

## ***Twins Taboo* in Mananjary: An Ancestral Tradition of the Dead that Strongly Dominates the Lives of the Living**

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**ABSTRACT:** On the southeast coast of Madagascar there was an ancestral tradition called *fady kambana* or *the taboo on twins*, which placed a curse on twins born in the Antambahoaka ethnic group. In the past they were exterminated, now they are only abandoned, but with a very high mortality rate due to abandonment. This paper is a study on this Antambahoaka taboo. This group could be accused of serious crimes against humanity if they were not understood in their context. That is why we want to understand what a taboo means in the Malagasy context. We will probe the historical roots of this taboo and the consequences of not respecting it in Antambahoaka society. We will have a look at the twins' side to see what terrible trauma they are experiencing because of this curse on them. Internal pressure from other ethnic groups and international pressure from certain child protection agencies has led to the issue of Law 23/2007, which we will analyze in relation to the abuse of twins. Finally, we will analyze the long-term solutions to this long-standing conflict between ancestral tradition and civil law on the taboo on twins.

**KEYWORDS:** *fady kambana*, taboo, twins taboo, Malagasy context, ancestral laws, Antambahoaka, Madagascar, abandonment, abandoning twins, Manajary, protecting twins

As a European living in Madagascar for nine years, I have encountered various customs during my travels to the ethnic groups on the Big Island. I like research, so the habits and approach to life in the Malagasy tradition have often piqued my curiosity and attention, especially since their ancestral traditions are on the border between physical and spiritual, two worlds that strongly intertwine. One of my recent travels took me to the Mananjary region, on the Indian Ocean coastline, consisting of the small towns of Nosy-Varika – Manajary – Manakara – Vohipeno – Farafangana. Cyclones Batsirai and Emnati hit the east coast of Madagascar in February 2022, leaving huge damage behind. So, a group of us flew to the area to provide humanitarian and spiritual assistance to our coastal friends. After the cyclones, people were left with few things, with their houses demolished, waiting for the water to drain and for life to return to normal. But 'normal' will mean a period of famine for the next three to six months, according to Pasqualina Disirio, director of *WFP Madagascar* (Al Jazeera English 2022) due to limited rice resources, with recent crops being damaged (Al Jazeera 2022).

The trip to this region led our team to interesting discussions, filled with curiosity and seriousness, about the ancestral traditions of the groups settled in these places in two stages over the last two thousand years (Campbell 2005, 873). Looking at the history of Madagascar, we found that Gabriel Ferrand, French orientalist researcher, had made a monograph of this area in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, describing the populations that inhabited it (Ferrand 1893, 20; Ferrand 1896, 14). "The population of Manajary is

composed mainly of Antambahoaka, to which some Hova and Betsimisaraka are added, as well as people from the south (Antaimorona, Antaifasy and Antaisaka), temporary Betsileo and Tanala residents, and some Europeans and French, English and German creoles” (Ferrand 1893, 20-21).

Among all these ethnic families, however, Ferrand has a special interest in the *Antambahoaka* people because of a very intriguing *taboo*: the abandonment of newborn twins (Ferrand 1893, 20-21). This practice is known as *fady kambana* and “has been practiced in the last decades because of economic and social difficulties”, according to Malagasy sociologist Gracy Fernandes (Fernandes et al. 2010, 12). *The New Humanitarian* wrote in 2011 about several incidents, including a case where twins were found near a landfill, in a box (The New Humanitarian 2011). *The Huffington Post* has also published several cases of abandonment (King 2014).

