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Producing Value among Malagasy Marriage Migrants in France

Managing Horizons of Expectation

by Jennifer Cole

This essay examines the long-standing Malagasy role of *vadimbazaha*, a word that literally means “the spouse of a European.” Malagasy women have historically aspired to this role to gain status and wealth as intermediaries who link social networks, enabling the flow of wealth, people, and opportunities among families. Prior generations of *vadimbazaha* stayed in Madagascar. Today, in the context of economic hardship, women seek European men and migrate to France. Their goal is to use their position in France to build a life-sustaining flow of resources back to Madagascar. Women achieve this goal by managing their French husbands’ and Malagasy kin’s horizons of expectation with respect to race, gender, kinship, and reputation. Understanding *vadimbazaha*’s economic practice requires attending to their ability to manage the meanings associated with their sexual, reproductive, and caring labor as much as the money they earn through low-wage labor and remittances.

The ongoing economic crisis in Africa has filled the continent with aspiring migrants. Zambians’ sense of “abjection” and their desire for a better life prompt many to seek ways to emigrate (Ferguson 2006), while Ivoirian youth dream of moving to France, the mythical land of plenty (Newell 2005). The prospect of migration to Western Europe and the United States so fascinates Togolese, meanwhile, that they have become a “nation in exile” (Piot 2010:3). Cameroonian women flood the Internet cafés in Yaoundé looking for foreign husbands (Johnson-Hanks 2007), while one Cameroonian migrant to Germany told a researcher, “Even if the Europeans build the wall until the sky Africans will still find a way to enter” (Fleischer 2010:1). Many Malagasy women also dream of migrating to Europe as the brides of native-born, white Frenchmen.¹ Since the late 1980s, around 10,000 coastal Malagasy women have married and settled in France, Madagascar’s former colonial metropole (INSEE 2011).

Similar desires motivate these different examples of African migration to Europe. Most migrants want to leave Africa so that they can obtain material resources, enabling them to care for others, an important part of what defines full adult personhood (Cole 2010; Groes-Green 2014). Many of these examples also underscore the importance of marriage and family reunification, a pattern that clearly reflects the power of contemporary European and American migration regimes. Yet

unlike other examples in which such binational marriages appear to be a comparatively new phenomenon distinct from prior, local practices, the case of Malagasy women involves a more than 200-year-old tradition. Situated at the crossroads of trade in the Indian Ocean, Malagasy women have long sought to connect Malagasy families with foreign kin networks whether or not they have moved to France (Bois 1997, 2001; Larson 2011).

This essay examines the long-standing Malagasy role of *vadimbazaha*, a word that literally means “the spouse of a European.”² Malagasy women have historically aspired to this role in order to gain status and wealth as intermediaries who link different social networks. Coastal Malagasy, especially, have long built relationships with foreign men who came to the island first as traders, later as colonizers, then as French *coopérants*, and more recently as tourists and businessmen (Bois 1997; Cole 2010; see also Tisseau 2011). Before and during the French colonial period (1895–1960), women who

1. I deliberately specify that these marriages are with white, native-born Frenchmen because much government concern about binational marriage across Europe targets marriages between people of the same ethnic group, a tendency that many French commentators fear will lead to *communautarianism*, or the founding and perpetuation of ethnic communities, which are perceived as threatening to the French Republican norm.

2. Over the course of my research, I documented the life histories and experiences of over 50 women, most of whom I met through various coastal Malagasy diasporic clubs and associations. Of those 50, I collected life histories and narratives from 25 women; over the course of 2010–2011, I spent extended amounts of time with 13 different women and their families, both at home and at work. In addition, I have made two return trips with women to visit their families in Madagascar.

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forged relationships with foreign men stayed in Madagascar. They used the material resources and social connections they gained from these relationships to manage concessions, buy and sell land, run hotels, or trade luxury items. Their wealth and social ties situated them at the apex of material and sentimental networks of kinship woven through exchange, making them leaders in their families.

Today, in the context of 30 years of economic hardship and periodic political crises, women seek European men (referred to as *vazaha*) even more eagerly than in the past. When they can, they marry *vazaha* and migrate to France, where they imagine that they will enjoy a luxurious lifestyle and have easy access to money, goods, and other resources. Yet going to France is only a first step toward achieving a new definition of what it means to be a *vadimbazaha*; they must then position themselves at the center of a flow of goods, resources, and people that stretches from France to Madagascar and back.

Women soon find, however, that becoming a successful *vadimbazaha* in France is far more difficult than they anticipated. To start with, the highly valued category of *vadimbazaha* does not translate into local French categories of personhood. Instead, women discover that they are likened to other, less salutary types of people. Most often, women are simply perceived as African migrants, or marriage migrants, a category that the French state seeks to regulate as part of its efforts to police the boundaries of the French nation. French neighbors, perhaps even their in-laws, may suspect them of marrying only to take advantage of the benefits that come with French citizenship. In recent years, moreover, Madagascar has become known in France as a place for sexual tourism. Malagasy women thus sometimes find that they may also be perceived as prostitutes, or at the very least, as women of little virtue.

