WITCH-HUNTING IN CENTRAL MADAGASCAR 1828–1861*

There was a time when historians and social scientists seemed close to agreement about the study of witchcraft. Techniques drawn from the anthropology of Africa were applied to Tudor and Stuart England to explain the rise and decline of witch-hunting.[1] Authors produced general studies in which European and African evidence appeared side by side.[2] Edited volumes placed papers on witchcraft in early modern Europe alongside analyses of Africa and other parts of what was then called the Third World.[3] It was often implied that witchcraft was some sort of gauge of social strain, although Mary Douglas, introducing one such volume in 1970, made a withering critique of the 'superbly untestable' assumption that witchcraft accusations were 'a symptom of disorder and moral collapse'.[4]

Since the 1970s, studies of witchcraft in different ages and continents have drifted apart. Some influential studies have considered European witchcraft belief as a form of discourse in the first instance, to be understood in the context of the mentalities of a particular time and place.[5] Perhaps this reflects the growth of a general doubt about the ability of social science to propose theories, analogous to those of natural science, that can be applied universally. As far as Africa is concerned, however, some recent studies by anthropologists continue to see witchcraft, in the words of one critic, as a set of 'shifting and versatile practices and idioms deployed within local communities in response to wider social

* I am grateful for comments on an earlier draft of this paper by Gerrie ter Haar. Translations from foreign languages are my own unless otherwise stated.

[1] Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1970); Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (London, 1971).

[2] For example, Geoffrey Parrinder, *Witchcraft: European and African* (1958; London, 1963), esp. 128–9.

[3] For example, Max Marwick (ed.), *Witchcraft and Sorcery* (London, 1970).

[4] Mary Douglas (ed.), *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations* (London, 1970), p. xx.

[5] For example, Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 1997); Stuart Clark (ed.), *Languages of Witchcraft: Narrative, Ideology and Meaning in Early Modern Culture* (Basingstoke, 2001).

forces', and most particularly as a way of contesting or appropriating modernity.[6]

One of the main features of many recent anthropological studies is their tendency to view witchcraft as an element of culture (which indeed it is), but not as a religious belief (which it also is). If we define religion as a belief in the existence of spiritual forces that may have an effect on human life,[7] then a belief in the existence of a malign mystical force that can be used or abused by human agents, such as is designated by the word 'witchcraft', needs to be situated in the first instance within the wider field of religious thought. The need to study religious beliefs as a coherent whole was long ago noted by Clifford Geertz. The 'anthropological study of religion', he wrote thirty-six years ago, is 'a two-stage operation: first, an analysis of the system of meanings embodied in the symbols which make up the religion proper, and, second, the relating of these systems to social-structural and psychological processes'. Geertz went on to express his 'dissatisfaction with so much of contemporary social anthropological work in religion' at that time, not because it was concerned with the second of these two stages, but because 'it neglects the first, and in so doing takes for granted what most needs to be elucidated'.[8] A recent study of witchcraft in South Africa notes that belief in a malign, mystical force perceived as being channelled through human agents is, like other forms of belief in 'invisible powers and mystical processes', impossible to prove or disprove by scientific means. Hence, empirically based research can neither verify nor falsify the existence of 'witchcraft'. Another essay based on fieldwork in Africa reminds us that witchcraft cannot be seen only as 'symbolic politics', and that witchcraft accusations in particular must be seen as actual political processes.[9] The same

[6] The quotation is from Blair Rutherford, 'To Find an African Witch: Anthropology, Modernity and Witch-Finding in North-West Zimbabwe', *Critique of Anthropology*, xix (1999), 91. The most influential studies of the type criticized by Rutherford are Jean and John Comaroff (eds.), *Modernity and its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* (Chicago, 1993) and Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (Charlottesville, 1997), who gives a brief summary of the literature on Africa on pp. 215–23.

[7] A definition in the tradition of the anthropologist E. B. Tylor.

[8] Clifford Geertz, 'Religion as a Cultural System', in Michael Banton (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London, 1966), 42.

[9] Maia Green, 'Witchcraft Suppression Practices and Movements: Public Politics and the Logic of Purification', *Comparative Studies in Society and Hist.*, xxxix (1997), 319.

could be said of any society in which witchcraft accusations create political and social effects. The implication of these remarks is that the social sciences and the humanities can study the content of witchcraft belief and can also explain why some people may accuse others of practising witchcraft, but that this is indeed an operation in two stages.[10]

The effect of these preliminary remarks is to distinguish between witchcraft as a category of religious belief, on the one hand, and the accusations that may be made on the basis of such a belief, on the other. Different methods of analysis are required for each.

I

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article concerns an extended campaign of witch-hunting in a country — Madagascar — that lies off the coast of Africa but that has assimilated over the centuries ideas and technologies from many parts of the Indian Ocean and also from Europe. For present purposes, it is regarded as legitimate to analyse the suppression of alleged witches — that is, people accused of being the human agents of a mystical force that the persecutors suppose to exist — as a form of political action. The comparison of the methods used to suppress the perceived practice of witchcraft in different times and places, while fraught with difficulty, is both feasible and useful. In short, the reasons for considering the suppression of practices considered as witchcraft as a form of political action are as valid now as they ever were, although with two major qualifications.

The first of these is that any study of witchcraft should concern in the first instance the nature of the belief in such a phenomenon, and its relationship with other associated ideas in their original context. It cannot be assumed that beliefs extant outside Europe, which bear a superficial resemblance to witchcraft as it was perceived in Europe in early modern times, are necessarily the same as the historical European version. The apparent similarities between European and non-European variants may be due largely to the way scholars — especially British ones — have thought

[10] South Africa–Netherlands Research Programme on Alternatives in Development, *Crossing Witchcraft Barriers in South Africa* (Utrecht and Turfloop, SA, n.d.), 2–3. This is the preliminary report of a project directed by S. T. Kgatla and G. ter Haar.

about certain types of religious belief in Africa. Thus one anthropologist wrote regarding the literature on Africa:

> It is most likely that witchcraft may have become a separate topic for anthropology because of its appearance in the history of our own [that is, British] society. This occurrence, by supplying us with a ready-made term, would be sufficient to destroy those cautions we observe in the translation of culture in connection with other problems.[11]

Some scholars have cited as an example the intricate theologies of the Yoruba of Nigeria concerning the soul, destiny and the moral self, that have sometimes been labelled as 'witchcraft' by authors writing in English.[12] The term 'witchcraft' is hardly appropriate in this case because it risks producing in the reader a set of assumptions about the moral nature of Yoruba beliefs and their place in a putative evolutionary scheme. By the same token, the enduring Malagasy belief in the existence of a virtuous mystical force known as *hasina*, and of its malign counterpart known as *mosavy*, cannot be assumed to correspond precisely to beliefs recorded in European history. The first half of the present essay sets out these religious ideas in their historical context in old Madagascar, using this local vocabulary for the sake of clarity; an explanation of how they formed the basis of political and social action then follows.

A second qualification concerns the assessment of the political and social aspects of witchcraft suppression. It has become apparent from the study of African history over the last fifty years that specific events which occurred in Africa cannot automatically be assimilated into 'categories of analysis . . . drawn from Europe', such as building European-style states, the growth of capitalism[13] or, indeed, the spread of modernity. Although Madagascar, with its distinctive history, cannot be considered typical of Africa as a whole, the same point holds good. Hence a particular narrative concerning the suppression of the supposed human agents of a cosmic force of evil has to be examined in the first instance in its own terms.

[11] Malcolm Crick, *Explorations in Language and Meaning: Towards a Semantic Anthropology* (London, 1976), 112. This forms part of a discussion of 'witchcraft' on pp. 109–27.

[12] Barry Hallen and J. O. Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft: Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy* (London, 1986), ch. 3.

[13] Steven Feierman, 'African Histories and the Dissolution of World History', in R. H. Bates, V. Y. Mudimbe and Jean O'Barr (eds.), *Africa and the Disciplines: The Contributions of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and Humanities* (Chicago, 1993), 178–9.

There is abundant evidence in many societies that people have believed in the existence of forms of mystical harm which can be inflicted by some human beings on others, with or without malice aforethought. In English these perceived forms of evil are most commonly called 'witchcraft' or 'sorcery'. The classic definitions of these terms are offered by E. E. Evans-Pritchard, the founder of modern anthropological studies of the subject. He describes sorcery as 'magic that is illicit or is considered immoral', a mystical weapon that can in theory be used by anyone, whereas witchcraft emanates from a quality believed to be innate in some people only.[14] But beliefs in forms of mystical evil that can be employed by human agents do not always correspond to the two distinct forms identified by Evans-Pritchard in his studies of the Azande of Sudan.[15] Above all, not all societies maintain a theological or philosophical distinction between radically opposed metaphysical forces of good and evil in the same way as orthodox Christians and Muslims do. It is relevant to note that some key items of religious vocabulary in Africa today reflect the habit, in the quite recent past, among European missionaries, of regarding all forms of indigenous religion as suspect, and possibly even satanic — a tendency which caused them to label a whole set of beliefs as 'witchcraft'. Included in this category are many varieties of initiation, divination and healing. Some of the best recent studies of witch persecutions in Africa point out how the performance of actions or rituals that were once respectable, or at least permissible, may, under the influence of a dualistic Christian theology, be perceived as witchcraft, which, in turn, may be seen as a form of lethal, radical evil inspired by Satan.[16] The history of Christian conversion, together with the use on a world scale of languages originating in Western Europe, has led to a Babel of misunderstanding. We cannot be sure that an English-speaking African who uses the word 'witchcraft' today is referring to the

[14] E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford, 1937), 9–10.