Writings from the earlier history of Madagascar record this taboo as having existed for hundreds of years, not only recently, being linked to ancestral traditions. “In times gone by, twins were disposed of...” claims J.S. von Dacre, journalist and researcher of the phenomenon. “...twins were disposed of by being left in cowsheds to be trampled on; in the wildness to be eaten by wild animals, or even by being physically smothered. Hundreds of babies lost their lives over the years in this way” (Dacre 2019). In his book, *Les Musulmans à Madagascar et aux Iles Comores*, Gabriel Ferrand describes an aspect related to the birth of Antambahoaka twins: “When a woman among the Antambahoaka in the southeast of the island gives birth to twins, her mother and the midwife who helped her immediately move away to make room for the witchdoctor to strangle them; the family then enters after the departure of the witchdoctor (*mpamosavy*) and mourns the death of the children; they also get rid of the babies by throwing them into a swamp in broad daylight, where they quickly sink and do not return to the surface. The Antambahoaka claim that these children would not live anyway, that they would be mad or would later threaten the lives of their parents.” (Ferrand 1893, 21).

All these things are intriguing and, at first glance, seem to speak of some very cruel and ruthless people. “Every culture has a right to their own beliefs” as Khanyo O. Mjamba states in an article. “Beliefs differentiate and bring variety among the people who live on this continent (‘Africa’ – author’s note) and on this planet. Beliefs usually exist for a reason, even if they may be outdated and irrelevant to today’s society. Some cultural practices, however, are impossible to justify” (Mjamba 2014).

The research of this article focuses on this taboo on twins in the Antambahoaka community, which has caused many contradictory discussions due to the interference of civil and criminal law (Law 23/2007) with the old Malagasy traditions, passed on by the village elders, as protectors of these traditions, from gods and ancestors (Chaudhuri 2019). This taboo on twins has attracted the attention of the local authorities in Mananjary since the 1970s, who tried implementing weak countermeasures, and then it came to the attention of international organizations that protect children’s rights, such as UNICEF, which started much more complex and sustained proceedings for the eradication of this tradition only in 2007<sup>1</sup>.

This study on the *prohibition of twins* consists of five parts. In the first part we seek to understand what a taboo means in the Malagasy tradition, and why it is stronger than civil and criminal law (The New Humanitarian 2011). Then we explore the ancestral practices of abandoning children born under a cursed fate in Madagascar. Here we also look at legends that were the basis for the formation of this tribal custom related

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<sup>1</sup> The report written by a group of Malagasy researchers (Ignace Rakoto, Nelly Ranaivo Rabetokotany and Gracy Fernandes) on this abusive tradition against twins was published in the book *Les jumeaux de Mananjary: entre abandon et protection*, published by UNICEF in 2010.

to the abandonment of twins, but also the implications of not respecting it in the understanding of the kings responsible for traditions in the Antambahoaka group. How this ban affects twins and what the long-term effects are is the subject of the trauma caused by *fady kambana*. We then analyze the legal steps that have been taken to protect twins and to oppose this tribal tradition. Finally, we evaluate the solutions planned by the national and local authorities of Madagascar to eradicate this interdiction, including a case study similar to that of the Antambahoaka people, in the village of Fanivelona.

### **Taboos and their importance in the Malagasy context**

One of the specific features of Africa and widespread in Madagascar is the sacred interdiction, called taboo. Jørgen Ruud, anthropologist who studied taboos for over twenty years in Madagascar, put together all his research on taboos in the book *Taboo: A Study of Malagasy Customs and Beliefs* (Ruud 1960). He defines the taboo as an interdiction (*fady* in Malagasy), referring to things that one is not allowed to do, objects that one is not allowed to come in contact with, words that one is not allowed to say, places that one is not allowed to enter and food that one is not allowed to eat (Ruud 1960, 280). All these things become *fady* actions (forbidden), *fady* words, *fady* places, to which both locals and foreigners must comply. *Fady* is a warning sign which indicates that it is very dangerous to deal with something that is forbidden (Ruud 1960, 280). The extent of conforming to these tribal taboos shows the respect for ancestors and deities with whom people identify, as well as respect for the community in which they live (Lambek 1992, 253, 255). If one disregards these ancestral taboos, one dishonors the ancestors, which will lead both to isolation from the community and to enduring the various curses that may come from the ancestors and from the 'supernatural powers' that guard the community (Ruud 1960, 265-267). On a personal level, desecration usually brings fear and illness, the most feared being leprosy, or even death, according to Brown (1978, 16). The desecration of taboos brings various disasters to the community, which can take the form of famine, cyclones, and disease (Ruud 1960, 267).

