

# Turning death to keep the world alive.

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The anthropologist Tim Ingold brings human beings and their so-called typical human features and activities back into the organic life-world without wanting to reduce them into objects of nature (naturalism). He writes that one can only talk about nature if the organism involved (in this case human beings) does not belong to it, so that it can look at it from such a safe distance that it is easy to live with the illusion that the observed world is not influenced by its presence and vice versa. The difference between *nature* and *environment* lays in a difference of perception: to see oneself outside the world or within. (Ingold 2000:20) Because of my attention towards Zanadroandrena astrology I have been thrown directly into a *cosmoecological* world of which the Zanadroandrena land and the people are part of. This means, following Ingold's argument, that the Zanadroandrena should consider their life-world as an environment where the celestial bodies, the spirits in rivers and marshes, the animals and the vegetation in the marshes or forests, we tempt to treat as being part of the universe or nature seen as an outside world, have all to be considered in a relational way as persons or things that the Zanadroandrena encounter in a mutual involved manner. There are, however, questions that inflict themselves on this matter. How do we have to treat for example the distinction they make between that what is natural (*voazanahary*, arisen from the creating divinities) and that what is made or finished by the living human beings (*vitan'olombelona*)? Or how do we have to treat the differences they see between human beings and animals? How do we have to treat their ritual places outside their territory and how do we treat the so-called untamed forces in their land?

I observe among the Zanadroandrena, individual gradations of empathy and familiarity with the world according to the intensity and kinds of encounters. This establishes different opinions about 'the other'. For example, on the one hand, most of the encounters with *Vazimba* (spirits of people living there in a far distant past) during daily activities are negative and confronting. *Vazimba* can attack somebody working in marshes and make the person ill. Therefore, they are easily associated with the dangerous forces of nature that people tame or extinguish when turning marshes into rice fields. On the other hand, healers who meet the *Vazimba* in dreams

and possession acknowledge their helping, caring and protective capacities as ‘persons’ involved in the Zanadroandrena well being of the land and the people. This kind of empathy and familiarity with the world is not only a capacity of specialists alone, however. The Zanadroandrena as farmers are very familiar with the land they cultivate so that a fruitful relationship with the land, its plants and animals is felt as a very intense and enriching relationship. The encounter with the world of dead people is possible by the *ambiroa* (invisible double that can for example wander around in the realm of the dead giving visions and dreams) that does not vanish after death. People cite the *ambiroa* as a typical ‘human property’ apart from the human knowing capacities (*mahalala*) and moral capacities (*fanahy*, soul) that animals do not share with human beings. Especially burial rituals typify humankind. The Zanadroandrena say that animals do not know (*tsy mahalala*). And when I ask what they do not know, I get most of the time as answer: burying their dead. *Lala* in the dictionary does also mean apart from ‘knowing’: mourning for the dead, worry. (Rajemisa-Raolison 1995: 524) The different burial rituals are meant as a disembodiment (separation of *ambiroa* and corpse) and re-embodiment of the dead (bringing together bones and *ambiroa*) so that the dead can become persons again. I argue therefore that animals ‘do not know’ because they do not bury their dead. This reality can be used socio-politically by denying ‘slaves’ or ‘landless people’ the possibility to bury their dead in a human way so that their life degenerates being perceived as an almost-animal-like way of being.<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, ‘being animal’ is a kind of degeneration instead of ‘being human’ as a kind of evolution. This is the same statement Viveiros de Castro makes concerning the perception of the world among some South American Indians.

Myths among those Indians narrate an original state of undifferentiatedness between human beings and certain animals. The difference between those animals and humans is established when animals lost some ‘human’ capacities. The ‘human condition’ situates presently in the ‘spirit’ or ‘soul’ covered by changing and distinguishing ‘clothing’ (bodies understood as skills, sensitivities, dispositions, making of products, learning processes, experiences ...). ‘Others than human beings’ are subjects in so far they have or are a ‘spirit’ and look at themselves as ‘humans’ in their own sphere (in so far culture is their nature) but distinguish themselves from an

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<sup>1</sup> A very shocking example one can read in Evers 2002.

other's viewpoint by their different choices, dispositions and capacities (nature is the form of the other as body). South American Indians postulate a spiritual continuity that results in animism where the 'spirit' or 'soul' integrates (humans and 'others than humans' are suspended in the same socio-cosmic medium) and a physical discontinuity that results in perspectivism whereby the body differentiates and one world is seen differently. Bodies differentiate and can also be transformed, hence being associated with 'clothing'. The different kinds of cloths that a shaman can wear or the masks that he can put on, activate the forces of a different body changing his identity and giving access to different worlds of the 'other than humans' who also consider themselves as 'being humans', so that he can see the other as subject, as another self. He can also have contact with the dead who are transformed into animals after their separation from the human body. Shamanistic metamorphosis shatters bodily differentiation (I experience the other as an object, an 'it') and enters a socio-cosmic domain into which human beings and others can communicate without losing the conditions of human subjects (I experience the other as a subject, a 'you'). (Viveiro de Castro 2002: 306-326)

