2 Innovation and Social Identity in Madagascar

Rita Astuti

Introduction

This chapter is about a change in the way the Vezo of Betania, a fishing village in Madagascar, rig their canoes—that is, the way they set the sail. I describe the change, and I report how villagers assessed its pros and cons. I then discuss a conjecture, put forward by one individual, as to how this change first came about, as well as how several villagers described the mechanism by which it became widespread.

The chapter is ethnographic. It documents something that happened over the course of my repeated fieldwork visits and that I initially documented almost by chance, by taking a photo and then realizing that what I had photographed was a piece of canoe equipment that I had not seen before. At the time, I was pursuing other research leads and didn't follow up on this accidental observation. Only much later, when almost the entire village had adopted the new way of rigging, did I join the conversation about the pros and cons of the new technique and ask questions about its origins. I mention this to draw the reader's attention to the fact that, unlike the authors of most of the other chapters, I will be addressing questions that were of interest to my interlocutors, using their language and concepts. This matters because what I document in this chapter is not just a technological change but how this change was explained, discussed, and evaluated by the agents concerned. These explanations, discussions, and evaluations are part of the cultural and social environment that determines whether a technical innovation is accepted or rejected, and thus they have a bearing on the questions addressed by this volume.

In what follows, I shall refer to the change that took place in the rigging of the canoe as an innovation. I do so because the people who adopted it came to regard the new way as an improvement on the old way. And I situate the discussion of this technical innovation in the context of local ideas about social identity because Vezo of Betania say that the canoe is the very "root of their Vezo-ness" (Astuti 1995).[1] In other words, unlike so many other *ethnic* groups of people who define themselves by reference to their ancestry and the traits that are inherited through it, my Vezo interlocutors define who they are (their being Vezo) by reference to the most important tool for their livelihoods and what they do with it: sail, fish, and trade along the coast. Given this pivotal role in determining group identity, one might have expected Vezo people to want to protect the "root" from significant change—that is, to display

rigidity in the way they maintain and pass on their sailing techniques. As we shall see, this is not the case (compare with Ongaro, this volume). I will return to the significance of this in the conclusion after presenting the details of the case.

Technical Innovation: The Sequence of Observed Events

During my first period of research—between November 1987 and June 1989—people in Betania rigged their canoes with *tehy mitsanga* (literally: standing poles). I will refer to this type of rig as a *double sprit sail* (figure 2.1a): a rectangular sail held up by two sprits (poles)

(a)

(b)

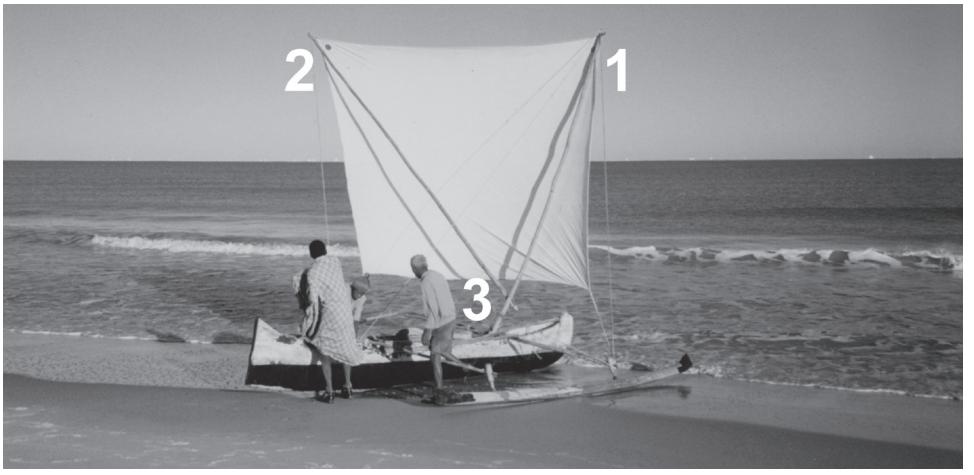

Figure 2.1
(a) Canoes with double sprit sails (1988). 1: sprits; 2: ties at the outrigger boom. (b) Canoe with common sprit sail (1994). 1: mast; 2: sprit; 3: rope sling. *Source*: Photo courtesy of Maurice Bloch, 1988.

that were tied to the outrigger boom and rested inside a holder at the bottom of the hull (which had six holes, four along the long axis and two along the short axis). Changing the position of the sail required undoing the knot, lifting one or both of the sprits, repositioning them in the appropriate hole, and retying them to the outrigger boom. Quite a laborious operation.