Arnold van Gennep, ethnographer specializing in the study of rites of passage in different cultures, considers taboo to be one of the fundamental elements of social and individual life among the people of Madagascar. It controls the daily life of all social categories on the Island, addressing both the poor and the noble, the head of the family and the whole tribe (Gennep 1904, 12). There are taboos related to all important aspects of life, from birth to death. Community life is strongly permeated by taboos at every level: family, sexual, religious, political, economic and relational. "The taboo can decide the parenthood and the way of life of the child to be born; it raises barriers between young people and limits or requires the territorial extension of the family; it sets the manner of work and the strict distribution of labor; it even dictates the menu of the people; it isolates the sick, it estranges the living from the dead; it preserves the power to the chief, and the goods to the owner; it ensures the worship of great fetishes, the perpetuation of ritual acts, the efficacy of medicines or amulets" (Gennep 1904, 12).

Because taboos are tied to faith, they are stronger than state laws, according to Ruud, noting the superiority of traditions over civil laws. While the state can punish the guilty with imprisonment or fines or forced labor, when one violates a taboo enforced by the ancestors (*ny manota fady*), one is placed in the situation of being severely punished and cursed by them, but especially by the supernatural forces, which means extreme danger not only for the individual, but also for the family and even the community, as well as one's future destiny (Ruud 1960, 266).

Because of this, the Antambahoaka people consider it more important to respect the ancestral culture than the state law, even if the latter can accuse them of child

murder. It is an extremely delicate and difficult to manage situation, which requires a lot of wisdom and knowledge of both parties involved. Accepting twins into Antambahoaka families means accepting the curse of the ancestors and gods over the community, which is clearly understood by any Malagasy familiar with traditional thinking. In a documentary made by *Unreported World*, one of the kings (*mpanjaka*) responsible for keeping the tradition explained in clear terms why it was difficult to lift the taboo on twins: “As long as we are alive, we will not dilute our ancestral culture. If you destroy your culture, you can no longer ask the ancestors to bless you” (Dacre 2019). Another *mpanjaka*, Nicole, from *Tranobe Satrokefa*, said with great determination: “If we do not keep this taboo, we will all die.” (France 24 English 2010). Kiki King, reporter for the Huffington Post, is outraged: “In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in a village called Mananjary, twins are still seen as a curse. In this village, the dead ancestors are believed to be the ones that make the rules for the living!” (King 2018).

### **Ancestral practices and legends which were at the basis of the twins taboo in the Mananjary region**

This custom of abandoning children is not just an isolated case in Madagascar. It is present all over the world, in different cultures in Africa, America and Asia. Ferrand gives some examples concerning the Lonny group on the west coast of Africa, where twins are buried alive. In Vancouver, among some of the First Nations, one of the twins is sentenced to death, and in Calabar, in the Guinea Gulf, they are considered deities of hell and are massacred immediately after birth (Ferrand 1893, 21).

Moreover, the habit of abandoning children in Madagascar is not only related to twins and it is not only related to the Antambahoaka group. It has existed in various forms in all of the ethnic groups in the past. It was related to the *vintana*, every person’s destiny, and the Malagasy astrological calendar of good, bad and cursed days (Ruud 1960, 28). Ruud explains how the days of the week and the time of birth determine a child’s immediate and distant future according to Malagasy astrologers’ thinking. If the child was born at a good time on a blessed day, the destiny, and implicitly the future, was going to be a good one for the child, the family and community. If the child was born at a cursed time, the family would have to get rid of him in various ways so as not to destroy their lives (Ruud 1960, 25-65). Lars Vig, missionary and researcher of Malagasy religious views, offers details about how these astrologers, *mpisikidy*, would remove a ‘cursed’ child from the family. In Hova and Betsileo communities, the baby was sacrificed either by pouring hot water over the child’s upturned face or by placing him on a termite mound, ending up being devoured by them (Vig 2001, 123). Etienne de Flacourt, French colonial governor and foreign historian of Madagascar, devotes an entire chapter to this custom, being greatly scandalized by these “wild practices of *ombiasy* (traditional healers), which advise fathers to abandon their children” (Flacourt 1661, 91-92).

