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The Sakalava Pilgrimage as a Royal Service (Western Madagascar)

Summary

My contribution presents a case study of pilgrimage and procession connected to the main shrine of the Sakalava royalty in western Madagascar. Sakalava pilgrimage developed within a cultural logic decidedly outside the Western world and is perceived as one of many aspects of royal work (*fanompoa*), performed to confirm and to reassure the relationship with royal ancestors. The renewal of family relations, friendship and identity is a natural part of this event, in particular, for those coming from abroad. My contribution will focus on the meaning of what can be described as Sakalava pilgrimage, and its changes throughout time and space. The analysis of more than 300 years of historical changes reveals, among others, manifold impacts of global conditions on the more recent development of Sakalava pilgrimage.

Keywords: Transformation of a royal residence into a religious shrine; colonial policy; negotiation of meanings; Sakalava; Madagascar; Boeny kingdom

Das ethnographische Fallbeispiel untersucht die besonderen Formen von Pilgerschaft und Prozession im Kontext des zentralen Königsschreins der Sakalava im westlichen Madagaskar. ‚Pilgern‘ entstand hier im Rahmen einer dezidiert nicht-westlichen Logik und wird von den Akteuren zunächst als eine von vielen Aspekten königlicher Arbeit (*fanompoa*) verstanden, wodurch die Beziehung zu den königlichen Ahnen erhalten und gefestigt werden kann. Der vorgelegte Text erörtert die spezifische Vorstellungswelt der Sakalava-Pilgerschaft im Kontext einer mehr als 300 Jahre langen Entwicklung. Die ursprünglich dominierende Funktion einer Bekräftigung der königlichen Machtposition wurde in neuerer Zeit in Folge der Entmachtung der Könige durch vielfältige neue religiöse, soziale und identitäre Aspekte ergänzt.

Keywords: Transformation einer königlichen Residenz in einen religiösen Schrein; Kolonialpolitik; Bedeutungswandel; Sakalava; Madagaskar; Boeny-Königreich

The results presented here are based upon preliminary fieldwork dedicated to the Doany Miarinarivo (about 15 months) between 1999 and 2000 and supported by the German

Academic Exchange Service. A systematic exploration of the Sakalava *doany* all along the west coast (2005–2008) and a political anthropology of the mid-west district Besalampy and the local Sakalava kingdoms (2010–2013) were subsequently supported by the German Research Foundation. I gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the above-mentioned institutions.

I Introduction: approaching the sacred in Mahajanga

On the north-eastern outskirts of the port town of Mahajanga, the urban center of north-western Madagascar, is a place known as Doany Miarinarivo, Doany Andriamisara Efadahy Manankasina, Doany Andriamisara or simply *the* Doany of Mahajanga. Visitors come here to pay homage to the mortal remains of four prominent royal ancestors of the main dynasty of the west coast, the so-called ‘Blessed Four Brothers Andriamisara’ (Andriamisara Efadahy). A particular occasion within the annual cycle is the ritual of the ‘big royal work’ (*fanompoabe*) in July, when several thousand people, including many mediums, i.e. individuals possessed by royal ancestors of the west coast dynasty, convene.

The categorization of these visitors as ‘pilgrims’ in the most conventional sense must be taken as read, given a location deemed sacred or religious in a broad sense, a shrine, which is the focus of the spatial movement of people of very different origins in search of transcendental help and support. The considerations presented here suggest, though, that such interpretation is, within the given social-cultural context, far less common than the dominant Western view, which is impregnated by a Christian or monotheistic iconography, would allow to predict. Arguably, these ‘pilgrims’ regularly occupy multiple roles far beyond that of being a ‘pure’ pilgrim: they may be subjects of the dynasty and various local kingdoms, mediums of royal ancestors, members of the royal family or the Sakalava¹ identity group, or even tourists or part of the large diaspora community, paying an annual visit to family and region of origin. The interpretation of the *doany* as a ‘simple’ place of pilgrimage can also be questioned by looking at its historical background. It may be asked, e.g. if the former signification of the *doany* as a royal residence actually has been given up, or if the spatial transformation of the former royal residence

1 Ethnic denomination of the west-coast population related to the Sakalava kingdoms, a chain of neo-traditional institutions, connected by the supremacy of the Maroseraña dynasty, dynastical kinship relations and by history, located all along the main

part of the west coast (between the town of Tuléar and the island of Nosy Be, but including as well Mayotte, the most eastern island of the Comoros archipelago, today a French domain).

into a place of worship of royal ancestors was successful. Should these and other changes rather be regarded as a tendency towards sacredness or, better, as a form of camouflage in the context of an uneven balance of power? Finally, should the description of the visitors as ‘pilgrims’ be seen not only as a simple misunderstanding on cultural grounds but also as an anticipated or even deliberate effect by local actors, the result of a long chain of interactions and reflections between ‘Western’ and Sakalava ideas of sacredness, power and identity in the context of different constellations of politics and economic interests?

The aim of this contribution is to elaborate the complexity and the ambiguity of those relations and networks as they crystallized in particular at the Doany Miarinarivo, and to come to a fuller comprehension of the current dynamic of ‘Sakalava pilgrimage’ within the modern Malagasy State.

