

EDUCATION AND THE VALI-VAZAHA: BETWEEN TRADITION AND EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE SOUTHWEST REGION OF MADAGASCAR

Whega Danitsaike Bien-Aimé ¹, Koto Bernard ², Ralaivao Hanginiaina Emynorane ³

¹²Université de Toliara, Madagascar, ³Universitas Hasanuddin, Indonesia

Corresponding: wwwheg@live.fr

Abstract

This study explores the phenomenon of vali-vazaha, marriage or concubinage with foreigners in the Southwest region of Madagascar, where tourism strongly influences local socio-cultural practices. While education is widely recognized as a fundamental right and a cornerstone of sustainable development, many families continue to prioritize early marriage, particularly with vazaha, as a faster route to economic and social mobility. Employing a qualitative field-based approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and participant observation in three rural coastal communes: Itampolo, Belalanda (Mangily), and Befandefa (Andavadoaka). A purposive sample of 30 participants, including parents, young girls, teachers, and community leaders, provided diverse perspectives on the interplay between education, tradition, and marriage practices. The findings reveal a paradox: although education is acknowledged as valuable, its long-term benefits are often overshadowed by the immediate financial advantages of early marriage. Tourism and exposure to foreigners have reshaped local aspirations, reinforcing the perception of marriage with a vazaha as a shortcut to prestige and stability. Girls are the most affected, as they face school dropout, limited autonomy, and early social responsibilities. The study highlights how economic insecurity entrenched cultural norms, and weak institutional support collectively perpetuate this practice. By analyzing these dynamics through Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, Berry's acculturation framework, and Durkheim's perspective on social norms, the study contributes a novel understanding of how globalization and local traditions intersect in shaping educational trajectories. It underscores the urgent need for context-sensitive policies that both strengthen educational opportunities for girls and address the socio-economic drivers of early marriage.

Keywords: vali-vazaha, girls' education, early marriage, tourism and globalization, southwest Madagascar

INTRODUCTION

Education is universally regarded as the cornerstone of sustainable development and social progress. In Madagascar, the proverb “*Ny fianarana no lova tsara indrindra*” (“Education is the best inheritance”), also adopted as the official slogan of the Ministry of National Education, reflects the central role of education as both an individual right and a collective investment for the future. However, in the Southwest region of the country, particularly in coastal and tourist localities, this value has been increasingly challenged by socio-economic pressures and cultural dynamics that prioritise marriage, and more specifically, the practice known as “*vali-vazaha*”, over formal schooling.

The term “*vali-vazaha*”, originating from the Vezo dialect, combines “*vali*”, meaning marriage or concubinage and “*vazaha*”, which means a

foreigner, usually European, or more broadly, an individual of dominant social status. Historically, this phenomenon has been interpreted by local families as a pathway to upward mobility, whereby young women are married to foreign men or to socially powerful nationals as an alternative to educational investment. Such practices illustrate a critical tension between traditional matrimonial strategies and the universal right to education (UNESCO, 2015). This situation is particularly acute in the Southwest of Madagascar, where UNICEF (2021) reports that two out of five girls marry before the age of 18, with prevalence rates reaching as high as 66% in communes such as Itampolo, Belalanda, and Befandefa.

Theoretically, this phenomenon can be examined through multiple sociological and anthropological lenses. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital underscores education as the most durable form of social mobility, yet in some Malagasy communities, "*vali-vazaha*" is perceived as a quicker and more secure alternative. Similarly, Berry's (1997) acculturation framework helps explain how tourism and Western presence have reshaped local aspirations, creating a cultural dissonance between modern values of education and traditional perceptions of success through marriage. Furthermore, Durkheim's (1912) emphasis on the role of social norms illustrates how ancestral values continue to influence intergenerational choices regarding both schooling and marriage. These theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for analysing how deeply rooted socio-cultural systems intersect with contemporary economic realities.

