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PLAYING WITH STONES: SOCIAL CHANGE, MOBILITY, AND MORALITY AMONG THE SCHOOLGIRLS OF HIGHLAND MADAGASCAR

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"...child play not only involves the absorption of knowledge about the world, [it] also provides a means of action within it" (Argenti 2001, 71)

In Madagascar, playing with stones and speaking through them is a widespread practice among girls aged 6–14 that has lasted for at least four generations[1]. In both urban and rural areas, the play called *tantara vato* (literally "stone story") or *kitantara* (from *mitantara*, "to tell stories") is the favorite activity of Malagasy girls when there is a free moment from school and domestic chores, sometimes done when just waking up at dawn, or on Sundays before mass. In the courtyards of the houses, by the side of the rice fields, my young friends would pick up a few stones, organize the space, and start playing.

I began to participate in these performances and became interested in the content and framework that governed them, asking questions and recording the stories; the intertwining of the ways in which the stories were expressed and the construction of the narration itself also allowed me to explore this practice as a "technique of the body" (Mauss 1935), which is acquired among peers and incorporated in repeated gestures. This paper intends to explore the narrative production of Malagasy girls from the analysis of a specific play, which consists of staging stories using small stones[2].

Narrative Production and Children's Knowledge

In the *kitantaras*, each character is identified with a stone, which is presented by the girl who prepares the setting, choosing the size and strength of the stones and their arrangement on the ground. The girl who moves the stones is the narrator and is the only one who can give voice to the story: this is made clear when she concretely gives the stone-character the word by tapping another stone on top of it, a "narrator stone." Every time she knocks that stone on top of another, it takes on the body and voice of a character. Similarly, it is only the child narrator who can give hints about the plot as a voiceover.

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1 A paper on Malagasy games from 1911 (Camboué 1911), for instance, makes no mention of it. From oral sources, the origin of this game seems to have come from another one, called *tamaboho*, which consisted of making marionette dolls that were animated by the hands of the participants, later replaced by stones.

2 The fieldwork with Malagasy children aged 8–16 and their caregivers, initially conducted between 2004 and 2006 in the city of Antsirabe for a total of fourteen months, was part of a PhD project in Social Anthropology at the University of Milan Bicocca. In return visits in 2011, 2012–2013, 2019, and 2023, other stories were collected and recorded both on the Highlands and in other areas of the country. Methodology included participant observation and interviews with adult informants (teachers and parents). The names of the research participants are given in the form of pseudonyms.

On some occasions, I observed them draw a kind of semi-circular arena on the ground with chalk, where the stones (in coastal locations often replaced by shells) were placed. Sometimes the girls do not have an audience and tell the story to themselves in a lower voice; more often, they are seated on mats or on the floor with friends. Both the narrator and the other children are seated in a crouched position where the backs of the thighs adhere to the calves and are often in a circle. The audience is not expected to interact with the plot of the story, although it sometimes happens that someone suggests a new action, the name of a character, or even encourages them to continue.

A girl's ability is judged according to the length of the story, the speed and strength of her hands in beating the stones, and, only lastly, the content of the story itself. Listening again to the recordings, the beating also marks the rhythm of the narration, as if the voice were in tune with the gestures and the flow of the plot: as if there were an aesthetic dimension of speaking, in which rhythm, speed, and words are in harmony (Duranti 1992).

It is a game entirely structured by girls, in which adults do not participate or control its development: the preparation, staging, and performance are all managed by the participants. This aspect reinforces the idea that peers are the real partners in play, engaging in face-to-face interaction and the exchange of intense emotions (Scheidecker 2023), while the participation of adults is difficult to see, as there is no shared idea that the relationship between adults and children also passes through playing together (Lancy 2015; Mezzenzana 2020).

Like other African pretend games, such as the similar *masekitlana* in South Africa (Kekae-Moletsane and Mokgadi 2008; Ofenste Phetlhu 2014) or the Angolan corncob-dolls play (Ponte 2017), it is non-competitive and links children's engagement with available materials to the imaginative worlds they develop. Another characteristic is that it is a female activity. Adults see its gender exclusivity as both the cause and the effect of its existence. They often say that "women are more open and talk more": it is the "essence" of being female that leads girls, not boys, to approach this game. There is no male counterpart as boys play marbles, basketball, or football, build objects, and participate in gender-mixed games such as *kapoka* (hide-and-seek) or *kisabaka* (hopscotch)[3].

Gendered *habitus* affects not only the nature of leisure activities, but also that of everyday lives, including schooling, domestic chores, and work performed by children (Astuti 1998; Devine et al. 2021) in a context where the economic role of boys and girls is highly visible. The body seems to be at the center of this expressive medium, where creativity and caring attitude, considered appropriate to the female gender, merge (Coffey and Watson 2015): to put it simply, one of the ways of performing the "being girl" is to play with the stones.

