DON’T WE ALL WANT A WORLD FILLED WITH “BRIGHT FACES” AND “FAT-CHEEKED BABIES”? CREATING THE STATE AND CRAFTING IDEOLOGY IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY IMERINA

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Political conflict and persecution have perpetuated horrific human misfortune, prehistorically, historically and, tragically, into the present day. Yet, we are also reminded daily by images in the press, from New Orleans to China to Haiti, of the horrors of famine, of disease, and of the natural disasters of flood, fire, earthquake, tsunami, cyclone, tornado and hurricane. Health and well-being seem to be so absent from the contemporary human condition! Yet health and well-being are, one could argue, a cross-cultural universal preoccupation and a hope that springs eternal from the human condition. Understandably the themes of health and well-being have become tied to arguments used both to legitimate and to condemn political regimes and claimants to authority, both religious and secular. Contemporary tragic and troubling examples are the commentaries of (Reverend) Pat Robertson and Rush Limbaugh concerning the earthquake of January 12, 2010 in Haiti. Robertson blamed this horrific tragedy on a pact with the devil made earlier by Haitians to overthrow French colonial authority, and the right wing political pundit, Rush Limbaugh, blamed the tragedy on communism, further arguing that the American President, Barack Obama, would put the tragedy to political use “to burnish [his and the Democratic Party’s] credibility with ... both [the] light-skinned and dark-skinned black community in this country” (CNN 2010; Rushlimbaugh 2010).

Madagascar has and continues to face recurrent problems of human suffering often resulting from a concatenation of environmental and political factors. In an article that appeared in the Madagascar Tribune online on January 18, 2010, the journalist Régis Michel spoke in an open letter to the “Monsieur le Pazenkor-Président,” the current (or pas encore) detainer of political authority in Madagascar. He remarked that when recently he received a letter and emails from friends in Madagascar with pictures of their families, he was overwhelmed by the image of a newborn whose mother was exceedingly thin. In another photo he saw “sunken
faces, new wrinkles, and strained smiles.” He further remarked that previously his friends had been “healthy and confident” but now they were “very thin and sad.” The letter continued as a plea to the government to resolve the political crisis in Madagascar. What is noteworthy in this letter for the purposes of our discussion below is that, without intention on his part, Michel virtually recreates some of the descriptive vocabulary and images of social and physical suffering that were used in the royal discourse of the eighteenth century attributed to Andrianampoinimerina. Andrianampoinimerina claimed to restore unity and peace to Imerina in order to fill the countryside with fat-cheeked babies, well-fed citizens, and bright smiling faces that were smooth and without wrinkles. (See Figure 1.)

Under the rule of Andrianampoinimerina (1787–1810), Imerina constituted an independent polity in the central highlands of the island. At its inception this state occupied an area of approximately 30 kilometers radius around the present day capital of Antananarivo. Under Andrianampoinimerina’s son and immediate successor, Radama I, the Merina polity went on to bring one-third of this fourth largest island in the world under its control. The *Tantara ny Andriana eto Madagascar* (*The History of the Sovereigns of Madagascar*) (Callet 1981), a document of over 1,000 pages, offers an indigenous account of the history and politics of the Merina polity from its inception to its situation in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, when this document was recorded in the Merina dialect of the Malagasy language by the French Jesuit missionary, François Callet. A number of Callet’s informants were descendants of Andrianampoinimerina’s family and familiaris, some of whom may even have witnessed the last days of Andrianampoinimerina’s rule (Delivré 1974: 37–60). Understandably, the majority of the text recounts the deeds and words of this paramount sovereign. We draw the reader’s attention to the fact that there is much evidence in these recorded oral traditions of a hegemonic political discourse that equates the health and well-being of Andrianampoinimerina’s charges to his legitimate positioning as singular sovereign of Imerina, and additionally that this discourse of health and well-being, of “bright faces” and “fat-cheeked babies” (cf. Callet 1981: 808–809) was used to craft and legitimate an expansionist political agenda to

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1 “…l’image de nouveau-né dont la maman était bien maigre…. Sur ces images, tous avaient le visage creusé, des rides nouvelles et le sourire en berne…. Ceux que j’avais quittés bien portants et confiants un an plus tôt n’étaient plus les mêmes!”