Despite this growing body of theoretical insight, there remains a research gap in understanding how education is locally perceived and negotiated within the specific context of tourism-driven economies in Southwest Madagascar. Most existing studies on early marriage in Madagascar focus on rural poverty and gender inequality (Rakotomanana et al., 2017; UNICEF, 2021), but few have regularly addressed the cultural logic of "*vali-vazaha*" as a distinct strategy of social and economic positioning. The novelty of this study lies in its attempt to bridge this gap by linking educational choices, marriage practices, and the influence of tourism, while grounding the analysis in local perceptions and lived realities.

This raises a central research problem: why, despite the universal recognition of education as a fundamental right and a driver of national development, do some communities in Southwest Madagascar continue to prioritise marriage, particularly "*vali-vazaha*" as the main avenue of social mobility for young girls? Addressing this problem requires examining both structural constraints (poverty, lack of access to schools, and limited state intervention) and cultural rationalities (the perception of marriage as economic security).

The significance of this study is twofold. Scientifically, it contributes to broader debates on the intersection of education, culture, and globalisation in shaping development trajectories in the Global South. By examining "*vali-vazaha*" in a context of intense tourism activity, the research highlights how

global-local interactions redefine educational values and gender roles. Socially, the study seeks to inform policy and community interventions aimed at reducing early marriage and promoting education as a long-term investment. Generating context-sensitive knowledge is essential for strengthening national strategies on gender equity and sustainable development in Madagascar, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 4 and 5).

METHODE

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach in order to capture the lived realities and the social representations surrounding the phenomenon of “*vali-vazaha*”. A qualitative orientation was considered most appropriate, as the study aimed not only to document practices but also to understand the cultural meanings, motivations, and symbolic values that underpin family decisions regarding education and marriage in the coastal zones of Southwest Madagascar.

Study Area and Field Context

The fieldwork took place in the Southwest region, specifically in three rural coastal communes where tourism plays a significant role in shaping social and cultural practices: (1) Itampolo (district of Ampanihy Ouest), (2) Belalanda/Mangily (district of Toliara II), and (3) Befandefa/Andavadoaka (district of Morombe).

These sites were deliberately chosen because of their direct exposure to tourist flows, which facilitated the emergence of the “*vali-vazaha*” phenomenon and strongly influenced family choices regarding girls' schooling and marriage. The long-term presence of tourism has created unique social dynamics, making these areas particularly relevant for analysing the tension between education and matrimonial strategies.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

The study targeted key social actors directly involved in or affected by the “*vali-vazaha*” practice. The participants included parents, young girls (both attending and having dropped out of school), teachers, school directors, and local community leaders. Sampling followed a purposive logic to ensure diversity of perspectives and experiences. The inclusion of different social categories enabled the study to capture the complexity of the phenomenon across generational and institutional levels.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and informal discussions, allowing for a rich and contextualised understanding of the “*vali-vazaha*” phenomenon. Semi-structured interviews with parents, young girls, teachers, and local leaders provided in-depth narratives on the perceived value of education, the economic and cultural significance of marriage, and the pressures shaping

family decisions. These formal encounters were complemented by participant observation during extended stays in the villages, where the researcher was engaged in daily activities and community life, resulting in gaining insights into the lived realities and social dynamics that are often contrasted with spoken accounts. Informal conversations in everyday settings such as markets, schools, and village gatherings further enriched the data, capturing subtle perspectives and unspoken norms that might otherwise remain hidden. This combination of methods ensured a nuanced, multi-layered picture of how education and “*vali-vazaha*” are understood and practised in the local context.

Data Analysis

The qualitative material was analysed using thematic content analysis. Transcribed interviews, observation notes, and field journals were regularly coded, and recurrent themes were identified, such as the perceived value of education, the symbolic and economic meanings of “*vali-vazaha*”, parental motivations, and the constraints that influence matrimonial decisions. This analytical approach made it possible to reveal patterns across participants while respecting the specificities of each context.

Credibility of the Data

Several strategies were employed to enhance the reliability and credibility of the findings. Triangulation was ensured by cross-verifying data from different sources (parents, young girls, educators, and local leaders) and by combining multiple methods (interviews, observations, and field notes). Prolonged engagement in the field provided the researchers with a deeper understanding of local realities, enabling the detection of inconsistencies between discourses and practices. Member checking was carried out by discussing preliminary interpretations with selected participants to validate the accuracy of the analysis. Finally, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process: the researcher's positionality and prior familiarity with the cultural context were explicitly considered in interpreting the data, reducing potential biases and strengthening the authenticity of the results.