In my case, the Zanadroandrena do not make a clear distinction between an integrating spirit and a differentiating body, however. The integrating factor of everything taking part in a socio-cosmic field in the Zanadroandrena perception of the world is not so much a spiritual essence or a soul but life. For them "*animism is the praxis of making alive*" (Bird-David 1999). Life is a constant task, searching to build fruitful relationships with celestial bodies, the land, animals, plants, spirits and ancestors to prevent their world falling apart. Each being plays a particular role defined by the astrological destiny they carry along their life-path. Originally, I was planning to use the *famadihana*, a ritual for dead relatives in order to help them becoming ancestors, as an example how such an astrological socio-cosmic field looks like in practice. But since I am presenting in another panel as originally planned, I will take it from a slightly different angle to show how death in general is turned to make or keep the Zanadroandrena world alive and the role some animals play in this task. I will start with *jiny* referring to particular forces of the earth and its inhabitants.

## Jiny.

*Death as the primordial nature of jiny.*

(Although I do not aim to take astrological practice as my main focus, I cannot avoid using it here and there to give sense to what I try to say. The image that you see are the astrological destinies arranged along the four cardinal directions with on top the east (and not the north as we are used to). It also gives the understanding of the destinies in one year time where each destiny is equivalent to one month. That is all you need to know.) In the astrological cycle the 'owner of *jiny*' is *Asorotany*, which carries the destiny of all things that grow on earth. It is the first *andro* in the realm of

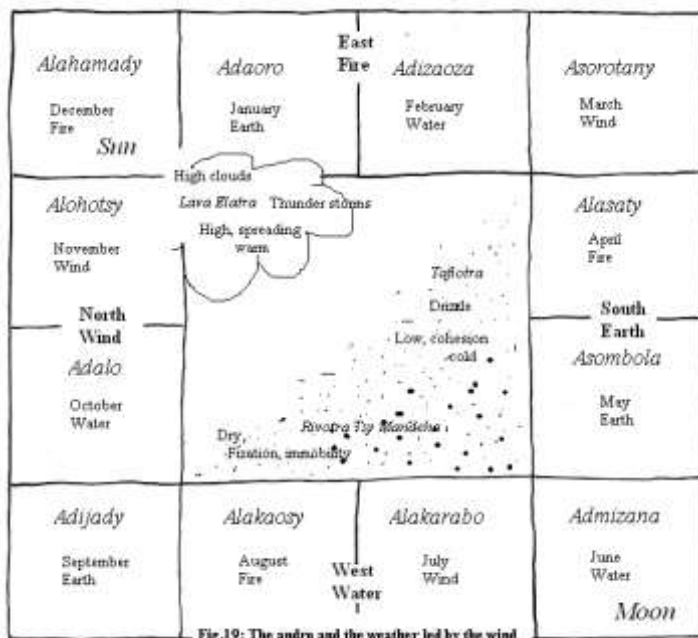


Fig.19: The andro and the weather led by the wind

the earth so to speak. *Asorotany* is also the cold southeast wind that cools down the earth, marking the start of autumn (*fararano*, the end of water). It introduces the end of the urge of life on earth (growth). *Jiny* are by nature forces originating from processes of decomposition that can attack and kill.

Going a few steps further in the astrological cycle to *Alakaosy/Adalo*, the spring months in the yearly cycle when the heavens separate from the earth, newborn bodies in the realm of the living are considered to have a lot of *jiny* because they are still strongly connected to the realm of the earth. In the realm of the dead, tombs still in use are temporarily overgrown by grass and shrubs until they have to be opened for burials or *famadihana*. Then the tomb yard is cleared. The vegetation overgrowing the tomb is not understood as the vitality of nature that takes over a humanised place, as many scholars state. It is vegetation that possibly harbours many bad forces because it has appeared from the soil of the dead. So, people clear the yard to take away bad forces. Newborn children, grass, tombs, manioc and zebus considered to be

quite ambiguous beings because of this reason. Another *Alakoasy* characteristic of *jiny* is the immobility of life force as the absence of wind during spring called ‘the wind that does not walk’, the life force of uncooked rice grains or the bones of the dead after decomposition.

Finally, marshes and other kinds of soft vegetation have much *jiny* since they are born of the earth in the very far sky of the summer, embodying the *andro Alahamady/Adaoro*. Marshes, in the eyes of the *Zanadroandrena*, are cold living soil (in the shape of vegetation) born of water in contrast to the warm life-giving soil of the fields prepared to grow rice.

*Jiny* appear as bodiless, attacking invisible creatures in the darkness, as bodies born of the bare highland and the bare highland itself, as newborn bodies in general and also as living lowland. None of these creatures, beings or places has reciprocal or converging life-generative capacities or intentions. Marshes, new-born babies, or zebus, are often said to be owned by *jiny*-spirits, shaping a unity between visible and invisible bodies having or being *jiny*. In the *Zanadroandrena* perception of the world, the generative capacity of life-giving and making alive in the realm of the earth appears respectively in the encounter of the sky and earth (*Asorotany*) and in the reciprocal nurturing and caring relationship between sky and earth and between earthly things (*Adijady*).

#### *Andro*

*Andro* (astrological destinies) are also a type of *jiny* (with forces of the ancestors if blessed). They are the elements that assure the ground of existence in the world (Rakotomalala 2001: 51-59) since each being is born in a particular destiny determining particular bodily conditions, properties and dispositions.