Let us first have a look at some of the constellations of this *doany*, which has been the subject of a number of publications.² Based mainly on data gathered between 1999 and 2000, the situation may be described as follows: Viewed from the city center of the port town of Mahajanga, which is situated on a peninsula and projects like a spur deep into the impressive bay of Bombetoka, the shrine appears peripheral. Situated about five kilometers on the north-eastern outskirts of the town, the Doany Miarinarivo is nowadays in a quarter of the town (*fokontany*) called Tsararano-Ambony (‘Upper Freshwater’). Until recently Tsararano was on the edge of Mahajanga, but during the last decades this quarter has developed into a popular residential area of the Malagasy middle and lower social strata. The ongoing construction of new houses and the enlargement of older ones, if possible using stones or concrete, is driven by a fast-growing population and the continual influx of people from rural areas, for whom this quarter serves often as a first stop. The implementation of an urban infrastructure is happening more slowly, but via the construction of roads made of bitumen, access to electricity and the provision of education facilities is leading visibly to increasing urbanization. All this is changing the appearance of the Tsararano quarter year by year. At a crossroads near the university campus the visitor encounters a domain characterized by the features of what may be described as a typical Sakalava village, common along the west coast but appearing unusual, traditional or even old-fashioned within the context of the new urbanity of the quarter: small huts built from the Bismarck palm (*satrana*, scientific name: *Bismarckia nobilis*) are distributed in a rather irregular manner on a small hillside, without the boundaries and shelters such as fences or walls often topped with pieces of broken glass which mark regularly the property within the new urban housing area on the border.

People who are less familiar with this particular locality could easily believe that it is the remnant of an original Sakalava village, which resisted for some hazards the rapid

2 More recently e.g. Ballarin 2000 and Ballarin 2006; Lambek 2002; Kneitz 2003.

evolution to which the surrounding Tsararano quarter was subject in recent years. A plate, though, quite improvised in appearance, draws the attention to a number of rules of conduct, allowing the visitor to comprehend that the *raison d'être* of this location is very different. The striking architectural particularities are, therefore, the result of a conscious effort, of an idea of a place, as will be seen, which underlies a historical 'law' enshrining a seemingly rather conservative view: the boundaries of the small *doany*-village are attained.

Experienced visitors know that the entry to the village is possible every day except Tuesday and Thursday, but to the shrine building itself only on Monday, Friday or Saturday. After a short walk in a north-easterly direction a space lined with mighty mango trees (*manga*) behind the village houses appears. Drawing closer, one comes to understand that the function of this space is to serve as a courtyard to a rectangular stone building (*doany*, *zomba*) hiding behind an original palisade trench (*valamena*) made out of concrete pickets. This particular construction, situated on the top of a small elevation and encompassing the shrine, is what is called more specifically the *doany*. As the *doany* hill slopes on the eastern side rather steeply and has no pathway, allowing the development of a 'wild' area not put to any particular use, access is clearly limited to the western, southern and north-western parts.

In about 2000, a supplicant desiring to approach the sanctuary would have experienced approximately the following sequence of actions. Arriving visitors usually are dressed up and would sit on the enormous roots of the mango trees, the 'waiting room' of the shrine. One after another they are received by the long-serving guardian Edouard or (with his shortened name) Doara,³ called as well *fabatelo* (i.e. guardian, his title in the context of the *doany*),⁴ in a small hut south of the outer courtyard. The guardian is first informed of the purpose of the visit. The hut offers the opportunity to adapt later one's clothing to the particular demands of the *doany*, in particular a sort of popular cloth wrapped around the waist (*lambahoany*), instead of trousers and underwear, to remove shoes, socks, watches or glasses, or to weave hair into loose braids. Once this is accomplished, the supplicants walk behind the guardian, passing the entrance of the palisade (*valamena*), right foot first, crossing the small court (also called the *valaicmena*) and finally reaching the south-western door. They enter a sparsely equipped and ornated chamber, measuring about six by eight meters and plunged into twilight, as only two doors and small window openings allow the light to enter. Only the north-eastern corner is striking: a huge curtain of white cloth (*safoday*) protects it but reveals at the same

3 He has been the guardian for more than two decades – Estrade 1985, 37, met Doara's father in the mid-1970s – and has been decisive in a number of crises and difficult situations.

4 Literally 'The Third', the name usually given to the third-ranking individual of the Boeny kingdom, behind the king and the highest-ranking noble, called *manantany*. Today, in fact, the *fabatelo* is the most influential person in the Doany Miarinarivo and the Kingdom of Boeny.

time vaguely a small wooden stilt-house (*zomba vinta*). The guardian and the visitors sit down in front of the curtain, and therefore just in front of the hidden stilt house as well, as close as possible to the royal ancestors, the ‘Four Blessed Brothers Andriamisara,’ whose relics are held to be stored in the house. An incense stick is lighted.

The group adopts a particular position for prayer, turning their palms to the ceiling, and Doara starts a prayer with a rather formalized beginning, invoking the four ancestors, before tailoring it to the expressed wishes and expectations of the visitors. Usually a small sacrifice of money, often just several hundred Ariary⁵ (but sometimes much larger and even impressive sums), accompanies the prayer, and the visitors receive in exchange some small pieces of limestone (*tanifoty*), which concretizes the benediction of the ancestors. As a symbol of the benediction received, the visitors’ chests are decorated with a white dot or other mark. Once the mission is accomplished, the guardian accompanies the visitors back to the mango trees outside the inner circle of sacredness.

2 Approaching the Sakalava pilgrimage

It seems only natural to term such visitors as ‘pilgrims,’ and to associate the spatial movement towards a holy place with the word ‘pilgrimage,’ especially as it developed within the practice of Christianity⁶. Such a designation is easily made, in particular as it is usual for the leading individuals of the *doany* to compare this place and its practice with Christianity and to use it as a model of reference. “The *doany*”, confirmed the guardian Doara during an interview in 1999, “should be understood as the ‘church of the Sakalava’”, a formulation which first appears at about the same time in a publication by Ramamonjisoa.⁷ The use by the guardian of the French word *église* (church) and its Malagasy equivalent *leglizinay*, usually adopted to designate Christian churches (the edifice as well as the institution), is particularly enlightening as it points clearly to a comparison of Sakalava and Christian religious practice. Such an analogy is not an abstract one but derives from personal experience, as the guardian and some of his family are members of the Roman Catholic Church, whereas the king (*mpanjaka*), called (at time of my research) with his shorthand personal name Dezy⁸ is a member of a Protestant church. Like Christians who go to church when they wish to pray, Doara explains, the disciples of the royal ancestors visit their *doany*. Likewise, it may be concluded, as Catholicism developed a worship of saints based regularly upon relics, which again became the center of a phe-

5 One Euro = 2500 to 2800 Malagasy Ariary (MGA) in the year 2000. The initial sacrifice of most visitors has a value of less than one Euro.

