

PEOPLE OF THE SEA

Identity and descent among the Vezo of Madagascar

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Introduction

This is a study of two different forms of identity, one which is achieved through activities performed in the present, the other which is given as an essence inherited from the past; one which is of a recognizable Austronesian character, for it is transformative, non-primordialist and non-essentialist, the other which bears instead a clear African imprint, for it is rooted in, and determined by, the unchangeable order of descent. These two identities are both known to the Vezo, a group of people who live on the western coast of Madagascar. One of the aims of this book is to explore how these two different and apparently incompatible ways of being a person are made to co-exist, and how they are articulated with one another.

In the following pages, I shall introduce the reader to these two identities as I encountered them during my fieldwork among the Vezo. I shall describe how I came to formulate the question that will engage us for the whole of this work; at the same time, I shall begin to provide and to explain the local idiom of identity – the contrast between ‘un-kindness’ and ‘kindness’.

A few days after arriving in Betania, a coastal village in western Madagascar, I saw two children, aged about six, playing in the hull of a broken canoe half sunk in the sand. As they paddled with two wooden sticks, they chanted to each other ‘*ve-zo! ve-zo!*’. *Vezo* is the imperative form of the verb *mive*, which means ‘to paddle’; the two children were imitating what one of the persons on a canoe-team chants to beat the rhythm for the others.

The term ‘Vezo’ also denotes a people. The Vezo often point out that their name means ‘paddle’, a name which indicates who they are: ‘people who struggle with the sea and live on the coast’ (*olo mitolo rano, olo mipetsaky andriaky*). This point was reiterated many times in my first weeks

in the field. Any attempt on my part to learn new words related to fishing or sailing, for example, prompted my instructors to explain that all the people who fish and sail are Vezo; similarly, when I showed a group of young men a map of the coastal region, they told me that all the people who live along the coast, near the sea, are Vezo. I soon found these comments rather tedious, for they appeared to be stating the obvious, namely that the Vezo are people who base their livelihood on the sea.

What I was being told with such insistence seemed of particularly little consequence since virtually all accounts by early travellers or missionaries, or more recent reports by geographers, anthropologists or historians of the region, had already made the point that the Vezo should be regarded as a fishing and coastal people. For example Koechlin, the author of the most detailed study of the Vezo, defined them as 'semi-nomadic marine people, and predators of the coral reef, of the mangrove swamps and of the forest adjacent to the coast' (Koechlin 1975: 23). Other scholars referred to the Vezo less technically as 'marine people, devoted to fishing, who spend a lot of time at sea and live along the sea-coast' (Grandidier 1971: 9), or as 'people of the coast, who practise navigation and are devoted to fishing' (Poirier 1953: 23).² In fact, the prevailing view in the literature has been that the only distinguishing feature of the Vezo is their mode of livelihood.³ This seems to be confirmed by the oft-mentioned fact that if a person leaves the coast to move to the interior, she ceases to be Vezo and becomes Masikoro, the name of the Vezo's neighbours who are cultivators and cattle raisers.⁴ It has thus been concluded that the term 'Vezo' does not indicate a trait of identity that is fixed and immutable, for people can move and change their livelihood accordingly. For this reason also, scholars have agreed that the Vezo are not a 'genuine ethnic group' (*une ethnie véritable*), a 'special race' (*une race spéciale*) or a 'distinct people' (*une peuplade distincte*).⁵ In other words, it has been argued that while the term 'Vezo' indicates what the Vezo do and where they live (that they are 'people who struggle with the sea and live on the coast'), it fails to reveal who the Vezo 'genuinely' are. As a result, the Vezo have been considered in need of an alternative identity, which has been found by assigning them to the 'large Sakalava ethnic family'⁶ (Koechlin 1975: 26), within which they are said to represent a technologically defined sub-group among others.

I began to appreciate that the statement that the Vezo are people who struggle with the sea and live on the coast was less obvious and less tedious than I first thought, and that it was a 'genuine' statement of identity, when I started to ask questions which were based on mistaken assumptions. For example, I asked why villagers who had migrated from the south and were

of Antandroy rather than Vezo origin were said nonetheless to be Vezo; or I expressed surprise that people with a broad and differing range of ancestral customs could nonetheless all be considered to be Vezo. To these questions, my informants would answer simply: ‘the Vezo are not a kind of people’ (*Vezo tsy karazan’olo*).