Moreover, because women usually come with little wealth of their own, they are initially dependent on their husbands for money. As a result, if women want disposable incomes to send home to be recognized by their kin as true *vadimbazaha*, they have to take the low-wage jobs that are available to them. These jobs contradict their own notions of what it means to be a *vadimbazaha*, a status that Malagasy associate with giving rather than taking orders. A woman who marries a Frenchman may have succeeded from the point of view of her kin and peers in Madagascar, but she has been drawn into another role tied to a different set of assumptions about gender, kinship, race, and economy. For many Malagasy women, then, being a *vadimbazaha* in Madagascar requires being a low-status African migrant in France, an inversion that reveals the internal contradictions that structure France's relationship with her former colonies and that shapes Malagasy migration. Malagasy women's efforts to enable the production and movement of wealth and social value between France and Madagascar rely on their management of competing horizons of expectation about who they are, what they do, the meaning of their presence in France, and their right to maintain their connections with Madagascar.

My analysis builds on recent efforts to theorize the role of female migration, care work, and the commodification of intimacy in the global economy. In recent years, increasing numbers of women from the global south have sought to earn their livelihoods and sustain their families by migrating to wealthier countries where they work as maids, wives, entertainers, or nannies (Constable 2009; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Faier 2009; Parreñas 2010). Migrant women's labor often contributes to stratified social reproduction: middle-class women in wealthier countries work outside the home, paying poor immigrant women to take over their household labor, and these women in turn send money to their relatives back home (Parreñas 2012). One promising line of analysis attends to the role of gender in mediating the effect of women's migration and wage earning. Women's migration and wages reconfigure gendered hierarchies; or, alternatively, cultural notions of gender limit the effect of women's earnings (Faier 2009; Gamburd 2000; Ong 2003; Parreñas 2001). There is a complex interplay between economic earning power and notions of gendered personhood. With few exceptions, however, studies focus on women's experience in either the sending or the receiving country.

At first glance, women's commodification of their intimate labor appears to map onto Malagasy women's marriage to Frenchmen and subsequent migration. After all, Malagasy women, too, seek to trade on their caring and sexual labor to find a husband and enable a flow of resources that they can use to help their kin in Madagascar. However, Malagasy women do not generally see intimate care, love, and money as antithetical social domains (see Cole 2009; Thomas and Cole 2009). Although there are certainly moments when a woman might seek to sell her sexual services, ideally, affective attachments and material resources are closely intertwined (see also Zelizer 2005). Moreover, Malagasy's efforts to become *vadimbazaha* in France involves more than simply migrating and then earning wages outside the home that they can then send to Madagascar. Rather, in order to sustain their position they must constantly negotiate competing visions of who they are and what it means to be a wife, mother, or daughter. Consequently, they draw attention to how gendered roles and expectations between a woman's home and her place of migration shape her ability to negotiate different value regimes, earn a livelihood, and accrue social value.

To capture this perspective, I build on Africanist scholarship that emphasizes the social and cultural dimensions of labor, highlighting the beliefs and values that are a part of work. Social and cultural meanings associated with different kinds of activities become part of the value attributed to different kinds of labor, which may also be associated with different types of persons (Cooper 1980; Feeley-Harnik 1984). Indeed, how one works and who one works for often embody notions of love, loyalty, and gendered personhood. Such a perspective extends the insight that gender shapes the effect of remittances to consider how women's ability to manage the horizons of expectation associated with their gender, race, sexuality, and

settlement in France is a crucial part of the work itself. A Malagasy marriage migrant's ability to realize her hopes by building social connections and enabling the flow of wealth, people, and opportunities between France and Madagascar does not happen simply by earning money in a market for unskilled labor and feminine care, nor does it happen because she has married a Frenchman and automatically achieves the role of *vadimbazaha*, as her kin back home sometimes imply. Rather, when a woman does achieve her aspirations, it is because she has managed to shape the understanding of those around her in such a way that she can achieve stability, accrue wealth in France, and manage the terms on which she transfers wealth back to Madagascar. *Vadimbazaha's* labor entails managing cultural notions of race, gender, kinship, and reputation. It is only by managing horizons of expectation across competing cultural frames that these women manage to make economic earnings and cultural practice commensurate in such a way as to make their livelihoods and the generation and sustenance of life from Madagascar to France and back possible.

Vadimbazaha in Madagascar: Conditions of Possibility and Horizons of Expectation

Two aspects of local kinship and gender relations enable Malagasy women to knit together far-flung social networks that cross national boundaries. The first is that in many parts of the island, including the east and north, which is where most Malagasy marriage migrants to France come from, kinship is bilateral and marriage is exogamous to the kin group.³ As a result, women move between families but never lose their natal ties. The second is that when men form intimate relations with women, they are supposed to support them with gifts and money. Such gifts communicate a man's care and respect, recognize a woman's worth, and prove a man's affections.⁴ Consequently, women can position themselves as conduits of life-sustaining resources and opportunities through the skillful use of their sexual and reproductive capacities.

Although women's position as central nodes within kinship networks appears to be relatively constant across historical periods, the types of resources women want and the precise economic activities they engage in have varied with time.

3. Each ancestry—a bilateral kin group—is an independent unit, the members of which are supposed to be blessed by their ancestors and manage their own familial affairs. Precisely because different ancestries or families are supposed to be more or less equal, they also compete: e.g., if a woman gives a gift of sacrifice to her mother's ancestry, it is more than likely that either she or another member of her family will fall sick and learn through divination that her father's ancestors feel slighted and want a sacrifice, too.