RESULTS

The analysis of field data revealed several recurring themes that highlight the complex interplay between education, marriage, and socio-economic strategies in the Southwest region of Madagascar. By drawing on testimonies from parents, young girls, teachers, and local leaders, as well as direct observations in the communities, the study identified patterns that illustrate how the phenomenon of “*vali-vazaha*” shapes educational trajectories and matrimonial choices. The following table 1 summarises these thematic results, showing convergences and divergences of perspectives while also reflecting the lived realities observed in the field.

Table 1. Vali-Vazaha, Education, and Marriage Practices in the South-West of Madagascar

Themes	Parents' Perspectives	Girls' Perspectives	Teachers & Local Leaders' Perspectives	Observed Social Practices
Perceived Value of Education	Many parents acknowledge education as important, but often secondary to immediate economic survival. They see schooling as costly with uncertain returns.	Schooling is viewed as a pathway to independence, but it is often interrupted by family pressures. Some girls express frustration about being withdrawn from school.	Teachers emphasise that education is essential for development and warn about high dropout rates. Local leaders note the cultural and economic pressures families face.	In classrooms, dropout rates among girls rise after puberty. Many girls abandon school before completing secondary level.
Marriage as Economic Strategy	Marriage, especially with a <i>vazaha</i> , is seen as a quick way to improve family status and financial stability.	Some girls feel pressured into marriage despite wanting to continue their studies. Others accept marriage as a means of helping their families.	Teachers criticise the commodification of girls, while leaders admit that marriage is still seen as a social “investment.”	Families negotiate marriage as a transaction, sometimes prioritising it over school enrolment.
Influence of Tourism / Vali-Vazaha	Parents perceive <i>Vazaha</i> as financially stable and offering long-term benefits.	Girls describe attraction to <i>vazaha</i> as linked to promises of mobility, wealth, and prestige.	Teachers worry that tourism reinforces harmful stereotypes and accelerates school abandonment.	In tourist areas, girls are often encouraged to interact with foreigners, reinforcing the idea of marriage as an opportunity.
Gender & Power Dynamics	Fathers and elders often make marriage decisions. Mothers show ambivalence, sometimes supportive of daughters' schooling but constrained by economic need.	Girls feel they have little say in their future, though some resist by seeking support from teachers or NGOs.	Teachers and leaders highlight the persistence of patriarchal norms that undervalue girls' autonomy.	Observed instances of older men (including local elites) arranging early marriages with parental consent.
Contradictions & Aspirations	Parents express pride when daughters succeed in school, but admit difficulty in resisting the economic temptations of marriage offers.	Girls aspire to careers (teaching, nursing, business) but recognise structural barriers.	Teachers advocate for awareness campaigns to show families the long-term value of education.	Despite high dropout rates, communities celebrate the rare cases of girls who succeed academically, creating role models.

The results show that most parents continue to view marriage, and particularly “*vali-vazaha*”, as a practical strategy to secure financial stability for their families. For them, marrying off daughters to foreigners or socially dominant figures is perceived as a faster and more reliable way to improve their living conditions than investing in long-term education. This perspective explains why many girls are withdrawn from school at an early age, as the economic value of marriage is considered to outweigh the benefits of continued schooling.

From the perspective of the girls themselves, the study reveals a split between those who are still in school and those who have already dropped out. School-going girls often expressed hope and motivation to complete their education, even when facing pressure from their families. On the other hand, those who were no longer in school frequently described feelings of resignation, stating that they were pushed into early marriage due to family expectations or financial requirements. This contrast shows how fragile the educational trajectory of young girls is in areas heavily influenced by tourism.

Teachers and school directors provided a critical view of the situation. They emphasised that although families understand the general importance of education, cultural and economic pressures push them to favour early marriage instead. Many educators also highlighted that the lack of resources in schools and limited government support further weaken the role of education as an attractive alternative to marriage. Local leaders reinforced this perspective, recognising that while they are aware of the harmful effects of early marriage, social norms and economic hardships often limit their ability to intervene effectively.