*Zanadroandrena* will not however acknowledge openly that human beings also have *jiny*, although different healers confirm this. Yet the *Zanadroandrena* talk about people’s *anjara*, *somebody’s allotted part in life*. If a person talks about his or her success or failure in kinds of cooperation with people, places or creatures, then he or she does so in terms of *anjara*. The *anjara* of a person is his or her positioning and movements in the astrological field of relations. If people, places, things and beings are not compatible, then the *anjara* reacts like *jiny* (it attacks), but when cooperation succeeds, then *hasina* (meaning in this context ‘blessing’) appears, making the cooperation generative, efficacious and productive so that things can be realised.

*Without jiny, there cannot be hasina.*

A dangerous attack of *jiny* that can be stopped with traditional medicines confirms the opinion of people in the area that ‘the place where the Zanadroandrena live is still sacred’ (*ny tany Zanadroandrena mbola masina*). I interpret this as meaning that the land and the community is still developed along with *cosmoecological* principles, unlocking *hasina* (blessing). Fruitful and life-giving relationships are built with all the features of the world, which grow, help and protect each other. People will only regard themselves as *tompon’tany* (normally translated as ‘owners of the land’) if there is evidence that the land and its habitants have accepted them to live there, i.e. if their fortune or spirit is compatible, and if the people accept certain taboos that are enforced by the land. Following those taboos is tantamount to accepting a commitment towards that land and its inhabitants, feeling responsible for it, and being aware of and respecting its demands. This is another translation of *tompon’tany* (Walsh 2002:457, see also Kaufmann & Tsirahamba 2006:236).

For example, the pork taboo (prescribes the prohibition on eating pork and also raising pigs and even letting them cross the land, alive or dead) together with the taboo to work on rice fields, marshes and plaiting mats on a Saturday, are the strongest taboos enforced by the land where the Zanadroandrena live. Until today, the people utter those and other taboos on several occasions. If people would not express taboos, the commitment and engagement with the world will vanish in their breach, making the *jiny* disappear and leaving life at the mercy of *Andriamanitra* (the highest divine principle) without the mutual help and support from the different inhabitants of the land and the land itself. Their presence results in a unity of local habits, customs, rules, life attitudes and visions that live in a particular place, and have to be followed by the people relative to their own positions and the paths they follow. The Zanadroandrena call the particular customs linked to a place the *rohon’tany*, as for example the *rohon’tany* of Zanadroandrena land expressed by the different taboos and rules linked to their land and all the agents that dwell there. Vig (1977: 27) defines *rohon’tany* as “the encounter of the forces of every destiny, the spirit of the earth”<sup>2</sup>. (Mattheeuws 2008: 138-150)

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<sup>2</sup> *Rohona* means noise, distant rumbling of thunder, or explosion, that can denote the start of the astrological cycle. Vig thinks that *rohona* might have an Arabic origin from *rûh* (*soul, spirit, breath of life*) and *rohon’tany* as *spirit of the soil*. This might be acceptable in the Zanadroandrena context since *jiny* is a concept that is closely connected to the earth.

## ***Animals in the life of the Zanadroandrena.***

I will give some examples now of the way animals or their products are integrated in the Zanadroandrena socio-cosmic web of relations.

*The sense for family connections (fihavana) is like the silkworm.*

If you ask a person's life history, it often starts with a drama or crisis (*isairana*) and ends up in a satisfying climax (*mafinaritra*). *Isa-ira* is the very fine single thread made by a silk worm, while *mafy-aritra* means very solid, able to support much, having perseverance. Life is the weaving together of single threads into a mutually supportive fabric. A Malagasy proverb says: 'the sense for family connections is like the silkworm: during life, one makes (buys) and offers shrouds, once death one is wrapped in them'<sup>3</sup>. The shrouds into which the corpse is wrapped must form a kind of new clean flesh in their new life when the flesh of the body disintegrates. They are meant to keep the dead warm. The new flesh around the corpse has three layers analogous to the bodily flesh. The first layer is a very thin shroud (*lamba manify*), like the thin skin connecting muscles to bones. The shrouds that one has collected during one's lifetime and the shrouds given by family members form the second layer, as the muscles. The more shrouds one has been able to buy when alive and the more extensive the family circle giving the shrouds, the thicker this layer is and hence, the warmer the dead, and the longer they will continue to exist. Finally, a last single and strong shroud (*lambabe*, big shroud) forms the skin that is considered part of one's personality. The colour of a person's skin indicates not only their origin but also their temperament and character. After a year or more, when the decomposition of the flesh has finalised, the bones are wrapped into new shrouds as part of the ritual elevating the dead into the realm of the ancestors. The Zanadroandrena like to keep their own dead for as long as possible in their individual shape of what they call 'the eight bones' (*taolambalo*) or 'white bones' (*fotsy taolana*). People talk about 'wet bones' (*taolana lena*) when having not yet fallen into pieces because the 'fat' (*menaka*) still keeps them together. The bones can be preserved for thousands of years when shut off from the air, but they may cease to be intact after a much shorter period (Pearson, personal communication). Being no longer intact is a condition called 'being dry bones' (*taolana maina*). They believe that bones become hard enough and well formed during the lifetime of the person when he or she is well fed