[15] Marwick (ed.), *Witchcraft and Sorcery*, 11–14. A recent study of Sri Lanka speaks of 'sorcery', where Africanists would be more likely to refer to 'witchcraft': Bruce Kapferer, *The Feast of the Sorcerer: Practices of Consciousness and Power* (Chicago and London, 1997), 8.

[16] Mary Douglas, 'Sorcery Accusations Unleashed: The Lele Revisited, 1987', *Africa*, lxix (1999); Isak Niehaus, with Eliazaar Mohlala and Kally Shokane, *Witchcraft, Power and Politics: Exploring the Occult in the South African Lowveld* (London, 2001), 31–6.

same type of thing as was meant by English-speakers four centuries ago when they uttered this same word.

For these reasons, 'witchcraft' cannot be used straightforwardly as a technical term that, like other items in the lexicon of social science, is supposed to describe something of universal application. Belief in forms of malign mystical force cannot be compared between one society and another without further inquiry. Some such comparison is necessary, however, if studies of the African continent and its islands, in ancient or modern times, are not to be assigned to an exotic category where comparison is considered possible only with other African cases, and never with European or other instances. If this were to happen it would be tantamount to a suggestion that witchcraft belief today is a phenomenon existing in Africa, but not elsewhere. Indeed, some recent literature on 'witchcraft' in Africa comes uncomfortably close to this position. Perhaps it was something akin to the problem this presents that Evans-Pritchard was thinking of when, according to one of his colleagues, he mused, 'there's only one method in social anthropology, the comparative method — and that's impossible'.[17]

Hence, I approach the object of study in the first instance by defining briefly what the people concerned — the inhabitants of central Madagascar in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries — meant when they spoke of *mosavy*, a form of mystical evil generally translated as 'witchcraft'. I then proceed by considering why massive, successive, bouts of persecution of people accused of this offence took place in the mid nineteenth century. It is argued that persecutions of people deemed to be anti-social in terms of the dominant style of discourse of any particular time and place can be compared if suitable precautions are taken.

II

PRE-COLONIAL IMERINA AND MADAGASCAR

The perennial combat against metaphysical evil in Madagascar was for centuries associated with the nut of a small, deceptively attractive, tree that is native to parts of this enormous island, two and a half times the size of Great Britain. The tree and its nut

[17] Quoted in Rodney Needham, 'Polythetic Classification: Convergence and Consequences', *Man*, new ser., x (1975), 365.

are called *tangena* in the Malagasy language, which is spoken throughout the island in various dialects. *Tanghinia venenifera* — the nut's botanical name — is bitter and highly poisonous.[18] In the past Malagasy people sometimes administered shavings of *tangena* nuts to people suspected of having engaged in forms of spiritual subversion called *mosavy*, and sometimes to those accused of other offences.

The Malagasy have generally believed in the reality of *mosavy* as a force for the destabilization of the proper order of society since the seventeenth century at least, when the first relevant historical records were being produced.[19] Many of their ideas about *mosavy* no doubt came originally from East Africa, as the word itself is of Swahili origin.[20] The use of poison ordeals to detect the presence of *mosavy* in humans was probably also of African origin, perhaps introduced by Madagascar's first inhabitants. These consisted of groups of people originating in what is now Indonesia, but many of these, before moving on to Madagascar over a thousand years ago, had settled in East Africa, where they incorporated local vocabulary into their Austronesian language and acquired some African technologies.[21] Poison was one of several types of ordeal employed by Malagasy to investigate people suspected of using mystical forms of evil. When *tangena* was used, the poison was often administered to an animal deemed to represent the person accused: if the animal died, the person was considered guilty and could be punished by other means. From a relatively early period, the poison ordeal was occasionally applied in some parts of the island to whole families, sometimes even at their own request in cases where people wished to establish their innocence of *mosavy*, the most anti-social of crimes.[22]

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Madagascar came to be dominated politically by a kingdom known as Imerina, situated

[18] William Ellis, *History of Madagascar*, 2 vols. (London, 1838), i, 461, has a fine drawing.

[19] For a brief survey of historical references, see Raymond Decary, *Les Ordalies et sacrifices rituels chez les anciens malgaches* (Paris, 1959), 11–30.

[20] J. Richardson, *A New Malagasy–English Dictionary* (1885; Farnborough, 1967), 444.

[21] Pierre Vérin, *Madagascar* (Paris, 1990), ch. 2.

[22] See the journal of the Dutch ship *Barneveld*, 1719, in *Collection d'ouvrages anciens concernant Madagascar*, ed. Alfred and Guillaume Grandidier *et al.*, 9 vols. (Paris, 1903–20), v, 23.

in the densely populated central highlands.[23] Under this government, a person suspected of spiritual subversion, and sometimes even of theft or other mundane offences, had to drink a solution of *tangena* shavings in water, followed by pieces of chicken-skin. Vomiting the latter was taken as a sign of innocence. Some people thus tested died from the effects of the poison. Others failed to vomit the chicken-skin, in which case they were considered guilty and liable to be executed. Oral traditions and memories first written down by Malagasy in the mid nineteenth century suggest that the application of the poison directly to humans had become a general test of guilt in Imerina less than a hundred years previously, and that use of the ordeal as a technique in the administration of justice was regulated by Imerina's founding king, who assumed the name Andrianampoinimerina on gaining power.[24]

After the unification, in around 1800, of the minor principalities previously existing in the highlands, successive rulers of the kingdom of Imerina, allying themselves with British power in the Indian Ocean, aimed to conquer the whole of Madagascar. The Anglo-Merina alliance, sealed by treaty in 1817, was to dominate the island until the acquisition of Madagascar as a colonial possession by France in 1895–6.[25] Merina rulers began to refer to their state as the kingdom of Madagascar, and were in time recognized by key European powers as sovereigns of the island, although they were never able to exercise effective control over the whole of it. The main British interest at the outset was to enlist the king of Imerina as an ally to stamp out Madagascar's slave exports. King Radama I (reigned 1809–28) welcomed missionaries from the London Missionary Society (LMS). They were highly impressed by Imerina and by the hospitality offered by this personable, ambitious and ruthless young monarch, an admirer of his contemporary, Napoleon Bonaparte.

[23] The name Imerina originally designated a purely geographical area, and it may be that it was not applied to a political formation before the late eighteenth century: Pier Larson, 'Desperately Seeking the Merina (Central Madagascar): Reading Ethnonyms and their Semantic Fields in African Identity Histories', *Jl Southern African Studies*, xxii (1996).

[24] Alain Delivré, *L'Histoire des rois d'Imerina: interprétation d'une tradition orale* (Paris, 1974), 188–90.

[25] The best study of nineteenth-century Imerina, the most important polity in the island at that time, is Françoise Raison-Jourde, *Bible et pouvoir à Madagascar au XIX^e siècle* (Paris, 1991).

But the course of the Anglo-Merina alliance was anything but smooth after the initial period of intense co-operation. From the mid-1830s until 1861, the government of Radama's successor, Queen Ranavalona I (reigned 1828–61), avidly continued to adopt Western techniques new to Madagascar, including a literate bureaucracy and a standing army, and to import Western firearms, used for some two centuries already in those parts of the island with access to international trade. At the same time, government policy under Ranavalona I was to prevent the queen's subjects from receiving baptism. All but a handful of foreigners were refused permission to settle in the royal dominions. British missionaries were expelled from the island from the mid-1830s, and the small Malagasy Christian community existed clandestinely, suffering sporadic bouts of persecution.[26]

When Queen Ranavalona I died in 1861, Madagascar was again opened to foreign traders, diplomats and missionaries. After a later queen and her consort, the prime minister, had themselves received baptism in 1869, large numbers of loyal subjects converted to Christianity. Madagascar became a focus of interest for British evangelicals. Informed by the publications of the LMS and other missionaries, who had a vested interest in emphasizing the most successful aspects of their work, a section of British opinion considered the self-proclaimed kingdom of Madagascar to be a brilliant example of Christian conversion accompanying economic and social development. Only in the decade before French colonization did British missionaries cease deluding themselves about the extent to which the Church and the government were actually the tools of a Merina elite intent on self-promotion and enrichment.