4. The very word for love—*fitiaviana*—implies not only sexual desire but is also commonly explained with reference to the exchange of material resources: if you love someone, you care for them and their well-being, which also means that you give them things (Cole 2009).

During the eighteenth century, Madagascar's nascent plantation economy emerged in interaction with the neighboring islands of Isle de France and Isle Bourbon—now Mauritius and Réunion, respectively. At the time, the Merina queen decreed that only Malagasy citizens could own land or slaves. Foreign men seeking their fortune in Madagascar often forged relationships with local women to access these precious forms of capital. Women, in turn, sought to draw these men and their resources into their local kinship networks, gaining prestigious trade goods, money, and social connections through these relationships.

French conquest in 1895 and subsequent colonial rule transformed the circumstances in which *vadimbazaha* operated. While many settlers continued to rely on Malagasy women to access local social networks, colonial laws made it easy for settlers to obtain land, which meant that they no longer needed women to gain access to productive resources. Nevertheless, from the Malagasy perspective, marrying a *vazaha* or foreigner continued to offer advantages. In rural areas, the Malagasy concubines of Creole settlers used their special status to protect their family members from forced labor. But settlers also sometimes bought their concubines land, registering it in their name, or gave them capital to start businesses of their own. Some women managed hotels while others bought property or invested in gold; still others used their French husband's social connections for commerce.⁵

These diverse examples reveal the close connection between the role of *vadimbazaha*, trading, and managerial positions, which contrasts with the kinds of low-status care work that contemporary Malagasy women find in France. In Madagascar, *vadimbazaha* do not work in the fields, clean houses, or work as nannies. Instead they become landlords, run hotels, trade gold, and produce and sell lace undergarments. Insofar as women during the colonial period gained economic and social capital from their relationships with men, their sexuality was not irrelevant, but it was not the most important aspect of how they were defined. Rather, their identities as wives and mothers, intermediaries and managers, dominated.

Over the course of the colonial period, however, the role of *vadimbazaha* also began to carry more ambivalent connotations. As more Malagasy women gave birth to *métis* French-Malagasy children, the colonial administration started to discourage interracial relationships, fearful that they would negatively effect French prestige (Tisseau 2011). Moreover, with the rise of the nationalist movement in Madagascar in the 1940s and 1950s, some nationalist leaders argued that Malagasy women's relationships with *vazaha* were unpatriotic. Perhaps for this reason, one former *vadimbazaha* from Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar and the center of the nationalist movement, reported that her neighbors mocked her after her French lover left (Knibiehler and Goutalier 1985).

5. Personal communication, Violaine Tisseau, e-mail, January 15, 2013.

She attributed their behavior to jealousy, though it may also have implied disapproval.

The years following 1960, just after Madagascar achieved independence, and the 1970s, when the government nationalized industry, mark high points of nationalist fervor. During these periods, women's relationships with foreign men were possibly less frequent and valorized. Moreover, as the economy began to deteriorate in the 1980s, more women turned to prostitution, creating an unfavorable image of women who went with Europeans in the eyes of some. Nevertheless, in Madagascar's stratified sexual economy, vadimbazaha continued to represent a comparatively respectable, middle-class phenomenon, especially in coastal areas. By contrast with prostitutes, who simply survive from one short-term encounter to the next, these are women who successfully use their relations with men to grow networks and social relations. Still, comparatively few Europeans came to Madagascar during this period. With the exception of women who married or had relationships with the French legionnaires stationed in the port town of Diego Suarez, marrying a vazaha was not a widespread phenomenon.

With economic liberalization in the 1990s, however, more Europeans came to Madagascar for tourism and business. The growth of the Internet made it easier for French men seeking wives and Malagasy women seeking French husbands to find one another. And a new generation of young, Internet and media savvy young people helped spread the knowledge of the embodied practices and skills that were required to make these encounters successful (Cole 2010). Until the turn of the millennium, a woman could enter France on a relatively easy-to-acquire tourist visa, find someone to marry, and regularize her administrative status. Many women who succeeded in settling in France then sought husbands for their sisters, nieces, even their mothers. They built houses in Madagascar, helped school their younger siblings, or provided the capital that their families used to start businesses; these practices are the quintessential markers of a contemporary vadimbazaha's success.

These undertakings potentially enable vadimbazaha to acquire a unique social status. Nana, a woman who had lived in France with her French husband for almost 10 years, described her cousin's social success, revealing the kind of authority a vadimbazaha acquires among her Malagasy kin.⁶

You know for her family in the country, as soon as she says something they all listen to her. . . . It's not really power. It's like, she has the first word (*tô teny*) and she says something and I can't explain it. You see, despite her age, she can tell someone who is old there (who therefore should have more social authority), the person who leads the ancestors. No one will go against her in the family. No one will contradict her.

Clearly, the power that a vadimbazaha accrues extends far

beyond simple economic earning power. Rather, as this woman explains, vadimbazaha acquire a quasi-mystical force that ramifies through familial networks connecting a woman to her ancestors and her kin even as her position upends the normal hierarchy of gender and generations. Becoming a vadimbazaha gives women the "first word," namely, the privilege of shaping family decisions before others have their say, a quintessential mark of precedence in Madagascar. No wonder that most parents greet the news of a daughter's departure to France by celebrating the success of their child. They eagerly anticipate both the honor and resources that it will bring to their family.