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<sup>3</sup> *Ny fihavana toy ny landy; velona itafiana, maty ifonosana.*

with highland food, a kind of stable *jiny*. Good food and ageing, in the eyes of the people, make long-lasting, fat bones. After being buried and wrapped in shrouds they should not change for at least thirty years, people say. They complain, however, that nowadays the ancestors ‘change’ already within ten years. Among the reasons they give are that shrouds are no longer made of (traditional) silk (see also Green 1998). This can have enormous consequences, especially when an ancestor has to be moved to a new tomb. If the individual bones of an ancestor has fallen apart and mixed with other ancestors or dead people, they cannot be moved to other tombs because people are afraid to move the wrong bones and mix ancestors that should not be mixed. Not being able to be moved might spell the end of ancestorhood for the dead person, as he is forgotten by younger generations.<sup>4</sup>

*Bees and humans walk the same path.*

When a bee colony becomes overpopulated, then a swarm of young bees leaves the nest led by a *mpanjaka* (leader, king or queen) who has chosen a good destiny to depart. The bee colonies you see in Bezanozano (my area of study) have come originally from the eastern or western forests that border on the area. The time of the year they would descend from the forest is the months of February. In the astrological cycle this is the destiny of *Adizaoza*, the water flooding the land. The movements of bees recall the local history of migration and new settlement of the *Zanadroandrena* who have crossed the western Angavo to settle along the Mangoro. Both bees and *Zanadroandrena* are allochthonous in the present area and both tend to settle and root there for quite a long time.

The bees have two kinds of habitats. One is the *ala savoka* (beeswax forest), small bushes growing on the lower hill slopes surrounding the heads of valleys, and forming an intermediate zone between land- and water-based ecosystems. There they like to establish bee colonies under the top leaves of *sarovy*, a general name for vines that according as they climb produce more branches forming a cover like the roof of a house. They prefer the roof of the *vahambongo*, a vine that you often see growing on the *amontana*, a quite aggressive tree that likes to intertwine with an autochthonous plant and eventually suffocate it to take over the place. A second habitat is on the open western hill flank bathing in the sun in the shape of mounds (*votry*) or formed by sand that has fallen down (*gorodon'tany*), both with an opening in the west. People

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<sup>4</sup> An example of a disastrous mixture of ancestors is narrated in Graeber 2007.



are not allowed to consume the honey produced in the second kind of habitat and certainly not use it for rituals because they bear too much resemblance to tombs.

The bee colonies have a double cycle of production and reproduction parallel with the movements of the belt of Orion (my observation). If we take the arrival from the forest in February as starting point, then the bees produce eggs for the first time in May/June (*Asombola/Admizana*) when Orion sinks low in the west in the early evening and then becomes invisible for about 3 weeks, migrate in June/July (*Admizana/Alakarabo*) when Orion reappears at the eastern horizon in the morning, and refill the empty combs with winter honey during the months of July/August (*Alakarabo/Alakaosy*) when Orion reaches its zenith. The same process is repeated in the months of November, December and January (when Orion disappears in the morning to reappear in the evening) and producing summer honey. For the Zanadroandrena the belt of Orion, *telo andakana*, three in a canoe, is considered to be an image of life generative movement. In earlier times, the rice harvest could start officially when the belt of Orion appeared low in the west in the early evening and could be seen through the western window by someone sitting on the conjugal bed. This moment in May was called *fararano*, the end of the water. This is also the time when the bees produce eggs for the first time. The month of the harvest, *Asombola*, is called the land that gives the destiny to the people and refers both to the rice as main food crop and procreation. A generation ago there was still a ritual in the house of grandparents (*ray-amandreny*), performed together with their children and grandchildren the day before the lineage would start harvesting, called *santa-bary*. Central to this ritual was harvesting the first ears of rice in the centre of the biggest field, where it is said that the 'spirit of the rice' resides, and then consuming this first new rice together with some old rice and honey. *Santatra* means the first result of something and also the start or origin (*niandohana*) of something. Here, during the *santa-bary* ritual, the climax of the rice plant in the rice fields was converted into a pioneer in the human sphere: the new rice grains becoming the creative forces giving life to, and maintaining, the life of the physical (and mental) body when they are consumed (*Alahamady*).

Honey is used in different rituals, at least, more often in the past. In order to transform marshes into rice fields, the living soil has to be killed so as to become life-giving and fertile. This is done by draining the marsh. Before this work can be started, the farmer has to check whether there is a *Vazimba jiny* dwelling in the marsh