Ignace Rakoto, former Minister of Education, claims that these are facts from the distant past of the Island and are no longer practiced in the Malagasy ethnic groups. He is very categorical when he states that these practices no longer represent the Malagasy. However, some customs remain, such as the taboo on twins in the Mananjary region, which is still preserved, despite western civilization influences in this part of the island. But this practice is about abandonment, not intentional killing. However, the taboo causes great suffering among Antambahoaka families (The New Humanitarian 2011).

There are two assumptions concerning the origin of the taboo on twins in the Antambahoaka kingdom, currently ruled by ten *mpanjaka* (kings), who strengthen the group’s cultural authority (The New Humanitarian 2011). The first assumption has to do with how twinning and the number two, which embody dualism, are understood in

Antambahoaka thinking. For certain ethnic groups, it can be a symbol of balance, but at the same time of opposition and can have potential threats in it (Fernandes et al. 2010, 15). There are ethnic families in Madagascar for whom the birth of twins is a blessing and a joy. Van Gennep quotes Durand as saying that among the Tanala people, the birth of twins was seen as a blessing from Zanahary, the supreme God (Durand 1898, 1275; Gennep 1904, 177). The Betsileo people blessed their children to multiply and have twins<sup>2</sup> (Dubois 1938, 373). On the contrary, for the Merina or the Antambahoaka, dualism represented rivalry, internal divisions, the weakening of a family's strength, revenge, antagonism, and the birth of twins was considered a curse (Fernandes et al. 2010, 15). The Merina did not abandon them both, but one of the twins was kept, and the other was given to another family from the extended family of the father of the twins (Gennep 1904, 176).

The second factor that influenced and strengthened the taboo on twins was the legends on which it is based. In their study on this phenomenon, Ignace Rakoto, Gracy Fernandes and Nelly Ranaivo Rabetokotany indicate three legends as a source, legends which have undergone various changes over the years (Fernandes et al. 2010, 27-29). The first legend is related to the Antambahoaka king called Raminia Rabevahoaaka, who had twins (Cahudhuri 2019). His kingdom was attacked by enemies, another ethnic group from the island. Being heavily besieged, the king decided to retreat with his family to a safe place. The queen took her children and fled with the king. In the rush, however, one of the twins was lost on the way. Frightened that the child would be killed, the king returned with some of his soldiers to look for the child, which led to his massacre (Fernandes et al. 2010, 27). With her heart torn by grief over the loss of her husband and a large part of the family, the queen would have uttered a curse against all those who gave birth to twins: "It is forbidden for my descendants to have twins, and if they do, may the twins become robbers and may they succeed at nothing in life!" (Fernandes et al. 2010, 28). The second legend is related to the 'Muslim Antambahoaka ancestor' who came from around Arabia and settled on the island in the area of Ambodiarany and Fanivelona, about 100km north of Mananjary. He found a wife whom he married and who bore him a child, and then twins. After giving birth to twins, she died unexpectedly. The Antambahoaka ancestor later married another woman, who gave birth to twins. After the birth of the twins, she died. He went through the same process with his third wife, which made him wonder. After thinking about the connection between the twins and the loss of his wives, the Antambahoaka ancestor swore an oath for himself and his descendants never to raise twins, an oath accompanied by curses for those who would break this taboo established by him (Fernandes et al. 2010, 28, 31). The third legend talks about an Antambahoaka king who had ten children, three pairs being twins. Due to the drought and famine that came over the coast, he made a curse oath that his descendants would no longer raise twins (Fernandes et al. 2010, 28).

