

Why are some people powerful?

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An anthropologist and a president

In early 2004 I spent two months researching the lives and journeys of young Antandroy cattle drovers trading cattle across the wild western plains of Madagascar. On the very day I returned to Antananarivo from my first journey, covered in red dust and smelling of straw, I received a telephone call from the Presidency. ‘Dr Freeman, The President wants to see you. You must be here in 40 minutes.’ This was not as unexpected as it might seem, for I had known Marc Ravalomanana many years before when we were both leading different lives. I had written to him to tell him of my arrival in Madagascar.

I hurriedly borrowed a suit from my Malagasy brother Solo, which was rather short in the leg. His smart shoes pinched too painfully, so we took a taxi to a shoe shop to buy some for me. Leaving my sandals there to be collected on the way home, we raced up to the palace, stopping only to buy a tie from a street vendor.

At the palace gates a guard in a red beret directed us to the security room. On a row of plastic chairs people were waiting patiently to be issued with passes. I explained the purpose of my visit to one of three staff behind a long desk. Looking up from his wordsearch puzzle, he made a phone call, filled out a form in leaking biro and issued us with security badges. A colleague waved a metal detector at us and we stepped through the airport-style security gate. An attentive young man led us across a courtyard in front of the palace, up some steps and into an ante-room. The room was glazed along the southern side, giving out over the suburbs of the capital. From half a mile below us, floating up on the breeze from the shores of Lac Anosy, came the shouts and angry slogans of a public protest against rising fuel prices. The armed soldier sitting in the corner of the room was oblivious to this, as he was listening through twittering headphones to a personal stereo. Solo and I sat nervously until the attentive young man returned and led us past a saluting and lavishly brocaded aide-de-camp (Does one salute back? I wondered) into the office of the president. He rose from behind a huge leather-covered desk. ‘So, Luke. How are you?’

I hadn't seen Ravalomanana for fifteen years, when, as Madagascar's most dynamic young businessman, he had employed me as his English teacher. He had barely changed: he still looked young – even boyish – and handsome, with dark eyes that look deep into you. I told him I was now an anthropologist and had just spent a month with cattle drovers. He looked puzzled for a moment, then grinned and thumped his palm on the desk. 'That is what I need! I need to know my own people. You can help me! I must make a speech tomorrow. You will write it for me.' He phrased it in a way that was impossible to refuse.

It was the closing address, to be delivered in English the next day at the WWF international conference. I wrote it that evening on Solo's kitchen table, sprinkling it with proverbs and pleas for the conservationists to respect local knowledge and practice. At 8 o'clock the next morning I found myself back at the palace rehearsing the speech with the president. I coached him in body language and intonation, and that afternoon he delivered it with panache to a standing ovation. He had previously been criticised for his inability to speak in public, a deficiency that only highlighted his political inexperience. Now he had found someone who could fix that for him. He was delighted.

Within a week President Ravalomanana had appointed me his special advisor and chief speech writer.

President Marc Ravalomanana

This enquiry into individual political power was provoked by the time I spent as a member of the president's staff. However, this is not a personal up-close portrait of Ravalomanana – those insights cannot be published here; nor is it an anthropology of elite politicians and their world. Arguing from a conventional anthropological perspective that the locus of power lies as much in the perceptions and projections of the subjects as it does in the figure and actions of their leader, this study and its conclusions are based as much on my knowledge and observation of ordinary Malagasy people over several years than on my short-term privileged access to the president. Nearly all the ethnographic evidence presented here would have been available to me from a position outside the presidential entourage. But what my

association with Ravalomanana did do was to force me to spend time around him, and this is what raised the question that forms the title of this paper. Indeed, it was the personal presentation of power, rather than governmental processes or party politics, which most intrigued my Malagasy friends and family whenever I returned home from the palace. They wanted to know what their president was like up close, in what way he was different from them, and how that enabled him to rule over them. As well as asking why he was powerful, they were asking why they were not.

Ravalomanana came into politics from a business background, having created a hugely profitable dairy company called Tiko. After only a few years as mayor of Antananarivo, he stood for president. A long and acrimonious standoff with the long-term leader Didier Ratsiraka threw the country into chaos and brought it to the verge of civil war. Ratsiraka eventually left the island in defeat in 2002 and Ravalomanana came to power on a wave of public support, a new charismatic leader in the Weberian sense, whose popular devotion was ‘born of distress and enthusiasm’ (Weber 1948:249). I was initially happy to work for him, as I had known him before he went into politics and I felt that – despite his lack of experience – he represented hope and stability for the country after many years of misrule and severe political upheaval. Advising the president was a chance for me to put my knowledge of Malagasy culture and society to the service of the country and its people. Initially, he did seem incredibly out of touch with how his people think, behave and believe – and I don’t think presidents should be. So on one hand I saw my work as a kind of advocacy: communicating to those in power the worldview and priorities of the ordinary people I had come to know and love. But on the other hand I was using my ethnographic and anthropological knowledge to present Ravalomanana’s persona in the most culturally persuasive way. So was I serving the president’s people or the president’s career? Was I people’s advocate or presidential spin doctor? Anthropologists rarely have such influence, and it did not always sit comfortably with me. But my natural curiosity got the better of me.

The material basis of Ravalomanana’s political prominence lies in the marriage of his personal business career with the wider economic agenda of western capitalism. Firmly believing in the potential of the free market to transform the Malagasy economy, Ravalomanana’s policies are all geared towards enabling private enterprise

to flourish. Major international institutions such as the World Bank have been instrumental in supporting Ravalomanana and his agenda of economic liberalism, enacted through the abolition of import tariffs on foreign goods, the promotion of public-private business partnerships and massive incentives for foreign investment. The European Union recently funded a large road building project in the north, and the World Bank supports numerous smaller projects. Much of Ravalomanana's political success lies in his ability to attract such finance and negotiate its terms, which are often linked to him pursuing the fight against corruption in government. In comparison to Ratsiraka, the majority of whose foreign aid and contacts came from France, Ravalomanana has developed productive relationships with a wider spectrum of donors, notably in the English-speaking world. As the largest captain of enterprise in Madagascar, Ravalomanana's own business interests (road building, distribution, media and agro-industry) stand to gain enormously from these policies. Neither the international backers nor the president himself seem to perceive a conflict of interest here: it is a marriage of convenience.