Altogether, the findings illustrate a social dilemma where education is recognised as valuable in principle but rarely prioritised in practice. The prestige and perceived financial benefits of “*vali-vazaha*” remain strong enough to overshadow investment in schooling, creating a cycle where girls' futures are shaped more by economic survival strategies than by their educational potential.

DISCUSSION

The paradox between valuing education and prioritising marriage

In the Southwest region of Madagascar, the tension between valuing education and prioritising early marriage, particularly through the “*vali-vazaha*” phenomenon, illustrates the intersection of cultural expectations, economic precarity, and shifting social aspirations. Families openly acknowledge that schooling is essential for shaping children's future and for fostering community development. However, this recognition often gives way to the immediate material advantages offered by marriage, especially when it involves foreigners who are perceived as financially secure. The decision does not stem from a lack of awareness about education's potential benefits but from a pragmatic response to structural hardships, where poverty, instability, and

limited opportunities reduce the perceived value of long-term educational investments. In such contexts, marriage emerges as more than a cultural tradition; it functions as a deliberate economic strategy, reshaping how families envision and pursue social mobility.

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (1986) provides a useful framework for understanding this contradiction. According to Bourdieu, education equips individuals with symbolic and social resources that can enhance their position within society. Cultural capital, transmitted through schooling, is meant to act as a slow but steady mechanism of social reproduction and transformation (Eric et al., 2025). However, in the Malagasy context, the long-term and uncertain trajectory of education competes with the immediacy of marriage alliances. Families perceive marriage to a “*vazaha*” as a form of symbolic capital that instantly elevates their social standing, offering both prestige and material stability. The tension, therefore, lies between two competing strategies of capital accumulation: the slow accrual of educational benefits and the rapid acquisition of social status through matrimonial ties (Emynorane et al., 2024). This inversion of priorities illustrates how structural conditions such as economic precarity, weak institutional support for education, and limited job markets distort the value of cultural capital and encourage reliance on alternative pathways to mobility.

Beyond Bourdieu, other scholars have highlighted similar dynamics where economic vulnerability reshapes educational aspirations. Jeffrey et al. (2008) argue that in contexts of uncertainty, families often develop what they term “pragmatic aspirations,” where short-term security is privileged over long-term investments. In sub-Saharan Africa, studies by Lloyd and Mensch (2008) have shown that early marriage is frequently justified by parents as a protective and economically rational decision in contexts of limited opportunities for girls. Within this framework, “*vali-vazaha*” is not perceived as undermining education but rather as an adaptation to global and local inequalities, where tourism and Western presence generate new forms of desirability and opportunity. Thus, the paradox of valuing education while prioritising marriage should not be read as cultural resistance to schooling but as a rational response to structural constraints. Addressing this contradiction requires not only expanding access to education but also ensuring that education translates into tangible opportunities, thereby realigning long-term investments with immediate family needs.

Tourism and cultural change

Tourism in the Southwest region of Madagascar has profoundly reshaped local cultural perceptions, particularly regarding education, marriage, and pathways to social success. The steady presence of foreigners (*vazaha*) in coastal tourist hubs such as Belalanda (Mangily) and Itampolo has redefined local aspirations, with marriage to a foreigner increasingly framed as a direct avenue to prestige, material stability, and upward social mobility. Within Berry's acculturation theory (1997), this can be interpreted as a process of cultural adaptation where local communities adopt certain external values

while negotiating their own traditions. In this case, the Western image of wealth and modernity carried by tourists exerts a strong symbolic influence, reshaping family strategies. While education was once viewed as the best inheritance, “*ny fianarana no lova tsara indrindra*”, its value now competes with the more immediate gains associated with “*vali-vazaha*”. This shift illustrates how external cultural contact and globalisation can destabilise traditional frameworks of social advancement, displacing the slow trajectory of schooling in favour of marriage as a faster, more visible route to success.

