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The Weight of the Past: Living with History in Mahajanga, Madagascar
By Michael Lambek
The Weight of the Past

Living with History in Mahajanga, Madagascar

Michael Lambek
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During the winter and spring of 2002, the people of Madagascar suffered the effects of political dissension and turmoil, while courageously refusing to let the situation slide into violence. As I send this book to press, I hope it is not too optimistic to predict that things have begun to look up. I dedicate this book to the citizens of Mahajanga with great respect for their courage, integrity, and good humor and with the wish, the ancestors willing, for peace and prosperity.
Stylistic Conventions

Malagasy “o” is pronounced like English “u.” English “o” is noted as ô. Velar “n” is noted as ñ. Malagasy “j” is pronounced “dz.” “I” shifts to “y” at the end of a word.

Malagasy nouns do not generally distinguish number or gender.
Exchange Rates

fmg = francs malgaches
1994—c. fmg3,500 per U.S. dollar
2001—c. fmg6,250 per U.S. dollar
2001—local rice fmg2,000/kilo; Pakistani rice fmg1,750/kilo
Glossary of Frequently Cited Words

ampanjaka ruler, royalty, royals, members of the royal clan
ampanjaka be reigning monarch
ampangataka intercessor, official who addresses the ancestors on behalf of supplicants
Analalava seat of an important Bemihisatra polity (Ampanjaka Soazara)
anjara established responsibility or right; lot or destiny
Antandrano “Water-Dwellers;” a cohort of Zafinifotsy spirits who died by drowning
Antankaraña Zafinifotsy kingdom north of Sakalava territory
bemanangy Great Woman, treasurer and animatrice for a particular section of royalty
Bemazava royal faction contesting Bemihisatra rights to the relics
Bemihisatra royal faction that currently controls the relics
Betsioko cemetery in Ampanjaka Désy’s domain where Bemihisatra ancestors, from Mbabilahy to the present, are buried
Bezavodoany cemetery in Ampanjaka Amina’s domain where the most senior royal ancestors are buried; shortened to Bezavo
Boina the historical northern Sakalava kingdom, including Mahajanga
doany shrine, sacred place associated with royalty
efadahy the four senior ancestors whose relics rest at the shrine of Ndramisara in Mahajanga, an abbreviation of “four men”
fady, faly taboo, forbidden
fahatelo manager of Ndramisara’s shrine; official below the ampanjaka and manantany, therefore literally, “third”
fanompoa service on behalf of living and ancestral royalty, including labor and prestations
fanompoa be the Great Service; annual celebration at the shrine of Ndramisara in Mahajanga
fômba custom, the right way to do things