6 See the definition by Morinis 1992, 4.

7 Ramamonjisoa 1998; see Kneitz 2003, 2, 55.

8 Prince Désiré Noël Randrianirina. He died shortly after 2006.

nomenon called pilgrimage, the appearance of visitors at a *doany*-shrine can reasonably be seen as the expression of an equivalent behavior.

A more profound knowledge of the Doany Miarinarivo and other Sakalava shrines, the practices related to them, the protagonists and their ideas and historical developments, though, suggests the picture is not quite what it seems. The interpretation of the *doany* as a *Leglizinay Ny Sakalava* (church of the Sakalava) certainly touches on an important aspect, particularly obvious – in comparison with other shrines of the Sakalava – at the Doany Miarinarivo, which has an unusual urban and Christian or monotheistic setting. A closer inspection reveals nevertheless that the analogy sketched above could hide at least as much as it allows us to understand, and this with good reason, as already the existence of a public arena impregnated by secular norms of the Malagasy Republic, emphasizing the separation of politics and religion, and the particular importance of Christian norms and ideas of morality for the state suggest. It can be expected that the new understanding of the *doany* as a shrine is the result of an evolution which blended many different ideas and practices in a complex social process, going far beyond a mere tactical reevaluation in the context of the dominant Christian belief system. One piece in this difficult puzzle is the tendency of twentieth-century Western or European, largely French, individuals to identify the *doany* first of all as a shrine or holy place,⁹ and no longer as the royal residence and power center of the king. This view became later accepted by the decisive figures of royalty and was further developed within a situation of strong inequality of power.

The subsequent text considers the phenomenon of the ‘Sakalava-pilgrimage’ not only as a religious practice but tries to reveal as well its many more layers of significance going far beyond a ‘regular’ pilgrimage: as a subtle manifestation of the historical relationship of king and subject on the west coast of Madagascar, based on hierarchy and duty, as an expression of an elaborate possession system, which allows the participants, mediums and supplicants alike, to worship ancestors of different historical epochs simultaneously and to establish thereby a particular way of communication, or, among others, as a means of regional and ethnical identification, including the political. ‘To pilgrimage’ in the context of a Sakalava shrine includes all these aspects, expressed within the basic notion of royal work (*fanompoa*), as a manifestation of loyalty towards the king and in particular the ancestors of the Sakalava dynasty.

This case study offered within the context of an edition aiming at approaching the sacred is therefore embedded in a rather independent locus of socio-cultural development and meaning. ‘Pilgrimage’ in the sense of a religious journey, generally perceived as a phenomenon typical of all times and cultures,¹⁰ started to develop within the given context of the western Malagasy or Sakalava coast only quite recently, and the formerly

9 E.g. Rusillon 1912; Estrade 1985; Ballarin 2000, 247. 10 Morinis 1992, 1.

dominant political meanings of the movement towards the *doany* persist in a latent and sometimes subversive way. The study presented follows the historical and more recent elaborations of what seems at first glance a ‘classical phenomenon of pilgrimage’ within its particular socio-cultural logic but as well as the product of modernization, leading, among others, to the invention of distinctively religious and political spheres.¹¹ By asking, inter alia, if and why the visit to a *doany*, perceived in pre-colonial times as a royal residence, should be regarded today as a ‘truly’ pilgrimage phenomenon, the study offers the opportunity to question the peculiarity, the character and even the origin of pilgrimage.

3 Kings and royal work: pilgrimage in western Madagascar from the historical perspective

The word *doany* signifies in present-day western Madagascar ‘royal residence’ (of all Sakalava kings), ‘shrine’ (of royal Sakalava ancestors) and ‘holy place’ in a very broad sense, but typically related to a religious practice perceived as traditional and particular to Madagascar.¹² In spite of the apparent close relationship to the main traditional institution of Sakalava royalty, dating back to the beginning of the seventeenth century, the few clues available suggest somewhat surprisingly that the term *doany* was coined rather late. In historical documents of the 17th and 18th century the royal residences at the west coast are called *donac*,¹³ or *donat*.¹⁴ The word *lapa* appears as well, but was perhaps more used in the center and the east of the island.¹⁵ The regular word *doany* appears for the first time at the beginning of the 20th century, in a book published by the French missionary Rusillon¹⁶ on the possession of royal ancestry (*tromba*) in the Boeny region. He presents it without comment as a given or ‘natural’ word, and it is used in the same way as it is today. I could not find any etymological account of the word *doany* in existing literature, but a high-ranking member of the Boeny royal family¹⁷ suggested that this term derived from the Arabic *doha* (prayer), allowing to comprehend

11 See Coleman and Eade 2004.

12 The latter is the dominant meaning of the terme *doany* in other regions of Madagascar, certainly developed with respect to the particular Sakalava *doany*.

13 E.g. Rennefort 1668, 265, and Rennefort 1688, 125.

14 E.g. Saussay 1722, 205–206, concerning a report of 1663.

15 E.g. A. Grandidier and G. Grandidier 1903, 343 [publishing a report of Houtman in 1603]. In the book by Flacourt (Flacourt 1995 [1661], 157), the word *lapa* is used for a ceremonial hut at a circum-

cision feast and meant here something like ‘church’ (“autant à dire qu’eglise”). The double meaning of royal residence and ‘church’ as both a political and religious place is therefore inherent in this term, as in the word *doany* today.

