke the practice of sabotage. Vadimbazaha fear sabotage while they are still in Madagascar. They fear it even more once they get to France. Women’s depictions of what makes people jealous or how jealous people act repeatedly evoke the same scenario: Jealousy occurs among people who know each other and not only desire what others have but hate them for having it. Trying to explain the idea to me, one woman remarked, “You see what the other person has and you want to cut it.” Having reached the pinnacle of success through their marriages to Frenchmen, vadimbazaha feel intensely vulnerable.

Control, illusions, and sabotage: The téléphone malgache

Vadimbazaha use many different communicative media, freely combining the advantages offered by landlines and cell phones, parties, and more-intimate kinds of speech to manage their simultaneous need for sociality and their intense desire to control each other and the flow of information. The ability to do so well is the sign of a seasoned migrant. In fact, a derogatory expression captures a newcomer’s foolish eagerness to make friends: “to greet like a newly arrived Malagasy.”⁴ New migrants do not know any better than to greet each other on the street—they are still innocent, unaware of the interpersonal entanglements that await them and of how, over time, they will come to distrust their own community. Though it is hard to identify the exact moment it occurs, fairly early on, women commonly become aware of their intense social vulnerability, perhaps because someone they thought was a friend betrays them in some small way. They find themselves torn between their need to be close to others and their fear that such closeness will lead them to reveal things about themselves that others can use as weapons against them. They become obsessed with “polishing their image” or “tarting up the outside” (*ravalement de façade*, which literally translates as façade cleaning) so that others will not know what their lives are really like and will not be able to use information to hurt them.

Women frequently try to reconcile their desire to have copines while managing the flow of information by con-

trolling one another through various kinds of psychological and emotional manipulation. If a woman has brought another Malagasy to France, perhaps her younger sibling or her friend, she may repeat a rescue narrative to deepen the new migrant’s sense of debt and loyalty: “I have brought you here, I have saved you from poverty” or, alternatively, “I took you in when no one else would.” The implicit corollary is that the new arrival owes loyalty to her sponsor. In terms that echoed the alleged effects of certain kinds of charms, women regularly acted this scenario out in discussions. When they did so, they reached out as if grabbing someone by the nose and said, “Sit? She sits. Stand? She stands,” jerking their hands up and down accordingly.

Vadimbazaha also seek to control one another by inciting fear. One way they do this is to tell a friend or family member how untrustworthy another person is to prevent any kind of friendship from blossoming between the two. Perhaps Florence was trying to prevent Claudette from developing a relationship with Nana and me while appearing to exhibit concern for Claudette when she called her and warned her that Nana and I were journalists. A copine may also try to make another feel that her choice of friend is not a wise one in terms of her quest for success. Since vadimbazaha arrive from Madagascar highly attuned to the importance of social status but terribly anxious that they do not know how to act appropriately in France, they are vulnerable to such manipulations. The first time Nana and I went to see Hortensia, for example, she told us that the family of another migrant woman had been terribly poor in Madagascar, the kind of people who just sold charcoal by the side of the road. The implication was that because the other woman came from a poor family, she was ill equipped to manage life in France. Nana scoffed at Hortensia’s remarks. Others, however, found them persuasive. By provoking fear of others, or asserting their superiority or the social debt they are owed, women seek to bind their copines to them ever more tightly.

Since women in France know few people with whom they can build close relationships and because they have so much more to lose than they would if they lived in Madagascar, the bonds that do exist between them bear far more pressure. Yet no vadimbazaha who comes to France wants to be controlled by another Malagasy. After all, the women believe that the sheer fact of migration has magically erased prior differences and made them all equal. In Madagascar, historically, masters-of-the-land often controlled precious resources, demanding the ritual respect and labor of newcomers (Feeley-Harnik 1991). In France, by contrast, not only do the demands of French husbands and families tug at women, making it much harder for them to fulfill other women’s needs but also, over time, more senior, experienced women may have less to offer. Nor does the advice of community elders or older kin who remain in

Madagascar, whose traditional role is to maintain harmony, have the same weight. There are fewer constraints to keep an ungrateful friend or rebellious sister from either striking back or striking out on her own.