The word *karaza* means kind, type, and indicates groups of objects, animals or people that share some essential characteristics (see also Bloch 1971: 42–3). For example, fish is a ‘kind’ of living thing, and Spanish mackerel is a ‘kind’ of fish. The word *raza*, from which *karaza* derives, applies in turn to the ancestors, and in particular to the ancestors of a certain ‘kind’, those who are buried in the same tomb and are referred to as ‘one *raza*’ (*raza raiky*). Membership of a *karaza*, whether of a class of objects, animals or people, is based on intrinsic and inborn qualities of the individual; neither ‘fishness’, nor a specific kind of ‘fishness’, can be acquired, learnt or changed – a fish is born what it is. Similarly, a human being does not acquire, or learn, membership of a particular tomb or of the *raza* contained therein, but obtains it through descent.

Consequently, the statement that ‘the Vezo are not a *kind* of people’, that they are ‘un-kindred’, is meant to signify that Vezo people are not *inherently* such – that they are not born Vezo, and are not Vezo by descent. It follows that people of Antandroy or of any other origin can be Vezo, because to be Vezo is not an issue of *origin*; and that people with different ancestral customs can all be Vezo, because Vezo-ness is not determined by ancestry.

When I understood that ‘the Vezo are not a kind of people’, I also realized that when people told me, with some insistence, that they were people who struggle with the sea and live on the coast, they were offering more than a descriptive statement about their mode of livelihood and about the environment in which they live; by describing what they do and where they live, the Vezo were in fact telling me *who they are*. Both statements – that the Vezo are not a kind of people, and that they are people who struggle with the sea and live on the coast – were informed by the same view, namely that Vezo identity is not determined by birth, by descent, by an essence inherited from the past, but is created contextually in the present through what people do and through the place where they live. ‘People are not Vezo because of their stock, but because they go out to sea, they go fishing, they live near the sea’ (*tsy Vezo am’raza, fa Vezo satsia mandeha andriva, maminta, mipetsaky amin’ sisindriaky*).

When I insist, as I shall do in the first part of this book, that the Vezo are what they do, that Vezo identity is an activity rather than a state of being, and that a Vezo person is not what she is or what she becomes, but what she

does, I depart from the scholarly consensus on the Vezo found in the literature – I will argue, in other words, that the term ‘Vezo’ defines who the Vezo ‘genuinely’ are, precisely because it defines them exclusively by reference to what they do and to the place where they live. And yet, I also agree with the view that the Vezo are *not* a ‘genuine ethnic group’, a ‘special race’, a ‘distinct people’, although I reach this conclusion for different reasons and I use it for very different analytical ends. Those scholars who have argued that the Vezo do not constitute an ethnic group were working on the assumption that a ‘genuine’ identity must be fixed rather than shifting (if a person is ‘genuinely’ Vezo, she cannot become Masikoro), inherent rather than contextual, that it must be established through descent rather than be achieved through practice. From this perspective, the Vezo were perceived to be anomalous, for they did not fit the ‘western ethnotheory of ethnicity’ (Linnekin and Poyer 1990: 2), a theory informed by the view that people’s identity is drawn from common origins and, through them, from some sort of biological or cultural trait which is either inherent to the person – like blood or descent – or is ‘naturalized’ and thereby made to appear inherent – like language, religion or a specific kind of history.⁷ Having perceptively recognized the Vezo’s anomaly, previous scholars failed nonetheless to perceive the full implications of their own finding; by remaining within the narrow framework of their ‘ethnic’ theory, they were unable to appreciate the non-essentialist character of the Vezo’s own ‘ethnotheory’ of identity. They stopped, in other words, where the present study begins.