As I worked for Ravalomanana, I soon learned – to my growing discomfort – how the overlapping of personal business interests with public office is echoed in other realms of the president's life. His political party is called *Tiako i Madagasikara* (I love Madagascar). The first word is very similar to the name of his dairy company, *Tiko*. The colours of the company and the party are the same: blue and green. *Tiko* advertisements adorned the stadium for the Independence Day parade. A major electioneering point, and still a central policy enormously popular in this country of feeble infrastructure, is the building of new roads. The graphic of people building new roads which he used for election posters now features on Madagascar's largest banknote.

His political control also embraces the religious domain. The motto that he used throughout the campaign in 2002 was a quotation from Jesus taken from St Mark's gospel: 'Don't be afraid, just believe'. He still uses it in political speeches today. But the way his speeches phrase it suggests that it is not God we should believe in, but him. 'Trust me – Marc Ravalomanana,' he is saying. 'Don't be afraid, just believe in me.' He also uses the motto on signs on his *Fanazavana* (clarity) radio station and in promoting his *Tiko* products. You see it on banners outside grocery shops: *Aza*

matahotra fa minoa fotsiny ihany, followed by the chapter and verse (Mark: 5:11). So the name of the gospel maker is confounded with his own, as he uses Mark the evangelist to evangelise on behalf of Marc the president. There is something (consciously?) messianic about the way he tours the country preaching to the people much in the way Mark depicts Jesus preaching in Galilee. He has become vice-president of the Protestant Church, historically the church of the Merina political and social elite, of which he is not a member by birth. Business, religion, politics have all become condensed under one banner, one slogan, one man.

This lack of boundaries between Ravalomanana's various roles is often pointed out by his political opponents. But in the long run he will be judged on the country's economic performance. For the moment Ravalomanana has combined the three major dimensions of social stratification: political control, wealth and prestige. These all reinforce each other. His political control rests in his executive presidential powers; his wealth lies in his business empire; his prestige resides in his central position in, and control over, the institutional loci of charisma, namely presidential and ecclesiastical office (Weber: 1964). To a population which is 80% rural, which does not have a notable business elite, which is one of the poorest in the world, Ravalomanana's achievement is almost fantastical.

Ethnographic and theoretical orientation

While the role of such structural factors in creating powerful figures is undeniable, it is not my main interest here. The chapter focuses principally on which attributes and achievements of powerful figures are particularly convincing; how an image of power is created and sustained; and how it is reflected and refracted between the leader and the people. As befits a speech writer, this paper is more about the projection and perception of power than it is about the material basis of it, though of course these are very closely connected. From this perspective, power is about gathering followers by communicating an aura of unusual efficacy as a person and of natural authority as a ruler. It is about seeking and gaining recognition as a social person who has power (Leach 1954:10). 'Reputation of power is power,' wrote Thomas Hobbes, 'because it draweth with it the adherence of those that need protection' (Hobbes 1968:150).

Western governments and institutions may be supporting Ravalomanana in office, but it was the Malagasy people themselves who put him there – and who will remove him

if he does not deliver. It is the symbolic communicative power of those foreign connections, rather than their economic effects, which I focus on here. It is to Ravalomanana's advantage, as I show later, that in Madagascar one of the expectations of leaders is that they should accumulate and embody powerful foreign essence.

Here I present Ravalomanana in the context of anthropological studies of people recognised as powerful figureheads. Sahlins' (1963) comparison of Melanesian big men and Polynesian chiefs provides a useful framework for considering the relationship of leaders to followers. He contrasts the work which Melanesian big men have to do to accumulate their following with the rank which Polynesian chiefs inherit that guarantees them theirs. In essence, it is a contrast between achieved and acquired status. Malagasy democracy – perhaps all democracy – combines elements of Melanesian and Polynesian ethnographic types: the need to gather support in order to achieve office and the support that office provides once achieved. The tension between personal authority and the authority of office is also central to Weber's (1964) discussion of three types of authority: legal-rational authority operates through generalised rules of jurisdiction imposed by a legitimate agency; traditional authority is based on an order deemed to be long established and sanctified by traditionally transmitted rules; finally, charismatic authority is contrary to the previous two forms in that it is usually held by an innovating leader who is in opposition to aspects of the established society (Weber 1964:324-406). Weber's distinction set up these types of authority as analytically pure and distinct but of course they are mixed and overlapping in practice, particularly as a leader moves from being the new hope 'born of distress' to the safely ensconced incumbent of power. This is where we find Ravalomanana now, straddling the three types: he promises a new economic direction for the country and an end to the corruption of the old regimes; his state duties place him atop the hierarchy of the traditional Malagasy ritual economy; and he exercises his political will through its legal-rational framework. From a structural perspective, Ravalomanana's charismatic authority is becoming 'routinized' into the established order. From another more actor-oriented one, he is skilfully realising the potential of all types of authority, although I doubt that he has ever read Max Weber. This chapter, then, is about how different, opposing ethnographic and theoretical models of power and authority converge in the figure of a democratically elected president.

‘Big men’ and ‘earth shakers’

According to Sahlins (1963:289-292), a Melanesian big man achieves his status by actions and skills which elevate him above the *hoi polloi*. He is a social and economic entrepreneur who gathers and mobilises factions to produce crops or livestock. These he accumulates and then redistributes in shows of competitive munificence which benefit both his faction and himself. He thus combines altruistic exploitation with self-interested generosity. The essential test of Melanesian power is the proven ability to gather goods and followers. And those who gather these attract even more: magnates are magnets. Ravalomanana’s incremental success – first with Tiko, then as mayor, and now as president – corresponds well with this model of power.