In January 1989, when I visited Belo-sur-Mer, a village about 60 kilometers south of Betania, people were using a different rig, which they referred to as *tehy mihanto* (literally hanging pole). I will refer to this type of rig as a *common sprit sail*.[2]

This sail is rigged on one movable mast that is tied to the boom of the outrigger and rests inside a holder at the bottom of the hull (which has two holes along the long axis) and one sprit (which, suspended in a sling made of rope, pivots around the stationary mast). This rig makes it possible to change the position of the sail without any unknotting, lifting, and reknotting—a much easier operation that, as we shall see, affords new maneuvers (tacking) that were not possible with the double sprit sail.

When I returned in 1994, I noticed that some villagers in Betania had adopted the common sprit sail; my host father, Gramera, was one of them (figure 2.1b). My visit was short and my ethnographic attention was elsewhere, and I therefore didn't investigate the issue. By the time of my visit in 1998, virtually all Betania villagers had abandoned the double sprit sail and had adopted the new rig, whether for fishing or local transportation. But the fact that some were still using the double sprit sail meant that I was able to discuss with people the reasons for their diverging preferences.

By 2004, the topic was no longer of interest as the new rig had become universal.

Pros and Cons (as Discussed in 1998)

According to those who had adopted it in 1998, the main advantage of the common sprit sail is that it makes sailing very easy (*mora mare*). This is because, as noted above, it does away with the need to reposition the sprits in response to either a change in the wind or in the desired direction of travel. In both cases, the sailors only have to pull on the ropes and let the pivoting sprit move to the new required position. As people put it (using the French word), the new technique makes the process of sailing *automatique*.

Because of this automaticity, the common sprit sail makes tacking (what Vezo describe as turning this way and that, zigzagging into the wind) a realistic option. With the old rig, tacking was not possible because each change in direction would have required manually and arduously moving the sprits. Instead, people were forced to take the sail down and paddle.

The new rig has another advantage, which is that the sail can be kept almost parallel with the hull (i.e., close-hauled), which allows sailing, as much as is physically possible, against the wind. This was not an option with the old system because the two sprits, both tied to the outrigger boom, could not be aligned along the axis of the hull. Notably, this is not an advantage that my interlocutors pointed out explicitly, probably because it offers improved tacking, which, under the old system, was not even attempted.

So, what are the disadvantages? The main reason some people resisted the new rig was that while it makes sailing *easier*, it also makes it more *dangerous*. If there is a sudden change in the wind direction, the suspended sprit is out of the sailors' control. This means that the canoe is at a higher risk of capsizing or breaking up. In addition, in strong winds, the sling

Figure 2.2
A close-up of the pivoting sprit and its supporting sling (1998). *Source*: Photo taken by Rita Astuti, 1998.

that holds the sprit (see figure 2.2) comes under a lot of pressure; if it breaks the consequences are catastrophic. The hull cracks, and in one instance, a man was reported to have been hit by the sprit and to have died as a result. The sprit itself can also break under the increased pressure, and so can the mast (but see next paragraph for a different view). People complained that the increase in the theft of poles was due to all these breakages.

Those who use the new rig disagreed. Badiga, the man who was first to adopt it in Betania, remarked that, like death, capsizing is something that just happens ("capsizing, like death, is not selective"). In more technical fashion, he also suggested that responding to a sudden change in wind is far more dangerous with the old rig than the new one. This is because one has to quickly lift and reposition the two sprits, with the risk of losing control over them, with equally catastrophic consequences. When making this point, he showed me his foot. Many years back, when he was adjusting the position of an original, double sprit rigging, one of the sprits had slipped from his hands and landed on his foot and crushed it. His damaged foot is proof, he said, that the new system is better than the old one. Another man pointed out that the reason some people think that the new rig causes the mast and the sprit to break is that they recycle the old poles instead of using new purpose-built ones appropriate for the new system.

As I mentioned, by the time I was having these conversations in 1998, the majority of people had adopted the new system. Those who hadn't seemed keen to inflect their decision with a moral valence. For example, one elder remarked that with the new technique, the wind becomes the "owner" of the canoe, and he doesn't like that—he would much rather be the one in control. Another remarked that the reason the new technique is popular is that it requires less effort; he tried it but went back to the old rigging because, when he sails, he wants to use his own strength. Another common remark was that the new rigging technique was particularly trendy with young men who like to show off their fast sailing, even if it means taking reckless risks.

