The Antankaraña, occupants of the far northern portion of Madagascar, are generally described in the literature and by educated Malagasy as one of some 18 'tribes' or 'ethnies' into which the island is said to be divided. They were, in the 1970's, the second smallest 'tribe,' with a population of some 44,852 (e.g. Jenkins, 1987). In this paper we problematize this kind of hegemonic depiction of social groups as discrete, bounded, reified entities. We suggest that alongside it, and rooted more deeply in northwest Madagascar, is a logic of collective identity constituted less by categorization than performance and less by exclusion than by inclusion, though we recognize these are themselves relative emphases rather than discrete alternatives (cf. Lambek 1995). Ascertaining the specific boundaries between groups in northern Madagascar is problematic; groups overlap and flow into one another so that even the French have been taken by the Antankaraña into the very heart of their world (albeit in such a manner that their distinctiveness is not denied). The question then becomes how the meaningfulness of the core or centre is constituted.

In this paper we argue that Antankaraña identity is established less by a conceptual grid of ascriptive categories than by means of commitment to a certain historical narrative and its regular re-enactment in a ceremonial cycle. In discussing the cycle we pay particular attention to its spatio-temporal qualities and the sense of potent, yet controlled, rhythmical continuity it brings to Antankaraña social identity. We show how ritual enactment instantiates the constitutional relationship between sovereign and subject. In the last section we turn to the objectification of the ritual within present-day Madagascar. Our central point is that the question—who are the Antankaraña?—may be answered best by
attending to the story they perform about themselves and its fate in contemporary Madagascar.

In borrowing Anderson’s (1991) term ‘imagined community’ we deliberately refrain from casting the Antankaraña in the usual analytic terms for depicting collective identity. John Comaroff (1992) has provided a lucid distinction between totemism and ethnicity as ideal types, demonstrating the dialectical processes through which ethnic groups form historically. As he recognizes, in practice it may be difficult to distinguish ‘totemic’ from ‘ethnic’ groups; this is especially true in an environment of expanding chiefdoms and proto-states with broad mercantile links such as characterized Madagascar between the 17th and 19th Centuries, the time at which an Antankaraña identity was forming and to which the Antankaraña today turn to explain who they are. Following Comaroff, we can see the gradual emergence of Antankaraña ‘ethnicity,’ but it exists alongside a differently constituted model which still retains saliency in which incorporating tendencies are at least as strong as demarcating ones. Comaroff bases his argument on the assumption of a universal classificatory impulse, ‘the marking of relations—of identities in opposition to one another’ (1992: 51) without specifically distinguishing a broad form from the distinctively modern rationalizing urge to impose a uniform classificatory grid over social reality, tidying it up into commensurable units (as in the picture of ‘18 tribes’). While we do not question the role of classification in human thought, we wonder whether classification by opposition has always provided the most salient or critical basis for group or individual identities, especially where bilateral principles assign people to multiple and overlapping categories.

Hence in our analysis we privilege performance over classification and centres over boundaries. Among Antankaraña, as among other Malagasy (Bloch, 1989b), the attempt is to counteract dispersal; activities are directed more at reconstituting a centre than at setting up or patrolling external boundaries. Movements to and from the centre help to imagine Antankaraña-ness, irrespective of how Antankaraña may differ from others. During the time invested in these ‘meaningful practices’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 37), an intensity (Durkheimian effervescence) is generated. Outside this social phase, which surely includes anticipation before the fact and recollection after, identity is somewhat more diffuse. In bringing out the importance of social context we are not speaking about ‘situational ethnicity’ so much as the significance of ritual and narrative practice in the imagination of identity. Indeed, our argument is the inverse of the situationalists since we focus primarily on moral order rather than instrumental strategy and since among