as an owner or protector of the place. He does this by putting an axe (*famaky*) upside down in the centre of the marsh and sleeping in the vicinity of the place for a night. If there is a *Vazimba* then this *jiny* will visit the farmer in his dreams in the form of a policeman or someone of a similar kind. This is a sign not only of the presence of a *Vazimba* but also of its agreement to change its place into a rice field. It opens the path. Only a healer can then replace the *Vazimba*. Very seldom is a *Vazimba* chased away. It is only given another place a bit higher up on a little elevation at the edges of the field, so that the farmer can work in his field without being harmed. The move is done with a gift of honey to calm down the *jiny*. After the harvest some people also give some rice stalks as a thanksgiving. In my view, to raise the *Vazimba* a bit higher at the borders of the field is to bring it into the sphere of the human life-world. It is a movement from the sphere *of* the earth to the sphere of the living *on* earth. The gift of honey must replace the soil from which the *Vazimba* used to live. Instead of being fed with living and growing *Alahamady* soil, it is now fed by an *Alahamady* product of the bees. Hence the *Vazimba* remain in relation with their life-world but their alliance with the living soil is turned into an alliance with the flourishing soil and its generative powers. The month of December (*Alahamady*) is when the sweet smell of honey fills the air and the trees blossom. The turning of forces is also expressed by the axe that is put upside down in the centre in search for the *Vazimba*.

In the same line, in the past, a particular red bull (*jaola mena*) who was part of the Zanandroandrena *hasina* (sacred and protective forces) was rubbed with honey on the day that the people went to their ritual centre to lift the protective forces for people, land and cattle in March (*andro Alasaty*). This red bull would appear from the prairie in August/September and sleep under the Voara tree (fig tree) in the ancestral village. He would stay there until the month of December. On the destiny *Alasaty* in March he would return to lick the ancestral medicines before people went to the ritual centre. Today there is no sacred red bull anymore, but I have seen that the healer responsible for the ritual centre rubbed the ancestral medicines with honey during a ritual bath in the month of August (*andro Alakaosy*) to purify and activate his sacred forces (a ritual of birth).

And last but not least, also in the past, blessings were accomplished with water called *rano ambodivendrana hangatsiaka*, ‘the water at the foot of reeds that will make cool’. Mixed with honey for the blessings it was called *taobelona*. This means literally ‘that which was there alive in the past’ and also ‘making alive’, and refers in

my view to particular ancestral forces. The water was fetched from the head of a particular marsh to which a tomb was connected. The water that bears the marsh is regarded as being formed by rotting processes of dead bodies that become part of the soil. Also the dissolution of corpses in tombs is considered as taking part in this process. Therefore the place of a tomb is always meticulously chosen with regard to the valley where the liquid of the corpses will appear as part of the *jiny* of marshes. The Zanadroandrena do not associate the water as the source of blessing with the ‘wild’ fertility of un-appropriated land associated with *Vazimba* that has to be tamed by channelling it in the lines of ancestral *hasina* (Bloch 1986: 41-43). The mistake many scholars make is categorizing the *jiny* as being only associated with *Vazimba* dwelling in marshes and *hasina* with ancestors in their dry state in the tombs. The Zanadroandrena associate the water used for blessings with the *jiny* of their own ancestors that is turned into life-giving forces by the addition of honey (calms down *jiny*) and by placement in the northeast during blessing where the *hasina* appear. The Zanadroandrena dead family members appear as a double life-giving source: an earthly source (*jiny* from the marshes) and heavenly (*razana* (ancestors) as part of the appearing *hasina*).

*A cock for Vazimba and a zebu for the ancestors.*

*Vazimba* and *Razana* (ancestors) are both dead people who have lived in the same land, who have been buried there or have died in rivers and marshes, and whose spirits still survive in the region. Why, then, are *Vazimba* and *Razana* not the same? I cannot know what the spirits of the dead *Vazimba* must have meant to the *Vazimba* living community, since they no longer have descendants in the region. I can only present the differences from what I have learned within the Zanadroandrena community. When I asked Rakotondrasoa why *Vazimba* spirits like to dwell near water and why the *Vazimba* tombs look onto water, in contrast to the spirits of ancestors, he answered, “that the spirits of the dead in general like to inhabit places they also liked during their lifetime”. Besides, he said, many *Vazimba* died in the marshes when they had to flee from a big fire, the drama that wiped out the *Vazimba* from the region.<sup>5</sup> There is archaeological evidence of settlements close to water from the time from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, that might have corresponded to the period

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<sup>5</sup> Another tradition says that they died of hunger because of people having been given cooked rice to sow.

of *Vazimba* settlements (Mattheeuws 2008:14). It is thus not strange to find the tombs and other places where *Vazimba* spirits dwell close to water. It is also not so strange that the spirits of the people's own ancestors prefer the highlands of the present villages and do not like water. The ancestors help and support whatever has to do with land, foundations and origins and the *Vazimba* help and support whatever has to do with water, life, well-being, and the vital functions of the community. Also the kinds of illness caused by harmful spirits are particular for ancestors and *Vazimba*. *Vazimba* will most likely attack peripheral parts of the body like head (mouth), hands and feet. The attacked body parts will start to swell because the *Vazimba jiny* like water. The *lolo* (bad spirits of the ancestors) will attack central parts of the body like eyes and the region of the belly. If caused by sorcery, a bone-like substance often grows in the region, taking away the *avelo* (subtle invisible version of the physical body with which it is intertwined during life and very closely related to the life and death of the physical body). Also the way the spirits are tempted to do harm is different. While *lolo* are tempted to do harm with honey, the *Vazimba* will eat excrement if it wants to help a sorcerer. Conversely, the new corpses that enter the tomb at intervals calm down the *lolo*, whereas honey calms down the *Vazimba jiny*. Finally, in relations to ancestors, the Zanadroandrena will kill a zebu during rituals, while in relation to *Vazimba*, they will kill a cock. Generally speaking, the ancestors are much more committed to everything concerning the dead soil of the highlands (*andro Adijady*), and the *Vazimba* to the cold living soil of the lowlands (*andro Alahamady*).