Big men’s power, then, lies in their actions, not their status. This kind of power is central to the politics of leadership amongst the people of Sahafatra, slash and burn dry rice cultivators in south-east Madagascar (Wooley 2002). It is remarkably different from the descent-based hierarchies of the irrigated highlands. Power in Sahafatra is held by men known as ‘earth shakers’, who are chosen not by descent, but for their proven ability to access and channel to their people the elemental power of the land. The people of Sahafatra subject the ‘earth shakers’ to stringent tests to make sure they are up to the job. To them, this creative relationship with the raw power of creation is more important than access to ancestral blessings. As leaders they marshal the force of the people to harness the autochthonous elemental power vital for life.

It is a similar ability to generate prosperity from the land and people of Madagascar that makes Ravalomanana exceptional. His dairy company Tiko is a rare example of a successful indigenous Malagasy business. It started as a cottage industry employing five people to make and deliver yoghurt. Benefiting from World Bank loans to import modern machinery, Ravalomanana developed Tiko into a huge business now employing five thousand staff. Its products range from yoghurt to Camembert, to ice cream, soft drinks and cooking oil. Tiko products are found in every small town in Madagascar and many villages, where they are marketed under the slogan, ‘*Tiko: vita Malagasy!*’ – ‘Tiko: made in Madagascar!’

So Tiko, then, can be taken as evidence of Madagascar's innate potential, realised by Ravalomanana's 'big man' entrepreneurship. Ravalomanana's wealth is evidence of Madagascar's wealth. It is made from the land and paid for by the earning power of all those Malagasy customers whose money buys his products. The products and the profits are a realisation of the potential of the Malagasy land and its people. It was Ravalomanana's ability to coalesce this native potential where most other indigenous enterprises have failed that qualify him, in Weber's terms, as a 'natural' leader, someone with 'specific gifts of the body and spirit [...], supernatural, not accessible to everybody' (Weber 1948:245). It is this that led many voters to believe that he could do the same for the country as he did for his company.

The material process by which Ravalomanana gathers and absorbs the potential of the Malagasy land and people, and thereby comes to embody it, is mirrored in the democratic process that has made him leader. In material terms, Ravalomanana as a wealthy entrepreneur is made up of the physical and human elements that transform grass into yoghurt into profit. In a democratic sense, he is constituted by the political will of the people, which they have transformed into the votes that made him president. His ability to coalesce material elemental power has led to his success in coalescing democratic political power. Both can be seen as kinds of tribute, paid in small amounts by people to a leader who responds through the promise of prosperity. One of his first gestures as leader was to provide every schoolchild in the country with a satchel bearing the legend 'We are learning' (*'Mianatra izahay'*). In the remotest villages, children learned his name and associated it with this gift. He was offering the most precious commodity of all – knowledge – to the people that most represent the potential of the land – Madagascar's millions of children. This act of calculated generosity was excellent political communication. It was the gesture of a big man.

Prestige and privilege

In contrast to 'big men' and 'earth shakers', whose power is a result of their actions, the power of the Polynesian chiefs resides in their office. Genealogical links to divinity imbue the chief with the prestige of rank, which outlives and is independent of any individual leader. With this prestige comes a set of organisational powers which extend the personal capacity of the leader: religious roles, military support,

administrative structures, special advisors (Sahlins 1963:295). Bolstered by these privileges, chiefs do not have to go out to collect followers as big men do – instead, followers come to them. And followers stick close to the fund of power because it is in their interests to do so. As I once heard a Malagasy deputy declare at a rally, ‘Those who are near the cooking pot get given the rice’.

Of course, unlike Polynesian chiefs, Malagasy deputies and presidents are elected officials. But just like Polynesian chiefdoms, democratic systems bestow on office holders established privileges which are enormously useful to their hold on that power. One minor example is the right of presidents to appoint wandering anthropologists as special advisors. Foremost of these privileges, though, is what Sahlins (1963:295) calls the ‘organized acquiescence’ of the people, that is to say the natural disposition of the public to revere and follow holders of high office because of the material benefits they offer and the aura of potency the office emanates.

When Ravalomanana became president, he inherited the established privileges of power that the democratic state provides. Suddenly he walked on red carpets. He had armed guards. He became the centre-piece of state occasions. From being a politician whom some supported he became the president at whom everyone gazed. His very presence became an event, what the Malagasy call, using the French word, a *spectacle*. I have seen crowds wait for hours just to get a good view of a presidential motorcade. That is the power of the *spectacle* – it can pull a crowd just through its promise of the extraordinary. Recent anthropological work has rather neglected spectacles of state, concentrating instead on such mundane technologies of power as surveillance, bureaucracy and inspection. Here I am interested not so much in how the state infiltrates people’s lives, as how it dazzles their eyes. And I am interested less in the administrative structures of power atop which may or may not sit a single powerful figure, than in how that figure projects an aura of power that is convincing to the people.

The occasion on which the Malagasy state clamours most loudly and sparkles most brightly is on 26th June, Independence Day. I joined the presidential party at the national stadium and witnessed a three-hour parade of military and civilian pageantry. The parade streamed past to the thumping of the military bands: platoons of army,

navy and air force, all marching in step with rifles shouldered and eyes rigidly left; then cadets from each service, precise and serious and shiny; then prison officers; an agricultural brigade shouldering long-handled spades; police; gendarmes; cycling gendarmes riding in formation; riot gendarmes piled in a truck wielding shields and wearing visored helmets. Then came customs officers with sniffer-dogs in a trailer; coastguards towing a boat; more gendarmes (towed in an inflatable dinghy and wearing orange life jackets); tanks and armoured cars; a steamroller on a truck; a soldier riding a rotivator; fire engines and firemen (one sweating it out in a kind of silver spaceman's suit); and finally, a lone frogman in a dinghy.