Rites of Passage: Reincorporation into the (Former) Colonial Metropole

In order to acquire and exercise these powers, to become blessed and "achieve the first word," however, women must marry and travel to France. Malagasy women's position in France turns on the central contradiction that France both needs their domestic and caring labor and seeks to police their presence. Though few of the men these women marry are truly poor, many live quite modestly. Their options on the French marriage market are limited because of their jobs, their family situations, or, as the director of a matrimonial agency that specialized in French-Malagasy marriages delicately phrased it, "the blessings of mother nature." In the past, the prototypical French bachelor was the lonely peasant who could not find a wife because long-standing southwestern inheritance patterns compelled him to remain on the family farm. Staying on the farm in turn condemned him to a life of hard work and little pay, while the job market meant that women could more easily move to the city and find work (Bourdieu 2008; Jegouzo 1991; Perrot 1980). Today, a relatively small percentage of the French population own and work their farms (Desriers 2007). Still, there are many men, whether peasant farmers or their sociological descendants, who have not enjoyed the social mobility that characterized the 30 years following World War II. Many who seek Malagasy brides are older low-level government employees such as postmen or janitors, or they are self-employed—tree trimmers, bakers, taxi drivers. Drawing on discourses concerning immigration, demography, and the renewal of the French population that have circulated in France since the early twentieth century (Camiscioli 2009), many assume that because Malagasy women come from a poor, underdeveloped country they are unspoiled by modernity and will tolerate both more traditional gender relations and more modest living conditions than their French counterparts.

Malagasy women sustain French ways of life by taking jobs that are essential to the reproduction of communities but that French people usually do not want. In some cases, when women marry peasants, they help run the farm. Others work in fruit and vegetable factories or else find employment in seasonal agriculture, as did earlier generations of Portuguese

6. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

and Spanish migrants. Many women also work caring for the growing population of French elderly. Much as in the United States—where Filipina, Latina, and Caribbean women predominate in the care industry—African migrants feed, bathe, and change the diapers of elderly French people.

Even as Malagasy women become part of French efforts to sustain French ways of life, they are also subject to laws intended to police the boundaries of the contemporary French nation. Since the state stopped encouraging labor migration in the early 1970s, family reunification has become the primary means through which foreigners obtain legal entry and citizenship in France. Yet the switch to family reunification does not mean that some communities do not need these women's labor; indeed, their capacities as wives and workers are intertwined. Women find themselves subject to a contradictory set of policies. Here as elsewhere, the social production of migrant illegality dovetails with the state's need for cheap and available labor (De Genova 2002). Because these women acquire citizenship through their marriages to Frenchmen, they are not illegal. Nevertheless, the acquisition of citizenship has become an increasingly arduous process that depends on the whims of bureaucrats (Spire 2008). In some cases, mayors refuse to perform the civil ceremony for "mixed couples"—the term generally used by the French administration to refer to marriages where one spouse is French and the other is of foreign origin—claiming that they fear that false pretenses motivate the marriage (Association cette France-là 2010; Fassin 2010; Ferran 2008; Robledo 2011).

Moreover, in an effort to justify mixed-marriage policing, the state has propagated a discourse of fraudulent marriage or "marriage gris" (gray marriage) that casts suspicion over all mixed couples (Association cette France-là 2010; Fassin 2010; Ferran 2008). According to a circular sent in May 2005 by the minister of justice to mayors and police chiefs, a "pretend marriage" is "any marriage that is not founded on the free and enlightened desire to take one another as husband and wife and has been arranged exclusively with the goal of migration, professional interests or social, tax or inheritance advantages in mind" (Robledo 2011:2). The context in which the circular was distributed implies that such "fake marriages" only exist among would-be immigrants, not native-born French people. This discourse reformulates much older, colonial representations of African women as venal, licentious, and after money.

Malagasy women who believe that their marriage to a Frenchman has made them a *vadimbazaha* begin realizing that others may not see them as legitimate immigrants or proper wives when they apply for a visa at the French consulate in Madagascar. Like consular bureaucrats across Francophone Africa (Kringelbach 2013), the officials who conduct the interviews regularly ask women why they want to go to France and how they met their husbands to test the legitimacy of the marriage. Consulate employees, who may be of upper-class Malagasy origin, further dismiss women with denigrating comments. In one case, I overheard a consular official, an

upper-class Malagasy from the dominant ethnic group, telling a woman who came from the coast and who did not speak good French that she should come back when she had learned the language—even though the official knew full well that she likely could not afford to pay for French lessons.⁷ This interaction reveals the competition between different ethnic groups within Madagascar, to be sure. It also underscores the assumption that because these women are uneducated and often do not speak French, they are not suited to life in France.

Such interactions prefigure the vulnerability that Malagasy women often experience when they arrive in France. Migrants usually receive a temporary residence card (*carte de séjour*) that they may have to renew yearly for 5 years until they become eligible to apply for citizenship. During this time, the French spouse, acting as a *de facto* proxy for the French state, has to sign the renewal applications. This period is difficult, because women have little power to negotiate their relationships. If a man decides to divorce a woman, he essentially revokes the grounds of family reunification, leading to expulsion. Although a woman could certainly contest a man's request for a divorce, it leads her into a complicated and risky set of bureaucratic procedures.