Although marshes are key partners in the processes of Zanadroandrena engagement with the surrounding world, they are an optimal habitat for reeds and do not therefore have to be cultivated in order to yield the materials to plait mats and baskets. It is different with the prairies. They could not have been formed without human interference. I give some examples. As a dwelling place for zebras they have clear, astrological limits established through a ritual called *soatany* (making the land good). To keep cattle within these limits and to protect them against disease and theft there is a ritual centre at its borders. That ritual centre functions as a kind of magical doorway, linking the prairies and the dwelling area of the living people. In this place the cattle are cleansed yearly in March after the hard work on the rice fields and before they enter the prairies (*hafan'omby*). This is necessary to take away the bad influences of breaking taboos during the work on the fields so that the protective

medicines could do their job. Besides the ritual centres at the borders of the prairie, there are place names remembering herd-leading bulls such as *Antandrokiboromena* (At the Horns of the Round Red One) or *Antandrokivangamavo* (At the horns of the Light Brown One). When such a bull dies, the horns are placed on a stick to prevent them from being polluted by animals. Beautiful big horns were used in earlier times to serve the *taobelona* during blessings. Herd leaders are considered to possess *hasina* and carry the protective medicines (*ody andro*) in the name of the whole herd. Another form of human impact are the prairie fires, also carried out to support cattle-breeding. The Zanadroandrena believe that this is necessary to ensure a second growth of the grass to tide over the winter season. But this does not amount to the cultivation of grass.<sup>6</sup> Clearly, human activities have impacted on the prairies, yet they are not perceived as ‘human made’ even if they might have been forested in a distant past. Since, when the Zanadroandrena arrived in the region they saw open land and no forests.

The ambiguous position of the prairies, between ‘natural’ and ‘human made’, is creating tension between this place and the Zanadroandrena dwelling place, in particular between the zebus and the people, something that I did not notice in the case of the marshes. Marshes, as a place from which reeds can be fetched, do not need to be controlled or protected, and the Zanadroandrena do not bring the *Vazimba* as ‘owners’ of the place into discussion. Tension only arises when people stain the dwelling places of *Vazimba* or transform marshes into rice fields so that they become part of human settlements. Concerning the prairies, grass is the basic food for the cattle. Zebus are therefore the secondary fruits of the highlands, just as people are in their own dwelling region where villages appear off manioc fields. Zebus and people are both highlanders seeking to be autonomous. Yet people have to control the prairies, and the cattle as well, to make them useful for themselves. Grass has to be burned to give a second growth and to keep in check the growth of shrubs that might otherwise harbour rats and other pests that might destroy the rice crops. Zebus, too, can destroy the crops if they are not properly herded. Although the people try to build good relations with them, becoming owners of zebus, there is a continuous discussion about who the owners are in fact: the *lolo* or the people. If a zebu is in the neighbourhood of the villages during the period of work, whenever they smell their

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<sup>6</sup> Now a new project has been initiated to try to keep the cattle indoors during the night and feed them with cultivated grass and shrubs.

prairie (seen as a call from the *lolo*) they can become wild and cannot be stopped from running straight to their home. The ambiguity of the prairie and its inhabitants is epitomised in the question of whether it lies in the realm of the living or in the realm of the dead.

Grass follows the cycle of the year (*taona*). During the summer season it grows luxuriantly, but this growth ceases in autumn and winter. The *Alasaty* smoke making alive, the prairie fires in autumn, give it a second growth. The old dry grass burns and three days later new shoots are already visible. That new, fire-induced growth helps to feed the zebus during wintertime and the dry period. Dwelling in the northwest, grasses are conceived as bodies born in the light separating from the earth. They are like the bodies of new-born babies: very soft and weak and not made alive, yet dwelling very close to the realm of the raw soil of the highlands, the realm of the living dead. Although they flower and have grains, their reproduction is mainly an appearance of new shoots from the roots. This gives an image of the close rhizomatic relationship between the ancestors and their descendants. Being close to the realm of the living dead grass is used as medium to retrieve the *ambiroa* of living people that have found resort in the realm of the dead.

In summer, when food is abundant, the zebus are fat (*matavy*). The Zanadroandrena judge fatness from the hump (*trafo*). The hump is the highland of the zebu and says a lot about the condition of the prairies. During wintertime zebus become lean (*mahia*) and the bones become visible through the thin skin and flesh. The condition of the flesh is important if zebus have to be slaughtered for ritual reasons. During a *famadihana* very greasy meat is necessary, while during funerals lean meat will be served (*hena ratsy*, bad meat). In general, leanness has negative connotations, being considered infertile like the bare highlands, yet on the other hand it is a stage that any form of life has to get through as a condition for rejuvenation. In a positive sense, leanness can refer to the thin and dry skin of the pregnant zebus in the dry season, carrying much water. People cannot produce fat by eating grass like cows. They must eat the cows or other highland food. The Zanadroandrena consider highland food, and the zebus in particular, as producing the human bones and physical strength based on fat (*menaka*). Fat is the basis for the productive and reproductive forces. It gives energy for growth and to renewal. As vital force, it stands in direct relation with the blood (*ra*), a kind of fluid old force developed from the fat, according to an informant. He explains that there are two kinds of blood circulations.