16 Rusillon 1912.

17 Personal communication (2000) from Mr. Bachir Soudjay, former member of the senate and president of the main Islamic association on Madagascar. The royal dynasty of the Boeny is still strongly influenced by Islamic belief.

doany as ‘a place of prayer.’¹⁸ This explanation corresponds quite well with the particularly strong relationship between the Islam and the royal dynasty since the conversion of the last king of independent Boeny, Andriantsoly (who reigned from ca. 1820 until 1824).¹⁹ It could allow to make understandable why plausibly the term ‘*doany*’ appears so late, even if the history of Sakalava royal residences goes back to the 16th century. For the moment at least it seems reasonable to sketch the following development: the word *doany* was presumably only introduced within the context of the progressive Islamization of the Boeny dynasty throughout the nineteenth century, a dynamic paralleled by the disempowerment of the kings and the new, more ‘religious’ veneration of the former residence, eventually enhanced by a linguistic process associating the Arabic based word *doany* with the older words for royal residence, *donac* and *donat*. It seems therefore reasonable to conclude that the denomination of all Sakalava royal residences or shrines on the west coast as *doany* is a rather new phenomenon, which developed perhaps during the second half of the nineteenth century. Both meanings of the *doany*, as royal residence and as shrine, are used today in a parallel and overlapping way all along the west coast, and it depends inter alia on the speaker and the particular place and context, which is preferred. To prevent an unhistorical use of the word *doany*, suggesting a wrong retrospective interpretation, it is used in this article only to designate Sakalava shrines and residences since the beginning of the twentieth century.

Following this short evaluation of the word *doany*, a closer look at the history of the west coast kingdoms, especially the Boeny kingdom, and their royal residences is necessary. The aims are to explain the development from the former historical residence of the Sakalava kings to the modern *doany*, and how a physical movement of the subjects towards the royal residential sites was an important practice and the basis for what might be today referred to as the ‘Sakalava pilgrimage.’

A patrilineal dynasty called Maroseraña became since the early sixteenth century entangled in an expansive dynamic all along the west coast, in a south-north direction. This dynamic was marked by the founding of always anew kingdoms in any generation, leading to the development of a chain of connected political units. After the foundation of two main political units, first the kingdom Lahefoty (today Menabe; founded ca. 1650 around the present town of Mahabo) and then Boeny (founded ca. 1685 south of what is today the town of Mahajanga), a growing number of small, semi-autonomous kingdoms emerged, which usually feuded in changing alliances one to another.²⁰ Step

18 Philippe Beaujard, a specialist in the Islamic communities of the south-east coast, agreed to the suggestion of a rather late and Islamic introduction of this word (personal communication 2011).

19 He sought later refuge on the island of Mayotte, where he became sultan (ca. 1832–1843). It should be noted that the relationship of the dynasty to

the Islam was established long before official conversion, as a 1741 Dutch document describing a Sakalava king praying to Mohammed reveals (A. Grandidier and G. Grandidier 1913, 116).

20 See e.g. Ballarin 2000; Kneitz 2003; Kneitz 2008; Randrianja and Ellis 2009; Kneitz 2014.

by step a chain of political independent units came into light, whose reigning elite were related to another by kinship, the knowledge of Maroseraña ancestry and a common socio-cultural as well as historical background – a situation which, on the other side, was not seen as any sufficient cause to organize alliances against common enemies or to understand themselves as a particular unit. In the nineteenth century, however, the term ‘Sakalava kingdoms’ started to be used, first by Europeans and other outsiders, later by the population itself, for the combined kingdoms, alluding thereby to overt similarities of the socio-cultural system and marking the start of a truly Sakalava identity.²¹

A synoptic portrayal of these kingdoms and of their particularities, including the specific logic of power and social structures underpinning their dynamics, is still not available, in spite of the number of important primary sources²² and research work dedicated to specific regions, periods, or thematic fields.²³ What we do know, however, suggests that these kings were absolute rulers who aimed at the subjugation of all the formerly independent clans and sub-groups, often of Bantu origin, living on the west coast once they arrived. One of the main techniques for securing the power of the dynasty, besides sheer military power and intermarriage, was placing the worship of selected royal ancestors at the center of the state at the expense of the worship of family ancestors, formerly practiced.²⁴ The royal ancestors, venerated at a *donac* or *donat* (as the historical documents cited above suggest), i.e. the royal residence, became the formal owners of the land (*tompont’ tany*), and therefore the uncontested authority of power in a very broad sense. Such a practice legitimized the power of the living king and included for example a guarantee of the protection and security of the population, stipulating therefore the need to ask regularly for their protection and assistance. It is very important to underline the particularity of the sketched ideas concerning the royal ancestors: they assumed not only a passive position, as a reference for royal legitimation, but were and are perceived as active entities as they have the potential to communicate their will through a number of mechanisms such as dreams, natural catastrophes or, usually, via mediums. Vice versa, it is always possible to ask their advice through mediums (*tromba*) or magicians (*moasy*). They are therefore partially exempted from the laws of the dead. The dead kings are, in short, an integral part of the living community.

21 The word ‘Sakalava’ is assumed to be a derivation of an ancient Arab word for ‘slave’ (Molet 1972). Its use in western Madagascar, at first restricted to parts of the Menabe population, alludes among many other things to the historical importance of slavery in this region. The construction of an ethnic identity known as Sakalava along the west coast was strongly influenced by strangers and in particular by European ideas of ethnicity and identity.

22 Still most important for an orientation are C. Guilain 1845 and A. Grandidier, Charles-Roux, et al. 1903–1920, a compilation of old documents concerning Madagascar.

23 E.g. Kent 1970; Lombard 1988; Feeley-Harnik 1991; Sharp 1993; Ballarin 2000; Lambek 2002.

24 See e.g. the letter of the missionary L. Mariano written in 1616 before the construction of Sakalava kingdoms in A. Grandidier and G. Grandidier 1904, 224–232.