Women express and try to minimize fissures in their relationships in several ways. Perhaps the most obvious practice, which vadimbazaha are attuned to listen for, is the *mpitso teny*. The word *mpitso* refers to something that springs off of something else: imagine the spray from a rushing river. In the context of speech, the *mpitso teny* is the stray word that goes against the grain of the speaker's formal discourse. While the overt content of the speaker's words may say one thing, the *mpitso teny* reveals the speaker's hidden intentions. Alternatively, a person may make a remark about a third party that is in fact an indirect message—perhaps even a warning—intended for the person to whom he or she is talking. *Mpitso teny* often indicate an effort to bring another person into line: Such stray words may help to prevent conflict even as they indicate social tension. Women may also “bring words” (*mitondra teny* or *mampita teny*) to one another to try to manage their relationships and avoid conflict, which is essentially what Hortensia did when she called Nana to warn her about Claudette.

To manage their anxiety about the flow of information, women also learn to use the material qualities of landlines and cell phones deliberately. For example, they may put the person to whom they are speaking on speakerphone while in the company of another person or hold out the headset so that another person can hear what is being said and, so, verify information. Conversely, women use the formal properties of telephones to maintain the social connections they crave and to control what people know about them. From the perspective of someone who wants to produce a particular image, the marvelous thing about telephones is that they allow people to talk without seeing one another. A woman could live in a low-income housing project and pretend she lives in a villa when she calls home to Madagascar. Women's keen sensitivity to what people see and know about their circumstances, and their fear that others will use such knowledge against them, means that they often prefer talking on the telephone to meeting face to face. One of Nana's coworkers when she worked as a caretaker in the north of France was a woman who came from her hometown in Madagascar. One day, Nana offered to drive her coworker home. The woman specifically asked Nana to stop the car some blocks from her home because she did not want Nana to see where she lived. When Nana left the caretaker job to return to the south of France, the woman regularly telephoned to share news. She clearly wanted to be friends with Nana. She also wanted to control what Nana saw and what she knew. The telephone enabled closeness and distance at the same time.

When women interact in person, they often do so in highly formal settings where it is easier to control what

others see. Women's participation in balls—all-night dance parties—speaks directly to their contradictory desires for sociality and intimacy, on the one hand, and the need to control what people know about them, on the other. Dance floors and concert halls are magic places because, like Cinderella, while there, a woman leaves her daily travails behind. For a few hours she becomes the person she wants to be. Though small groups of women who know each other's daily circumstances attend balls together, friends also bring friends, and in these moments, otherwise dispersed and often isolated women come together en masse. During balls, women do not simply dance. They also work to perform their success for other Malagasy, carefully hiding aspects of their lives that they do not want others to see and becoming the “spouse-of-a-European” (*vadimbazaha*) that they dreamed of being back in Madagascar. Remarking on this dimension of the balls, Nana mused,

When you go to the *fête malgache* you can't tell [what people's real situation is], because everyone is wearing their gold jewelry, everyone is next to their husbands. They show you, “Here we are, here we are” [they just show their good side]. They put on their jewelry, they bring out their fancy cars. It's like they say, “Here we are the wives of the *vazaha*.” And you can't tell if she is a peasant's wife, or married to a sewerman (*ebouer*) or to someone who cuts the grass—or if she's a maid. They want to care for their image, no cracks!

Not unlike Salvadorans who eke out a living on Long Island but craft an illusion of wealth for their families at home by sending them pictures of themselves in front of fancy cars in neighborhoods they cannot afford to live in (Pessar 1995), *vadimbazaha* collude in performing an image of success for one another. They deliberately hide negative aspects of their experience while hoping that the positive image they project will drift back, along the ever-buzzing wires of the *téléphone malgache*, to their kin and friends in Madagascar.

Despite women's best efforts to manage their relationships and determine what others know about them, they cannot, by themselves, control the flow of information all of the time; they need the help of others too much. If a woman has a lover, her friends may help her maintain the relationship, perhaps covering for her while she goes off to meet the man. If she wants to send more money home to her family, she probably does so through her friends. If she is doing well in France and not sending money home, she may not want her kin in Madagascar to know of her success. If she is struggling in France, she may want to represent her situation as better than it really is, perhaps using one of the many euphemisms provided by the French state that lend allure to what is in fact menial labor—for example, calling a maid an “*aide menagère*” (literally, household helper). But her copines usually know the truth.