One is the central open blood circulation formed by the bone marrow (*tsoka*) leading the reproductive forces – it stands at the beginning of the process of becoming fertile. The Zanadroandrena believe that the male and female fertility develop from the *tsoka*. The other blood circulation is a peripheral closed circulation formed by the fat joining the meat (*sabora*) and leads the productive forces, forming the blood and the bodily strength to work and also to be sexual active. The two blood circulations are intrinsically linked and together make a person ‘fat’ and ‘solid’ (*matavy*). If a person has been ill and lost a lot of weight, then he or she will be considered as both not being able to work, not being fertile and even as not have the strength for any sexual act.

While the *andro Alahamady* is generally speaking the destiny for life of young bodies, for the zebu chosen to be ritually slaughtered it is the destiny of death. Whereas rice is only harvested at the real end of its lifetime and consumed in order to make born bodies alive and grow, a zebu is slaughtered as a full body just prior to the point of going downhill, in order to turn decay into new life – in reproducing and renewing forces, in procreation. When slaughtered, its breath (*fofon'aina*), its blood (*ra*) and its meat (*hena*) are given respectively to *Andriamanitra* (highest divine principle), the earth (the dead) and the living people to cleanse the polluting effects of death. While everyone (even visitors) can consume rice from Zanadroandrena land, the zebu is only consumed within the sphere of particular family relationships. This is very important for understanding why the Zanadroandrena can feel themselves united with *all people* of Madagascar so as to form ‘one land, one soil or one body’ (*iray tany*) on the one hand, but can become only ‘one breath’ or ‘one life’ (*iray aina*) with the *particular families* of daughters- and sons-in-law (*vinanto*), if children are born from the marriage, on the other hand. Rice forms the living body (living and growing soil), while zebras are considered to be at the basis of life-generating forces in the darkness (generative soil). Madagascar is one body, yet it generates not one life but different manifestations of life.

The astrological ground image of the sacrifice of zebras differs from occasion to occasion. On the one hand, the zebu is usually entered into the ritual scene in *Adijady*, being put down there and then pulled to the northeast corner. There it is put with its head towards the northeast and its body is made small and round by closely tying three of its legs. This ritual act already brings the zebu into connection with the realm of death in the reciprocal sphere of the north. I take this idea from the

understanding that dead people visit mostly in dreams during the winter, when the sleeper is tightly huddled against the cold. Yet, one untied leg keeps the zebu in the open. On the other hand, the directional place where the mat is put with the rum, the directional places where the crowd is standing and the directional places that are kept open in an earth-sky setting, differ. Moreover the time of the sacrifice differs. I have seen that if the sacrifice has to do with rituals concerning the dead, then it is done just before sunset (5 or 6 a.m.), while in the hours of the young sun (7 or 9 a.m.) if it has to do with the living. During the sacrifice for a marriage the rum was put in *Asombola/Admizana* (the directional place of procreation) and the crowd kept open the east, the directional places of life. During the sacrifice for the erection of the ritual place in the village to celebrate a *famadihana*, the mat was put outside the ground image in the northeast since the whole ritual had to be supervised and

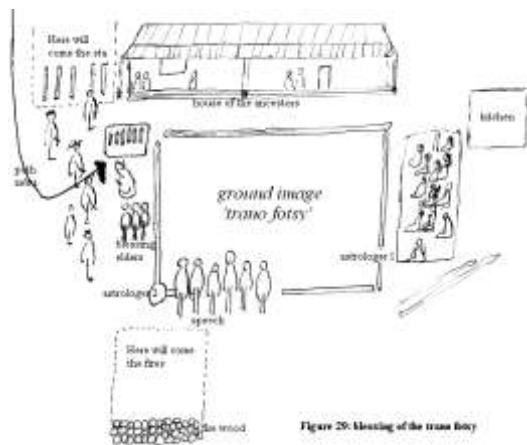


Figure 20: Heating of the trano fotsy

protected by all the *hasina*, the ancestors in particular, and the west, the directional place of the dead, was kept open since it is a ritual for the dead. Once the zebu has been killed, it is cut into pieces somewhere south outside the ritual place by ‘*ancien serviteurs*’, the directional place where bodies fall apart. The different parts carry different forces and are therefore carefully distributed to compatible people who will