This study of Vezo identity was triggered by the statement that the Vezo are not a kind of people. I heard this statement often at the beginning of my fieldwork, when I still formulated questions and made remarks based on misguided assumptions about the nature of Vezo identity. In due time, as I learnt to ask questions more in tune with the Vezo’s own perception of their identity, I also came to perceive the ‘un-kindness’ of the Vezo embedded in what people had to say about themselves. Rather than a simple denial, the statement of ‘un-kindness’ began to seem like a positive affirmation of how the Vezo come to be what they are through what they do.⁸

The first part of this book aims to elucidate the claim that the Vezo are not a kind of people. A more familiar way of describing ‘un-kindness’ is to refer to it as undetermination – the undetermination of Vezo-ness and of the Vezo person by the past. In order to be Vezo, a person must act in the present, for it is only in the present that one can perform one’s identity. By contrast, activities performed in the past do not determine what a person is

at a certain point in time. The Vezo person can thus be imagined to start from scratch every day in creating its identity through practice.

The Vezo deny that the past impinges on the present; they deny, in other words, that Vezo identity has a history. One of the many ways in which the Vezo assert this is by recounting an act of defiance that happened in the past. They claim that they were never part (i.e. subjects) of the Sakalava kingdoms which, up to the colonial period, ruled over the whole of western Madagascar. They add, proudly, that instead of paying homage to the rulers who came visiting the coast, they would take to their canoes and flee; as we shall see, one of the things they fled from was the determining power of history. Whether this story is historically accurate or not is of little consequence, except for suggesting that the little known history of the Vezo's modes of integration into the Sakalava polities⁹ might throw light on the origins of Vezo's current 'un-kindness'. My aim in this study, however, is not to uncover the historical roots of present-day Vezo-ness, but to analyse the particular configurations of identity as they are experienced by the Vezo in their everyday life – the morphology rather than the genesis of that identity.

Fieldwork among the Vezo can easily turn into the experience of becoming a Vezo person. By this I mean something more specific than the common and often romanticized process of acceptance and gradual assimilation experienced by many anthropologists; as we shall see, the possibility of 'becoming Vezo' is closely linked to the specific nature of Vezo identity.

The Vezo readily apply the two related notions that they are 'un-kindness' people and that they are what they do, to any person who lives among them and performs, more or less skilfully, the things that make people Vezo. As I was once told:

the Vezo do not have a master. Vezo is a collective name for everyone who is able to do things all right, if they like the sea. Vezo-ness doesn't belong to any one person, it doesn't have a master. One can't say that so and so is the master of Vezo-ness. No! Everyone is master of Vezo-ness, if they like it and like to practise it.¹⁰

My Vezo friends often remarked on the fact that I really liked the sea, that I liked swimming, sailing and fishing; they noted that I had been wise in choosing their place to carry out my research – they seemed to agree that I was well suited to becoming Vezo.

Only at the point in my fieldwork when I spent whole days being Vezo by way of doing – by going out fishing, by smoking fish or by selling shrimp at the market – did I fully grasp what the statement 'the Vezo are not a kind of people' meant. My own transformation into a Vezo, experienced subjec-

tively and through other people's perception of myself, was made possible precisely because of the 'un-kindness' of the Vezo: it is because the Vezo person is undetermined by the past, that I too could shed my own personal history and acquire a new identity in the present. From this perspective, I consider my own transformation as a minor but significant instance of the process experienced by all Vezo people of becoming what they are through what they do.

In the ethnographic account that follows I sometimes deploy personal experience to exemplify the way in which people learn to do Vezo things and become Vezo as a result. It could be argued that when my hosts told me that I was Vezo because I could swim or because I sailed, they did not mean it literally. In other words, did they ever think that I was 'really' Vezo? The answer, of course, is no; but this is not because I was a distant and unreconstructed foreigner, but because no Vezo person is 'really' Vezo in so far as no one can claim to be so inherently. My friends were well aware that once I left them, I would resume a very different identity; but they liked to think that this did not affect my new way of doing, hence of being, while I was among them. My being Vezo was undoubtedly contextual; however, I shall argue that Vezo identity is always contextual for *everyone* who acquires it and performs it.

Inevitably, the modes through which the Vezo constitute and define their identity in the present profoundly shaped my fieldwork and determined the kind of questions I asked; the experience of inclusion – through the process of becoming Vezo, which at times I felt was almost being forced upon me – brought into focus the issues and problems around which the first part of this book is organized. Experiencing the *limits* to my inclusion, on the other hand, made me aware of a second identity, one which stands in opposition with Vezo-ness as I describe it.