Listening to the stories, there is an apparent absence of a fantasy world, but a strong connection to reality: the stories tell of family life, problems in finding food, conflicts, love relationships, and school life. It is a theater of everyday life: the stories are set at the market, at school, or at home. There are vendors, peasants, *pousse-pousse* drivers, but also complaints about homework, shopping, and rice to be cooked. They talk about the allocation of tasks and responsibilities: who must buy coal, who goes to the market, and who must look after the *zebu, b*ut also of unexpected

[3] The traditional board game *fanorona,* played mainly by boys and men, has been regarded as an apprenticeship for future political leaders, encouraging young men to improve their analytical skills (Kneitz 2022), but it is not a children's game. As for *kitantaras*, boys do not perform them, and they are not very welcome even in the audience.

events to deal with, such as the theft of gold, the arrival of the police, a traffic accident, or an act of witchcraft.

It is therefore a "symbolic game" (Ofenste Phetlhu 2014; Goldman 1998) where improvisation is central, but at the same time embedded in a reproducing narrative structure: actions are generally followed by a climax (represented by an unexpected event) that is followed by a resolution. Narrative competence and language vary depending on the storyteller's age, as Jirata observed (2019). Children's storytelling is less coherent than the adult standard. In any case, narratives appear to be both a way to incorporate and question social norms.

A more detailed analysis reveals, in fact, the presence of "imagined worlds" which often function as plot-solving spheres, a co-presence of real-life elements with dreamed or less realistic aspects. The paper presents three stories that illustrate salient aspects of the social and projective realities of the girls who participated in the research.

Seduction and Change

The first story was told by Nialy, an eleven-year-old girl of Betsileo origin, on the outskirts of the city of Antsirabe.

> Presentation of the stone-characters: Mr, Mrs, three daughters, and the father's employer. The narrator explains that the father receives his salary every Friday. An argument begins between the couple over money: the wife asks for money to buy *laoka* (all that accompanies rice), [and] he says there is none. They eat rice without *laoka*. The wife accuses him of giving the money to his lover. The narrator says they no longer love each other. The three sisters pray and go to sleep.
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> The mother goes to see the employer and becomes his lover. After another quarrel, the husband leaves. The mother and the lover have an accident in the car [trace on the earth the junction and the dynamics of the collision], they break an arm, and by chance the husband passes by and discovers them. The employer goes home, offers the girls a snack, and tells them that they are going to the Saturday market to buy clothes; he asks if they [would] prefer to go by bike or by car. The employer and the mum get married, says the narrator. They go to the market and buy a T-shirt and a dress.
>
> The ex-husband sells vegetables and his lover starts begging.
>
> Since they are fed up with living in Madagascar, the five protagonists leave for abroad.

As Nialy has experienced several times, lack of resources is a common situation in Malagasy family life. In this story, the escape from the situation of poverty, complicated by marital quarrels, begins with the seduction of a powerful man by her mother: after the car accident that marks the caesura between the past and the future, the man turns into a caring and attentive father. This man, in fact, triggers a path of social mobility that sees the improvement of the initial situation, through the acquisition of a series of goods—the snack, the car, and the clothes—and finds its climax in the departure for abroad.

It is interesting to underline how wealth and social improvement, objectified as commodities, become accessible through the instrumental use of seduction: the mother begins an affair with her husband's employer, who allows her to redeem her poverty. In Madagascar, sexuality has also been studied as an arena in which young women experience the possibility of changing

social hierarchies and transforming the balance of power. Cole's studies of youth in the coastal town of Tamatave, for example, speak of changes in gender relations related to the globalization phenomena that have taken place since the adoption of a free-market capitalist policy (Cole 2004; Cole 2005). While not clearly referring to the growing market of transnational sex, the stories do, however, refer to the gain that can be made from a relationship with a powerful man, sometimes much more profitable than that which can possibly be obtained through educational credentials.

Social and Imagined World

Presentation of the stone-characters: mother, father, and two daughters.