In effect, Queen Ranavalona I's accession to the throne in 1828 was the result of a military coup organized by a clique of generals and officials able to exploit the establishment of a standing army. This military-dominated expansionist government, unfriendly to missionaries but enthusiastic for foreign technology, was to oversee administration of the deadly *tangena* ordeal on a very large scale until the queen's death in 1861. At times the poison was applied to entire population groups on an unprecedented scale. A French Jesuit, Father Marc Finaz, who visited Madagascar from 1855 to 1857 and received much information from his

[26] Ellis, *History of Madagascar*, i, ch. 17; J. J. Freeman and D. Johns, *A Narrative of the Persecution of the Christians in Madagascar* (London, 1840).

compatriot, the adventurer Jean Laborde (who had spent years at the royal court and spoke fluent Malagasy), has left some especially vivid descriptions of the *tangena* ordeal in his unpublished diaries. '*Tangena* is used on the slightest pretext and even without any pretext at all', he noted.[27] Finaz, a careful observer, thought that almost every adult in Imerina had undergone the ordeal, some of them more than twelve times. It is clear that the poison ordeal was not always fatal, because individual nuts might vary in strength, victims might expel most of the poison by vomiting, and — not least — the officials who administered the poison could adjust the dose.

Imerina proper had a population of perhaps five or six hundred thousand in the mid nineteenth century, in an island with a total population of perhaps two to three million.[28] The Reverend William Ellis, writing in the 1830s slightly before the worst excesses, used information compiled by the first generation of LMS missionaries in the island to calculate that one-tenth of the population of Imerina took the poison at least once in the course of their lifetimes, and that a fifth of these died as a consequence. 'And thus', he estimated, 'a fiftieth part of the population is carried off by this most formidable instrument of destruction'. He put the number of deaths at some three thousand per year.[29] Estimates made by other contemporaries, Malagasy and European, range from two hundred thousand to four hundred thousand deaths over the thirty-three years of Ranavalona I's rule.[30] Such high numbers for deaths from the poison ordeal are treated seriously in a modern study of historical demographics.[31]

These figures may well be overestimates, as there were periods of relative inactivity in between major national purges. Both

[27] Recorded in the journal of Father M. Finaz, for the years 1855–7, Archives historiques de l'archevêché, Andohalo, Antananarivo, sér. 'Diaires', no. 20, 33–4. This archive includes Finaz's original diary, plus a manuscript copy by Father A. Boudou. Extensive extracts from Finaz's journal are published in C. de la Vaissière, *Histoire de Madagascar, ses habitants et ses missionnaires*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1884).

[28] Gwyn Campbell, 'The State and Pre-Colonial Demographic History: The Case of Nineteenth-Century Madagascar', *Jl African Hist.*, xxxii (1991), 419.

[29] Ellis, *History of Madagascar*, i, 487.

[30] C. Caillon-Filet, 'Jean Laborde et l'Océan Indien' (Univ. of Aix-en-Provence *thèse de 3ème cycle*, 1978), 287–94; C. Buet, *Six mois à Madagascar* (Paris, 1894), 262; G. S. Chapus and G. Mondain, 'Le Tanguin', *Bulletin de l'Académie malgache*, new ser., xxvii (1946), 176; book 3 of Rainandriamampandry's unpublished history 'Tantarany Madagascar', Archives de la République malgache (ARM), Antananarivo: Royal Archives, sér. SS12, fo. 97.

[31] Campbell, 'State and Pre-Colonial Demographic History', 437–9.

foreign missionaries and later Malagasy Christian authors had a tendency to portray the traditionalist government of Ranavalona I in a dark light. Moreover some slaves who failed the ordeal were revived by their owners, 'by giving them copious draughts of water, in which certain herbs have been boiled', after which they were discreetly sold in distant parts of the island, so as not to lose their value.[32] Nevertheless, it can hardly be doubted that very large numbers of people died through the application of the poison ordeal, and that the 'kingdom of Madagascar', as the government styled itself, oversaw a redoubtable regime of destruction of human life. To determine why this was so requires first a brief survey of the role of religious belief in Malagasy statecraft over a long period.

III

THE POLITIES OF OLD MADAGASCAR

The first sources for a reasonably precise political history of Madagascar are the writings of the earliest European travellers to the island — slave traders and missionaries who left written accounts from the sixteenth century onwards.[33] They described an island containing some clusters of population whose political institutions European contemporaries recognized as states or kingdoms. These Malagasy political formations appear to have taken shape over centuries through the evolution of techniques of domination and subordination as they circulated from one part of Madagascar to another. Ideas and technologies such as literacy in the Malagasy language transcribed in Arabic script, regarded as a potent religious instrument, were imported from an early period by, among others, Islamized settlers and traders from the South-East Asian islands, the Persian Gulf and East Africa. Once Madagascar had become a port of call for European and American East Indiamen and slave traders, Europe also exercised a considerable influence on the evolution of Malagasy kingdoms which

[32] Ellis, *History of Madagascar*, i, 460. This is also mentioned in the leading nineteenth-century Malagasy source, *Histoire des rois d'Imerina*, ed. François Callet, trans. G. S. Chapus and E. Ratsimba, 5 vols. (Antananarivo, 1953–78), iii, 225–6, which indeed gives the recipe for the slaves' restorative. Subsequent references will use the title of the Malagasy original by which this work is best known, *Tantaran' ny Andriana* (1878–81). Volume and page numbers refer to the French translation.

[33] The main collection is *Collection d'ouvrages anciens concernant Madagascar*, ed. Grandidier *et al.*

imported silver coin and firearms in exchange for slaves. During the seventeenth century, and until the rise after 1750 of slave-importing sugar economies in the islands today known as Mauritius and Réunion, the most powerful of Madagascar's kings lived on the island's west coast, the one most visited by Europeans. The material assets acquired by these rulers supplemented the ideological and spiritual attributes that were the basis of enduring authority. It would be wrong, however, to surmise that this represented a gradual replacement of the religious base of power by a secular command of wealth and coercion, for all these were inextricably linked.

European travellers composing a systematic description of any particular Malagasy polity often devoted chapters to government, religion and various aspects of custom in an early form of ethnography.[34] They had only a limited aspiration to reflect the world-view of the Malagasy themselves, whose concepts of power, authority and legitimacy were sometimes very different from those of their European chroniclers.[35] This is clear both from a careful reading of the European sources of the period and also from later sources which provide greater insight into key aspects of Malagasy traditions of thought, most notably the texts partly or wholly authored by Malagasy in the nineteenth century.[36] Among other particularities, Malagasy before colonial times were generally more inclined than their European contemporaries to suppose that spiritual forces suffused all aspects of their lives and of nature rather than being restricted to the sphere corresponding to conventional European notions of religion, now or even then. This is not to say that the Malagasy struck most European visitors as people of an especially ethereal character, since they were also known for their hard-headed attitudes towards war and commerce in general and the slave trade in particular.

For the Malagasy, ritual practices intended to communicate with the invisible world were inseparable from all life and action,

[34] See esp. Étienne de Flacourt, *Histoire de la grande isle Madagascar*, ed. Claude Allibert (1658; Paris, 1995).

[35] Raison-Jourde, however, notes that Flacourt, writing in the mid seventeenth century, could find many points of similarity between Malagasy society and his own, whereas the rise of a different type of state in Europe after his time made such understanding progressively more difficult: Raison-Jourde, *Bible et pouvoir à Madagascar*, 51, 52 (n. 1).

[36] The best-known of which is *Tantaran' ny Andriana*. A guide is Delivré, *L'Histoire des rois d'Imerina*.

and did not belong to an identifiable category of the 'religious', in so far as that is possible given that the Malagasy language did not have any word corresponding to 'religion'. Some early European authors, such as Étienne de Flacourt, an official of the French Compagnie des Indes, thought that the Malagasy actually had no religion. This was not because Flacourt was ignorant of Malagasy customs, but rather because he could identify no sphere of ritual oriented towards a deity and no dogma or caste of priests that, in the opinion of a contemporary European, qualified as religious.[37] Malagasy people were inclined to believe that all power — the very breath of life as well as power in a political sense — was derived from spiritual forces. These could include not only the invisible spirits of the ancestors or of previous kings, but also the spirits of such highly visible but (in Western science) inanimate objects as running water, rocks and mountain-tops, and the earth itself, all of which were believed to be sources of an essence that had the potential both to enhance life and to destroy it. The nut of the *tangena* tree was thus understood to be animate, containing an inherent power evidenced by the alarming effects produced by eating it. A surviving manuscript written by one of the religious specialists at the court of Ranavalona I includes a transcription of the prayers used in administering the poison, in which the nut was addressed as a living being, and requested to do its work of discerning metaphysical evil present in a person or animal.[38] As one Malagasy put it at a later date, 'people imagined that the *tangena* contained a sort of spirit which could sound out the human heart and which entered the stomach of the accused person with the poison, punishing the guilty while sparing the innocent'.[39] The spirit of the nut had a name, Manamango. In Malagasy societies without widespread literacy,[40]

[37] Flacourt, *Histoire de la grande isle Madagascar*, 153.