Towards the end of my stay I happened to be in a very dangerous situation at sea. I was sailing back home at night, when the young man who was in charge of the canoe lost the paddle that was being used as a rudder, and realized that he had forgotten to take the spare paddle which is normally kept on board. We were thus left with no control over the canoe. We quickly took down the sail, and made out that the current was pushing us into a shallow inlet where the sea was very rough. Although the canoe began to take on a lot of water, and the hull was in danger of splitting under the strain, we managed nonetheless to push ourselves slowly to shore with the aid of the two sail poles. Although I kept myself busy trying to reassure a small boy who was travelling with us, I realized on reaching shore that we

could easily have drowned. A few days later, someone told us they had found one of the watermelons we had thrown overboard that night many miles to the south, lightly remarking that they could well have found our bodies instead if the canoe had been wrecked or capsized. This episode prompted a question that had been hovering in the back of my mind for a long time: would my Vezo family have buried me in its tomb if I had died? The answer was that they would *not*, because my parents 'on the other side of the ocean' would want my body and bones to bury in *their* tomb.

Like all other people in Madagascar, the Vezo attach great significance to the 'placing of the dead', that is, to the choice of the burial tomb (cf. Bloch 1971). Among them, burial into different tombs divides people into 'kinds', which are called *raza*; by excluding me from their tomb, my Vezo relatives effectively barred me from being incorporated into their *raza*. The reason for this is that, contrary to Vezo-ness, *raza* identity is a state of being and not a way of doing; it is an identity based upon descent, upon a person's ancestry which cannot be changed contextually in either time or space.

The existence of 'kinds' of people, the *raza*, among the Vezo who claim that they are *not* a 'kind of people' poses a theoretical puzzle. How can two opposed identities co-exist among the same people, one that evolves through practice and the other that is fixed by descent? One that is inclusive and the other that is exclusive? How can the Vezo be at the same time 'un-kindred' and 'kindred' people? These are the questions addressed in the second half of the book.

Kinship will be used as the backdrop against which one can perceive the 'kindredness' of the Vezo. Two different domains can be distinguished, one which establishes relatedness in the present, and the other which divides people into 'kinds' (*raza*) and operates only in the future, after a person's death. This distinction, based upon the experience of time, is vital for understanding the co-existence and interplay of what have traditionally been referred to as cognatic and unilineal descent; it also sets the context for the analysis of the identity ('kindredness') experienced by the dead. The latter can be reconstructed by analysing funerals and mortuary rituals, during which the living Vezo separate themselves from the dead, and yet at the same time create distinctions of kind among them.

Finally, we shall be in a position to understand how the Vezo both deny and recognize the continuity between their identity and the identity of the dead, between 'un-kindredness' and 'kindredness', between the past, the present and the future.

I spent my fieldwork among the Vezo (from November 1987 until June

1989) living in two villages: Betania and Belo-sur-Mer (Belo for short).¹¹ Morondava, the main town in the area, which includes governmental offices, a market, a hospital, a post office and an airport, lies about 3 km north of Betania. For most of the year Belo, 60 km south of Morondava, can be reached from the town only by sea. While living in Betania and Belo I spent short spells of time in other nearby Vezo villages: Lovobe, Bemangily, Ankevo, Begamela, Antanimanimbo, Manahy an-driaky; at the market in Morondava I met women from many Vezo villages north and south of Betania. I also visited some Masikoro villages in the interior: Ambohibary, Manometinay, Beleo, Marofihitsy, Manahy an-tety (see Fig. 1).

Betania lies on a long and narrow tongue of land, surrounded by water on three sides: to the north, an inlet which grows and shrinks according to the tide; to the west the ocean, a mere 200 m away; to the east, a mangrove swamp. The village in its entirety can be seen only from the sea. The sun and moon both rise from and set in the water.