As far as I could tell, such personal preferences were the main factors in determining whether people decided to drop the old rig for the new one. When I inquired about the costs of transitioning from one system to the other, some reported that there were no costs since they had used the old equipment (sail, sprits, and sprit holder) and that they only had to add a few ropes. Others argued that to use the new rig properly and safely, a new set of poles was needed and that the sail had to be repurposed, rotating it by 90 degrees.

All in all, my overall impression was that the new system did not have insurmountable entry costs that would have stopped people transitioning from old to new. Having said this, in at least one case—the case of Badiga who, as mentioned, was the first to adopt the new rigging technique in Betania—the impetus for change came when an external event disrupted his equipment. I will have more to say about this man's reflections on how the new system came about, but here I am interested in what he said about the moment when he decided to make the transition, having had plenty of time to observe it and discuss it with people who were using it already. The moment came when a cyclone (in his recollection in 1989) buried his canoe into the sand. At that point, as he set out to replace it, he decided to cut a new mast and a sprit and to start sailing in the new way.

Where Did the New Idea Come From?

In an article on "The Evolution of Pacific Canoe Rigs," Adrian Horridge writes that all variations on the common sprit sail scattered across the Pacific region (e.g., China, Philippines, Indonesia) were "certainly introduced independently to many places by western colonists and I know of no case that can be shown to be indigenous" (1986, 92).

When asked where the new rigging technique came from, most Betania villagers pointed to the south. No one named a particular person, but they all agreed that the people they had copied the technique from had themselves copied it from other people further to the south. I should note here that all along the coast, villagers are connected by extensive kinship links. This means that they have many reasons to travel north or south for funerals, ancestral rituals, and celebrations of one kind or another, in addition to fishing and trading. They thus have plenty of opportunities to observe localized "ways of doing things" (*fomba*), including sailing.

While the southern origin of the new rig is universally recognized by the people of Betania, Badiga (the man we encountered earlier) offered a more complex account of how he believes it came about, which very much aligns with Horridge's claim about its Western origins. As a prelude to the story, I need to briefly introduce the schooners that sail up and down the western coast of Madagascar. Schooners (known as *botsy*) are built locally and are used to transport cargo and people (figure 2.3). They were introduced by a Breton family of shipbuilders, the Joachims, who came to Madagascar via Réunion at the request of the Merina King Radama II (in power from 1861 to 1863) as part of his pro-European policies and treaties. After Radama's assassination in 1863, the Joachim family made their way to the west coast and eventually established themselves in Morondava, Morombe, and Belo-sur-Mer, where they opened boatyards and taught the locals how to build, rig, and sail European-style schooners.

The history of how this knowledge came to be owned and passed on by Vezo villagers is outside the scope of this chapter; all that matters here is that schooners, a Western introduction, are fore-and-aft rigged; that is, the sails are set along the direction of the boat's hull. With this in mind, let me return to Badiga's account (which I paraphrase). He speculated that the person who first thought of changing the way the canoe was rigged must have reasoned as follows: schooners cannot be propelled by paddling, and yet they manage to move even if the wind doesn't blow in their favor; they do this by zigzagging until they get to their destination. By contrast, in such unfavorable wind conditions, a canoe doesn't move at all, and people have to paddle to get to where they want to go. He thus suggested that the rig of the canoe was changed to mimic that of a schooner—that is, by turning one of the sprits into a mast and adopting a fore-and-aft rig. He concluded that with the new rig, the canoe

Figure 2.3
A schooner partly rigged (2017). *Source*: Photo taken by Rita Astuti, 2017.

became "like" a schooner: it can zigzag just like one, with the added advantage that, unlike a schooner, if there is no wind at all, one can still paddle and move on.

Badiga did not offer any detail of how this person went from his "thought" to the implementation of the new rigging system—like many others, Badiga asserted that there is no "history" about how this happened. But he suggested that the new technique must have developed in the stretch of coast near Andavadohaka (about 250 kilometers south of Betania), where there are lots of small islands scattered along the coast. Unlike in Betania, where people can sail in a straight line out in the open sea, in the Andavadohaka region, people have to make their way around these islands. And to do this by sailing, rather than paddling, they have to be able to use, and easily switch between, all available points of sail: run, reach, and close-hauled. According to Badiga, these local conditions prompted the idea of rigging the canoe in the new way, turning it into something of a schooner.