The particular status of the dynasty was imposed on the new subjects not only by military means but through their magicians. Typically, the oral literature relates that the victorious foundation of a new Maroseraña kingdom in a particular area became possible only through the means of sacrifices of ‘precious things’, namely humans and particularly women, such as a wife loved by the king, virgin girls or children.²⁵ Such an extravagant sacrifice, it can be read between the lines, was crucial as only its fulfilment allowed the respective king to succeed, i.e. to restructure the defeated population and to govern without opposition.

These factors allow us to understand those conditions better which made the physical movement of the subjects towards the royal residence to an essential expression of today’s Sakalava identity. The residences of the kings became, as could be expected, the all-embracing center of the respective political units. They accommodated not only the living kings but the relics, i.e. the ancestors themselves, known today as *dady* in the Boeny or Menabe areas and *manjoka* in the Milanja and Ambongo region, legitimating the position of the dynasty and approving ongoing politics and decisions. The hierarchical relationship between the king and the population was reflected, among others, by rituals which were bound to the duty of presence at the capital of the respective kingdom to confirm loyalty. Following the perception of the king as a ‘divine creature’ occupying a position outside and above society, each service or work devoted to the king was a ritual act, termed as *fanompoa* (royal work), particularly within the context of the royal residence. A typical *fanompoa* was the construction of a new residence or tomb, or the regular need of their physical rehabilitation, which developed into sophisticated rituals, executed in compliance with the lunar calendar and with respect to forbidden days (*fady*), and by assigning particular works to specific clans.²⁶ To accomplish such duties it was evidently necessary for the clans and individuals concerned to appear at the royal residence.

Another occasion was the annual ceremony of the ‘big royal work’ (*fanompoabe*), as it is nowadays called in the Boeny kingdom, the ablution and anointing of the receptacles containing the relics, an act aiming at re-confirmation of royal power over land and population, approximating in many aspects to an European New Year ceremony. To that end a complex ritual was performed attended by the majority of the population, who assisted with the solemn display of the receptacles in public, a procession to a river or the sea, and a purification rite. The earliest evidence of such a *fanompoabe* with the participation of thousands of Sakalava visitors comes from the second part of the nineteenth century in Mahajanga, a period when the Boeny kingdom was still subject to the

25 See e.g. a summary of different accounts concerning the Boeny kingdom in Kneitz 2003, 302–308; it was possible for me to document comparable accounts concerning the Milanja region in recent years.

26 A detailed example in post-colonial times can be seen in Feeley-Harnik 1991, Part III, 367.

Merina people.²⁷ At the end of the nineteenth century the preparation of this important ritual included, as today, a complex procession of territorial sub-centers of Boeny royalty along particular long-established roads to transfer objects like drums or incense to the center to cement the relationships and dependence between the different parts of the Boeny kingdom. There is also the possibility of an opposite movement, as my unique observation of ritual practice in the Milanja region indicates (in the year 2008). The relics (the ancestors) are carried here from time to time in a procession from village to village, allowing, or forcing, the local population to express loyalty, subordination and gratitude towards the king, terminating again with the public anointing of the relics, a ritual certainly to be regarded as an ancient practice. It was only the population of the nearby region, essentially within the frontiers of the kingdoms, which were approaching a royal residence in these pre-colonial times, we can reasonably argue. Following the observation of present practice at a *fanompoabe*, it can be deduced that the population of the respective sub-units of the kingdoms arrived together, as a unit, testifying to their loyalty.

The question of whether the physical movement in pre-colonial times, sketched above, towards the capital of Sakalava royalty may be associated with the term of ‘pilgrimage’ can now be taken up again. As the realms of politics and religion were strongly related, it is clear that pilgrimage in the sense of a mainly religious movement was certainly not an idea comprehensible to the population at this time. The desire to process to the residence of the king and his ancestors was loaded as much with political as with religious significance. It was perceived simultaneously as an act of subordination towards a divine, absolute king, a confirmation of hierarchical organization, which gave to the king a rank outside the rest of society, and a performance that expressed the acceptance of the royal ancestors as the ultimate protectors of the country and the overall prosperity of the people.

Nonetheless it is necessary to take a closer look to the expression of those parts of the movement which seem to fall in the religious category. The positioning of the royal ancestors as the owners and protectors of the country meant, for example, the practice of demanding aid for all sorts of individual or communal problems. It seems very plausible – even if no document allows us to confirm this – that individuals should have taken the trouble of coming to the royal capital not only for official rituals or events but also to seek advice, much as they do today. The figure of Andriamisara, a central personality of Sakalava ancestry, is particularly significant as it combines kingliness with the particular knowledge of an astrologer and a healer.²⁸ It should be taken for granted that looking for advice in this context is part of a very old Malagasy ‘religious’ regard for ‘loaded’ places and objects, such as a tree, a stone, a source, an animal. All these were

27 Ballarin 2000, 415–417.

28 Ramamonjisoa 1976.

seen as the expression of a transcending sacred force, which became the focus of a pilgrimage exceeding political, social or ethnic borders, including the mythically-inspired wandering and search for meaning by individuals from afar. The appearance of wandering healers or astrologers throughout Madagascar, known formerly as *misara* in the south, is intriguing.²⁹ Therefore, it seems very reasonable to believe that such expressions of a more 'religious' kind pilgrimage already took place at the former Sakalava royal residences as well. Such practice was always secondary, however, to the dominant political significance of expressing loyalty towards the king. Even if some religious aspects coincided with core aspects of what is regarded today as a typical pilgrimage, it would have not been possible to differentiate them from the political-religious amalgam: the idea of pilgrimage as a pure religious observance was certainly not present.