When a relationship grows too unequal, with one woman endlessly trying to assert seniority because she happened to have arrived first, or when women become jealous of one another, the result may be a well-timed revelation to redistribute power within the relationship. Given women's need to control the flow of information both to their husbands and between France and Madagascar, copines use information that they learn in the course of their interactions with one another to harm their rivals. They deliberately use sabotage to make another woman lose face or prevent her from enacting her projects. A copine draws on her knowledge of what is happening in one place to disrupt what is occurring in another.

Of transnational gossip, sabotage, and consequences

Examining patterns in women's sabotage further underscores how gossip and the management of reputation in France shape their relations with kin at home. It also reveals how, over time, these processes also recursively affect how women adapt to life in France. Sometimes copines reveal information about one another to French husbands or in-laws—the men and kin on whom these women rely to succeed in France and, by extension, in Madagascar. When a copine seeks to hurt a woman's reputation in France so as to destabilize her home and undermine her success, she typically calls either the husband, the mother-in-law, or, occasionally, a representative of the French state. She may tell the husband or the mother-in-law that when the woman is allegedly home in Madagascar visiting kin and building a house for her family, she is really visiting her secret lover. Or she may reveal the woman's complex, perhaps colorful, past to her French husband, implying that the woman worked as a prostitute or lived in a way an elderly French mother-in-law is likely to judge immoral. Or she may let a social worker know that although the woman is divorced and receiving welfare, she really has a boyfriend who supports her. Given the images of African women that circulate in the public sphere, which depict Madagascar as a poor island where girls take up prostitution to make ends meet, husbands, mothers-in-law, and social workers often find these stories all too believable.

If the woman's husband or her in-laws believe the story, the result may be a fight, perhaps even a divorce. Nadine, for instance, eventually confirmed Priska's mother-in-law's fear that her daughter-in-law was secreting away household money to send to her kin in Madagascar. The mother-in-law successfully convinced her son to divorce Priska, forcing Priska to spend her savings while she established a new household, thereby slowing Priska's otherwise meteoric social ascent. When a woman does not yet have her permanent citizenship papers, such events make her vulnerable to

deportation. If a woman does have her citizenship papers, or if she and her husband fight but do not divorce, such revelations can still affect the marriage. In one case, a man tried to hang himself in a fit of jealous despair when some of his wife's copines recounted her romantic history. He survived but ended up crippled; his Malagasy wife continued to care for him. Though this case is particularly dramatic, it reveals the way copines may thwart one another's projects by playing on French men's sense of honor, stereotypes about Madagascar, and asymmetries of knowledge. More frequently, such revelations are likely to make a woman's husband more controlling and less trustful or tolerant than he might have been. Insofar as women always need some margin to maneuver to manage their relationships in France and Madagascar simultaneously, a husband's mistrust can become a powerful constraint, interfering in women's ability to build networks of kin, amass wealth, and prosper. The revelation that they are breaking the rules of the French welfare system may similarly result in the revocation of benefits, a reduced income, and more constrained circumstances.

A betrayal in France also has repercussions in Madagascar, where it sparks different interactions, judgments, and counterreactions. Pirette described what happens if word gets back to Madagascar that a woman's life in France is not as she portrays it and is then publicly used to shame her family: "You get ashamed! Malagasy fear shame! They show off, yet they have nothing! And then someone says, 'Oh, their *vazaha* overseas, they don't have a thing, they're a poor *vazaha*.' That affects everyone. People think, 'We have children overseas.' They've already received so much honor for that. And if someone brings a rumor like that, it can break everyone!" Woman's efforts to puncture each other's image are so common that there is even an expression that refers to the false pride of women who live overseas: "Proud like an overseas Malagasy, yet she washes the ass of *vazaha*."⁵