This was the physical apparatus of the state in full, and as it passed the presidential box every single parader – including the frogman – saluted the head of state. The link between all this splendid state hardware and the president was underlined throughout: by the fanfare that greeted him, by his tour of the stadium to the strains of the national anthem. All this focused the event around Ravalomanana. The display sent two concurrent signals to the crowd: on one hand, it was evidence of the glorious and protective state, the sovereignty and unification of Madagascar; on the other hand it represented the latent but clearly terrible force that the president controlled and could unleash even against his own people. Simultaneously, then, the president emanated both protection and danger, both sunshine and lightning.

Of course, although such regalia and ceremony cover the president in reflected glory, they do not necessarily reflect his actual character. The president may or may not be a wonderfully charismatic leader, but in this instance he doesn't need to be. In fact, the point of such ceremonials is to accentuate non-personal symbolic qualities and thereby mark the leader's difference from ordinary people (Frankfort 1948:36). The glorious regalia of state create a stunning figure so that the president himself does not need to be one. What is more, the trappings of state power can reinforce the confidence of the leader in their own charismatic potential. This is certainly true of Ravalomanana, who has become more assured of his mission and more bold in his presentation as he has settled into power. And the watching public does not necessarily distinguish between the effects created by non-personal symbolic qualities and individual charisma: they may all appear as one dazzling package.

Ordinary and extraordinary

While Ravalomanana's achievements, office and privileges of power may make him appear extraordinary, there is a risk that he will appear disconnected and aloof. So he also has to present himself as someone who understands the people and possesses the common touch. In public, his image refracts between two poles as he appears simultaneously to be both of, and not of, the people.

One of the reasons Ravalomanana used me as an advisor was that he recognised the need to appear closer to the Malagasy people, and he guessed that my knowledge of rice farmers and cattle drovers could help him. In the Independence Day speech I wrote for him, which was broadcast on television and radio, I invoked the unity in diversity of the Malagasy people and intimated that the president was listening to their problems and sharing in them. Words are powerful, but when such appeals to closeness are also made through actions, the effect can be even stronger. To record the broadcast, Ravalomanana had been placed at a lectern, but this made his speech very stilted. Taking him aside, I suggested that he deliver the speech seated at his desk in his office instead. The aim was to create a more intimate, less stentorian atmosphere. 'Invite the people into your office,' I said, 'they will feel close to you.' He smiled broadly and turned to the television crew and the aides. 'I have had a new idea', he crowed, 'we are doing it at the desk in my office. Move everything now!' We did the speech in one take, with the president relaxed and convivial, appearing on people's television sets as if seated in their homes.

Although this change was orchestrated by me, Ravalomanana agreed because he was already aware of the need to appear on the level of the people. In that sense the idea he claimed as his *was* his. It just hadn't occurred to him how it could be adapted to television. But in other contexts he needed no prompting. Immediately after the filming he ordered that a motorcade be made ready for him to take a *tour de ville*. It was Friday, rush hour, the eve of a national holiday. The motorcade sped off hectically through the dusk, taking a wrong turn at Lac Anosy and losing the mayor of Antananarivo. We dashed through the crowded streets, the walkie-talkies crackling. Suddenly we veered off onto a football field where a pop concert was taking place. The guards jumped out, toting their guns to make a passageway for the president to climb up on to the floodlit stage. He saluted the crowd with his trademark both-hands-

in-the-air wave, standing smiling over them in his leather jacket, his wife beside him, while the pop group jauntily played the national anthem. I stood just behind him, looking across the sea of smiling, waving, cheering fans, their faces full of wonder. Then suddenly, as quickly as we had arrived, we left, sweeping through the cobbled streets past Chinese lanterns and firecrackers and the smell of sewage from the open drains.

Other open-air meetings I witnessed were more planned, such as the mayoral inauguration ceremony at Betafo in the heart of the fertile vegetable-producing area of the highlands. Many in the huge crowd had walked a long way to be at the *spectacle*. They all gazed up as they heard the approaching thud of the presidential helicopter. Then it emerged from the clouds and landed in a nearby school playground, creating a huge swirling duststorm. A blacked-out 4x4 whisked the president to the field where the crowd were waiting behind a rope cordon manned by gendarmes. To huge applause and cheers he waved and shook hands before mounting the podium, where he enthroned himself in a vast armchair under a beribboned arch. I sat behind him with my fellow speech writer frantically scribbling the speech Ravalomanana was about to deliver. We were still writing when he started to speak and had to hand it to him page by page via the aide-de-camp.

Before beginning his speech, though, he addressed the cordon of gendarmes, ordering them to allow the people closer to the stage. '*Mandroso*', he called to the crowd, in the manner of a host inviting guests into his house. The crowd then surged forward like an ocean swell, engulfing the gendarmes in a moment of dangerous mayhem. I saw Ravalomanana operate this ploy on several occasions, and he was clearly aware of the effect it had on the public. The apparently simple gesture is actually a complex piece of theatre. It acts as a snub to the head of security and more generally it is a deliberate undermining of state officialdom. As such, Ravalomanana declares to the people that he is on their side against the faceless conventions of the state. He has no time, he insinuates, for the old order of things. But at the same time, of course, he retains the security the state forces offer. In this one charismatic gesture, Ravalomanana offers his hand to the people and sticks two fingers up at the establishment.

Although Ravalomanana may be acting the common man, the excitement he generates by doing this is due to the very fact that he is not common at all. The effervescent crowd surges and screams, pushes to get nearer somebody who seems, to them, almost otherworldly. For the public, shaking the president's hand is to make a connection with his power and protection. It is like touching an icon. I felt it myself in the early days of working with him. He would be really pleased with my work, but then ignore me for days. When he called on me for advice again, it was like walking from shade into sunshine. Imagine this feeling multiplied in the experience of all those whose hand he shakes, whom he invites to approach the podium.