Globalisation's influence on cultural change in developing contexts has been widely documented. Cole and Durham (2008), in their study of youth cultures in Africa, show how global exposure often creates new hierarchies of aspiration, where markers of prestige are linked to proximity to foreign wealth and lifestyles. Similarly, Tucker (2007) argues that in tourism-dependent regions, local practices of intimacy and marriage become reoriented by the economic opportunities offered through relationships with foreigners. In Madagascar, this dynamic is particularly worrying because structural poverty and fragile educational systems amplify the appeal of such alternatives. The encounter with external cultures thus transforms not only economic practices but also the symbolic order surrounding education, gender, and family life (Eric et al., 2025). Ultimately, this demonstrates how globalisation produces hybrid cultural logics in which traditional values, such as education as inheritance, are neither abandoned nor fully sustained but are reinterpreted in light of the opportunities and inequalities introduced by tourism.

Gender inequality and vulnerability of girls

In the context of the “*vali-vazaha*” phenomenon in Southwest Madagascar, girls carry the heaviest social and economic burden. They are often forced to leave school prematurely and pushed into early marriages framed as strategies for family survival. These decisions, while rationalised as securing financial stability, effectively reduce girls' opportunities for personal growth, limit their autonomy, and perpetuate cycles of dependency and poverty. Global research consistently demonstrates that early marriage undermines girls' rights to education, health, and participation in society. UNICEF (2020) reports that child marriage remains a major barrier to achieving gender equality worldwide, as it restricts educational attainment and increases the likelihood of poverty and health complications. Similarly, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2021) highlights that child marriage constitutes a direct violation of children's rights, exposing girls to increased risks of gender-based violence and maternal mortality. In Madagascar, where economic precarity intersects with the influence of tourism, these vulnerabilities are exacerbated as girls are socialised into prioritising family income over their own aspirations, effectively silencing their agency in life-defining decisions.

Recent scholarship further underlines how structural inequalities perpetuate these dynamics. Wodon et al. (2019) emphasise that child marriage has significant economic costs, not only for individuals but also for national

development, as it reduces human capital investment. More recent evidence from Sagalova et al. (2021) confirms that early marriage has persistent intergenerational effects, reinforcing poverty and inequality in sub-Saharan Africa. In the case of “*vali-vazaha*”, the gendered dimensions of inequality are even sharper because marriage with a foreigner is idealised as a unique opportunity for upward mobility, intensifying parental pressure on girls to comply. This reproduces patriarchal norms where girls are seen as economic assets rather than individuals with rights and aspirations. Tackling these inequalities requires a multi-level response: policies that enforce existing child protection laws, community initiatives that challenge harmful social norms, and educational reforms that create safe and empowering environments for girls. Without addressing the intersection of poverty, gender norms, and external influences, the cycle of vulnerability will persist, denying girls the chance to realise their full potential.

The role of social norms and ancestral values

In the Southwest of Madagascar, parental choices regarding “*vali-vazaha*” marriages are deeply embedded in long-standing social norms and ancestral values. Many parents justify their decision not solely on immediate economic advantages but also by invoking cultural blessings such as “*ho tabin-Janahary*” (“to be blessed by God”). These symbolic expressions reflect collective beliefs that frame marriage, particularly with foreigners, as a pathway to divine favour, familial prestige, and communal approval. This aligns with Durkheim's (1912) perspective that social norms and traditions function as a form of social regulation, shaping individual behaviours and decisions through shared moral frameworks. Even when parents recognise the modern importance of education, these collective values hold a normative force that directs choices toward marriage as a socially validated path.

Recent scholar confirms that such cultural norms remain powerful in influencing decision-making in contexts of poverty and globalisation. Rakotonarivo et al. (2021) show how ancestral traditions in Madagascar continue to guide community responses to contemporary challenges, often overriding developmental agendas. Similarly, Cislighi and Heise (2020) emphasise that social norms, particularly those tied to gender and family, sustain practices like early marriage despite global campaigns for reform. In the case of “*vali-vazaha*”, ancestral values thus reinforce a moral legitimacy for parents' decisions, making them more resistant to external interventions. This tension illustrates how the weight of collective tradition can both provide social cohesion and impede transformative social change in education and gender equality.