[38] A French translation is Lucile Rabearimanana, 'Mystique et sorcellerie dans le manuscrit de l'ombiasy', *Omaly sy Anio*, i–ii (1975). A number of detailed descriptions and quotations from invocations used in the administration of the poison are contained in nineteenth-century publications; an example in English is Ellis, *History of Madagascar*, i, ch. 17.

[39] Ravelonahina, quoted in Louis Chevalier, *Madagascar: populations et ressources* (Paris, 1952), 66. I am grateful to Solofo Randrianja for this reference.

[40] Before the nineteenth century, literacy in Arabic script was limited to a tiny number of people who used it as an esoteric skill: see Ludvig Munthe, *La Tradition arabico-malgache vue à travers le manuscrit A-6 d'Oslo et d'autres manuscrits disponibles* (Antananarivo, 1982). Literacy in the Latin alphabet, coupled with a growing tendency to use writing for mundane purposes, spread from the early nineteenth century: Françoise Raison-Jourde, 'L'Échange inégale de la langue: la pénétration des tech-

(cont. on p. 103)

familiarity with such forces was not derived from texts but was instead transmitted through action and speech.

Common to those kingdoms in old Madagascar which succeeded one another, rising and declining in the extent of their influence, was the notion of *hasina*.[41] This designates the invisible essence of power and fertility that can be channelled to human beings, particularly through ancestors. Maintaining this life-force demands respect for ritual obligations and taboos that in effect bind members of a family or a community to each other, to nature, and to the land. The foremost principle of political authorities throughout the island was that they should embody *hasina* and bestow it on their subjects. Various customs and institutions deemed to be of ancestral origin were associated with the transmission of such power. Some of the most fundamental Malagasy ideas concerning political hierarchy arose from the prestige associated with a person or family considered to be a channel of exceptional virtue by reason of her, his or its ancestry.[42] Mystical power of this type, when applied for the negative purposes of destroying order and fertility, was tantamount to *mosavy*, which is, therefore, *hasina* in reverse.[43]

The oldest ideas of political authority must have been brought to Madagascar with the first settlers, and were then constantly enriched with new inventions and imports.[44] The concept of *hasina* is certainly older than the quite extensive political units that European writers from the seventeenth century onwards regarded as corresponding reasonably well to their own notions of kingdoms. The rulers of the many polities of pre-colonial Madagascar were transmitters of this metaphysical essence, which was more crucial than any powers they might have as organizers of labour and repression or redistributors of wealth. All Malagasy political authorities, from kings to simple family heads, channelled *hasina* by invoking the invisible forces of the world through word and ritual gesture, by securing the services of diviners, and by

(n. 40 cont.)
niques linguistiques dans une civilisation de l'oral (Imerina, début du XIX[e] siècle)', *Annales E.S.C.*, xxxii (1977).

[41] Mentioned, for example, by Flacourt, in his *Histoire de la grande isle Madagascar*, 184. On *hasina*, see Delivré, *L'Histoire des rois d'Imerina*, 140–71.

[42] See Paul Ottino, *L'Étrangère intime: essai d'anthropologie de la civilisation de l'ancien Madagascar*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1986), i, 9–10.

[43] Raison-Jourde, *Bible et pouvoir à Madagascar*, 84.

[44] Françoise Raison-Jourde (ed.), *Les Souverains de Madagascar: l'histoire royale et ses résurgences contemporaines* (Paris, 1983), esp. 18–35.

arranging their affairs, in details ranging from the shape of their houses to the naming and treatment of their children, in conformity with what they believed to be the pattern of the cosmos.

The fundamental task of a Malagasy king was to reign: to dispense blessing, notably through the practice of appropriate rituals, to ensure fertility, to prevent the subversion of the natural order, and to channel the *hasina* of his[45] ancestors to his subjects. These core religious aspects of political authority were no doubt always associated with certain forms of material benefit and coercion, but it was the advent of the European slave trade that radically increased the scope of possible enrichment through trade and war and contributed to the development of a more formidable monarchical power. Successive Sakalava kings on Madagascar's west coast in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries acquired substantial armed followings and wealth in coin, thanks to their relations with European, Swahili and Arab traders, enabling them to exercise influence over large areas.[46] Various polities, situated in different parts of this huge island, succeeded in asserting their influence as the patterns of the slave trade shifted, and as princes rose and fell. Memories of the major polities and dynasties survive in the form of today's ethnic labels, such as Sakalava, Betsimisaraka and Merina, originally names applied to whoever owed allegiance to a common authority rather than being ethnonyms in a modern sense.[47] The increase in the command of material resources reflected in the history of these polities did not detract from the fact that the core of political legitimacy lay in the ability to channel the spiritual quality of *hasina*. Hence Toakafo, the Sakalava king of Boina in north-west Madagascar, a slave trader and warrior (and a ferocious consumer of liquor!), probably the most powerful king in the island at the time, was

[45] Sovereigns were more often men than women. But, for most of the nineteenth century Imerina was ruled by queens, increasingly manipulated, after the coup of 1828, by a government dominated by military men.

[46] Two excellent eyewitness descriptions of the same Sakalava king, Andriamaheininarivo — probably the most powerful ruler in Madagascar at that time — are by merchants of the Dutch East India Company. See the description by O. L. Hemmy (1741) in *Collection d'ouvrages anciens concernant Madagascar*, ed. Grandidier *et al.*, vi, 52–196, and the journal (*dagregister*) of the *Schuylenburg* (1752), the most accessible copy of which is in the Rijksarchief, The Hague, VOC 10814.

[47] On the meaning of ethnicity in modern Africa, see Bruce J. Berman, 'Ethnicity, Patronage and the African State: The Politics of Uncivil Nationalism', *African Affairs*, xcvii (1998).

described by a Dutch slave trader in 1715 as 'honoured and feared as a god by his subjects'.[48]

The combination of religious authority with material aspects of domination was evident in the kingdom that emerged in the late eighteenth century under Andrianampoinimerina (reigned *c.*1783–1809), the most famous king in Madagascar's history since he was the founder of the Merina kingdom that was later to attempt the conquest of the whole island. It is telling that, in the kingdom which he founded, one of the sovereign's titles was 'God visible to the eye', while the death of a sovereign was often referred to as 'Heaven and earth turned upside down'.[49] King Andrianampoinimerina (whose own name means 'the prince at the heart of Imerina') was, like his successors, at the centre of a system thought to mirror the cosmos, with the king being the articulation between heaven and earth. In the Merina kingdom he established, royal authority acquired an extraordinarily pervasive domination of a society where the sovereign was involved in the daily life of every subject. This was in spite of the monarch's lack of much resembling a bureaucracy. Behaviour and thought were governed by intricate rules, conventions and gestures having a force derived from their spiritual aspect which was reflected in everyday relationships and actions. Royal subjects absorbed such ideas from birth, making this a society with a high degree of social integration and political control. It was through ritual that royal power penetrated local communities that were in many respects self-governing.

We should resist the notion that the religious practices which existed in Madagascar before the nineteenth century were 'ethnic' in nature, in the sense of defining and being proper to a bounded group defined by speech or culture. It would be more accurate to say that many religious practices and ideas were current over wide areas and in different polities, while a feature of the most successful rulers was their ability to innovate in ritual matters. A successful ruler, by definition, was one who succeeded in transmitting *hasina* throughout his reign, as measured by fertility and harmony. Sovereigns therefore strove to control the instruments

[48] Hendrik Frappé, 'Korte Beschrijving van 't Eiland Madagascar of St Laurens aan de Westsijde', in National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, MS D 3, fo. 16.

[49] James Sibree, *Madagascar before the Conquest* (London, 1896), 152–3. A description of Merina political culture in Andrianampoinimerina's time is in Raison-Jourde, *Bible et pouvoir à Madagascar*, chs. 1–2.

for the transmission of *hasina*, essentially the religious systems of ritual and divination. Queen Ranavalona I was perhaps unique in attempting to create an ethnic religion, in a conscious attempt to underpin the new state institutions established in imitation of European models by her predecessor King Radama I. Her ministers aspired to employ certain conventions that, they had learned, were regarded by Europeans as having international application, such as an obligation on all residents to obey the law of the land.[50] Partly as a result of contacts with British Protestants and French Catholics, Ranavalona and her ministers deliberately set about creating a Merina national religion from existing elements such as the practice of circumcision, transformed into a ritual in which the whole kingdom was represented as a single descent-group stemming from the royal ancestors.[51] A uniform corpus of religious ideas and rituals was therefore imposed on the queen's subjects.