All three legends have to do with crisis situations in life, in which the twins caused either the destruction of the family by massacre, the loss of a wife, or financial difficulties, and all three are connected to vows and curses made by ancestors. Because of this, the Antambahoaka kings who protect the tradition and perpetuity of the group, have imposed drastic restrictions on those who do not respect this custom on twins: they are not allowed to enter the *Tranobe* (Fernandes et al. 2010, 38), the place where the community leaders gather to judge various cases and to make decisions. Such is the case with Julia Raoarimanana, who, together with her husband, Auguste Tsimindramana,

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<sup>2</sup> Dubois, Henry. 1938. *Monographie des Betsileo*. Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, 373: "Maroa fara sy dimby; manaova kambalahy sy kambavavy!" (May you have many descendants: make twin boys and girls!).

opened the Center for the Reception and Transit of Abandoned Twins (CATJA) on July 27, 1987, who was denied access to the *Tranobe* (Fernandes et al. 2010, 45). Moreover, those who touch twins and seek their protection cannot be buried in the family tomb, which is of vital importance to any Malagasy, and that is a sign of ostracism and curse (The American 2021). If in the city of Mananjary, the taboo on twins is more relaxed because of the townspeople, in the villages the pressure and intimidation that is put on women and families who want to keep twins is very high, and they can be rejected even by their extended families.

### **Trauma of the abandoned twins and the families that abandoned them**

The first complex study on abandoned twins was conducted in 2007 by CAPDAM (Center for Analysis and Perspectives concerning Madagascar's Development), administered by the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Madagascar. It was called *L'étude sur les jumeaux de Mananjary (Study on the Twins of Mananjary)* (CAPDAM 2007) and had a part in the setting of Law 23 of 2007 on child rights and protection. Then UNICEF, through their office in Madagascar, developed a comprehensive study on this phenomenon in collaboration with Malagasy researchers Gracy Fernandes, Ignace Rakoto and Nelly Ranaivo Rabetokotany in 2008. Their report became the book *Les jumeaux de Mananjary, entre abandon et protection*.

In their report, they interviewed abandoned twins, some of them still children, some teenagers, and some adults, as well as their biological families and people who were willing to protect twins, to understand the suffering they went through. Thus, they found that the pressure imposed by the taboo on twins manifested itself in suffering on at least two levels (Fernandes et al. 2010, 5). The first suffering of the twins was of a *physical nature*. Twin babies were abandoned at birth. The mother no longer breastfed them and did not dress them for fear of the family repercussions. They were left at an orphanage or at a center for abandoned children if they were born in the city. If they were born in the country, they were placed at the base of a tree or on the side of a road or river, in a basket or in a box. Sometimes mothers would travel in a canoe for two to three days to abandon the children on the banks of the Pangalane River. During that time, they were deprived of medical care, the umbilical cord was untreated, and the two-to-three-day journey to the place of abandonment, as well as nakedness, lack of food, cold and shock, could all lead to the death of the babies (Fernandes et al. 2010, 49). Sylvester, Chief Executive Officer of CATJA Orphanage, in an interview to *SBS Dateline* said: "Usually, priests and nuns and local authorities bring them [twins] us. For example, we have one baby boy here who was found after two days. He was almost dead. His skin... it had completely dried out and was coming out." (Dacre 2019). In most cases, their life expectancy is dramatically reduced, and 25% of them die within three months due to malnutrition, dysentery, malaria, and other tropical diseases in the Pangalane river area (Fernandes et al. 2010, 50).

