

Discovery of a Neolithic Adze in Madagascar

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IN November 1968 I accompanied a group of ORSTOM (Office de la Recherche Scientifique et Technique d'Outre-Mer) ethnology and geography researchers on an extensive field trip in the southwest of Madagascar. On the return to Tananarive, a twenty-minute stop to look for marine fossils was made near Tambazo, a small village 180 km inland or east of the coastal town of Morondava. Here were found, on the surface, among some small boulders within 20 to 30 m of an 8 m high riverbank, an unfinished adze and a small hammerstone.

Both the adze and the hammerstone are made of a yellow-brown chalcedony. The adze, 62 mm long, is untanged with a trapezoidal cross-section (face 23 mm, base 31 mm, thickness 17 mm) (Fig. 1, Plate I). The implement was initially shaped by flaking and the surfaces are relatively smooth, but along the sides and at the blade end there are definite marks of chipping. Since the butt end is missing it would seem that it broke off and the adze was discarded before completion.

A pebble of approximately pyramid shape was used as a hammerstone. When it is held in a particular way, the thumb is braced in a groove on one side; the index finger rests in a slight indentation on the top; and the middle finger, when bent, covers the other side. The striking surface, which measures 25 mm by 20 mm, is pitted and lies parallel to the thumb and palm of the hand when held in the above fashion.

In 1965 a smaller fragment of a possible adze blade, also made of chalcedony, was found by a geological prospector in the plateau region at about 75 km north of Tananarive and east of Ankazobe. The exact location is not known. Its cross-section is rectangular and the sides, face, and base are smooth.

The great interest of the Tambazo adze is that it is the first Neolithic artifact associated with a specific locality—perhaps site—to have as yet been found in Madagascar. A pre-Iron Age has been assumed by many to have existed in Madagascar and, primarily on the basis of linguistics, physical types, and cultural

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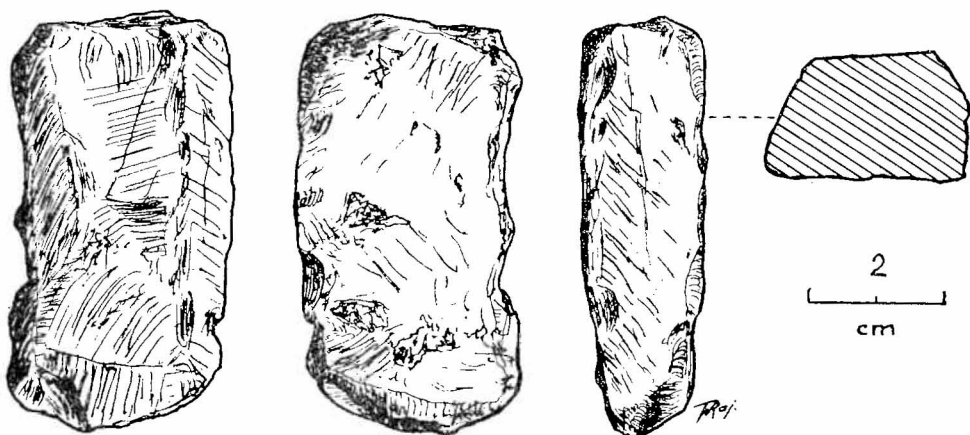


Fig. 1 Tambazo adze.

traditions, close ties have been drawn between Madagascar and Indonesia. However, as Posnansky has pointed out, "There is as yet no archaeological evidence for this movement" (1966:85).

Untanged quadrangular adzes are distributed over a large area covering Indonesia, Southeast Asia, and Polynesia. In Indonesia they first came into use between the second and first millennia B.C., though certain types developed locally and continued into use up to historic times (Van Heekeren 1957:127,128). None have yet been recorded in East Africa. There, the transition seems to have been from flaked hand tools, lances, points, and microliths to ground, sometimes pecked, and polished round axes and adzes. Furthermore, these artifacts have not been found associated with any living sites; all the known Mozambique coastal sites are post-Islamic or 10th century and later.

In Madagascar no neolithic site has yet been found. So far the earliest radiocarbon date is 980 ± 100 B.P. from Irodo, a site on the northeast coast containing iron artifacts. Both this site and the rich one of Vohemar farther down the coast already indicate the Arab or Islamic penetration. Talaky, the second oldest site recorded, is located on a coastal sand dune at the extreme southern end of Madagascar and was radiocarbon dated 840 ± 80 B.P. However, it too is not a neolithic site, for in addition to the pottery, net weights, and turbo shell spoons, two iron fishhooks and a fragment of an iron spear were recovered.