In the short term, such unmasking wounds the pride of the person targeted. It may also hurt the person's kin because it diminishes the family's ability to deploy the *vadimbazaha*'s reputation to their own ends. Recall, for example, the elderly aunt of the woman I referred to above, who blithely invited half the town to her niece's sacrifice and who was permitted to do so because her niece hoped that "next time she [the aunt] asks for something, people will respect her." Given an awkward revelation about the niece and the diminishment of her reputation, the next time the aunt asks for help from someone else in town, the person might ignore her request or make a hurtful remark that will cut her to the quick. In a world where, as one woman said, "you need friends, you *need* friends in Madagascar," the effects of sabotage ripple out, damaging one's ability to command respect, obtain resources, and flourish. At its worst, the sabotage that sometimes occurs through the

téléphone malgache can break families apart and destroy livelihoods.

Such acts of sabotage, however, rarely go unanswered. To the contrary, since “everyone wants to succeed,” an act of sabotage that diminishes a person’s reputation usually evokes a competitive response. People often respond through rituals or other acts of conspicuous display and consumption. In one case, two half-sisters, who had the same father but different mothers, fought in France. On subsequent trips to Madagascar, each sought to reveal information about the other that put her in a negative light, with one, for instance, providing details about how poor and dirty the other’s farm was. That sister’s response was to return once again to Madagascar and disprove the accusation of poverty by throwing a sacrifice—a public display of her wealth. Her sister, who could not bear to be outdone, did the same. In this case, the temporary loss of face that occurred for one side of the family compelled a competitive response. In France, the half-sisters still do not speak to one another, but they continue to maintain relations with their shared kin in Madagascar. Their kin, in turn, lament the discord between the sisters in France. They also benefit from the material support that this competitive relationship produces.

Transnational gossip, social transformation, and the intimate politics of integration

Women have always gossiped in Madagascar. They have drawn on the reputation-producing and fortune-destroying practices associated with *laza* and sabotage as they negotiate their relationships with one another. If one looks at gossip in Madagascar and at what women talk about through the *téléphone malgache* in France, one finds that the content is much the same. Women talk about their husbands and lovers, their children, their plans for building a house, the latest way to earn money given the economy, their annoying coworkers and neighbors. In France, however, women find themselves in new circumstances. While they anticipate that their migration to France will reconfigure their relationships to their kin back home, they discover that the experience also reconfigures their relationships with one another in unexpected ways. They take up the tools at hand—cheap access to landlines, dance parties, and long-standing modes of interpersonal interaction—and create partly new ways of sharing and concealing information, generating loyalty, and controlling others. The necessity of simultaneously negotiating two social worlds that exist 6,000 miles apart makes some aspects of social life easier. It makes other aspects of social life more necessary to hide. As women’s need to succeed in France converges with their need to build connections with their kin in Madagascar, information becomes a particularly powerful weapon.

At first glance, the *téléphone malgache* appears to have a paradoxical effect since the very social relations among women that are crucial to the maintenance of transnational ties to Madagascar sometimes encourage women’s separation from one another. Yet closer examination shows that the effects of the *téléphone malgache* are highly contextual, evolve over time, and depend on the fates of the individual women involved. Almost all Malagasy women migrants to France start with sensibilities that demand far-flung networks, intense sociality, and visiting. Depending on how they experience entanglements embodied in the *téléphone malgache*, they may eventually repair their relations, seek to manage them more carefully, or withdraw from contact with other Malagasy. Priska and Nadine stopped speaking to each other for over two years. Eventually, however, Priska found a French boyfriend. Declaring that she was happier with this new situation, Priska forgave Nadine, remarking that, ultimately, Nadine’s intervention had helped her. The friendship was repaired. For the woman whose husband tried to commit suicide, however, the effects of the *téléphone malgache* were permanent. She found herself, essentially, a single mother who also had to care for an invalid and subsequently withdrew from the wider Malagasy community, maintaining ties with only two childhood friends. Still others grow reliant on their husbands’ families and perhaps a very small group of friends or limit their interactions to balls, which are comparatively anonymous, public, and safe.