A second trauma that Gracy Fernandes and her colleagues found in the twins was *psychological trauma* or *social trauma* related to abandonment. Abandonment trauma manifests itself through a discriminatory lifestyle from society, as if they were not considered legitimate human beings. This puts a mark on their whole life (Fernandes et al. 2010, 50). If they live in a rural community, the rejection is very obvious, while in the urban community of Mananjary, the discrimination is less visible, but still felt by those who live it.

The Antambahoaka community forbids all twins, as well as those who care for them, to take part in three fundamental rituals. First, twins are not allowed to have *Sambatra*, the collective circumcision ceremony that takes place every seven years, every 'Friday year', and an uncircumcised Malagasy is considered *fady* for the

community. Next, the twins are forbidden to participate in the ritual celebration of trampling the rice fields of *mpanjaka* or *hosin'ny mpanjaka*. But the greatest discrimination and hurt is the prohibition of twins being buried in the family tomb, *fasaña*, which means that they will never be able to benefit from the status of ancestor and their name will never be invoked among the Antambahoaka ancestors who bring blessings to families and communities (Fernandes et al. 2010, 24).

To better understand the *psychological pain* that twins feel from society and the resentment that rejection produced in their lives, Fernandes gives an anonymous but representative case from among those they met and interviewed. A twin child was extremely hurt at the age of 12, when one of his relatives, in front of him, threw away the glass which he had used to drink, considering it dirty. Although at the time of the interview, he was 28 years old, married and had a family, that memory remained a bitter pain in his heart because it revealed the stigma he had in the Antambahoaka culture as a twin. He now works as a motorcycle mechanic and receives everyone who comes to him for repairs. However, the Antambahoaka who know him keep their distance and do not shake his hand, unlike the Betsileo who shake his hand and with whom he managed to build close friendships (Fernandes et al. 2010, 50).

### **Measures against the twins taboo and the protection of Law 23/2007 in Madagascar**

The Mananjary community became split in two because of the taboo of twins. Some of the people in the city took action to protect the abandoned twins. CATJA (Center for the Reception and Transit of Abandoned Twins) was established in 1987 to receive these children and to provide them with a bed, food, clothing, medical care and access to education or vocational training for older twins (The New Humanitarian 2011). For newborn twins, adoption solutions were sought in the extended families of the women who gave birth to twins, in families from other ethnic groups in the same area, or internationally, in families in other countries. More than 300 pairs of twins were adopted by Malagasy and foreign families through CATJA over a period of about 25 years since their establishment (The New Humanitarian 2011).

Bringing the taboo of Mananjary twins to the attention of the international public opinion and the pressure of international organizations that protect children's rights finally led to the adoption of Law 023/2007 on August 20, 2007, concerning child rights and protection (Chaudhuri 2019). Law 023/2007 considered all the conventions and declarations related to international child rights from 1924 to 2007 (Wikipedia 2021), but incorporated the ten principles that give particular protection to children on the decisions of the *International Convention for Child Rights* in 1989 (Fernandes et al. 2010, 11). Among the principles that specifically address the issue of abandonment of twins, we mention principles 6 and 10. Principle 6 states that "the child, for the harmonious development of his personality must grow up in a family and in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding", and was introduced in Law 023/2007 Article 6: "Every child has the right to life, survival and the harmonious development of his personality." and Article 9: "The child occupies a privileged place in the family: he has the right to material and moral security as far as it is possible." Principle 10 (a) states: "The child shall be protected from practices which may promote racial, religious and any other form of discrimination." and is found in Article 4: "No child shall be subjected to any form of neglect, discrimination (abuse), exploitation, violence, cruelty and oppression."

Nelly Ranaivo Rabetokotany finds that Law 23 introduced some innovations compared to the principles of the International Convention on Child Rights. The innovations concern both the redefinition of 'child abuse' in Chapter III of the law,

Articles 66-68, which extends the definition of abuse to avoid any kind of child abuse, as well as “the obligation to signal cases of child abuse that are attempted on a child, by imprisonment and severe fines” (Fernandes et al. 2010, 54). In defining the term ‘abuse’, the first paragraph of Article 67 states: “Abuse is defined as any form of violence, assault or physical or moral brutality, abandonment or neglect, ill treatment or exploitation, which includes sexual violence on a child by his parents, legal representatives or any other person.” And with regard to fines for not reporting abuse, Article 62 stipulates imprisonment of between one month and three years and fines of between 72,000 Ariary (20 Euro) and 4,500,000 Ariary (1,000 Euro).

