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From 1989-1999, the author conducted research and field work among the Betsileo people of the extreme Southern Highlands of Madagascar. Until recently, this region was virtually unknown and considered to be a no-man's-land. Historical archives described the area as a frontier, settled in the early twentieth century by ex-slaves.

These first migrants, as it turned out, had succeeded in implanting a myth of themselves as *tompon-tany*, or "masters of the land", by building tombs and creating a land monopoly.

The *tompon-tany* relied upon a trilogy of tombs, kinship and ancestors, coupled with a skilful deployment of "Malagasy customs" to reinforce their legitimacy and to exclude later settlers. Some of these migrants were labelled *andevo* ("slave" or "slave descent"). The *tompon-tany* prohibited the *andevo* from owning land, and thereby from having tombs. As a tombless people, the *andevo* were socially ostracised and economically marginalised. They were *olona maloto*, an "impure people".

This is the story of the tombless *andevo*, and how their ascribed impurity and association with infertility, illness, death and misfortune made them an essential part of the *tompon-tany* world-view.