These women thus navigate competing visions of who they are and how they should behave. In Madagascar, a *vadimbazaha* is the mistress of her household, running the family business, managing servants, and giving orders. Her Malagasy kin expect that their absent daughter, sister, or mother is wealthy—a real *vadimbazaha*. They also expect her to benefit from her relationships with her husband as any sensible woman should, drawing him into a thick web of reciprocal obligations. In France, however, Malagasy women carry the stigma of coming from a former French colony that is now associated with poverty and prostitution; they must constantly justify their presence. They marry men of modest means, often accept low-wage, repetitive kinds of labor, and take orders from others. Unfamiliar at first with the social value and skills of *vadimbazaha* and with a world of Malagasy kinship in which they are expected to support numerous kin, the French husbands and in-laws perceive them as poor immigrants who have come in search of a better life in France. They expect women to privilege their relationships with them over their extended kin in Madagascar. Influenced in part by the state's suspicion of migrants, French husbands and their kin watch expectantly to see whether and how adeptly women adopt French speech, dress, and values. Like the French state, they seek proof that women want to become culturally French and that they are not there only to acquire French citizenship or to take a man's money.

Even as women try to carefully craft how their husbands

7. The consular official was Merina, and the woman who had come to seek a visa was Betsimisaraka. During the nineteenth century, the Merina conquered Betsimisaraka territory and incorporated it into the Merina kingdom. Historical memories of Merina domination continue to shape their relations with other groups on the island to this day.

and French kin perceive them, they must constantly send goods and resources to their families and work hard to manage their reputations. Their reputations reinforce or diminish the social efficacy of their positions as *vadimbazaha* both in terms of their social status and how their position benefits their kin. Most women do not want their Malagasy kin to know the kind of work that they have in France. While some women go to great lengths to conceal or misrepresent their work, over time, their kin usually learn what they do. If someone wants to hurt a *vadimbazaha*, they can make this information public and use it to shame them (Cole 2014). Yet as long as they act like *vadimbazaha* when they are home and share their wealth with others, there is a tacit agreement not to delve into what really occurs in France. In this respect, these women and their kin construct an economy of appearances that helps paper over the contradictions that structure their relationships to one another. More importantly, women's ability to earn a livelihood in France and become a *vadimbazaha* in Madagascar relies on their negotiation of competing notions of wife, mother, or daughter. Women straddle different worlds, each with their own regimes of value. Their efforts to translate between what they take to be "French" and "Malagasy" practices, assumptions, and ways of life contribute to the reification of those categories even though their practice contributes to their further entanglement.

Seeking One's Fortune in France and Projecting Power Back Home: The Case of Franceline

Let me turn to the case of Franceline to explore further how women's efforts to inhabit the role of *vadimbazaha* while living in France entail the management of meaning in such a way that they can embody competing expectations simultaneously. Franceline grew up in a small town in northeast Madagascar. Her father was a chauffeur who spent most of his time with various mistresses, leaving her mother alone to raise nine children. She quit school at 16 years of age. At 17, a local doctor approached her mother and asked for her hand in marriage. Repulsed by the doctor's arrogant certainty that she would accept him, Franceline declined the offer, but feeling pressure to contribute to the household, announced to her parents that she wanted to work. Her father found her a job as a maid with wealthier relatives who lived in the northern city of Diego Suarez—the city from whence the custom of seeking foreign spouses spread in the postindependence period. On the urging of a cousin, she "tried her luck" at finding a "correspondent" (*koresy*)—a pen pal relationship aimed at finding a romantic partner. After submitting her name and information to an agency that was run by a Réunionnais woman out of Belgium, she received the names of four men, three of whom lived in Belgium and one in France. As chance would have it, only the Frenchman, who worked

as a tree trimmer, answered. He bought her a plane ticket to France, where they married after several months.

Franceline's marriage to the tree trimmer ended after 7 years, by which time she had given birth to a daughter. Looking back on her early years in France, she attributed the divorce to her husband's depression and her increasing desire, as she adapted to life in France, to exercise her independence. As I heard the story from other Malagasy women, she left the house after a fight, cradling their baby in her arms. She happened to get into a taxi driven by Pierre, a recent widower with two sons. Eventually, Franceline and Pierre started a relationship. For several years, Pierre lived alone in his house, content to have his independence. Franceline and the daughter, meanwhile, stayed in the subsidized apartment (*habitation à loyer modéré*) that they had been assigned to by social workers at the time of her divorce.

After several years, Pierre and Franceline married. Franceline worked two different jobs as a maid, rising before dawn to go to work. Pierre also helped her by giving her money so that she could build a large cement house in Madagascar, the dream of every *vadimbazaha*. Despite the fact that local custom privileges ties with one's father, Franceline chose to build her house in her mother's ancestral land, signaling her attachment to her mother.