The religious cosmologies of Madagascar were highly dualistic, possibly as a result of the degree of Islamic influence in the island since the twelfth or thirteenth centuries.[52] The ancient Malagasy notion that the cosmos had an exact and regular design, reflected in topography and astrology, generated a series of negative concepts twinned with positive ones. Thus, the complex systems of taboo and divination which guided correct behaviour, typical of Malagasy religious practice, also served to identify incorrect or sacrilegious behaviour. Such ideas were current in all parts of Madagascar and could be as binding on sovereigns as on their subjects: the Dutch slave trader who described King Toakafo of Boina in 1715 noted that this king killed those of his own children who were born on a Sunday or a Tuesday, days which were considered inauspicious by his diviners.[53]

IV

MERINA POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

Andrianampoinimerina, the unifier of Imerina who died in 1809, has been represented in most Merina oral traditions as an almost

[50] Cf. William Ellis, *Three Visits to Madagascar* (London, 1858), 78.

[51] Maurice Bloch, *From Blessing to Violence: History and Ideology in the Circumcision Ritual of the Merina of Madagascar* (Cambridge, 1986), esp. chs. 7–8.

[52] Pointed out by Ottino, and quoted in Allibert's edition of Flacourt, *Histoire de la grande isle Madagascar*, 498 (n. 6). See also Pierre Colin, *Aspects de l'âme malgache* (Paris, 1959), 25–8.

[53] Frappé, 'Korte Beschrijving van 't Eiland Madagascar', fo. 19.

superhumanly wise lawgiver and ruler. However, it is clear that Andrianampoinimerina owed his success in part to some base political skills, starting with the manipulation of popular grievances in the town of Ambohimanga that enabled him to overthrow its ruler. The Malagasy historian Raombana, writing in the 1850s with access to excellent sources, describes this in detail.[54] The slave trade was growing fast in response to demand from the French sugar-colonies Mauritius and Réunion. Having won power with the support of a faction with interests in the slave trade, Andrianampoinimerina cornered the main slave markets throughout the central highlands, drove up prices, and secured a better supply of guns than any other Malagasy ruler.

Merina political ideology, as we have seen, considered historical reality 'not as the product of human agency, but of ancestral beneficence, *hasina*, which flowed downwards on obedient Merina from long dead ancestors in a sacred stream'.[55] Andrianampoinimerina, a political entrepreneur with a questionable right to rule, became legitimate only gradually, as he was seen to transmit this *hasina* effectively. This he did by carving himself a role in religious rituals considered to bestow this vital force. Various groups under his subjection had their own religious symbols, known as *sampy*. These were cult objects credited with channelling power from the invisible world for collective rather than personal use, likely to be used both aggressively as well as for protection. *Sampy* were made mostly of vegetable matter, sometimes decorated with bits of silver or crocodile teeth, for example. They were considered receptacles of a spiritual power with a personal character, rather like the *tangena* nut.[56]

As he expanded his area of rule, subjecting numerous self-governing groups, Andrianampoinimerina took control of the most potent *sampy* and outlawed those liable to be used by his enemies. 'He plucked from obscurity local or tribal amulets to turn them into the official protectors of all the Merina', noted one French colonial official and scholar; the king thus codified their accompanying rituals and made them obligatory. He often entrusted these powerful objects to his leading generals, 'creating,

[54] Raombana, *Histoires*, ed. Simon Ayache, 2 vols. (Fianarantsoa and Antananarivo, 1980–94), i, 155–83.

[55] Gerald M. Berg, 'Writing Ideology: Ranavalona, the Ancestral Bureaucrat', *History in Africa*, xxii (1995), 73.

[56] Charles Renel, *Les Amulettes malgaches, ody et sampy*, special issue of *Bulletin de l'Académie malgache*, new ser., ii (1915), 63–70, 134.

so to speak, a state religion' based on a national pantheon.[57] To the British missionaries who arrived in Imerina only a couple of decades later, the *sampy* were 'idols', products of ignorance, superstition, and even charlatanism. One LMS missionary, noting that the king 'did repeatedly convene the population to witness the consecrating or setting apart of several of the present national idols', asserted that Andrianampoinimerina 'is said to have acted thus solely from political motives, having their foundation in the conviction that some kind of religious or superstitious influence was useful in the government of a nation'.[58]

This last description implies a distinction between religious belief and realpolitik that would surely not have been shared by the person it describes. For Andrianampoinimerina as for his subjects, the *sampy* were as powerful in their own way as guns. It was normal that the king would seek to control them and to prevent his subjects from honouring other *sampy*. People who refused to respect the king's sacred objects, or who harboured others, were suspected of undermining the order Andrianampoinimerina had now established. The surest method of detecting such disruptive people was through the use of the *tangena* poison ordeal, usually applied to an animal taken as representative of the person under suspicion but also applied by Andrianampoinimerina directly to people suspected of mystical subversion.[59] Such people could be identified collectively as well as individually, in keeping with prevailing notions about the collective aspect of people's identity. 'For now and then', wrote the historian Raombana, who for privacy's sake made a point of writing in the English he had learned at a nonconformist academy in Manchester, '[Andrianampoinimerina] orders the *Tangena* ordeal to be administered to the whole population of Towns and villages (with the exception of children) for to discover those who in his opinion had magics and witchcrafts, and awful to relate, a great number of them dies through this horrible Test'.[60]

The most ruthless rulers in central Madagascar, including the very king deposed by Andrianampoinimerina when he took power, sometimes sold for export as slaves people accused of

[57] *Ibid.*, 241–2.
[58] Ellis, *History of Madagascar*, i, 397.
[59] *Tantaran' ny Andriana*, iii, 102–4.
[60] Raombana, *Histoires*, ed. Ayache, i, 233. The grammatical errors are reproduced here as in the original.

using subversive mystical force.[61] By this means, wrote a French slave trader, 'the powerful chiefs . . . make an object of speculation out of this [*tangena*] ordeal'.[62] There is evidence that the practice of selling into foreign slavery people considered guilty of spiritual subversion spread throughout Madagascar during the boom years of the slave trade.[63] The very conditions that made possible the creation of a united kingdom also permitted the emergence of enterprising individuals suspended, as it were, between the strong levelling ethos of their descent-groups and their patron, the king. The resulting jealousies and suspicions were fertile ground for accusations of *mosavy* not just from the king, but also from within their own families.[64] Before Andrianampoinimerina, it was common for families engaged in petty feuds to capture members of rival groups and hold them to ransom, a practice encouraging circulation of the very limited supplies of silver coin. Andrianampoinimerina's interdiction on civil war and on the export of his loyal subjects made this custom obsolete, thereby probably encouraging the growth of accusations of *mosavy* as an alternative arm for the waging of internecine war.[65] Malagasy rulers routinely believed themselves to be surrounded by political opponents in secret possession of powerful charms. It was logical that an expansion of royal power would take the form of searching for possible dissidents with dangerous, unlicensed amulets that represented unofficial, and therefore potentially subversive, channels of the cosmic force *hasina*. The social dislocation caused by an expanded slave trade made more urgent the task of rooting out dissidents.

To an extent, then, political unification through a monopoly of armed force implied a displacement of political rivalries into related areas of struggle, namely accusations of spiritual subversion that could undermine the king's duty of dispensing *hasina*. Andrianampoinimerina therefore took central control of the

[61] *Ibid.*, 149.

[62] The trader Lebel, quoted in Pier M. Larson, *History and Memory in the Age of Enslavement: Becoming Merina in Highland Madagascar, 1770–1822* (Portsmouth, NH, Oxford and Cape Town, 2000), 97.

[63] As reported by a French agent in Fort-Dauphin to the governor of Bourbon: Archives départementales, Île de la Réunion, France, sér. 1 M 48c: de Roland to de Freycinet, 20 June 1822. On the same phenomenon in West Africa, see Rosalind Shaw, 'The Production of Witchcraft / Witchcraft as Production: Memory, Modernity, and the Slave Trade in Sierra Leone', *Amer. Ethnologist*, xxiv (1997), 861–5.

[64] Raison-Jourde, *Bible et pouvoir à Madagascar*, 106.

[65] *Ibid.*, 189–91.

poison ordeal, the key element of royal justice, announcing a list of charms and cult objects that would henceforth be regarded as illegal, possession of which was considered evidence of *mosavy*. He forbade anyone to administer the poison other than a group of officials belonging to the noble category called Andriamasinavalona, and even then only in the presence of judicial officers whom he created.[66]

While it is useful to make an analytical distinction between King Andrianampoinimerina's religious practice and other aspects of his rule, it is important to recall that the sovereign's function as the channel for the transmission of blessing was not considered by Malagasy to be distinct from his activities as warrior, trader and politician. The same was true of his immediate successor, Radama I, who was often considered by nineteenth-century British observers to be an enlightened ruler because of his abolition of slave exports and because of the scant respect he showed to the oracles and religious instruments inherited from his father.[67] Radama, urged to abolish the *tangena* poison ordeal by the Irish sergeant whom the British governor of Mauritius had sent to advise him in the wake of the treaty signed in 1817, is said to have replied that 'if I were to abolish the *tangena* . . . I would regret it my whole life long. If this form of judgement ceased to exist, the most terrible anarchy would prevail throughout the island'. He did, however, tell Sergeant Hastie that he thought the use of *tangena* was 'barbarous', and at one stage decreed that it should be used on animals only.[68] According to Raombana, educated in England, the king 'disbelieved in the virtues of the *Tangena* ordeal'.[69] Such 'disbelief', though, is better understood as a choice about how power could best be channelled rather than as a crisis of conscience. Radama was encouraged by Europeans to reject the religious form of rule developed by his father. An intermediary between heaven and earth, and only a teenager at the time of his accession, he asserted his independence from the counsellors and officials he had inherited from his father. As a demi-god Radama felt unconstrained by tradition or custom. Impressed with the superiority of British power, transmitted

[66] *Tantaran' ny Andriana*, iii, 206, 213–14, which also names some of these officers.