By collapsing the spatial exclusivity that normally separates him from his people, Ravalomanana is employing a technique of power far more potent than political persuasion. He is generating a physical feeling far more memorable than words. He is offering a physical connection to his source of power.

It should be noted that most of the audience would never have seen Ravalomanana, nor any president, in person, even on television, let alone touched one. Descending in a suit and tie from a helicopter, surrounded by soldiers and regalia, Ravalomanana must have appeared as something very odd and otherworldly. Yet ironically, it is that otherworldliness that made him somehow familiar. Rural Malagasy do not expect presidents to be like them, dressed in rags and carrying spades. Even though they had not seen a president before, the Betafo crowd nevertheless recognised him because he reflected their expectation of extraordinarily powerful entities. Charisma is the expectation of the extraordinary (Feuchtwang & Mingming 2001:172).

Ravalomanana's sheer otherworldliness was proof of his power.

The promise of plenty

The image that Ravalomanana presented refracted continually, alternating between that of a super-wealthy foreigner and a hand-shaking Malagasy. By approaching the crowd and then withdrawing to the podium, by bringing them closer but retaining a guarded distance, he played on the tension between his accessibility and his inaccessibility, his similarity and his difference, his humanity and his super-humanity. The crowd felt awe, but also connection. Like a divine king – an envoy between two worlds – Ravalomanana stood both within the society and outside it (Evans-Pritchard

1948). It was from this ambiguous position that Ravalomanana played his trump card: he offered to share his extraordinary foreign wealth with the crowd. Departing from his script, he promised to build a tomato-canning plant so that they, the people of Betafo, would have access to wider markets. Then, his speech over, his promises made, he left the podium. His helicopter raised another dust storm and away he flew, like a magician vanishing in a puff of smoke.

To offer a factory is to reinforce the transient physical connection of the spectacle with the promise of more durable benefit. The factory itself will become a symbol which embodies and perpetuates the collective moment (Durkheim 2001:176). On a political level, Ravalomanana is a global corporatist, which is a rare thing in Madagascar. He knows how world markets work and he wants to bring the people of Madagascar into them, which is why the World Bank supports him. Very few country people could exploit the workings of such systems, yet they recognise from his wealth that Ravalomanana clearly can. No other politician can offer anything like this. Ravalomanana is offering the people access to a world far beyond their reach and largely beyond their ken, a world of apparently fruitful labour and profitable harvests. What better way to convince followers that they are backing the right leader?

At one level Ravalomanana is just offering the people goods, which the cynical might consider bribes. I think he certainly recognises both the political and the economic advantage in such offers. But what he perhaps doesn't recognise is that he is also operating on a symbolic level, tapping into the locals' mystical notion of what an extraordinarily powerful person might bring them. Without being aware that he is exploiting their expectations of the numinous, he is nevertheless meeting them.

Power in Madagascar is often created and maintained through alliances with strangers (Beaujard 1983; Raison-Jourde 1983). In Africa, and indeed the rest of the world, rulers and powerful things frequently originate from outside their homeland (e.g., Lan 1985). In Madagascar, Europe is known as 'the other side' (*an-dafy*) and is thought of as particularly potent and inaccessible to the ordinary person. It is a place of unimaginable wealth: Betsileo farmers, who earn about 50 pence a day, marvel at the cost (£800) of the air tickets of their compatriots who manage to go abroad to study. These emigrants return with powerful European knowledge and fantastic European

spending power. The knowledge creates bewildering technology such as helicopters, which were a favourite topic for scientific speculation in my highland village. On one helicopter trip with Ravalomanana, an isolated hilltop lavatory stop drew from nowhere an instant marvelling crowd. Those with access to this big money are expected to share it with their families, and, if they are politicians, with their constituents. One former Betsileo deputy even campaigned under the pseudonym of Pierre Vazaha (*vazaha* means ‘white foreigner’). One of the expectations of leaders is that they will mediate and trade with foreign powers in order to channel their extraordinary riches back to the ordinary people. This is exactly what Ravalomanana was doing in offering a tomato factory. He was calling on the symbolic value and communicative power of his World Bank support.

In any crowd there are sceptics. Not everyone will believe the promises. Although most in the crowd cheered at Ravalomanana’s promised munificence, the thrall was not total. Leaving the event, I heard one man mutter: ‘He promised us a factory at the election [two years previously] and we still haven’t seen it.’ There are many Malagasy who oppose him. So Ravalomanana is taking a gamble: he might or might not provide the cannery. My point here, though, is that the promise of such a fabulous gift can only be made by a really powerful person. That, in itself, in the heat of the moment, signals his power. In the long run, though, he will have to deliver.

Gifts and hierarchy

As gifts create social bonds, and power is largely about the management of social bonds, there is always a logic of power to a gift economy. In Madagascar most gifts are small, and flow from junior to senior people. They mark this difference in status and can be seen as a kind of tribute. Senior people do give gifts to their juniors, but in order to show that this is not tribute, the gift has to be a really big one (Wooley 2002:136). For the head of a northern Betsileo tomb group this might be a bull for sacrifice. For a president, this might be a factory. Tribute flows upwards, munificence flows downwards. The best-known example of this management of power through exchange is the *hasina* system which characterised the Merina monarchy. The Merina king Andrianampoinimerina travelled round his kingdom performing rituals, often at sacred sites won from conquered rivals. Subjects offered pieces of silver to the monarch as a sign of their submission and as a form of taxation. In exchange they

received blessings, protection and ultimately prosperity. Both tribute and blessings were known by the same word: *hasina*. By receiving the tribute and bestowing the blessing, the king effectively short-circuited the flow of *hasina* and usurped the role of the ancestors as the givers of blessing (Bloch 1986).