In the summer of 2012, Franceline returned to Madagascar to perform a customary cattle sacrifice ritual to inaugurate her house. A day after her arrival, she found herself surrounded by her female maternal kin, several of whom had begun preparations for the event months before. Each of them had his or her own idea of how the ceremony should be carried out to bring honor to the family. Enormously proud that her niece had done well, Franceline's elderly widowed aunt, a devout Catholic, arranged for her favorite priest to perform the mass. She also recommended a local caterer who would help with preparing the food, someone she said "all the *vadimbazaha* use." Collectively, the various women ordered the men around, telling them to go buy the bulls for the sacrifice at the cattle market. Franceline's father, meanwhile, wounded that Franceline had not informed him of the event and resentful that she'd built the house in her mother's hometown rather than his, stayed away. He was probably fully aware that, according to custom, Franceline needed him to perform the cattle sacrifice ritual. Eventually, Franceline went to make peace by explicitly inviting him to the event.

Franceline's efforts to shape the event and her own idea of how it should unfold further illustrate her role as a *vadimbazaha* and the social expectations she had to manage. As we went from place to place, first to the caterer's, then to visit the man who would act as the master of ceremonies, then to a meeting with the choir to select the hymns, she carefully explained her goals to the various participants. Dropping her use of Malagasy and switching into French, a linguistic choice that signaled her high status but also, perhaps, her genuine effort to connect her two worlds, she said that having lived in France for nearly 20 years, she felt torn between two cul-

tures. She especially emphasized to the caterers, and to the kin who accompanied her on her errands, that she wanted the French style of sitting at table for parties to be respected. Her hope was that she could share with her kin in Madagascar a little bit of the *savoir faire* she had learned to appreciate in France.

When Franceline threw her party, it was already evident to many by virtue of her fancy house that she was successful. At the same time, to be truly recognized, she needed to translate the wealth embodied in her house locally. Women in France may only be able to send small amounts of money home, but the public display of wealth and power in a ceremony can extend the social effects of their position, helping their kin in ways that exceed any simple monetary calculation. So, too, a woman's kin know that no matter what happens while she is away, her return obliges her to share her wealth, particularly in ritual contexts. Franceline's favorite aunt, in particular, took advantage of this fact, insisting that Franceline invite as many notables in the town as possible, many of whom Franceline did not know or care about. When Franceline complained to other family members about her aunt's outlandish guest list, her cousin remarked that the aunt was old, alone, and poor and defended the aunt's right to invite numerous guests, saying that if people in town saw that the old woman had powerful, wealthy kin, they would be kinder and more helpful to her in the future. The aunt's demand and the cousin's defense spoke for all of Franceline's kin who lived in the town: they all needed the respect that her status garnered, a respect that would perhaps be translated at a later date into new opportunities and new life-giving connections.

In the event, Franceline's genteel vision of the celebration was not to be. In part, this was because the caterers appeared late with the food. But it was also because Franceline could only minimally control the hundreds of people who came to the event, some whom she and her aunt had invited, while others came unbidden. Visitors flooded the house and courtyard, brought by truckload from her father's village to the south. Everyone came and partook of the wealth as they assumed was their right, eagerly consuming Franceline's food and drink. Few people sat politely at the table. In the hurly-burly, some honored dignitaries of the town did not get to eat enough of the high-status foods such as cake and whiskey. Others had to wait a long time before being served.

Not only did the organization of the party and the behavior of some of the guests cause tensions, but the staging of the ritual also marked Franceline's distance from some aspects of local practice. To begin with, Franceline had wanted to hold the sacrifice on Bastille Day, which is still considered an auspicious day. Only when she arrived in the town did her aunt inform her that because the moon was waning rather than waxing, which is considered inauspicious, the local ritual specialist told them to refrain from invoking the spirits of the land, a part of the invocation normally considered necessary to the ceremony. Moreover, after her father had finished the ritual benediction and the bull had been slaughtered, her aunts

wanted to mark Franceline and her daughter with the blood of the bull, as is customary. They also wanted to hang the horns of the cattle on the roof of the house, another common practice that signals to all passers by that the ritual has been performed. In both cases, Franceline refused, protesting that her daughter, who had been raised in France, fainted at the mere sight of meat hanging in a butcher's window, and that the custom was barbaric. The horns of the bull were tossed out and left to the dogs to eat, a gesture that others likely perceived as disrespectful.

Franceline, however, was far more chagrined by the unattended guests than any ritual missteps that might have occurred. The next day, she began to try to set things straight. She and her aunt and a team of helpers went from house to house, delivering pieces of cake and glasses of whiskey. At each household, she explained how the caterers had been late, apologizing for the oversight. Slowly, house by house, she worked to repair any damage that might have been done to her reputation—and by extension to her kin—because of the slow service. She worked painstakingly to make sure that people appreciated her social efforts, felt respected by her, and did not blame her for the delays.

In the days following the ceremony, Franceline continued to intervene in her family's affairs. She decided that instead of living with his aunt, her nephew, whose mother lived in France, should move to live with yet another family member. She also attempted to undertake a pedagogical project of teaching her kin how to manage money rather than wait for her to send money from France. Before leaving for Madagascar, Franceline had shipped a container filled with used clothes and other household goods. She spent days with her siblings selling the clothes. The house became a Zolaesque Ladies' Paradise, with women trying on clothes, haggling over the price, and getting annoyed when Franceline refused to bargain. Her eldest brother recorded each sale in a notebook. The day before she flew home, Franceline's niece took her to see a piece of land that she hoped Franceline would help her buy. Franceline returned home to France on a Friday and went back to her work as a maid on Monday.