Things changed visibly with the beginning of French colonial reign in 1896. The implementation of the new power eliminated the kingdoms as a political entity and consequentially the kings as political actors. Even more importantly, the constitution of a secular colonial regime and later, from 1960, the independent Malagasy Republic, meant nothing other than the radical negation of any right of the dynasty to reign. At the same time, however, the Sakalava kingdoms continued to exist, including all their institutional structures, as they were regarded by now as a purely religious and/or traditional practice, without any particular relevance for the new and 'truly' political orientation of the government. This practice of not actively changing the institutional structures of Sakalava kingdoms but of denying their political foundation was the starting-point for a still ongoing dynamic, including for example the tendency to appoint women (instead of men) or to select princes³⁰ regarded as weak, a slow deterioration of the administration structures or the growing difficulties of performing rituals as the population could not now be forced to participate. More important for this article is the tendency towards a new form of sacralization of the *doany*, as the logic consequence of the negation of the political aspects of the monarchy by the state. The spatial and symbolic centers of the *doany* are by now occupied only by royal ancestors, as their authority can be expressed without constraints, whereas the prince (*mpanjaka*) appears in a secondary position, as it is shown by his new residential site which no longer occupies the symbolic center. He acts nowadays only as a mediator. Behind the ancestral dynastic rituals, it is true, it is often the prince who holds an important informal position as well as official authority, but usually it is only on his death that he becomes the true center of attention through the voice of mediums.

Another new development is the phenomenon of a particularly intensive and 'free' cult of possession of royal Maroseraña ancestors (*tromba*), once the strong regulation of

29 Ramamonjisoa 1976.

30 The French title 'king' (*roi*) was no longer used after colonization, whereas the Malagasy denomination

mpanjaka (meaning simultaneously prince and king) remains.

mediums of royal ancestors within Sakalava kingship, inevitable as long as their advice was firmly connected to political authority, was not longer necessary or possible and became lifted.³¹ The new possession cult developed its own logic regarding the mediums and the social environment connected with them. Among others it has to be noted that the mediums are related via the ancestral ghosts. The ghosts are regarded as ‘sitting’ (*mipetraka*) within their body, while the mediums become connected to those regions, kingdoms and *doany* which are seen as historically related to the respective ancestors. Once a royal ancestor has been identified and named for the first time, the medium needs to ask for recognition by other mediums (of the same ancestor) or individuals responsible for the particular place related to the ancestor in question, often in the form of an examination. If s/he passes, the medium has to show loyalty by contributing money or by visiting the particular *doany* of ‘his/her’ ghost, and by participating at the *fanompoabe* of this particular ancestor.

As ‘religion’ has been the dominant category since 1896 for understanding what constitutes a royal residence, a *doany*, it seems appropriate to use the terms pilgrims and pilgrimage to indicate what kind of people are arriving and what they are looking for. But as the modern secular state is not an undisputed entity in Madagascar and the political meaning of the kingdoms remains, the Sakalava pilgrimage has to be assessed by an in-depth examination of its practice.

4 Pilgrimage in the land of shrines: an overview of present day Sakalava kingdoms

Some 120 years after the arrival of French colonists the historical kingdoms along the west coast have developed into new neo-traditional entities, difficult to categorize along established lines. They are institutions which combine religious, political, identical, traditional and decidedly ‘cultural’ (in the sense of cultural heritage) aspects. From a local or Malagasy perspective they are still called ‘kingdoms’ (*fanjakana*, or in French *royaume*), whereas the living ‘kings’ (*mpanjaka*) prefer the title ‘prince’, as noted earlier, to differentiate their new position within the modern state. In the context of a state construction defined as republican and plural their position can be described as a specific neo-traditional, autocratic element of civil society, an element with important influence on the local situation and the decision-finding process.

Through a systemic investigation of the situation between 2006 to 2008, the existence of about 50 such neo-traditional Sakalava ‘kingdoms’, i.e. kingdoms governed by

31 First documented by Rusillon 1912; see also Ottino 1965 and Kneitz 2003.

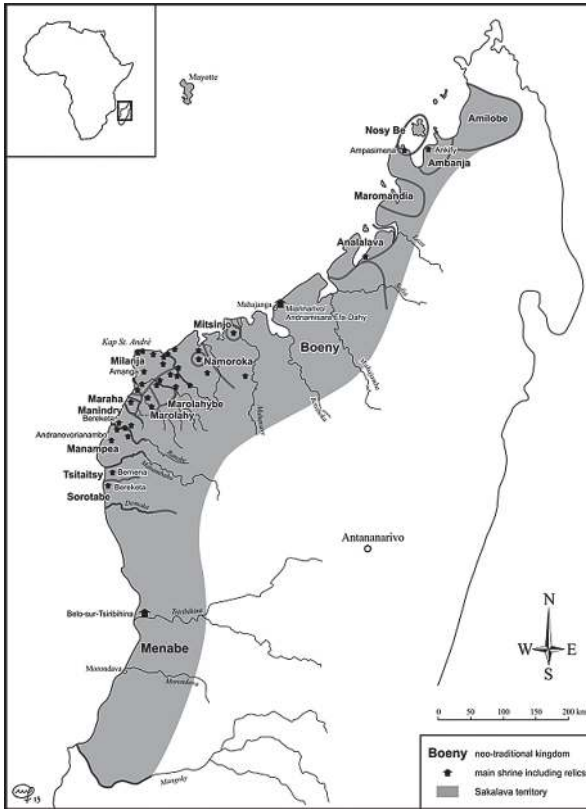


Fig. 1 Overview of Sakalava kingdoms and *doany*.

members of the Maroseraña dynasty, was documented.³² They, of very different size, are strung, starting in the south-west with the most important kingdom (in terms of territory) of Menabe, north of the river Mangoky, and encompassing several hundred kilometers to the north-west, almost all along the coast, as far as the town of Ambanja and the adjacent island of Nosy Be, and even further to the island of Mayotte, the most eastern of the Comoros archipelago (Fig. 1).³³ This Sakalava territory, composed of many smaller and larger polities, is stretching about 50 to 60 kilometers from the coast to the hinterland. The Boeny kingdom is therefore only one among many similarly construed kingdoms, even if it occupies a prominent position in the internal hierarchy.