It is hard to know the degree of intentionality involved in such innovation, but that does not mean the action did not have the effect described. Touring the island with Ravalomanana to invest newly-elected mayors I observed that he too was performing actions that could carry ritual messages neither intended nor manipulated by him and of which he was perhaps not aware. Large crowds gathered for the ceremony in which the president bestowed 'honour' (*voninahitra*) on the mayors in the form of sashes, gave a speech, and a bull was killed. The last action is typical of tomb rituals, where it is the sponsors who provide the cattle who play the role of channelling the blessings from the ancestors to the people. The Merina monarch Andrianampoinimerina appropriated the circumcision ritual for this very purpose (Bloch 1986).

Ravalomanana did not participate in the slaughter of the bull but the fact of his being effectively its sponsor would have associated him with its usual ritual meanings. He concentrated instead on making a speech and giving out sashes. The bestowing of *voninahitra* is comparable to that of *hasina* since both are the act of elders and superiors. Similarly both infer a social and political hierarchy in which the recipient accepts submission to the donor. Just as Andrianampoinimerina appropriated the ritual sites of his conquered rivals so Ravalomanana performed many inaugurations in those marginal constituencies where he most needed to impress his political dominance.

By giving *voninahitra*, *hasina*, or bulls Ravalomanana was acting within a hierarchical framework which has long been the basis of traditional authority in Madagascar. As Bloch argues, traditional authority is convincing because it binds everybody into this hierarchy, implying, as it does, 'a total order of which both superior and inferior are a part though in different degree' (Bloch 1986:169). In carrying out his presidential duties, Ravalomanana was using an official ritual framework inherited from his predecessors, although he was not necessarily aware of its symbolic impact. Indeed, much of the ritual potential (such as the slaughter of the bull) would have appeared – to the mind of a cynical spin-doctor – as under-exploited.

But in inheriting the framework of traditional Malagasy authority Ravalomanana was able to communicate the fact of his power, without even consciously having to manipulate it. What he brought to it, in the seductive context of a *spectacle*, is the charismatic presence of an extraordinary person offering marginal peasants a new vision of technologically-enabled market opportunities.

So much for the generous aspect of power. But, as mentioned earlier, power can threaten as well as bless. Royal ancestors in particular bless and curse in equal measure (Middleton 1999:23). The same monarch, while revered as an ancestor, might also be remembered for his brutality (Lambek, this volume). Similarly, while commoner ancestors bestow blessings and prosperity on the living they also have a dangerous and unpredictable side (Cole 1999; Graeber, 1995), rather like the capricious God of the Old Testament. And while the Malagasy see Europeans as fantastic sources of wealth, their narratives of French rule (Cole 2001; Tronchon 1974) remember the brutality and repression of the encounter. This brutality seems inherent in the nature of power. It is as if power could have no force for good if it did not also contain danger.

Brutal theatre

The brutality of powerful figures is often ostentatious and theatrical, using humiliation to underline hierarchy. As a political tactic, humiliation is not just about the exertion of power, it is also a display of power: ‘It is far better to be feared than loved,’ wrote Machiavelli (2003:54). Even though the act of humiliation may be personally motivated, powerful figures are aware that such acts will naturally have wider political implications. The case of the expelled bodyguard illustrates this on a national scale.

As well as a large retinue of security personnel, Ravalomanana employed two non-Malagasy private bodyguards. One was a former martial arts world champion, Jean-Marc Koumba. With his laid-back charm, good looks and commitment to the Malagasy people (he organised two hugely successful martial arts festivals), and his frequent appearance on television in the company of the president, Koumba became something of a celebrity in Madagascar. In fact, it was widely – though rather fancifully – suggested that many young women voted for Ravalomanana in 2001 on

the basis of his association with the charismatic bodyguard. But the relationship came to a very sudden end in March 2005, when, due to a minor motorcycle accident, Koumba was unable to show up for work. Ravalomanana fired him on the spot, giving him 24 hours to leave the country, and organising a platoon of soldiers to escort him to the airport. Koumba left behind a deal of back pay and a pregnant fiancée. It was an ignominious exit for the man described by the Malagasy press as having a fist of iron and a heart of gold.

Now, Ravalomanana's reasons for expelling Koumba could have been personal or political – or both. It is possible that Ravalomanana felt sidelined by Koumba's popular charm. Whatever the motives, the expulsion itself was clearly orchestrated for public effect. The use of a military escort both demonstrated the martial forces at the president's disposal and compounded the humiliation, since the escort was made up of Koumba's former colleagues and subordinates. The use of armed guards was also a macabre inversion of the normal airport departure scenario, in which the departing person is accompanied by a posse of family and friends. The deportation was a dramatic demonstration of the president's unpredictable and immediate power. Koumba was just a character in the drama, like Admiral Byng, punished 'pour encourager les autres' (Voltaire 1958:85).

Such a theatre of humiliation was enacted on a much more physically brutal scale by Radama I in April 1822 when faced by thousands of women protesting against his cutting his hair in the European fashion. When the protestors claimed, invoking tradition, that short hair was not the custom of kings, Radama in effect answered that it was in the tradition of kings to do as they pleased. He then shaved the heads of the ringleaders, executed them and left their bodies to the dogs (Larson 2000:250,252). His power was most evident when tested, most strident when under dispute. Naturally, such brutal symbolic cultural politics carries the risk of inciting popular disgust and uprising, as indeed later happened to Radama.

Impetuous as Ravalomanana's expulsion of Koumba may have been, he appears to have displayed his dominance without suffering significant popular backlash. In fact, he turned the threat of Koumba's growing popularity into a chance to show who is really the boss. The irony is that what initially might seem a cavalier disregard for

public opinion actually turns out to be an astute (though often instantaneous and perhaps instinctive) calculation of it. The more brutal the theatre and the greater the infringement of taboo, the more risky the calculation. Indeed, shrewdly calculating such risks may be a characteristic of powerful figures.