> The parents separate and the girls move in with their mother, who remarries another man. The daughters go to school, and when they come back, they ask their stepfather for a snack; he does not give it to them and tells them to go and ask their mother. The new couple always quarrels. The daughters are always sad because no one takes care of them. They continue to study, are close to getting their diplomas, and start having their first boyfriends. One day when the parents are not at home, a boy goes to visit the eldest daughter; when the father returns and finds them, he gets angry. "You're close to succeeding and you start doing things that shouldn't be done." [Scene change] The mother, who has a stall in the street, is walking with a heavy bag and collides with a passerby. The bag falls and the contents are broken. [Long time passes]. The mother goes to Paris, where she bumps into a Malagasy man: when she gets closer, she realizes it's her first husband.
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> He asks her where their daughters are; she gets angry and says "They are grown up now!" He apologizes for everything. She says that things have changed and "maybe you too will have made progress, you will always drive and no longer walk." She does not have a good salary and works as a maid. He says he is not interested in her work and that "they had never broken up."
>
> The mother goes back to Madagascar and she hardly speaks to her daughters; in the end, she tells them that she met their father in Paris, and he will come the next day. They then decide to leave. When their stepfather comes home, he sees that they are preparing to leave and gets angry. They explain that they are leaving to prevent their father from finding them. He is so furious that they say, "We are only taking the clothes, not the furniture, and then we are leaving with our feet, not yours."
>
> They leave the house, and a car is passing on the road. The little girl remembers that she is the passerby who collided with her mother. The woman stops, lets them into the car, listens to the whole story, and decides to take them in. The next day, the father arrives from Paris and finds only the stepfather; he manages to find the house where they are staying and tells the daughters that their stepfather is a liar. When the hostess returns, the girls tell her that their father has been there. When the mother returns, he apologizes again, convinces her, and the two get back together. They move to Antananarivo and the eldest daughter marries the boy who had been visiting her at home.

In this second example, the cultural context and the imagined world seem to merge. Several key elements of the social life of Malagasy families can be found: The formation of new households and the subsequent transfer of children to different care (or neglect) contexts. The status of female children making power marginal, just as the ability to obtain resources, symbolized by the snack,

was considered a surplus by my young informants. Female solidarity, born from the desire to repair a conflict represented by the episode of the passerby, contrasts with male authority, which is expressed in the control of the girl's love life. Connected to this, school success is contrasted with the girls' entry into sexual life: the female students risk failing in their project of "success" by starting a romantic relationship. It refers implicitly to unwanted pregnancies, a topic discussed at the school, the main reason for girls' dropouts and a concern for rural families about their daughters being exposed to "urban temptations." Finally, the foreign city is not only an imaginary location but also functions as a key factor in the reintegration of the order. France is the European country most present in the Malagasy reality and the first migration target: in this story, the girls seem to be familiar with the integration process in the destination country, where the first stage is low-skilled jobs, and then the availability of goods increases the quality of life and adherence to Western models, where "you no longer walk but drive."

Education and Power

The third story is told by Rova, a ten-year-old girl of Vakinankaratra origin, in a meadow near the rice fields.

> There are two bratty children who play hooky from school. One day they tell their mother that there is a computer course on Saturdays: the first two months are free, then the monthly fee is fifty thousand Malagasy Franc. Then they steal from their father's wallet and wander around. The mother, on her way to the market, meets the friar who is the director of her children's school. She asks him about the course and the lie is revealed. The mother quickly greets the friar. The narrator says that "the mother is very ashamed." She returns home and scolds her children. Their cousin, on the other hand, is good and can go to study abroad. "It's a good opportunity," says the mother.

In this story, the narrator re-proposes the two categories that the school and adult world employs to talk about children, which can be translated as "good and bad" (*hendry* and *maditra*), and she stages adult morality through the voice of a mother who praises her diligent cousin and scolds her children who lie. The protagonists of this story, except for the mother, are all male: the friar, who embodies school authority, and the three students, who exemplify different educational paths.

The story opens the theme of families' investment in education as a place of progress and modernity, but at the same time of ambiguity and transformation (Bloch 1998; Freeman 2004): the children take advantage of educational credentials—represented by extracurricular courses—to obtain money from their parents that they would otherwise spend on other forms of consumption.

Schooling scenarios recur in the *kitantaras*: formal education is represented by the school itself and the development agencies as a "social legacy" (Stambach 1998), a body of knowledge that can take kids far (*lasa lavitra*) and contribute to the improvement of the country. Moreover, the school's cultural context seems to overcome gender dichotomies, and in national rhetoric it is through education that the new female generation will achieve emancipation.

In Madagascar, as elsewhere, studying also means moving away from home: as many of the life stories of the schoolchildren show, often after attending the first years of primary school in one's own village, one moves to middle school in the provincial town, to high school in a larger city, and to university in the capital. In this journey, not without hiccups and comebacks, one also grows

in power and symbolic capital, and encounters the "dangers" of education (Sharp 2002), exposure to foreign influences, mass media, gender relations, and even witchcraft, disease, and contagion, which function as "metaphors to represent the precarious nature of students' ambitions" (Freeman 2004, 104). Even in this brief story, we see how the lives of individuals are articulated with the power of institutions: from time to time, family, school, and church represent a frame within which children and adults move, not without contradictions.