The varied and paradoxical effects produced through the *téléphone malgache* and these matrimonial migratory circuits suggest a far more contingent and complicated relationship between marriage migration and integration into French society than French policy makers usually imagine. Since the early 20th century, France has been particularly concerned with questions of integration, seeking to promote social cohesion through familialism, schooling, and other civic institutions (see Robcis 2013). The role that policy makers have attributed to marriage and migration has differed according to historical period. In the early 20th century, for example, some commentators argued that marriage between French citizens and foreigners indicated the foreigner spouse’s “integration” or absorption into French society (Camiscioli 2009). Today, by contrast, many officials appear to fear that what looks like marriage between a French citizen and a foreigner is really a marriage between two members of the same ethnic community (Tribalat 2009), thereby reinforcing distinct ethnic groups within France.

Insofar as the bicultural and binational marriage that I have focused on here involves white Frenchmen and their Malagasy wives, it diverges from the kind of intraethnic marriage migration that so concerns French government officials. Nevertheless, the *téléphone malgache* that emerges in the context of this type of marriage migration

reveals the subtle ways that family reunification policies, which, in this case, yield a scattered form of settlement, make it harder for migrants to engage in collective projects. Even when women do manage to forge connections through the *téléphone malgache*, the maintenance of transnational ties to one's country of origin and the integration or assimilation into a host society are not opposed processes (see also Faier 2009; Levitt and Jaworsky 2007; Lucassen 2006). When we look at the gossip that occurs via the *téléphone malgache*, we can see that the interactions between copines in France are inseparable from the women's relations to kin at home: One cannot understand one without the other. Yet we can also begin to understand more precisely some of the reasons that the culture of these marriage migrants begins to change. To be sure, some of the reasons are related to marriage into French families and participation in French society. However, by drawing attention to the subtle effects of gossip, and the ways women's adaptation and use of technologies like telephones helps their quest to control others and shape the flow of information, we can better see why and how this cultural change might come about. New patterns emerge not only because Malagasy migrant women positively embrace the values and patterns of sociality that characterize French social life. They also emerge because of the ways that the experience of coming to France and trying to manage relationships in Madagascar simultaneously rearranges their relationships with one another.

Further comparative questions follow. The numbers of Malagasy women who marry Frenchmen and migrate to Europe are relatively small. But some of the patterns that I have depicted here are very widespread. Family reunification is the primary way that most European governments seek to regulate migration, but the efforts of Malagasy women to negotiate the tension between their high social status at home and their position in France is a dilemma that confronts other migrant groups. Daniel Mains (2012), for example, has noted that young Ethiopian men sometimes seek to avoid the shame that comes from having a menial job by moving abroad. Sasha Newell (2012), meanwhile, points to Ivoirian young men's use of deceit to transform their trips abroad into an elevated status at home. With their efforts either to avoid shame or to increase their value through the deliberate use of distance, these African men seem to share concerns with the Malagasy women I depict here. On the basis of existing ethnography, it is hard to say whether a set of practices comparable to the *téléphone malgache* has emerged in other migrant groups and, if so, how it relates to the legal regimes that govern matrimonial migration. But, given the ubiquity of gossip, the reach of contemporary telecommunications, and the widespread use of family reunification, the *téléphone malgache* is likely to be far from anomalous. The

subtle ways that gossip, secrecy, transnational telephone calls, and government regulation of migration coalesce to create other kinds of "telephones" offer a path for further exploration.

Notes

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1. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

2. I conducted fieldwork in southern France from August 2010 to August 2011, with additional return trips in 2011, 2012, and 2013. My research in France builds on over 23 months of fieldwork in Madagascar since 1992.

3. It is interesting to note how the woman's statement gives the telephone agency. Most of the time, women are well aware of which people want to help them or hurt them and have a highly individualized sense of will and intent. It is also true that the system of social relations, and the way it gets mediated through a telephone network, can take on a distributed kind of agency in ways that resonate with actor network theory (see, e.g., Johnson 1988).

4. *Miarahaba ohatran'i Malagasy voatonga.*

5. *Miavonah karany gasy andafy nefa manasa vodimbazaha.* This saying is a version of another saying that mocks false pride: "Proud like a cat, yet doesn't even know to wipe their ass."

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