[67] See Ellis, *History of Madagascar*, ii, 411–12, and Raombana, *Histoires*, ed. Ayache, ii, 253–63, for British and Malagasy accounts of some similar anecdotes.

[68] Quoted in Decary, *Les Ordalies et sacrifices rituels*, 15.

[69] Raombana, *Histoires*, ed. Ayache, ii, 267.

through such ritual objects as Bibles and books, he based his power on the creation of a standing army, officered by men from various parts of Imerina and beyond, with British and French instructors. At his death, his army commander was actually a Jamaican sergeant, James Brady, seconded from the British army.[70] Radama's policy was to shift his father's old elite into the new category of civilians, especially appointing them as judges.[71] Members of this older elite displaced by Radama conspired to put their own candidate on the throne when Radama died in 1828 and were to triumph in the in-fighting that followed.

Despite the disrespect with which he treated religious customs, so potent was the *tangena* ordeal that not even Radama dared abolish it entirely. 'Literally speaking', Raombana wrote in relation to a slightly later period, 'the *Tangena* ordeal is the sovereign of Madagascar'.[72] The noble Andriamasinavalona group that Radama's father had charged with the administration of the poison consisted of certain families enjoying high rank and privilege inherited from their royal ancestors. Traditionally, families classed as Andriamasinavalona, although having high prestige, were not always wealthy and did not always enjoy political power. They were more like a Hindu caste[73] than a European feudal nobility. Andrianampoinimerina, seeking a means of ruling his enlarged kingdom, tried to turn the Andriamasinavalona into a nobility of service, incorporating conquered kings into the group and giving them authority to administer the *tangena* poison in tandem with his judicial officers. Over time, a deep hostility was to arise between these noble families and the coterie of military chiefs who had fought King Andrianampoinimerina's wars, who were mostly from commoner families in his home territory, and who drew most benefit from the political in-fighting after 1828.

As expansion and European contact opened up unprecedented new opportunities, it was overwhelmingly the commoner generals who grew rich on war and slave trading. When Radama's armies conquered Madagascar's main sea-ports, the centralization of

[70] *Boky Firaketana ny Fiteny sy ny Zavatra Malagasy* [Treasury of Malagasy Expressions and Things] (publication in instalments, Antananarivo, 1937–), entry on 'Andriamihaja'.

[71] Larson, *History and Memory in the Age of Enslavement*, 223–4.

[72] Raombana, *Histoires*, ed. Ayache, i, 47.

[73] Georges Condominas, *Fokon'olona et collectivités rurales en Imerina* (Paris, 1960), 119–30, refers to the orders of Merina society as 'castes', although most anthropologists avoid the term.

power enabled rival factions at the royal court in Antananarivo to recruit personal retinues of clients, dependants and military retainers throughout the provinces. Thus, the bitter rivalries between various families present at the royal court, some of elevated traditional status and others having risen to prominence only recently through the slave trade and success in war, some newly classified as military and others as civilian, were transmitted throughout the kingdom. Added to a general hostility between high-rank families and the new generation of generals were bitter rivalries between senior military men themselves.

V

THE *TANGENA* ORDEAL UNDER RANAVALONA I

From the military coup of 1828 until Madagascar's conquest by France in 1895, the real arbiters of power were a handful of generals, most notably from a family known as the Andafiavaratra ('on the north side', so called from the position they occupied at court), who ruled from behind the throne. During the reign of Ranavalona I, before the definitive opening of Madagascar to Europeans, the poison ordeal came to play a key role in factional conflict at court, in the manipulation of political power more generally, and in the government of a state which had expanded to include population groups historically independent of any ruler based in Antananarivo.

Queen Ranavalona was under the influence, noted the Reverend David Jones of the LMS, of 'a number of superstitious men who did put her on the throne and who were the ministers of Radama's father'.[74] Since the poison ordeal was regarded as the surest means of detecting *mosavy*, and had been turned by the founder of the united Merina kingdom into the key instrument of royal justice, it may be understood that a restoration of the system of governance through traditional religion, spurned by Radama I, required the general use of *tangena* once more. Radama I's innovations, moreover, had created all manner of social conflicts likely to stimulate accusations of *mosavy* from below, through the creation of a standing army and the division of families that this involved, the expansion of forced labour and

[74] Archives of the London Missionary Society (LMS), School of Oriental and African Studies, London: Incoming letters, box 2, folder 4, jacket D: Jones to Arundel, Antananarivo, 10 Sept. 1828.

the arrival in Imerina of massive numbers of slaves. French ships, attempting to restore France's position in the Indian Ocean, bombarded ports on the east coast, creating fears of an invasion in Antananarivo. It was in this febrile atmosphere that the queen ordered her first general administration of the *tangena* poison ordeal to all civilians, in an established procedure neglected by Radama I, whereby each district was required to use a ballot to identify a number of people suspected of *mosavy*, as a way of cleansing the kingdom.[75]

The group of conspirators who had brought Ranavalona to the throne was quite extensive, however, and included one of Radama's technocrats, Andriamihaja, 'a brilliant young man who knew English and French, very handsome, skilful, immaculately dressed, and very accomplished in European ways', according to later tradition.[76] Missionary sources agree that he was 'the principal man in all the events that conducted Ranavalona to the throne'.[77] The queen appointed him as her army commander, took him as a lover and conceived a child, almost certainly by him. This debonair general was much resented by other courtiers and generals who had lost ground but who had useful connections outside the army, notably through the networks of religious functionaries and family and district heads whom Radama had increasingly placed in charge of the religious duties that he himself disdained. Andriamihaja's main rivals were two brothers, Rainiharo and Rainimaharo, who, using their influence with the keepers of the *sampy* and the chief diviners, succeeded in convincing the queen that Andriamihaja was plotting against her. He was excluded from court and charged with *mosavy*. Among his accusers were the son and grandson of an official Andrianampoinimerina had appointed to conduct the poison ordeal thirty years earlier. Realizing that he had been outmanoeuvred and that the deadly poison would be administered in such a way as to ensure his death, Andriamihaja refused to submit to the ordeal, whereupon his enemies had him stabbed to death.[78]

[75] This procedure is described in *Tantaran' ny Andriana*, iii, 217–26; for the 1829 episode, see *ibid.*, v, 104–5.

[76] *Boky Firaketana ny Fiteny sy ny Zavatra Malagasy*, 'Andriamihaja'.

[77] Freeman and Johns, *Narrative of the Persecution of the Christians in Madagascar*, 17.

[78] *Ibid.*; *Tantaran' ny Andriana*, v, 122–5; *Boky Firaketana ny Fiteny sy ny Zavatra Malagasy*, 'Andriamihaja'.

Through its use in the death of the army commander and royal consort, *tangena* had become not only an instrument of government but also a weapon of elite rivalry. Thus the brothers Rainiharo and Rainimaharo, now in effective control of the army, soon discovered that rivals with influence among the civilian corps of judges and among leading noble families were prepared to make full use of this resource: it was the judges and the Andriamasinavalona nobles who had the authority to administer the poison ordeal, though all manner of senior officials could bring their influence to bear through intrigue. Probably the main supporter of the *tangena* was Rainijohary, a rival politician with particular support among the old nobility and some of the civilian judges empowered to administer the *tangena* ordeal.[79] Thus, even though Rainiharo was the effective prime minister, he was unable to prevent his own wife and sister-in-law, two sisters, and a female cousin falling victim to an accusation of sorcery. All five were subjected to the poison ordeal and failed to vomit the pieces of chicken-skin they had swallowed, as was required for proof of innocence; all were strangled. According to the Malagasy-speaking French courtier Jean Laborde, this episode served to temper Rainiharo's enthusiasm for the *tangena* ordeal.[80]

There are known to have been at least three general applications of the poison using the ballot system during the reign of Ranavalona I. These were in 1829, 1843 and 1860,[81] the general administration of 1843 being intended to clean the kingdom for performance of a national circumcision ceremony.[82] Beyond these three general ordeals, the use of *tangena* against local officials was reported from various parts of the island and in a great variety of circumstances. In 1836 the government sent out an order to arrest any of the queen's Merina subjects who had gone to other districts of the island to trade without a permit. Many of those arrested were forced to undergo the poison ordeal, allowing a handful of senior officials and army officers to create trade mono-

[79] C. de la Vaissière, *Vingt ans à Madagascar* (Paris, 1885), 123. The source is Jean Laborde.