How Did It Become Widespread?

Badiga admitted that when he first saw the new rig, he didn't like it. He was put off by the fact that there were far too many ropes compared with the old system. But then, after observing people using the new rig, he started to see "what makes it a good thing," adding, "What's good becomes something that people are okay doing, and it becomes something that people will learn." Thus, while the old system was good for "keeping oneself alive"

(i.e., to support one's livelihood), the new system is much better than that: no need to struggle; one just sits at the back of the canoe, steering it along. Badiga's story was one of progress (although he didn't use that term).

As we saw earlier, by 1998, most people in Betania had adopted the new rig. Badiga had led the way, and everyone recognized him as the local origin point of the new system. However, when I shared Badiga's speculation about the origin of the new rig with Gramera, my host father, he strongly disagreed (in part because he misunderstood it as a claim on Badiga's part to have been the one who came up with the idea, which wasn't the case). Gramera insisted that the people of Betania, including Badiga, had just copied what other people were doing elsewhere. This is not something that "comes out of somebody's head," he added; it is not anybody's thought but is just something that people "copy" from other people.

In this, Gramera articulated a view that was shared by all the people I talked to. They all stressed the ease with which they were able to copy by "just watching." Badiga agreed with this account. He told me that after overcoming his initial resistance and having come to appreciate the advantages of the new rig, all he did was to discuss it with a relative who was already using it. And when I inquired whether he had asked the relative to take him out sailing on his canoe so that he could learn the new technique, he replied no, that it was enough for him to just watch the way the canoe was rigged. Another elder who, in 1998, was still contemplating whether to adopt the new system, told me that he didn't need anyone to teach him how to use it; all he needed was to watch, and he would know.

The claim that people learned the new technique simply by watching others resonates with the local folk-sociological theory that anyone, irrespective of their ancestry, can become Vezo by learning the knowledge that makes people Vezo—namely, sailing, fishing, trading fish, building a canoe, and so on. My adult interlocutors say that learning to be Vezo, which is what children must do since they are not born Vezo, is not something that requires Western-style schooling. Instead, children are taken out to sea; they initially get seasick and throw up; they then get used to it; and when they are used to it, they watch and just learn to do things. This shared narrative, which is also applied to newcomers from the interior who have never before been anywhere near the sea, is a cornerstone of the local folk-sociology: it is only because people emphatically say that Vezo knowledge is so easy to acquire that they can sustain the idea that anyone can become Vezo.

In reality, things are more complicated than the narrative suggests. Children do learn a great deal by watching, but they also learn by playing with toy canoes and schooners (figure 2.4), by listening to stories about sailing and fishing, by being told what to do, and by being told off when they make mistakes. And while newcomers do become Vezo, they require guidance and mentorship, typically by Vezo kin or in-laws who are prepared to take them out to sea with them.

Still, in the case of the acquisition of the new rigging technique, my impression was that people did in fact copy it from others without much guidance. This is plausible since what they were copying was not something radically new but more like a variation on what they already knew about sailing and about the wind, the sail, the ropes, the masts, the hull, the outrigger, and so on. Thus, for example, when Badiga discussed the new rig with his relative, he will have used a shared vocabulary and tapped background knowledge that made the conversation meaningful and helpful. While I did not witness this particular exchange,

Figure 2.4
Vezo children playing with a model schooner (2017). *Source*: Photo taken by Rita Astuti, 2017

I heard countless stories (which often went over my head) about sailing and fishing expeditions—stories full of details about unexpected wind conditions and what the sailing team had done about it. It is this shared knowledge that must have allowed Badiga to ask just the right questions about the new rig and to receive just the right answers.

The point here is that the introduction of the new rigging technique required people to incorporate new features into a well-known technical system, even if that involved changing that system quite radically (e.g., transforming one sprit into a mast). I suspect that this is why I didn't encounter much anxiety about the loss of the old system. Some mentioned that it would be a good idea to show children how the old system works, in case they have problems with the new way and want to revert back; by contrast, Badiga thought that there is no reason to teach children about the old way, since the new one is so much better.

Innovation and Social Group Identity

If one asks Vezo people why they do a certain thing in a certain way, one is likely to receive the following answer: it's because this is the *fomba*, the way of doing things. Only superficially this is a circular answer (I am doing *X* in this way because doing *X* in this way is the way of doing it). In fact, the term *fomba* signals that the way of doing something is customary (rigid, not flexible) and that it is not open to much negotiation, if at all.