Once Law 23/2007 was enacted, a great barrier in its practice was evident because of those who respected the taboo on twins (parents of twins, communities and *mpanjaka* - kings or heads of families). The *mpanjaka* are not commonplace people, but traditional kings or heads of families, highly respected not only by the Antambahoaka group, but by all other ethnic groups, people with great influence in society and community. Called to give statements on television in December 2007, they firmly stated that they would not abandon their ancestral customs (Fernandes et al. 2010, 55). They were even more convinced that society, and especially foreigners, despised the ancestral traditions of the group, while they were appointed as guardians and keepers of the traditions by their Malagasy ancestors and gods.

These public disputes which could potentially lead to violent conflict situations, because of the high influence of the ten Antambahoaka *mpanjaka*, caused the public and judicial administration to become cautious. According to Dr. Ignace Rakoto, head of an association fighting against the taboo on twins, it is good to be flexible and wise in this persuasion battle, “using carrots and sticks, but more carrots than sticks”. A forceful attempt to lift the taboo on twins both by forcing the parents of twins to not abandon them and by forcing the *mpanjaka* to abandon this tradition of the curse of the twins would make matters worse (The New Humanitarian 2011).

### **Seeking multiple long-lasting solutions to lift the taboo on twins**

Mananjary judicial authorities understand that the protection of twins and the removal of the taboo of the curse of twins is a long-term marathon that may last for a generation. Since 2007, when the law on child protection was passed until today, the law is preferentially applicable. The Malagasy state is still working to communicate with the traditional Antambahoaka leaders and to transform rural communities, so that they become more open-minded about the taboo on twins.

In the ‘battle’ against the curse of the twins, they sought different strategies to work from within on the mentality of the guardians of the custom (*mpanjaka*), to change the mentality in the Antambahoaka villages and communes that have this faith, and to change the hearts of parents who are often pressurized to submit to the taboo, despite the trauma they themselves go through by abandoning their own twins.

Through various meetings, conferences, and school lessons, they try to create collective mentality openness, so that people understand that twins are gifts from Zanahary (the Creator) and therefore they are good, not bad. As one of the *mpanjaka* from another ethnic group stated at the event organized by the Ministry of Justice on November 17-18, 2008: “Twins are born of divine will. Zanahary never gives evil fetuses” (Fernandes et al. 2010, 64).

Oleena Chaudhuri believes that the illiteracy rate and poverty keep people enslaved to superstitions and traditions, defying the dignity of human existence. She proposes that a good solution would be for Madagascar to take action to increase literacy and school development, to make the new generation aware that old beliefs,



although good, may contain abusive, immoral and even against humanity elements (Chaudhuri 2019).

On the other hand, public authorities need to address the issue from the outside as well, strengthening the applicability of Law 23/2007 through sanctions and imprisonment applied to those who abandon their children in a very visible way to the community, but also through other actions in which the State offers protection to children and families with twins, providing a support fund for the biological families of twins starting from the birth of the children until they reach adulthood (18 years old) (Fernandes et al. 2010, 58). The birth of a child brings costs. The birth of twins brings additional costs: milk packages, clothes, blankets, etc. (The New Humanitarian 2011). The parents of twins need to be helped, because they are under double pressure: one is the public disapproval of the community, due to disobedience to the ancestral Antambahoaka taboo; then there is the financial pressure of raising two children at once. Estimates of the cost of providing for twins began to be calculated in 2009, so that the Malagasy government could develop a government fund for the Mananjary taboo on twins. A group of about 50 people was considered, which included parents and twins who go to school, as well as assisting mothers who gave birth to twins with milk, clothes, blankets and other strictly necessary things. The one-year study found that the annual budget that the Malagasy state should allocate to each group of 50 people with twins would be \$10,000 (Fernandes et al. 2010, 58).