32 As some kingdoms in the hinterland are located within a territory called by the Malagasy administration 'red zones' (*zones rouges*, i.e. areas outside public security), it was not possible to work out an exhaustive documentation and the number of kingdoms

was therefore estimated, based on local information available outside the 'red zones'.

33 As noted, Andriantsoly, the last king of the independent Boeny, fled to Mayotte from the approaching army of the Merina and founded a sultanate. His

In the symbolical center of each kingdom and sub-kingdom or 'little kingdom'³⁴ one typically finds a *doany*, meaning simultaneously a royal residence and a shrine, totalling therefore to a number of about 50 shrines. In consequence, the Doany Miarinarivo of the Boeny kingdom is only one among many similarly shrines at the west coast, even while it is distinguished by many unique aspects. In addition, places of minor importance, difficult to quantify, exist which may be called as well *doany*, because nowadays all places used for religious practice perceived as traditional Malagasy tend to be named as *doany*,³⁵ for example as well in the central parts of Madagascar.³⁶ These *doany* are better understood and labelled as 'secondary *doany*' or 'secondary shrines,' however, as they are not perceived as capitals of their respective kingdoms (even if some were genuine a *doany*). These are places which play a less important role within the royal rituals or particular historical events. These secondary *doany* are recognizable by the construction of a hut containing usually a *viarara* (ceremonial knife, used for the sacrifice of zebu cows) and the accessories of mediums, but they do not contain relics. There are also royal tombs (*mahabo*) which are never the center of important public rituals. The graves actually are not accessible but to a handful selected persons, but in the case of funerals as well as on the occasion of construction work they are becoming the subject of a 'royal service' (*fanompoa*) and thereby demand the presence of mediums and royal clans, similarly to a *fanompoa* at a shrine or *doany*. Finally there are a number of additional sacred places also assigned to the royal sphere but not characterized by a particular building, e.g. lakes which hold certain parts of the dead bodies, and which may also be called *doany* by local people or specialists. It should be added that the making and eventual unmaking of *doany* continues in the Sakalava area³⁷ as well as throughout Madagascar.

All *doany*, and eventually all secondary *doany* as well, are pilgrimage sites in the broadest sense, or at least have the potential to become one in particular circumstances. As the *doany* are more or less regularly subject to rituals like the anointing of the relics (*fitampoha*, *fanompoabe*), it is necessary for those related to the Sakalava kings to participate and to move to the site itself. On the occasion of a ritual (*fanompoa*) at a more important *doany*, the followers of the subordinated smaller kingdoms are requested to arrive as well. For example, the Doany Amanga, the main shrine of the kingdom of Milanja, is nowadays the center for eight 'little kingdoms,' having been erected by the children

Islamic tomb is regarded as a *doany* (a very unusual use of this word, as royal graves or *mahabo* are categorized in the dualistic perception of 'traditional' Sakalava as opposite to the residence of the living king (see Baré 1980, chapter V and VI) and is the scene of an annual *fanompoa* ('royal service').

34 An expression coined in the cultural context of the Indian subcontinent (Schnepel 1997, 47).

35 See for example Rakotomalala, Blanchy, and Raison-Jourde 2001, 65.

36 In this text the word *doany* is used always according to its original meaning as 'Sakalava royal residence and shrine,' and not with reference to the more general meaning of a 'sacred place.'

37 A particularly intriguing example is the foundation of a recent *doany* close to the town of Port-Bergé, north of Mahajanga, by a sub-branch of the Boeny dynasty.

and great-children of the founding king. Each *fanompoa* at the Doany Amanga will therefore lead ideally to the participation of representatives (mediums, living members of the royal dynasty) of the children and great-children of the founding king.

At least in principle all these places – *doany* and secondary *doany*, and even the hardly known additional sacred places – can receive individual requests for assistance or benediction by people who have travelled some distance in search of a solution to a particular problem or perhaps because this or that ancestor appeared in a dream. In reality, though, most of these royal places are of mere local relevance, hardly known beyond a very restricted area, without any visitors from outside. One indication of their isolation is the fact that rituals like the anointing of the relics (*fanompoabe*) at many of these shrines rarely take place simply because of lack of means. This concerns particularly those relatively remote *doany* in the west-coast regions like Mailaka, Ambongo and Milanja, in between the southern kingdom of Menabe and the northern kingdom of Boeny, which were historically of secondary rank, following the minor rank of the respective kingdoms in term of power, and whose ancestors were not known in other regions for important deeds and consequently are not known to outsiders.

Only two of all the existing *doany* are in fact the focus of significant pilgrimage, namely the *doany* of Belo-sur-Tsiribihina, the successor of the royal residence of the kingdom of Menabe, and the Doany Miarinarivo in Mahajanga. The performance of rituals in these places in many respects garners much more attention than those of smaller *doany*, as they are in the middle of a particularly important network of mediums and kinship, and as the presence of TV or radio teams on the occasion of the main royal service reveals. Observation suggests, though, that the *doany* in Belo-sur-Tsiribihina is at present far less anchored in the population than it was before. The once hereditary ritual is nowadays executed mostly by members of the dynasty itself and not by the respective clan members, and there is a growing tendency to neglect traditional norms and to relate this place to the quite new notion of '(national) cultural heritage'.³⁸ Most importantly, the *doany* in Belo cannot be seen as the center of an intensive cult of possession, as it is definitely the case for the Doany Miarinarivo in Mahajanga.³⁹ It appears then that it is the latter, which is by far the most attractive shrine and the focus for a new phenomenon of Sakalava pilgrimage, transgressing national and international borders and therefore part of those tendencies of modernization and globalization, which have been described for other pilgrimages as well. It is therefore particularly interesting to proceed now to a more detailed analysis of the Doany Miarinarivo.

