This book concerns the role of generational transitions—the many small steps young people take as they move from childhood to adulthood. It also examines personal change, the ways individuals adopt novel orientations toward their social worlds. And it is about how both generational change and personal change shape, and are shaped by, broader historical and cultural transformations. I explore these topics through a focus on women’s intimate and religious lives in Tamatave (Malagasy: Toamasina), a large multiethnic port town on Madagascar’s east coast. Hence my title: *Sex and Salvation*.

In the 1990s, Madagascar abandoned an isolationist form of state socialism and adopted an aggressive policy of economic liberalization. Previously the life trajectory of aspiring middle-class residents of Tamatave had been fairly predictable: many people attended school and found jobs, then married and had families. They would likely have belonged to Catholic and Protestant churches that, since the nineteenth century, have been a familiar part of the cultural landscape. Now, with massively intensified globalization and new economic pressures, this older way of moving from childhood to adulthood is becoming more difficult. Disillusioned with other options, a generation of young women have embraced what they perceive to be the promise of a sexual economy, taking up practices that some liken to prostitution. Others have sought the alternative path of salvation in the Pentecostal churches that have recently sprung up throughout the country. Participating in these churches requires abandoning ancestral practices that have long been synonymous with Malagasy culture and identity. By following women as they enter the sexual economy or join Pentecostal churches, I trace two common paths through which “newness enters the world” on the mundane terrain of everyday life.
My analysis of how young people seize hold of the cultural, social, and economic resources that enable adulthood, adapting these resources to their present circumstances, and of how slightly older people enter Pentecostal churches when alternative paths prove unsatisfying, takes seriously a level of analysis that is usually elided in broader structural histories. A basic premise of this book is that the many small steps people take as they find new ways to support themselves and build families, and the ways they inevitably seize on and transform existing social and cultural practices, bring together two different but interdependent time scales of historical transformation: the life course and national and global development. This conjuncture of the life course with broader economic and political change not only is produced by but also produces new cultural and historical formations. This is never a mechanical, unreflexive matter of one cohort replacing another as some theories of generational change have implied. Rather, it is a highly imaginative undertaking in which people’s desire to be good and to be valued, their culturally shaped dilemmas, and their visions for the future meet the broader forces of history and culture in unpredictable, uneven ways.

This book is based on research that spans from 2000, when people living in Madagascar’s cities first began to witness the full effect of the liberalization policies enacted some years earlier, to 2009, when Andry Rajoelina seized power and declared himself the new president of Madagascar. I first went to Tamatave because I wanted to understand young urbanites’ relation to the ancestral rituals that were such an important part of the rural life I had studied earlier. Like the rest of Madagascar, and much of Africa, relatively high fertility rates and comparatively low life expectancy mean that the population in Tamatave is disproportionately young. The sheer numbers of young people make what they are doing and thinking highly visible, an important part of how all Tamatavians think about the options available to them. And I soon found myself drawn into Tamatavians’ concerns about how to build a viable future amid considerable economic and cultural flux.

Since I had worked in a rural area of Tamatave province in the early 1990s, I already had several points of contact when I arrived in Tamatave city. One of these was at the university, and I soon started to meet groups of young people there, who in turn led me out into the wider community. I also knew many others who came from the village where I had worked previously. Some of those people had lived in Tamatave for years, but others had only recently arrived, owing to hardships at home. Albeit in different ways, it was these two groups—university students and their friends and families in town (most of whom did not go to university), and my connections from rural areas—that directed my attention toward the practices associated with
young women and the importance of the sexual economy. At the same time, having studied the role of ancestral practices in shaping social relationships in rural areas, I arrived in Tamatave already curious about the possible effects of Pentecostalism, which is well known in the literature on Africa for its hostility to ancestors. Consequently, I developed and maintained active relationships with members of various Pentecostal churches, attending services and prayer groups and spending time in youth groups.

It was only when I began to recognize such patterns after conducting the bulk of this fieldwork that I initiated archival research in France. That research enabled me to provide a deeper history for contemporary practices. At the same time, the newspapers and other archival materials I consulted raised new questions, which I took back to the field. Having completed the bulk of my research by 2007, I then returned to the village where I had previously conducted fieldwork to get a sense of how rural patterns compared with what I saw taking place in Tamatave. My visit confirmed that many of the patterns I observed in Tamatave were different from what was taking place in the countryside. However, it also revealed that some aspects of urban life were beginning to stretch into rural areas.

Scholars generally agree that, as a social category, generation is a notoriously difficult concept to delimit. It is certainly true that everyone goes through similar processes of biological maturation, whether or not they come to be considered socially adult. But not all people who are born sharing the same times or places share the same problems or the same solutions; not all people “come of age” in the same way, and not all have common formative experiences. In this sense, generational formations are inevitably partial. Moreover, to become visible, the new kinds of cultural formations that emerge as young people enter adulthood must somehow become embodied or institutionalized: the particles that have hung dimly in solution, so to speak, need to crystallize and take form in cultural symbols, laws, or even commodities. My long-term fieldwork in Madagascar enabled me to watch as what was first an inchoate phenomenon, a nascent form of novelty shared and performed by a group of young people on the cusp of adulthood, began to affect the more macro sociopolitical events that are the stuff of typical historical analyses. It remains for a future ethnographer to document how these patterns evolve over time.

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