Franceline's visit home reveals some of the many hurdles and hazards that women must negotiate to become *vadimbazaha*. From the French perspective, Franceline, remains an immigrant, a low-status person who is tolerated rather than wanted. Her family in Madagascar also has an ambivalent relationship to her. They admire her, envy her, and want to control her all at once. Recall how Nana depicted the successful *vadimbazaha* as someone who possesses a quasi-mystical power and enjoys the "first word." Franceline's experience demonstrates how extraordinarily difficult this ideal is to achieve. To do so, Franceline had to successfully transform the attraction and labor power she possesses as a Malagasy woman into a legal identity, a social status and monetary income in France. She also had to reconvert those various assets into respect and a modicum of social power among her family in Madagascar. Franceline made this association

explicit when she remarked, "When I go home to Madagascar, everyone treats me like a princess." But, as the events make clear, her "princess" status is fragile and requires constant work. By the time she returned to France, Franceline was exhausted, sucked dry by her family. She was also proud.

Negotiating Race, Gender, and Kinship

Much as Franceline's trip home reveals how vadimbazaha seek to negotiate their kin's expectations, so, too, women must negotiate their relationships with their husbands so as to create the conditions in which they can care for others. Whether consciously or not, men may find the imbalance of power between them and their Malagasy wives appealing; as I suggested earlier, men may enter these relationships with the implicit idea, built on centuries of French men taking temporary wives in the colonies, that Malagasy women do not merit the same rights or respect that a native-born French woman does. In some cases, men seek to keep their wives dependent, although these relationships usually do not last. Recall that Franceline walked out of her first marriage because her husband sought to control her, while her horizon had grown. Alternatively, men sometimes take up the paternalistic position of guide and teacher, informing women about French cultural life. Part of the reason that Pierre and Franceline's relationship worked was that unlike her first husband, Pierre enjoyed using his position of wealth and relative cultural competence to teach Franceline about France. He remarked, "Franceline's ex-husband never took her out. It was probably so she'd remain ignorant and so he would be able to spend less money. To control her. Many men, they feel vulnerable; they fear that if they know too much, the women will reject them. But I like teaching her. I would take her to the market, take her around the area. . . . Now she is much more independent."

Pierre's desire to teach Franceline was both paternalistic and generous. Much as French settlers in Madagascar taught their concubines foreign habits and practices, which could be seen as part of the more general colonial dynamic of bringing civilization to their colonial subjects, so, too, Pierre taught Franceline about life in France. Franceline, in turn, enjoyed and benefited from what he taught her.

Even so, Franceline's position as the mistress of the house was hard won, the result of her effort to redefine the terms of their relationship, assert her rights, and prove that she transcended stereotypes of African women. When Franceline first met Pierre, he was a widower. According to French law, as long as he did not remarry, he received his wife's pension. Pierre enjoyed his personal freedom and the pension. He also had an affinity for women of African descent (he had been dating a woman from Martinique when he first met Franceline) and appeared to share common French stereotypes about black women's easy sexuality. He was happy to keep her as a girlfriend and not marry her.

For Franceline, however, being Pierre's girlfriend hardly

conformed to the vadimbazaha ideal to which she aspired. To the contrary, it hurt her status. Among the coastal Malagasy diaspora in France, the great majority of whom enter France as brides, there are always some whose marriages do not work out and who find themselves in a precarious position. They may turn to their fellow Malagasy for help. Once she had acquired citizenship, Franceline offered various young women in difficulty a place to stay. It was part of being a vadimbazaha, a well-positioned woman who could act as a generous patron; she hoped that news of her generosity would travel back to Madagascar. Each time she did so, however, Pierre slept with the woman and gave her money, infuriating Franceline and wounding her pride. The other Malagasy women, in turn, sometimes used this information to contest Franceline's status and hurt her reputation.

To successfully attain her goals, Franceline needed to secure her position. Although she did not need the legal status that a marriage conferred, she knew that she would gain more respect as a wife than as a girlfriend. She began a campaign to convince Pierre to marry her. She even involved an elderly French couple who had agreed to serve as her godparents when she decided to have a formal second communion at the local Catholic Church. They intervened with Pierre on her behalf. Eventually, Franceline triumphed and had her white wedding; she and Pierre were even driven to the church in a Rolls Royce, a spectacle that she was particularly eager to share with her Malagasy friends and kin.

Franceline's desire for respect and her fierce need to achieve a certain French-Malagasy norm motivated her efforts to convince Pierre to marry her. But her marriage was also an important part of her effort to become a vadimbazaha and had economic and social consequences. Not only did it secure her right to a portion of Pierre's inheritance but also it was only after their marriage that Pierre helped her build her villa back home, implying that the legal bond increased his willingness to invest monetarily in their relationship and her family. The elaborate church wedding did not simply signal his respect or give her financial security. It also changed how other Malagasy perceived her. Pierre could continue his dalliances, but they would not matter in the same way. Franceline's ability to redefine her relationship to Pierre made her status more secure.