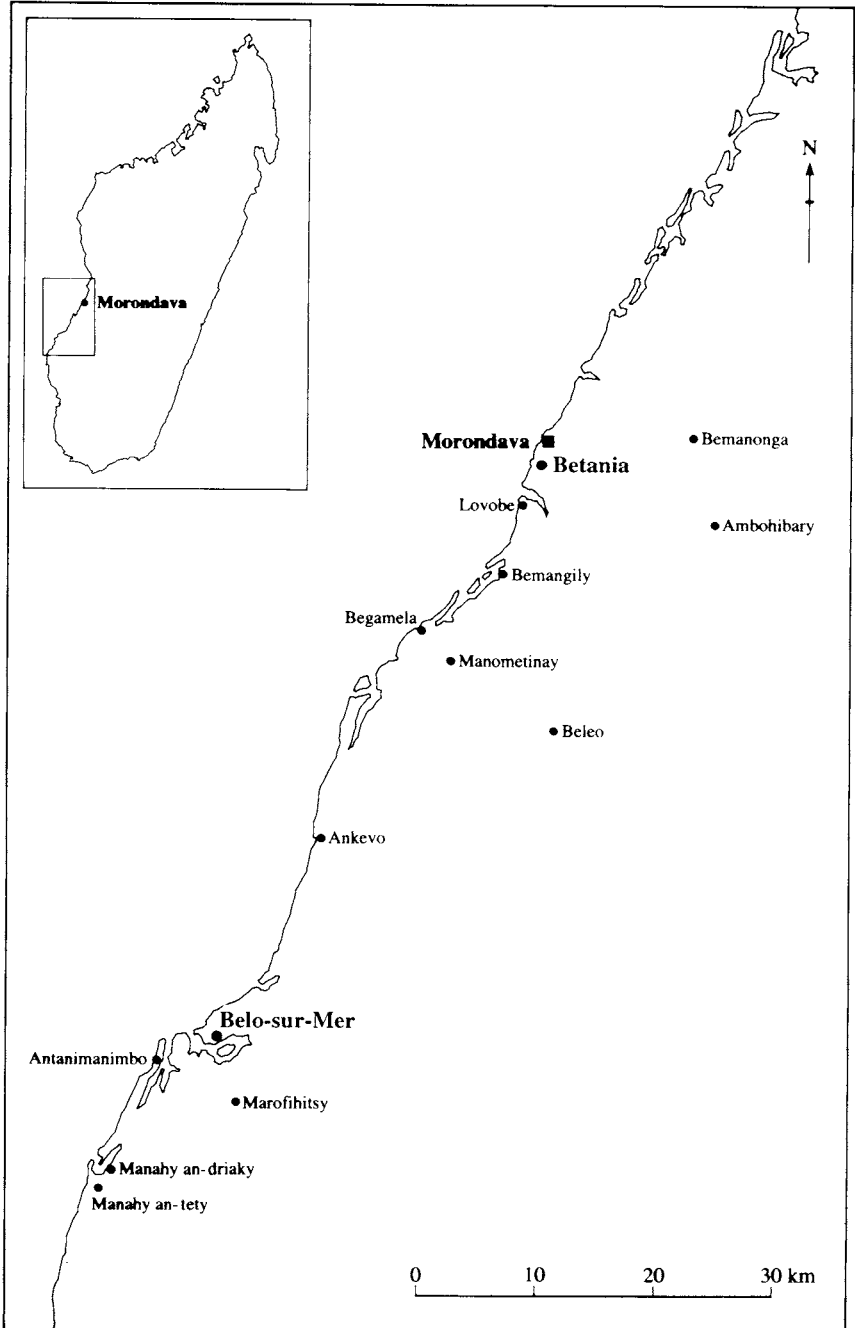
Like all other Vezo villages, Betania is built not on 'hard land' (*tany mahery*) but on 'soft sand' (*fasy malemy*). The beach merges with the village; the only boundary demarcating them is a range of coconut palms scattered between the houses. Looked at from the ocean, Betania can be recognized by the disposition and height of its palms, and by one large umbrella-shaped tamarind tree at its northern tip.

The houses are built on a band of sand along a north/south axis running parallel to the sea, and canoes are beached in a similar manner. Most houses consist of a wooden frame. The walls are stuffed with dried *vondro* (a long grass which grows in the interior), the roof is made of layered coconut leaves, and the floor is covered with woven mats spread out over the sand. Besides these there are a few brick houses, with corrugated iron roof and cement floor. The openings in both kinds of dwelling are in the eastern and western walls.