In the battle to change the mentality of traditional chiefs and families with twins, the Malagasy state invited people from a neighboring region, the village of *Fanivelona*, about 100km north of Mananjary, who had eradicated the taboo on twins in 1982. According to legends, they are the descendants of a mixed family where the father belonged to the Zafindrohova clan (descendants of Rohova) and the mother was of the Antambahoaka clan, so the taboo of abandoning twins was part of the Fanivelona, Nosy-Varika, Ampômanitra and Ambodiaramy tradition for hundreds of years (Fernandes et al. 2010, 67). Although it brought pain to the families, it could not be abandoned, for fear of upsetting their gods and ancestors and inviting curses over their families. The years 1981 and 1982 proved to be very difficult economically in the region, due to the cyclones that swept the coast and due to political crises in the capital, which caused the Malagasy currency to be devalued by 15% (Fernandes et al. 2010, 69).

Under these conditions of poverty, the maternity hospital in Nosy-Varika was unable to keep the abandoned twins, and the doctor, midwife and nurse asked the traditional leaders to come up with a solution for families to keep their twins, lifting the ancestral custom. Aware of this ‘bad custom’ within the community, the 56 *mpanjaka* and six *mpanjaka-tangalemena*<sup>3</sup> gathered in a large gathering called *kabaro* (public discourse) and decided to lift this taboo on July 5, 1982, a day dedicated to the invocation of deities and ancestors around the sacred stone in the center of the village of Fanivelona.

On July 5, 1982, all the families of the four villages gathered at Fanivelona around the sacred stone and brought sacrifices to the gods and ancestors, slaughtering oxen and sprinkling their blood on the sacrificial stone, asking that they receive their sacrifice and allow them to abandon this taboo. Three of the *mpanjaka-tangalamena* publicly took the role of scapegoats, asking that in case the gods become upset over abandoning the custom, the curse (*tahiña*) would fall on them (Fernandes et al. 2010, 69). But they lived long and well, a sign to Fanivelona that the divine powers and ancestors were not upset by the decision. The written statement on this occasion says: “From this day on,

<sup>3</sup> Among the Southern Betsimisaraka, the *tangalamena* (lit. he-holding-the-red-staff) is the priest who invokes deities, ancestors, and spirits, while the *mpanjaka* is the chief of descendants. The two functions can be fulfilled by one and the same person or assigned to two different people.

Fanivelona is allowed to keep twin children, who are gifts from the gods” (Fernandes et al. 2010, 73). Thus, the taboo on twins in all these villages and communes was abolished, starting with Fanivelona, Nosy-Varika, Ampômanitra and Ambodiaramy.

Although more than 34 years passed since the Mananjary authorities took action and 14 years since Law 23/2007 was adopted, the taboo on the curse of twins still remains an unresolved dilemma. Some oppose the ‘cruel’ custom, often supporting twins through associations, others remain deliberately silent on the subject, and others clearly side with the ancestral laws. From time to time, world personalities, such as Miss World Madagascar 2020 (Nellie Anjaratiana), raise this issue to the public and openly offer their moral and financial support to help Mananjary associations that take care of abandoned children (Anjaratiana 2021). It is clear, however, that it may be a long time before this issue becomes a thing of the past. The best approach for now, it seems, is to be sensitive to all positions, but especially to the pain of abandoned children, providing long-term assistance on every level that these children have to endure: emotional, financial, legal and social. In Mananjary, children continue to be abandoned first by their parents and then by their country. There is so much to be done in Madagascar that the priority of abandoned children may return to the nation’s agenda only when international organizations are scandalized again.

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