[80] Recorded in the journal of Finaz, for the years 1855–7 (see n. 27 above). The story of Rainiharo's family is in the copy by Boudou, 246. It is almost certain that Laborde was Finaz's source.

[81] Rainandriamampandry, 'Tantarany Madagascar', ARM, Royal Archives, sér. SS12, fo. 97^{r-v}.

[82] Bloch, *From Blessing to Violence*, 118.

polies for themselves.[83] Rival military leaders with extensive patronage networks sometimes accused district heads loyal to their rivals of disloyalty to the queen, forcing them to undergo the poison ordeal. Queen Ranavalona's private secretary — the same Raombana who was secretly writing a history of his times — wrote that the poison ordeal was used by leading army officers to attack the client-networks of various rivals and to acquire slaves, cattle and goods from those they accused.[84] The son of one of Jean Laborde's slaves later described how, when the queen went on a provincial tour to visit the Frenchman's workshops in 1850, she was afraid of travelling through a district notorious for harbouring unofficial charms. She had the entire area encircled by troops; its people were forced to undergo the poison ordeal, and the result was thousands of deaths.[85]

There was a wide range of circumstances in which people might accuse each other in ordinary disputes, even cases of theft, resulting in the visit of judges and administration of the poison ordeal.[86] Slave-owners were allowed to administer the poison to their own slaves, and routinely did so if they suspected that an illness or death in the family was caused by malefice, but even if found guilty, slaves were quite often sold rather than executed.[87] The old convention that persons making unsuccessful accusations of witchcraft must themselves undergo the poison ordeal seems to have disappeared, at least in the case of accusations emanating from royal officials. What remained was the practice of dividing the goods of a victim between the accuser and the government.[88] Visiting the royal court of Imerina, the Austrian traveller Ida Pfeiffer noted the blatant self-interest which seemed to motivate so many accusations, since government officials were able to confiscate the goods of those condemned.[89] Great numbers of

[83] Public Record Office, London, Foreign Office Papers, ser. 48, file 1: Johns to col. sec. Mauritius, 30 Oct. 1837, quoted in G. S. Chapus, 'Nouveaux documents sur l'époque de Radama Ier et Ranavalona Ière', typescript copies of archives from London and Mauritius, Académie malgache, Antananarivo, AM 325, 289–92.

[84] Raombana, 'Annales', 932–55, 1058–68 of original text (to be published, ed. Simon Ayache).

[85] Manuscript by Raalbert, quoted in Chevalier, *Madagascar*, 66 (n. 2).

[86] Listed in W. E. Cousins, *Fomba Malagasy* [Malagasy Customs], ed. H. Randzavola (1876; Antananarivo, 1955), 84–98.

[87] See n. 32 above.

[88] *Tantaran' ny Andriana*, iii, 102.

[89] Ida Pfeiffer, *Voyage à Madagascar (avril–septembre 1857)* (1862; Paris, 1981), 150–1.

accusations were due, according to Finaz, 'to the most base passions, to hatred, vengeance, and an insatiable cupidity'.[90] The queen or one of her officials would periodically command a particular village or region to deliver up any unofficial amulets in their possession (taken to include Bibles and other Christian objects), ordering suspects to be tested with the *tangena* ordeal.[91] Some people even denounced themselves. One of the incentives for doing this was that it would save their families from being reduced into slavery, the normal procedure in cases where conviction followed denunciation by a third party.

The surviving archives of the old Merina government, housed in the modern Malagasy national archives, contain no known records of trials involving the use of *tangena*.[92] There is not enough information to say much about the incidence of applications of the ordeal in terms of age, gender, locality, status and so forth, except to say that it seems to have been administered more in central Imerina than on the fringes of the kingdom, and both as a result of accusations from the general population as well as from officials. Probably proportionally more freemen than slaves died from the ordeal.[93] There is no obvious distinction between men and women.

In a case from 1857 recounted by Finaz, the people of one small area had been given one month to produce anyone guilty of an offence. When not enough suspects were forthcoming, the government gave them another month, on pain of administration of the poison ordeal.[94] Fourteen soldiers were burned alive, sixty-five condemned to death by stabbing, 1,237 people were sentenced to chains, and five thousand were sold into slavery.[95] Finaz compared the atmosphere to the French terror of 1793, which was still just about within living memory:[96]

> No one dare leave the house, for fear of never returning. No one dare stay at home, for fear of being dragged from there to a place of execution when least expected. Men tremble for their wives and children, for these

[90] Finaz, original diary (see n. 27 above), 44.

[91] For example, ARM, Royal Archives, sér. III CC 146: Rainimanga to Ranavalona I, 5 Adijady 1857.

[92] This was based on my own rapid search in 1999, and is also confirmed by Françoise Raison-Jourde.

[93] Campbell, 'State and Pre-Colonial Demographic History', 438, thinks otherwise, but I can see no evidence for this.

[94] Finaz, original diary (see n. 27 above), 38–9.

[95] *Ibid.*, 45.

[96] *Ibid.*, entry for May 1857.

are sold and all their possessions confiscated if the head of the family is accused, which is to say if he is condemned; for the slightest hint of denunciation is enough to warrant execution, without the victim even being informed of the grounds on which he is condemned.

VI

EXPLANATIONS AND COMPARISONS

Belief in some form of metaphysical evil exists in many societies, bearing at least some resemblance to what was known as witchcraft in early modern England and English-speaking North America. Hence, it is not surprising that writers in English have consistently translated as 'witchcraft' the belief that we have until this point referred to by its Malagasy name of *mosavy*. No technique of social science can determine whether witchcraft and *mosavy* 'really' exist. They are among the many moral artefacts that societies produce, 'a construction of the real', in the words of one American author, 'no more or less intellectual than its analogues in [American] society — "race", the "value" of gold, the "self" and its cognates'.[97]

In the introduction to this article it was claimed that it is desirable to compare African and non-African beliefs, but that precautions need to be taken as one may not be comparing like with like. Where the comparative approach seems most incisive is in the study of how the consequences of such belief may be translated into social and political action, for here we are dealing with events that can be recorded, visible actions rather than invisible beliefs. This occurs, for example, when one person accuses another of being a witch. A great variety of societies maintain some category of officially labelled deviance, to which are consigned 'those who commit acts perceived as transgressing the fundamental moral axioms on which human nature, and hence social life, is based'.[98] The behaviour of such dangerous and anti-social wrong-doers is often thought to be the mirror-image of that which is desirable in terms of sex, eating habits and ideological orientation.[99] Since such categories of infamy are conceived within a dominant ideology or discourse that may or may not be

[97] Karen Fields, 'Political Contingencies of Witchcraft in Colonial Central Africa: Culture and the State in Marxist Theory', *Canadian Jl African Studies*, xvi (1982), 586.

[98] J. S. La Fontaine, *Speak of the Devil: Tales of Satanic Abuse in Contemporary England* (Cambridge, 1998), 14.

[99] *Ibid.*, 180.

religious in the sense of supposing the existence of invisible, spiritual forces, then it is in theory possible to compare the way in which people are consigned to such a category of infamy in different places and times, or in other words to write a comparative sociology of scapegoating. An authoritative account of Stalinist purges in the 1930s Soviet Union, for example, explicitly notes the 'many similarities' between that pursuit of people deemed existentially evil and earlier European witch-hunting.[100] A study of the persecution of people perceived as sexual deviants in modern Britain makes a similar analogy.[101] Although neither of these last-cited cases concerns so-called 'witches', both are comparable inasmuch as they concern the use of power to label certain people as deviants and to hound them, often to their deaths. It appears that if those who wield power in a given polity or community believe or construe it to be necessary, or perhaps simply in their interest, to eliminate such deviants, then the resulting purge will inevitably be imagined and described in whatever ideology or discourse is paramount in a particular time and place. Societies in which the invisible world has a high importance — such as that of old Madagascar — are likely to perceive such threats in terms of spiritual subversion.

In old Madagascar, the precise manner in which the life-force known as *hasina* could be acquired was the very stuff of politics. The revolution which occurred in the central highlands in the late eighteenth century and which led to the formation of the Merina kingdom was also a process of centralizing the institutional forms through which *hasina* was channelled. We have seen that King Andrianampoinimerina assembled a pantheon consisting of the protective devices of various groups whose allegiance he had secured. These group protectors — *sampy* — were, in the language of social science, both religious and political symbols. The Malagasy of that time hardly distinguished between these two fields. Royal control of the sources of spiritual power entailed a concentration of control over the means of coercion and material reward. The circumstances were such as to create exceptional opportunities for individuals to gain wealth and power that, moreover, tended to escape regulation by traditional procedures. Some of these became collaborators of the king while their relations to

[100] J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932–1939* (New Haven, 1999), 7.
[101] La Fontaine, *Speak of the Devil.*

their own kin, to whom they were joined by strong bonds of solidarity, became deeply ambiguous.[102] The social hierarchy became unstable at the top, where heaven and earth were joined through the sovereign, and at the bottom, where farmers were bound to the soil.