In December 1968 a return trip was made to Tambazo to prospect the area more thoroughly and to do some test excavations. However, apart from some pieces and flakes of chalcedony, no artifacts were found and the ground was sterile from the surface down. Today the area is dry and barren. Trees are confined along the banks of the river and streams. Although no surface remains were distinguished of a living site that could have been associated with the adze and hammerstone, the general area at a much earlier period was inhabited. Downstream and across the river on a rise, scattered over a fairly large expanse, there are fifty or more sepulchers built of stone slabs set vertically and horizontally and covered with earth. The present villagers, Sakalava, say that these are Vazimba graves (Plate II).

Today very little is known about the Vazimba, and much that is written concerning them is controversial. According to the local traditions the Vazimba, thought to be of Malayan origin, were the former inhabitants or Proto-Malagasy; they lived in the central part of the island, in what later became Merina and Betsileo territory, and in the mid-west. Their material culture was simple and subsistence was based on gathering and slash-and-burn. They did not have knowledge of iron but knew how to make pottery. Their political organization was equally rudimentary; there were no social strata and no sovereigns—only headmen who held a nonhereditary position.

During the mid 1500s, the Vazimba were overthrown by Andriamanelo (1540–1575), the first Merina sovereign whose mother at least was a Vazimba. He was also the first to introduce in Imerina the Indonesian techniques of iron smelting and forging (as well as the system of irrigating rice fields). During the reign of Andrianjaka (1610–1630) the Vazimba were finally chased from the plateau to a no-man's-land in the mid-west situated between the plateau feudalities of the Merina and Betsileo and the coastal plains controlled by Sakalava warrior lineages. Here they sought refuge. Today their descendants are not physically distinguishable from other Malagasy.

In sum, the age of this Tambazo adze and hammerstone cannot yet be advanced. It could date back to a very early period before the Merina had gained control of most of the island, or it could simply be the vestige of a small band of Vazimba who had sought refuge in this inhospitable area in historic times.

Considering the immensity of the island, the sparseness of the habitations, the absence of surface remains other than graves, the nondurability of much of the material culture, and the destructive effects of erosion, it may be only by chance that additional neolithic remains will be found. And not until a great many more such artifacts or sites are found can many of the myths and controversies concerning the Proto-Malagasy—be they Vazimba or others—commence to be settled.

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Plate I Tambazo adze (actual size).

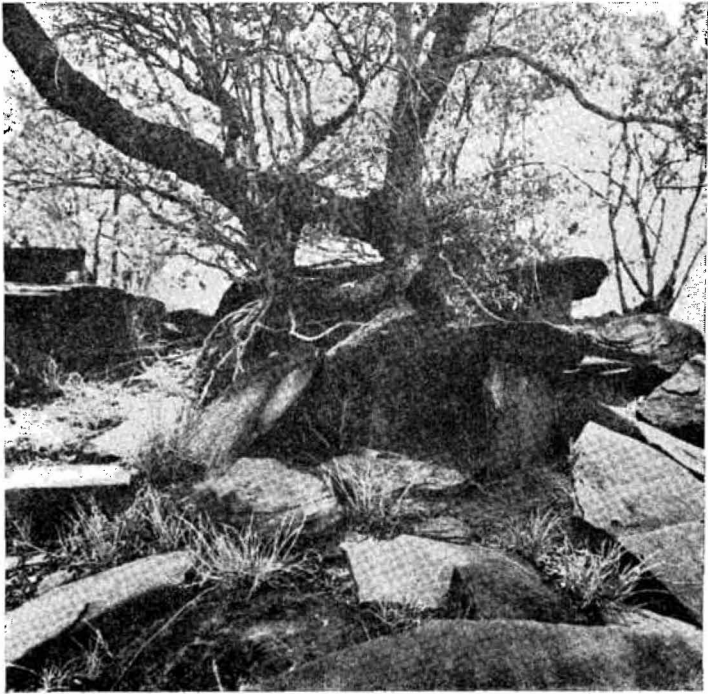


Plate II Vazimba grave, Tambazo.