Mobility and Morality

In their process of social world-building, Malagasy girls elaborate sociodramatic play (Goldman and Smith 1998), which moves through the production of imagination, mimesis, and play, and make the adult world their own by reworking some of its traits. Imagination, in this case, refers to the notion studied by Appadurai (1996), who recognized it as a characteristic trait of modern subjectivity distinct from fantasy, seen as a stream of individualistic thoughts.

The main themes of the stories are the making and unmaking of families (conflicts, separations, and new kinship nuclei), the dimension of sexuality (forms of control, use of seduction, and dangers) and female and male education.

These themes intersect with other recurring axes of development, namely those of mobility, morality, and social change. As far as mobility is concerned, we can trace a threefold use in which the category of "abroad" is employed: an escape from poverty and a channel for social improvement, the city of Paris as a setting for family recomposition, and Europe as a reward and continuation of studies. These are three models for thinking about mobility and three scenarios in which family and children move: geographical shifts, social changes, and important personal changes. Morality, on the other hand, leaks out in much of the rhetoric reported in the stories and carried out by the family, the school, and religious institutions. The process of the westernization of Malagasy women began in the nineteenth century with Christian missions' use of "missionary feminism" (Predelli 2000; Skeie 2005) to change lives. This "domestication" used control of sexuality and fertility, conversion, prayer, sewing, and literacy through Bible study.

Although the aspirations of Malagasy women and families have certainly changed over more than a century, the echo of the European model of femininity and the bourgeois nuclear family remains. Missionary and development projects organize embroidery workshops, and family planning campaigns and school curricula encourage a reduced number of children. New rhetoric has placed schooling at the center of development for the new generations, which often has to do with the control of sexuality and fertility. In Africa, in fact, one of the implicit aims of schooling has been to postpone the age of motherhood (Stambach 1998). Despite this, even today, pregnancies are among the main reasons why women drop out of school (Sharp 2002; Johnson-Hanks 2005). Female sexuality thus becomes a public ground on which girls' professional futures, school discipline and reputations are at stake, and can significantly affect gender differences in school expectations.

As the second story suggests, educational itineraries are thus intertwined with marriage patterns, experiences of motherhood, and missionary logics. Consequently, being educated and postponing the age of marriage can also mean "being modern" locally. At the same time, precisely by retracing the suggestions provided by the *kitantaras*, we can locate education and sexuality at the crossroads of biographies. Seducing a man or chasing educational credentials may indeed be two possible

options for Malagasy students. Both imagined mobility (geographical and social) and convey a specific idea of success. And again, becoming a nun or "finding a boyfriend" are two ways in which young girls represent their future and their relationship with religion, school, and family.

Social Change and the Questioning of Norms

Although adults recognize *kitantaras* as "an open book on family life," how does the knowledge of gender and age allow a particular social reality to be staged, with its peculiar narrative style?

As Keenan Ochs showed in the 1970s by studying language practices in the same region, women can "break norms" of communication. The norm of non-confrontation—according to which speech must never attack, criticism can only be made through allusion, and the demonstration of respect must govern communication—can be broken by particular groups, including children and women: in some cases, even, "women communicate feelings that men share but do not wish to express" (Keenan Ochs 1974, 137-141). *Kitantaras* might be considered as a tool for expressing childish and feminine themes that are shunned by adults and institutions. This intimate production is sheltered from the influence of the "dominant culture" and adult-centric norms. However, the stories can be a good ground for exploring gender and generational issues.

They are then not only an experiential game, nor merely mimetic (reproducing dialogues and situations seen in the adult world), but are a setting in which to address issues related to reality and one's own culture (Schwartzman 1976). If the Cameroonian children studied by Argenti (2001) construct performance masks appropriating the "material culture of modernity" and stage a "second world" with NGOs and opposition party members, similarly, the Malagasy girls recreate the scenarios of modernity they witness. School words are often in French, the urban and rural worlds sometimes overlap, and fantasies of mobility are intertwined with the emergence of local knowledge. Overcoming the dichotomies that set play against work and reality against fantasy, play can be seen as both a social action and a form of cultural production. Conversely, analyzing plays can be a way of gaining access to the complex child world (Spyrou 2011), by using children's knowledge rather than relying on them making a declaration of it (Astuti 2017), and the cultural variants that construct ethno-ludology (Goldman and Smith, 1998).

Kitantaras are a media through which Malagasy girls produce their social world and reveal their emotions and secrets. But they are also the exercise of skills and specific body technique: in the children's group I knew, it was common knowledge who was the best storyteller. The others would cheer her on, and sometimes her nails would break, or her hands would get calloused from the force of hitting the stones. But even in moments of tiredness or when she stopped to catch her breath, the performance was never in doubt. In this sense, one of my informants was right when she came up to me one day and said that by banging on the stones they were not playing: rather, they were telling stories.

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