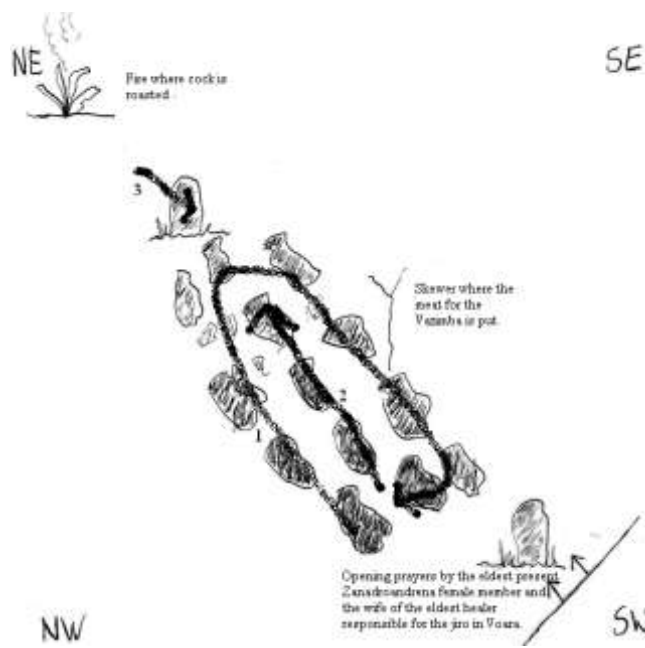
cook and consume the meat in their own houses, enforcing their social position in reference to the ritual from inside. The colour of the skin is also important in the choice of a zebu to be slaughtered, relative to the aim of the sacrifice. (Mattheuws 2008: 212-2017)

While the dwelling place of zebus is the grassland of the northwest, the cock dwells in the villages that appear in the southeast region of Zanadroandrena land. Cocks belong to living villages. In a living village people say, “one can see the ascending smoke of the hearths, and one can hear the children play and the cock crowing”. When a cock announces the day in the village, it is said that he crows in *Asorotany*. He is the owner of the twilight between darkness and light, and between light and darkness, and knows its forces better than human beings do. If people build a grave or a new village, they always give a cock to the sculptor and/or astrologer to



protect him during this dangerous work. If dangerous forces appear, the cock will die before his owner. Sensible to the twilight, 'a young red cock with broken voice' (*akolahy mena vaky feo*, a cock on the verge of adulthood) is offered by female members of the Zanadroandrena community to the chief *Vazimba* northeast of the villages in the month of October (*andro Adalo*) just before the first rains. This ritual is called *tranga taona* (the appearance of the year) and is the only ritual in which I have seen the Zanadroandrena killing a cock. It is part of the rituals in the realm of the north concerned with the opening of the earth, the appearance of the sources and the giving birth of new bodies. These new bodies have to be nurtured and taken care of if they are to stay alive and grow into autonomous adult beings. The blood of the sacrificed cock is sprinkled over the *Vazimba* grave from west to east, then in the

centre and little the northeast. is roasted on a northeast. The into pieces and among the the women who The offer to the skewered on a southeast the grave in an



finally on the *tsangambato* in Then the meat fire in the cock is divided distributed *Vazimba* and are present. *Vazimba* is little stick (*Asorotany*) of upside-down

manner: on the bottom the head and wings scorched black, in the middle the intestines and on top the legs, both put over the fire for only a little while. The women will eat the central parts of the cock. People often talk in a humiliating way about *Vazimba*, saying that they only like dirty things or things with less value and that everything concerning the *Vazimba* is upside-down compared to their own life and the life of the ancestors. But during more serious conversations one learns their important role in Zanadroandrena society as protectors of young life in the light. The reason why the pieces are put upside down, I believe, is to turn the head towards the earth as during birth, i.e. turning the head towards *Asorotany*. The head and wings being scorched black bring to mind the drama of the big fire which extinguished the living *Vazimba*

and forced them to flee to the west. This drama is turned during the ritual of the *tranga taona* in a movement towards the east by ‘crossing the fire’ (*sakafo*, food).

From the point of view that life is born of death as the primordial movement from southeast to northwest, what is made mobile during the ritual at the *Vazimba* grave is a movement upside-down, bringing living bodies towards their climax in *Asorotany*. Being born in the light is proceeding towards death. People perceive their life on earth as born of the drama in *Adijady*, the bare hill, and directed towards the southeast. *Asorotany* is then a kind of climax in lifetime. The Zanadroandrena, dwelling in the southeast part of their land, try to generate a climax system of the bare highland (sensations in the northwest) where they arrived and settled down. Since I had the chance to experience the establishment and growth of a new village on a previous manioc field (*Alakaosy*), I know the difference between the ‘sensations in the northwest’ and the ‘sensations in the southeast’. Within one year, an open place with only grass, became a lively place with houses, people, children, chicken and cocks, smoke and water at the hearth, a village *jiro* in the centre, and also little plantations of sugar canes and fruit trees. There were places for pounding rice at the periphery of the village, and the whole place was full of different sounds, smells and happenings. It seemed to me that the growth of the village was comparable to that of a forest on bare land, leading towards what ecologists call a climax system. When I checked the comparison with villagers by describing the inhabited village as a ‘place inside a forest’ (*anatin’ala*), they agreed. (Mattheeuws 2008: 218-220)

### **Conclusion.**

The aim of this paper was to show the intrinsic relationship between life and death. Death is a dangerous force that can make the world fall apart, and yet it is a natural part of life. The Zanadroandrena have many ways to turn death into a life-giving direction. Animals play in this effort an important role.

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Panel: religion and the human-animal relationship

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