Economic insecurity as a driving force

Economic insecurity emerges as one of the strongest drivers behind the persistence of “*vali-vazaha*” marriages in Southwest Madagascar. Families facing chronic poverty, unstable employment opportunities, and weak state support for education often view schooling as a long-term and uncertain

investment. The immediate costs of school fees, uniforms, and the loss of children's contribution to household labour are perceived as outweighing the uncertain future returns of education in a context where jobs are scarce. By contrast, marriage, particularly with a “*vazaha*”, offers a tangible and immediate economic benefit: financial assistance, improved family status, and, in some cases, the promise of material resources that education alone cannot guarantee. This framing reflects what development studies literature identifies as “short-term decision-making,” where poverty constrains the ability of households to prioritise future gains over present survival (Banerjee & Duflo, 2019).

This survival-oriented rationality reinforces structural inequalities, as girls disproportionately bear the cost of these decisions through interrupted schooling and early entry into marriage. Such patterns are consistent with findings from global poverty research, which shows that households under economic stress often adopt coping mechanisms that perpetuate cycles of deprivation (Dercon, 2022). Moreover, in contexts where the state provides minimal safety nets or labour opportunities, these short-term strategies become not just choices but necessities. The consequence is a dual reproduction of inequality: within families, as girls’ aspirations are curtailed, and across society, as communities remain locked into practices that limit long-term human capital development (Eric et al., 2025). Addressing these dynamics requires not only promoting education but also alleviating the structural poverty that makes marriage a more immediate form of economic security than schooling.

Educational institutions and local authorities are weak actors

Educational institutions and local authorities in Southwest Madagascar occupy a fragile position in the fight against early marriage and the “*vali-vazaha*” phenomenon. While teachers, school directors, and local leaders are generally aware of the social and developmental risks that early marriage poses for girls, their ability to act is severely constrained. Limited financial resources restrict schools from providing adequate infrastructure or support programs that could keep girls enrolled. Likewise, the enforcement of laws against child marriage remains weak, often undermined by cultural acceptance of the practice and by the prioritisation of family economic survival (Emynorane et al., 2024). As a result, interventions from these actors are fragmented and largely symbolic, failing to tackle the structural drivers of the issue.

This situation highlights broader challenges of governance and policy implementation in rural Madagascar. Study shows that weak local governance, lack of coordination between national and community-level actors, and insufficient community engagement hinder the effectiveness of child protection policies (Harper et al., 2020; UNFPA, 2021). Without stronger institutional capacity and culturally sensitive interventions, schools and local authorities risk remaining passive observers rather than active agents of change. Strengthening their role requires not only resources and legal

enforcement but also sustained dialogue with communities to reconcile development goals with cultural realities.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the persistence of “*vali-vazaha*” in the Southwest of Madagascar is not simply a cultural curiosity, but a deeply rooted socio-economic strategy shaped by poverty, tourism dynamics, and shifting perceptions of social mobility. The practice reflects the tension between immediate material security and the long-term promise of education, particularly for young girls whose futures are often negotiated within family survival strategies. While the communities studied are not unaware of the value of schooling, systemic pressures and limited institutional support have led to a hierarchy of choices in which marriage, especially with a foreigner, often takes precedence over education. To address this issue, several levels of intervention are necessary. For policymakers, there is a need to design integrated programs that go beyond school access and directly target the economic vulnerabilities that drive early marriage, such as conditional cash transfers for families who keep their daughters in school. For local communities, awareness campaigns should be culturally grounded, involving elders, religious leaders, and parents in reframing education as an immediate asset rather than a distant investment. For schools and teachers, strengthening mentorship and creating safe spaces for girls could foster resilience against early dropout and marriage pressures. For international organisations, supporting community-driven initiatives that combine education with livelihood opportunities would reduce reliance on marriage as an economic solution. Finally, further research should investigate how globalisation and tourism reshape local gender norms and aspirations over time, including comparative studies between regions exposed to tourism and those less influenced by it. Longitudinal studies following the trajectories of girls who remained in school versus those who entered “*vali-vazaha*” unions would provide valuable evidence on long-term outcomes. By situating the phenomenon within broader debates on gender, education, and development, future studies can help craft more nuanced strategies that empower young girls while respecting local cultural contexts.

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