Still, depending on the context, invoking *fomba* may be a lazy way of stopping the conversation and discouraging any further questions, while in fact there are reasons that people can easily spell out (if they are so minded) to explain why they do what they do in that way. For example, while it is undoubtedly the case that painting the bottom part of the canoe's hull with tar (see figures 2.1a and 2.1b) is *fomba*, in the sense that it is a well-established and shared practice that has been passed down from previous generations, there is a perfectly obvious reason that people can easily articulate to explain why that particular *fomba* exists—that is, it is a way of making the hull waterproof.

By contrast, there are contexts in which invoking *fomba* is really all that people can muster. This is because the only reason they do that thing in that particular way *is* that it is *fomba*. This applies to the details of all ritual practices that have been laid out by the ancestors, as well as to the numerous taboos the ancestors imposed on their descendants. In such cases, people just defer to whatever the ancestors prescribed or proscribed and leave it at that. Trying to explain why during an ancestral offering the pot where the rice is cooked must be placed in this and not that position is a futile exercise: the only reason is that the ancestors stipulated it, and because of this, it is what their descendants will do (see Astuti and Bloch 2013 for a fuller discussion).

The contrast between *fomba* that can be easily explained and those that cannot maps onto the distinction between bodies of practices that can be flexibly adapted and innovated and those that must be rigidly observed and obeyed. And although the contrast should not be overdrawn, it is certainly the case that changing the details of a ritual or redefining an ancestral taboo would require a completely different process of innovation than what I have described in this chapter. Central to it would be a delicate and potentially dangerous process of negotiation with the ancestors involving sacrificial offerings and a certain amount of pleading (see Astuti 2007 and Cole 2001).

None of the people with whom I discussed the new rigging method thought that changing this *fomba* required the involvement of the ancestors. When I asked whether, before adopting the new technique, they had called on the ancestors to inform them of the change and seek their blessing, my interlocutors told me that "sailing doesn't have ancestral laws" (hence no need to seek ancestral approval and blessing if one changes the way one sails) or that both old and new sailing techniques are just ways of "dealing with the sea," so it is a matter of individual (as opposed to ancestral) preference whether one uses one or the other.

Thus, even if the canoe is said to be "the root of Vezo-ness," the people who are made Vezo by it can flexibly transform it into something that sails like a European schooner! This openness to change and innovation, so different from the rigidity that comes from deferring to the ancestors, dovetails with an observation I made at the time of my first period of fieldwork—namely, that there were no origin stories about the canoe. When asked where the canoe came from and what its origin was, my interlocutors would refer to the fact that the people of the past already knew how to make canoes, and they would leave it at that. Only once did an old man offer a more elaborate narrative. The first time that people tried to make a canoe, he said, they used a tree that was too heavy, and the canoe sank. They returned to the forest and saw another type of tree that they thought might be suitable, and

indeed it was. This time the canoe floated. That is the tree that people still use today, but the names of the people who made the discovery are not remembered, nor the time or place where it happened.

I read this lack of interest in the moment of discovery as a manifestation of a more general disregard for the past, which lies at the core of how my Vezo interlocutors construct their identity (see Astuti 1995, chap. 2 and 3). Specifically, what is striking about the story of how the canoe was invented is that it fails to transform a rather fortuitous moment of human discovery into an ancestral event. Free from the control of the ancestors and their *fomba*, the canoe remains open to exploration. Like those people who first discovered how to make it float, present-day Vezo continue experimenting with it.

In this sense, the canoe truly is the root of Vezo-ness in that, like the identity that it creates, it is not anchored to the past. And it is thanks to this cultural elaboration of what it means to be Vezo that the canoe remains open to innovation: innovation without a named inventor that spreads easily as people watch, discuss, and copy what looks like a better way of doing things.

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Notes

1. Sailing is almost exclusively a male domain, and in this chapter I will only refer to the testimonies of men. Women have other ways of rooting their Vezo-ness.

2. The same rig is illustrated in Les Vezo du Sud-Ouest de Madagascar by Koechlin (1975: 78-79; 87-88), who carried out his research in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Bevato, a village about 100 kilometers south of Belo.

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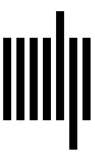

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