Even as Franceline sought to secure her relationship with Pierre, she also worked to manage how he perceived her ongoing commitments to Madagascar. After all, she was the second oldest girl in the family; she took seriously her responsibilities to her mother and younger siblings. Part of the reason that vadimbazaha achieve the "first word" is that they become vital to their families' livelihoods, whether by helping other kin to come to France or by sending money home for various projects. In either case, women must negotiate both various administrative hurdles and their French families' understandings of kinship. To bring their sisters to France, vadimbazaha must convince their husbands and French kin that the relationship merits the investment of time, labor, and

money. If they appear too invested in their kin, they run the risk of being stigmatized as “unintegrated,” a negative attribution that makes it more likely that their French kin will seek to control their movements.

Franceline had fulfilled her duties in this respect early on, after she had established her relationships with Pierre but before they moved in together. Most women, however, find that in order to succeed in this respect, they must negotiate with their husbands. Franceline’s friend Vola, for example, brought over three of her nine siblings while living with her husband and his mother. A sociable man who had married late in life, her husband welcomed the sisters and agreed to give them the proof of housing that the French state requires to issue a visa. Over time, however, as one and then another and another of the sisters came, filled the bathtub to the rim with piping hot water and ate enormous amounts of expensive packaged food, he began to complain. Meanwhile, Vola’s kin continued to ask her for help, recounting how they had become aware of a half sister, their father’s child out of wedlock. They reported that she had started frequenting two well-known nightclubs. Fearing that she might be on the slippery path to prostitution, they begged Vola to “save” her by sponsoring her migration and helping her come to France.

Vola in turn had to convince her husband to accept her half sister’s presence. As he began to protest the onslaught, arguing that surely they could not help that many sisters, Vola cunningly responded by using the language she hoped would persuade him: that this was her sister and she had to help her. Her husband acquiesced, convinced by her appeals to moral responsibility and kinship. But Vola used the term “sister” to describe a relationship that her husband would likely not have categorized in the same way. Northeastern Malagasy women reckon kinship in “classificatory” terms, referring to what the French would call “aunts” and “uncles” as “mothers” and “fathers” and to “cousins” as “siblings,” thereby creating feelings of closeness and solidarity despite what the French might construe as genealogical distance (see Cole, forthcoming). In practice, of course, shared residence as well as blood shape people’s commitments to one another. Nevertheless, Vola could use the terminological ambiguities to frame the relationship in a way that persuaded her husband to participate and help.

If women like Franceline or Vola appear more committed to their siblings than they are to their husbands and children, they jeopardize their moral authority vis-à-vis their French families. It also implies a kind of clannish thinking that French public discourse often attributes to immigrants. One French husband made this assumption explicit when he complained about how his ex-wife “just wanted to live among Malagasy” and “didn’t want to integrate.” By insisting that it was her moral responsibility as an older sister to bring her younger sibling, then complaining about her sister to her husband once she arrived, Vola managed to simultaneously enact her role as *vadimbazaha* in the eyes of her kin at home and appear properly integrated with her husband and mother-in-law.

Movement, Making Life, and Managing Expectations

Efforts to sustain life across generations and to accrue value by moving through space is indeed central to “making a living” and negotiating the current period of economic crisis, much as Narotzky and Besnier (2014) argue in the introduction. It is precisely because women take a socially valued gendered social role that has long existed in Madagascar and try to achieve it through the very different conditions of life in France that Franceline’s case reveals actors’ cultural work as they sustain life by negotiating between competing and unequally situated horizons of expectation. Franceline and women like her constantly manage not only a global political economy but also a political economy of gendered reputations rooted in the colonial past. Consequently, their efforts to find solutions to the ongoing economic crisis in Madagascar by marrying Frenchmen and settling in France depend as much on their ability to manage the meanings associated with their sexual, reproductive, and caring labor as they do on earning money from low-wage labor and sending it home. To “give life” to their French families and communities and their kin in Madagascar simultaneously, women like Franceline must also negotiate between different regimes of value. They must be able to constantly take the migrant social status and wages that they gain in France and convert them into the quasi-mystical force of someone who “has the first word” in Madagascar.

In the process, they incur both symbolic and material debts in addition to new obligations in both France and Madagascar. As a Malagasy woman who has made good, Franceline owed a debt to her kin and her ancestors in Madagascar, without whose blessing she certainly would never have succeeded. But she also has obligations to Pierre, who supported her endeavors materially and helped her practically to maintain her ties to home. The debts and obligations that she had to negotiate with her kin in Madagascar and with Pierre in France turned on their different visions of who she was. To manage these visions simultaneously, Franceline had to negotiate competing horizons of expectation regarding who she was and what her actions meant. It also required her to participate in an economy of appearances. Franceline could only work as a maid in France and be a *vadimbazaha* to her kin in Madagascar if she acted like a *vadimbazaha* at home, displaying her wealth and building her social relations. So, too, she could only really attain the wealth that she needed to build her social relations in Madagascar by simultaneously working and receiving help from Pierre. And she could only obtain meaningful support from Pierre, including the ability to bring her sisters over, if she could convince him that she was not just another easy African woman but someone who demanded to receive the rights and respect due to a French wife. To do this, she had to gain sufficient knowledge of French gender norms and kin practices to be able to gain her husband’s cooperation. Meeting such competing demands enabled

Franceline to coordinate the expectations of her French and Malagasy kin, contingently bridging the different social relations that enable the production and flow of resources to happen.

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