Andrianampoinimerina's successors continued the work of centralizing power through innovations that included the standing army, mission-schools, an expanded system of forced labour, and the beginnings of a government bureaucracy. Still, power remained embedded in webs of social relationships of obligation and dependency that took visible form in ritual actions and objects and audible form in words. Merina sovereigns assumed, like their subjects, that the proper order of the cosmos was always vulnerable to subversion by unruly forces articulated by human agents, the *mpamosavy* or witches.

King Radama I pursued his goal of island-wide control through alliance with Great Britain, encouraging LMS missionaries to found Christian schools and awarding key administrative positions to his own favourites rather than to the supporters of his late father. This was accompanied by a suspension of royal favour towards the national pantheon of *sampy*, such a key instrument of his father's rule. Among the conspirators who masterminded the coup d'état of 1828 were leading figures associated with the national pantheon who had lost power in the preceding decade. Thereafter, the government of Queen Ranavalona I, while continuing to import Western technology and to centralize power, found it prudent to restore the national pantheon.

In short, the kingdom of Madagascar as it emerged over several generations was governed by an elite whose ambition was to create an island-wide state, but which struggled to locate forms of control and legitimacy appropriate to this ambition. The semi-divine figure of the sovereign was the obvious focus. With only a brief interlude when King Radama I experimented with new forms of domination which soon led to an acute political and social reaction, the government used the language of ancestral religion to justify itself until the 1860s, when the opening to Europe entailed the establishment of an alternative political and religious vision. Previously, the idea of an alternative power had been unthinkable except as a form of subversion, necessarily

[102] Raison-Jourde, *Bible et pouvoir à Madagascar*, 106.

spiritual in nature; no political thought was permissible outside the scope of the ruling power. Traditional *mosavy* beliefs became incorporated into a quasi-nationalist ideology in which religious heterodoxy became a political crime.[103] This is a process very similar to what has been observed by some historians of early modern Europe concerning the conditions in which the witch-hunts of those times occurred.[104] Accusations of *mosavy* and, in consequence, application of the *tangena* ordeal, became a redoubtable weapon in competition among factions of the national elite. With the grandees of the royal court recruiting partisans and clients country-wide, this process affected every level of power as rival groups struggled for advantage. Accusations and subjection to the poison ordeal escaped the control of any particular person or faction. Courtiers accused each other, local officials accused other officials, people accused neighbours out of fear, greed or revenge. All the jealousies and rivalries of any society (but in this case, one undergoing profound changes associated with the centralization of government, large population movements, a massive death-toll from war, poison and disease,[105] and the accumulation of impressive fortunes by oligarchs) risked being subsumed into accusations of witchcraft. The effect was deadly.

During the process of centralization associated with the rise of the Merina kingdom, with its rulers' ambition to dominate all of Madagascar, notions of the proper order and of its possible subversion changed markedly, partly through European influence. In general, the European visitors, missionaries and military advisers who stayed in Imerina in the early nineteenth century actually wrote rather little about sorcery or witchcraft as these might be identified in local religious practices, and were far more concerned to combat other forms of 'wrong' religion which they often labelled as 'superstition' or 'idolatry'. The writings of early nineteenth-century missionaries to Madagascar support the view that it was a later generation of European travellers to Africa that identified Africa generally as 'the heartland of witchcraft and magic', as opposed to other forms of supposed religious error.[106] Of greater influence in the witch-purges of the mid nineteenth

[103] *Ibid.*, 289.

[104] Christina Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief* (Oxford, 1984), 89–90, 124, 128.

[105] Campbell, 'State and Pre-Colonial Demographic History'.

[106] Peter Pels, 'The Magic of Africa: Reflections on a Western Commonplace', *African Studies Rev.*, xli (1998), 195.

century was the European tendency to identify the sovereign as an absolute monarch, an idea deliberately supported by very active British diplomatic and military aid to Radama I and unintentionally stimulated by missionary teachings concerning the King of Heaven. 'Is Andriamanjaka and Andriananahary (King and God) the same?', some LMS missionaries were asked in 1823. 'Yes', they replied 'but one is in heaven and the other upon earth'.[107] The translation of Christian ideas and the Bible into Malagasy gave new meanings to existing concepts. While these strengthened in many ways the old Malagasy idea of the sovereign as the monarch at the centre of the earth, they also introduced an expectation, profoundly threatening to the oligarchy that ruled half of Madagascar, of a millennial reign when justice would prevail on earth.[108] The queen herself described Christianity as 'the substitution of the respect of her ancestors . . . for the respect of the ancestor of the whites: Jesus Christ'.[109] Those who formally accepted Christianity were seen as devotees of a foreign dynasty rivalling the sovereigns of Imerina.

The kingdom remained founded on a conception of power as a metaphysical force channelled to the living. The *tangena* poison ordeal, in spite of its extensive use (or abuse) by courtiers, enjoyed a high degree of legitimacy as a political and religious instrument. One of the set forms of application of the *tangena*, in fact, was known as *horon'ondrin' ny mpianakavy*, in which it was administered to an entire family or clan at their own request.[110] Raombana wrote that the people were so convinced 'of the sacredness of the *Tangena* ordeal . . . that in law-suits they prefer their cases to be decided by it'.[111] A missionary agreed that '[o]ne of the most remarkable things in connection with this ordeal was the implicit faith of the people generally in its supernatural power'.[112] Queen Ranavalona I herself was so terrified of becoming a victim of sorcery that she routinely caused the poison ordeal to be administered to servants on entry into her service as a form of screening, and whenever she was ill or had bad dreams.[113]

[107] LMS Journals 1/7: Griffiths, Jones, Canham entry for 16 Sept. 1823.
[108] Raison-Jourde, *Bible et pouvoir à Madagascar*, 133–8.
[109] Quoted in Bloch, *From Blessing to Violence*, 19.
[110] Decary, *Les Ordalies et sacrifices rituels*, 24–7.
[111] Quoted in Campbell, 'State and Pre-Colonial Demographic History', 437.
[112] James Sibree, *The Great African Island* (London, 1880), 282.
[113] Finaz, quoted in de la Vaissière, *Histoire de Madagascar*, i, 256.

To cease using *tangena* without adopting some other form of anti-witchcraft prophylactic in its place was, in the opinion of many nineteenth-century Malagasy, an invitation to disaster. 'Now is the reign of the sorcerers', one Merina villager told a European missionary in 1880, explaining that the abolition of the *tangena* and other aspects of traditional religion by a government now officially converted to Christianity had deprived people of the main defence against spiritual subversion.[114] And indeed, the Christian government that continued in power from the conversion of Queen Ranavalona II and her prime minister to Christianity in 1868–9 until the annexation of the island by France, was unable to maintain whatever political integrity Imerina had previously had. It could not enforce the extraordinary degree of social control which had been achieved by its predecessors in Imerina in the early nineteenth century, and perhaps in some other regions of the island at earlier periods. Nor has any subsequent government of Madagascar, colonial or post-colonial, been able to achieve the same.

The control of perceived witchcraft was itself a form of government in old Madagascar. Like all forms of government, it could be used for purposes of narrow self-interest, as noted by a missionary who described the poison ordeal as 'this convenient method for the removal of prominently obtrusive members of "the opposition" '.[115] But to describe the mid nineteenth-century witch-hunts as political is not to imply that the people who engaged in them had no belief in what they were doing. It is probably more accurate to think of this particular cosmology as an inclusive language which governed private thoughts as well as public discourse.

Since the mid nineteenth century this religious construction has been dismantled, first by the conversion of Queen Ranavalona II and her prime minister to Christianity in 1868–9 and, later, by the creation of a secular state by the French colonial administration. Nevertheless, nowadays most Malagasy probably still believe that *mosavy* exists and that measures need to be taken to guard against it. Although post-colonial governments have occasionally tried to turn elements of traditional religion into political

[114] Diaire d'Ambohidratrimo, entry for 14 June 1880, Archives historiques de l'archevêché, Andohalo, Antananarivo, sér. 'Diaires', no. 98.

[115] H. H. Cousins, 'Tanghin, or the Poison Ordeal of Madagascar', *Antananarivo Annual*, v (1896), 387.

capital, and elements of it remain important in daily life, they have never been officially incorporated into the structures of the state.[116] And so, the fight against witchcraft takes place in a private and piecemeal fashion.

In retrospect, the great witch-hunts were intrinsic to the articulation of a religious and political power that proved unable to endure, not least because of the vast inequities and ambiguities with which it was associated. For power does not reside in persons or things, but 'in the interstices between persons and between things, that is to say *in relations*'.[117] This, too, is precisely where the artefact we call witchcraft is perceived to exist.

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[116] Malanjaona Rakotomalala, Sophie Blanchy and Françoise Raison-Jourde, *Madagascar: les ancêtres au quotidien* (Paris, 2001), 14–16.

[117] Edmund Leach, quoted in Elizabeth Tonkin, 'Masks and Power', *Man*, new ser., xiv (1979), 247.