Most people have a separate hut for cooking; otherwise food is cooked outdoors. Nothing is ever cooked in the dwelling used for sleeping. Small enclosures near the houses are used as 'showers' (*ladouche*), where one can undress and wash with the help of a bucket. Cooking, drinking and washing water comes from a number of wells dug between the houses. Chickens and pigs roam freely around the village; but if they get too close to a house, and especially if they belong to 'enemies', they risk being clubbed, stoned or scalded with boiling water. Casualties have been known to occur.

If one were to ask the people of Betania what the most important feature

Fig. 1 Area of fieldwork



of their village is, beside being a Vezo (i.e. a coastal) settlement, they would probably answer that its 'character' (*toetsin-tana*) derives from its proximity to the Morondava market. This market is an integral part of the villagers' social space. To the question, where they were going, people heading north would most often answer that they were walking to the market (Q. *Ho aia nareo?* A. *Handeha a bazary aña zahay*). Although I soon learned that this answer can be a polite equivalent to 'mind your own business', most of the time the reply was truthful. Villagers go to the market every day to sell their fish and to buy provisions for the day's meals; they buy rice and, if they earn enough money, they buy ingredients to make 'rich side-dishes' (*laoke matavy*) such as pork with potatoes, or beef with manioc leaves. In fact, they will often point out that proximity to the market enables them to avoid the monotony of eating fish every day (*oma fia isanandro isanandro*); as a result, people will seldom be bored with their food (*tsy morimoritsy*).

On mentioning that I wanted to move to Belo, a village with no market (*tana tsy misy bazary*), friends in Betania insisted that I would be miserable: I would eat fish day in day out, and life would be so quiet (*bangy bangy*) that I would soon get homesick (*jangobo*). When a relative from Betania subsequently came to visit me in Belo, he asked teasingly whether we could make a quick visit to the market before supper, and made a great show of surprise at hearing that there was no market nearby.

One of the first things I noticed on arriving in Belo were the deep ruts in the sand left by carts with which inland Masikoro periodically carry maize, manioc or rice to Belo to sell or barter for fish. Villagers in Belo say that these carts are their market, but they will readily admit that they do not provide the same excitement as the market in Morondava. They also recognize that their diet is more monotonous than in Betania because they eat fish every day; however, they pride themselves both for the greater variety of fish and crayfish and for its being both fattier and tastier.

The atmosphere in Belo is quite different from that in Betania. The village lies on one side of a vast lagoon and is further away from the open sea, and it is therefore hotter than Betania. The sand, which is much darker, also heats up more and makes it painful for small children to walk on; one will see more frequently than in Betania older children carrying their younger siblings piggy-back from one shaded area to another across a stretch of scalding sand. Also in Belo most houses are built with solid wood planks, making them much more durable than in Betania; on the whole, the settlement has a more solid and permanent appearance. This impression is reinforced by the many *botsy* under construction, massive schooners made

with very hard, long-lasting timber. It is these schooners, and people's involvement in their construction, that is regarded by the inhabitants as making the 'character' of their village.

When I moved from Betania to Belo and whenever I travelled to another Vezo village I was encouraged to notice the differences in ways of doing (*fomba*), mostly with respect to people's livelihood (*fiaveloma*), but also to their manner of speech, their diet, the location of the villages, and the build of houses. As one of my closest adoptive relatives once explained to a visitor who had never met me before, I had come to Madagascar to learn about the Vezo, and I had been travelling to different places in order to see the many different ways in which the Vezo do things.

Despite widespread awareness of these differences, my interlocutors used the term 'Vezo' in conversations with me or among themselves to refer to all the people who 'struggle with the sea and live on the coast' (*olo mitolo rano, olo mipetsaky andriaky*). The fact that in one place people dive for lobsters while in another they line-fish for Spanish mackerel is irrelevant, in so far as in both places – in *all* places along the west coast – people base their livelihood on the sea and are therefore Vezo.

In this book I employ the term 'Vezo' in two complementary ways. First, I refer to the small fraction of Vezo people I got to know in the two villages where I lived for long stretches of time; I write about what they taught me of themselves and about those things they did which made them Vezo. Second, I write about 'the Vezo' in the same way as my informants talked about them(selves), with the awareness that despite differences in practice, the people of Betania, of Belo and of any other village on the west coast are all Vezo because they are all 'people who struggle with the sea and live on the coast'. Following my informants' usage, I assume that this criterion of identity transcending local differences (as well as the notion that 'the Vezo are not a kind of people') is shared by all Vezo people, even though I lack empirical confirmation that this is the case outside the region where I worked.