In a sense, brutality and humiliation are social taboos, for they transgress the limits of normal relationships. Powerful leaders in Madagascar are characterised by their willingness to break taboos that ordinary people would never dare break. At the time of the royal bath in 1817, Radama deliberately ordered his staff to undertake a minor building project at a time in the ritual calendar that forbade all projects of productive labour (Larson 1999:58). Similarly, one new ruler of the Bemazava monarchy recently turned the royal palace into a disco hall, and blatantly neglected to complete his father's tomb (Sharp 1999). Such deliberate ritual transgressions are not so much a prerogative as a duty. They should be understood as statements boasting of extraordinary power. The perpetrators thereby suggest that they are powerful enough not to worry about transgressing taboos because in effect they have an alliance with the ultimate, unanswerable sources of authority – gods or ancestors – that is, those who made the rules in the first place.

So far I have described how Ravalomanana's actions accord with patterns of behaviour characteristic of powerful figures, and how his persona consequently meets public expectations of powerful entities. That Ravalomanana often achieves this unwittingly does not mean it is not occurring. Now, however, I turn briefly to some of Ravalomanana's particular characteristics and some of the historical contingencies that might have assisted his ascent.

Character and chance

Madagascar, famously rich in unique flora and fauna, is home to more chameleons than any other country (Glaw & Vences 1994). Ravalomanana is one of them. He has an ability continually to change the way he presents himself, according to the context or the audience. In his negotiations with foreign donors, he is the rational advocate of liberal capitalism. In interviews with the world press, he is the fearless scourge of political corruption. In his attendance at church, he is the fervent preacher of Christian morality. In an address to the nation, he is the wise purveyor of ancestral proverbs.

Descending from his helicopter, he is the vector of foreign wealth. Dropping in on a pop concert, he is a man of the people. Exiling his bodyguard, he is an authoritarian showman.

Ravalomanana also has an astute ability to balance the different aspects of his public persona against one another. While at times he presents the image of an ordinary Malagasy, he also cultivates a strikingly individualistic persona. While he plunges into the crowd, he also keeps his distance. Apparently high-handed and hot-headed on some occasions, he can be mild and charming on others. Alternately dangerous and protective, foreign and Malagasy, sociable and individualistic, the unpredictability of the persona is partly what gives it its enigmatic and charismatic force (Lindholm 1990:133). And it makes it hard for his political opponents to know how to read him. It also makes it hard for his advisors to work with him, which is one reason I no longer do.

In the course of human interaction, we all play different roles to different audiences. For someone in power, though, those roles tend to be much more caricatured. This is because the messages they convey are far more public. Moreover, they are much more laden with meaning because they largely embody the interests of their followers (Sahlins, 2000:323). So in the political game of self-presentation, the stakes are high. If Ravalomanana gets it wrong, the political consequences can be huge. But he is a gambler and an opportunist. Expelling his hugely popular bodyguard was a risk, but he got away with it. From our first meeting, he recognised my use to him long before I did. He shrewdly recognised and realised the possibilities afforded by having an anthropologist at his disposal. He fed off my ideas, intuitively moulding the new knowledge he was gaining to the demands of his office.

My role as an anthropologist, who, in Ravalomanana's words, knew his people better than he did, made me unique among his advisors. I contained elements of both *vazaha* (European) and Malagasy. In a televised speech, not written by me, but delivered *ex tempore* in the northern Betsileo town of Ambositra, he boasted of how he had engaged a *vazaha* to come and work with him to help the country, a *vazaha* who knew the northern Betsileo area, the language, the mentality, and the customs of the people. It was a subtle political statement, simultaneously proclaiming his own

connections with the power of ‘the other side’ whilst invoking a resonant notion of indigenous Malagasy tradition. It is a strategy characteristic of past Malagasy monarchs (Raison-Jourde 1983, 1991).

Ravalomanana’s instant appointment of me as a special advisor was typical of his ability to make snap decisions and act on them. It is one reason for his success in business. It appeals to the electorate, too, who often praise him for his ability to ‘get things done’ (*mahavita raha*). Implied in this praise is a criticism of the rather slow-moving consensual politics which people consider to be typically Malagasy and which they often blame for the country’s lack of development. In speech and action, Ravalomanana presents himself as progressive, decisive and direct. It is an idiom known as the ‘new way’ (*lalana vaovao*), which is particularly associated with the school and educated people (Keenan 1975:101). The ‘new way’ is, of course, the European way.

The snap decisions he makes seem impetuous to his opponents and supporters alike. But I think in fact they are intuitive. Perhaps one of the gifts of the powerful is daring to make a decision without knowing why. Ravalomanana operates less on strategy than on opportunism and instinct. Uninvolved in politics until he stood for mayor of Antananarivo, within five years he had ridden a wave of popular support to achieve the presidency. Then he had to learn as he went along. A gift for intuition and opportunistic risk-taking compensated for his political inexperience. And he had the good fortune to come to prominence just as Ratsiraka’s power was waning.

The question of historical contingency is slippery. To account for present success by past events risks the error of teleology. Yet some events clearly matter more than others. Sahlins (2000) tells the story of a chief, who, on visiting a neighbouring kingdom, spotted a pig wandering through the village. He claimed it as his by right. This sparked an argument, which, in the existing climate of bad relations, led to all-out war. The pig was the historical contingency which triggered the war, but it was not the cause: ‘The war was generations old before it began’ (Sahlins 2000:320).

In Ravalomanana’s case, political circumstances favoured his rise: the fall of Ratsiraka; the decline of Soviet influence in the western Indian Ocean; the

corresponding rise of commercial and diplomatic ties with Europe and the United States; the growing global dominance of English as the language of business. But while these political factors may have contributed to his success, they do not fully explain it. Nor does the idiosyncratic combination of personal circumstances: the early Lutheran connections that took him to study in Norway; the fortuitous choice of yoghurt as a business venture; the poor command of French. In any ascent to power, luck plays a part. For example, in 1933 Hitler was able to cement his tenuous early hold on power when the Reichstag fire, started by a lone fanatic, gave him the excuse to declare a state of emergency which dramatically increased his powers (Kershaw 1991:67). In becoming powerful, luck matters. But opportunism – the ability to seize on luck – matters more.

Fifteen years ago, long before becoming president, Ravalomanana seized on a young Englishman living next door to teach him English. Now he has mastered it enough to prefer it to French in his international dealings. This preference carries a huge political message about his calculated re-orientation of a Francophone country towards the Anglophone world. The World Bank has found a man with whom it can both do business and talk business. In a fanciful moment one could even speculate that, in some small way, the young English teacher, later to return as an anthropologist, was the pig that happened to wander across the village.

Models of power

In this essay I have been interested in the dialectical relationship between public expectations of powerful figures and the creation of Ravalomanana's political person. His actions portray symbolic meanings and are modified accordingly. As I have said, I don't think Ravalomanana is always aware – at least not in the same way that anthropologists are taught to be aware – of the symbolic impact of his actions. When he offers a tomato cannery to a crowd of peasants he sees it more as a politico-economic strategy than the expected fulfilment of a mystical relationship based on a numinous notion of other-worldly power. Nevertheless, the offer's social impact is partly due to the existence of that notion. Ravalomanana repeats the strategy wherever he goes because, without precisely knowing why, he sees that it creates the right reaction. Unlike anthropologists, he doesn't think too hard about it. He trusts his

intuition. He takes risks. He learns as he goes along. He consolidates his position of power.

Of course, his power is neither uncontested nor unbreakable. Many Malagasy are fervently opposed to Ravalomanana, but for the moment they have nobody else to propose who comes anywhere near to challenging him. No other candidate has accumulated and promised wealth as he has. And now, having come to power on that basis, he controls the political domain and has become central to the traditional institutions of state and religious charisma. In democratic systems, the established apparatus and privileges of state favour the incumbent, which is why it took so long to replace Ratsiraka. For the same reason, it may take a long time to replace Ravalomanana. He has become something of an elected monarch.

Leach (1954:197) claims that in their practical application even monarchy and republicanism may sometimes look very much alike. His point is that the difference between political systems is merely theoretical. He famously illustrates this through the example is of the two theoretically contrasting types of Kachin political organisation – one egalitarian and democratic, the other feudal and hierarchical – that are in fact constantly in the process of changing into one another. Moreover, individuals are pragmatic in invoking whichever system favours them: at one moment appealing to egalitarianism to avoid paying feudal dues; and at another calling on chiefly connections to promote their prestige (Leach 1954).

The position of power that Ravalomanana is now consolidating is a mixture of types. Having worked a commercial miracle with his Malagasy yoghurt, he passes the test of a Sahafatran earth-shaker; having taken office, he now manages the economy of blessing associated with the descent-based systems of the highlands. Like a Melanesian big man he has accumulated wealth and followers; like a Polynesian chief the aura of his office presents his power as timeless and inevitable. He encompasses the charismatic authority of a self-proclaimed renovator, the traditional authority of the ritual hierarchy and the legal-rational authority of the state.

Leach's point was that theoretical categories are too rigid and that different models of power could operate simultaneously in the same place. This is clearly what is

happening in Madagascar under Ravalomanana. It is no doubt also the case in the Pacific: the inherited authority of Polynesian chiefdom is surely not uncontested; and it seems likely that Melanesian big men benefit from the existing ritual trappings of their hard-won status. Similarly, Weber's distinction between different types of authority gets blurred in practice because they are 'ideal types', not empirical reality. Ravalomanana provides a great example of this, getting the best of all Weberian worlds as he stands beneath the Malagasy flag handing out 'honour' while at the same time presenting himself as herald of 'the new way', a World Bank corporatist who will bring home the wealth of 'the other side'. The system of republican democracy, which calls for continuous and regular renewal within an existing framework, could be said to be ideally suited to chameleon leaders like Ravalomanana.

This brings us to the interaction of authority and power. While the former operates at the cultural level of prestige, the latter is manifest in the execution of political intent (Ortner 1996:143). Cultural prestige and political power are not necessarily commensurate, as the case of high-caste but low-power Brahmins illustrates (Dumont 1966). Conversely, it is possible to have power but lack prestige. But in the case of Ravalomanana, and no doubt other democratically elected presidents, power and prestige feed off each other. Ravalomanana mobilised his financial power to back his presidential campaign, and through his media outlets convinced people that a successful entrepreneur would make an effective president. Through the office of president he has acquired both the persuasive prestige of institutional charisma and the mandate to execute his economic and social policies. His presidential power has made him attractive to the Merina aristocracy, who have installed him as vice-president of their church, the FJKM. Something of an arriviste in their midst, he has achieved an elevation in both social status and religious authority. Intent on accruing legitimacy with both the Malagasy people and foreign financiers, he employed me to write speeches that wooed both audiences. With their support he has the mandate and the means to exercise his political will over the country's economic destiny, which is inextricably linked to his own business interests. Here, power and authority work hand in hand, and the power is all the greater for it.

Ravalomanana is one of a new kind of leader, a business tycoon with media interests and political ambition, in the mould of Silvio Berlusconi and Thaksin Shinawatra,

recent former prime ministers of Italy and Thailand respectively. It may well be that in the years to come such corporate statesmen will become increasingly common, particularly in poorer countries. They will undoubtedly get there without the assistance of anthropologists. On reflection, that is how it should be.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to the editors and other contributors to this volume for their guidance. I also thank Stephan Feuchtwang for his wise insights.

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