I chose to live in Betania initially for reasons of convenience, for it was the closest village to the administrative centre of Morondava, and thus the easiest place I could arrange to move to at short notice. At that point I was anxious above all to learn the language, and life in Betania seemed an easy solution to acquiring linguistic competence before moving to a more distant location, which I identified as Belo.

In the end, despite these plans and a first visit to Belo four months after settling on the coast, I spent most of my time in Betania, where I was able to establish an ideal human and working environment which I felt I could not

leave lightheartedly. In Betania, I was adopted within the kinship network of the man whose house I rented. Within these bounds, which included eight households, I could join in any conversation, meeting, argument, gossip, fight, joke, whispering, laughing or crying I wished to be part of. I could ask questions and require explanations. Although some people were remarkably better than others in providing answers I could understand, most were at ease with the idea that I was interested in learning about them and were highly committed to teaching me what to learn and how.

Outside this close kinship network, I soon got on familiar terms with a number of other households, where I could ask questions freely and provoke discussions on topics I was interested in. Although I sometimes made formal interviews, I found it more useful to participate in conversations and activities I had not initiated myself. Nonetheless, even though I could visit these households informally whenever I wanted to, I lacked the intimacy of my adoptive family. At times this greater formality was compensated by the fact that for more distant people I was a special kind of outsider to be treated with special attention, so I was allowed or even encouraged to watch certain rituals from a privileged viewpoint. Within my adoptive family, by contrast, I lost these sorts of privileges as soon as my daily presence began to be taken for granted. Other villagers instead remained distant throughout my stay. Some I felt did not like me; some I found it hard to like. Others were indifferent towards me, or uninteresting to talk with. Yet even with these people I had some degree of familiarity, since we lived in the same village and shared many important activities like attending funerals and the market in Morondava. Finally, there were those I could neither talk nor exchange greetings with, for by becoming part of one kinship network I was forced to adopt all my kin's hatreds and enmities.

When I finally arrived in Belo after more than a year in Betania, I was regarded as a 'visitor' (*vahiny*) from Betania. I was accompanied by a woman who had married into my family in Betania and whose old father lived in Belo. I was considered her daughter and her father's granddaughter, and I was integrated accordingly into their vast local kinship network. Except for my adoptive grandfather and a few others, however, relations in Belo were more formal than in Betania, partly because I spent far less time there, and partly because I had reached a point in my research where I wanted to ask questions on very specific points. I made a large number of structured interviews and I visited people on the basis of the information I hoped to get from them, rather than according to the strategy of non-selective involvement in any conversation or activity I had followed in Betania.

This book is based on an extensive use of my fieldnotes. Since I often quote informants' statements as I recorded them in my notes, it is necessary to say something about how I wrote them down. I took notes from the first day I arrived in Betania when I hardly knew a word of Vezo. At first I wrote down simple descriptions of what people did, how they dressed, sat, moved or laughed. As my linguistic abilities improved, I was able to incorporate more and more of what people said; I wrote down bits of sentences or expressions that seemed to recur and were easy to remember; sometimes I could ask people to repeat what they or others had said and I wrote it down in full. But mostly I paraphrased conversations, choosing specific points I found more interesting or reporting explanations I asked for or that were volunteered. Because of the informal way I met, talked or listened to people, I made very little use of a tape-recorder. Nonetheless, the few transcriptions I have and which I use extensively in the book include particularly effective statements that express crucial aspects of Vezo-ness.

Both in Betania and in Belo I was able to participate in almost all the activities I wished. The most significant exception was that I was not allowed to go into the forest to observe the first stage in the construction of canoes. Although women rarely join in this undertaking, the reason I was not taken was not my gender but the inconvenience of having me around while working in a hostile and unfamiliar environment. More generally, I never felt that my gender or age significantly affected the information or activities I had access to. A far more determining factor was the intimacy that grew between me and my foster kin, an intimacy that required as much commitment and loyalty on my part as on theirs.