38 Chazan-Gillig and Haidaraly 2006.

39 Lambek 2002; Kneitz 2003.

5 The Doany Miarinarivo: the dynamic of a Sakalava pilgrimage site (ca. 1685–2013)

The history of the royal residence of the kingdom of Boeny comprises a time span of more than 300 years. The residence has seen many different locations during this long development, the latest of which is its recent establishment at Tsararano-Ambony in Mahajanga and known as Doany Miarinarivo, as it was described above already extensively. The evolution of this place contains many aspects which are exemplary of most Sakalava *doany*, but its many specific, and avant garde, particularities should not be neglected. On the most basic level it has gone from a royal residence to a shrine, from subordination to a living king to the veneration of royal ancestors, and from politics to religion. The task of this paragraph is to present the essential steps of the historical evolution of this most important of shrines on the west coast, including changes to its architectural and symbolic design and the ritual practice as well as the changing movements of its adherents.

The Doany Miarinarivo is thought by the population of north-west Madagascar, in particular those of Sakalava identity, to enjoy direct historical continuity with the residential siege of the kings of Boeny, even though the location was established only in colonial times and its architecture and iconography is in many aspects very different. It is possible to date the emergence of the kingdom of Boeny to the period between 1684 and 1686, when Andriamandisoarivo, an unsuccessful pretender to the Menabe throne, wanted to establish his own political unity in the north-west of Madagascar.⁴⁰ The first residence, known in the oral tradition as Tongay,⁴¹ was established roughly fifty kilometers to the south-west of the town of Mahajanga, in the southern hinterland of the bay of Boeny, where a rich colony of Islamic merchants on a small island attracted the interest of Andriamandisoarivo and became subdued. The place of the residence changed regularly, as a consequence of a custom demanding the destruction and replacement of the residence following the death of a king, for strategic reasons or later as a result of the conquest of the Boeny region by Merina and French troops. The designation of the Boeny residence changed in consequence repeatedly and appears under many different names in historical documents (Fig. 2).⁴²

One of the best descriptions of the early situation of the Boeny royal residence is a Dutch sketch referring to a 1719 report (Fig. 3).⁴³ The place is called Tananarive,⁴⁴

40 For a detailed reconstruction see Kneitz 2014.

41 Probably near the village Bezavo of today, the most important royal cemetery of the Boeny kingdom, which includes among others the tomb of Andriamandisoarivo (Vérin 1975, 337–340).

42 See Kneitz 2003, 276–278.

43 Valentyn 2002 [1726], 148–151.

44 Antananarivo or Tananarive was the capital of the Merina kingdom in the center of Madagascar (today the capital of Madagascar) since end of the 18th century and became later the capital of the Malagasy Republic. The designation ‘Tananarive’ for the

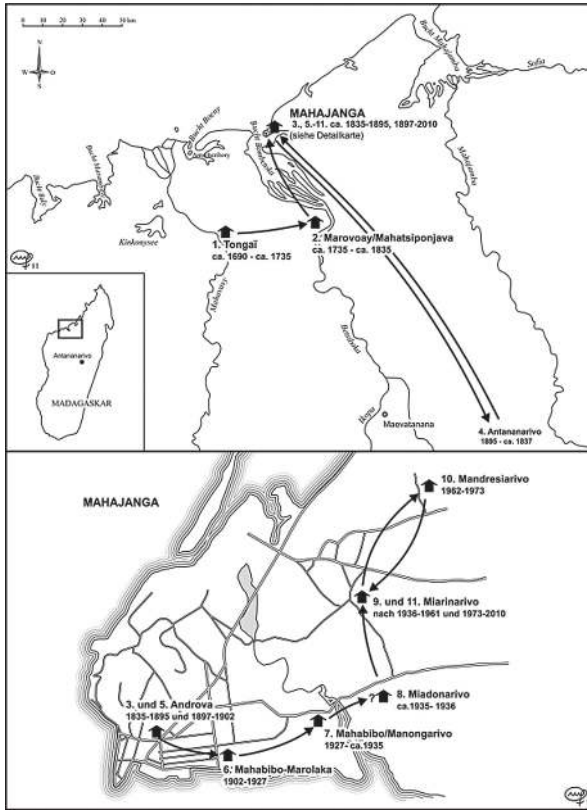


Fig. 2 Some changing locations and names of the Boeny-doany (1685 until today).

recognizably a spacious residential village. The center is clearly dominated by a more important hut made out of planks, surely the king’s house. Just in front of it a mighty pole, sharpened at the end, is sunk in the ground, as if to symbolize the center of the kingdom. Nothing similar can be found today at any *doany* I have seen along the west coast, but the pole recalls the *hazomanga*, which were used formerly as a place for sacrifice and as a reference for royalty.⁴⁵ Only near a *doany* in the village of Marofatiky (west of Besalampy) is a small *hazomanga* pole displayed, recalling a former location of the *doany*. The sketch also shows a dozen smaller huts distributed around the center, and one in the background has gables distinguished by crossed sticks, sharpened like spears. This symbol of royalty might indicate the location of the relics and other precious things. The whole area is demarcated by a palisade made out of sharpened posts.

Boeny residence appears only in this 1719 document.

45 Goedefroit and Lombard 2007, 53.



Fig. 3 The royal residence of the Boeny kingdom in 1719.

The symbolic meaning is arguably that the residence is placed in the center of the kingdom and even of the four cardinal directions – and therefore pretending to be the middle of the world and the cosmos. Sharpened objects like the palisade or the central pole are found repeatedly as an architectural icon at the royal residence, and are always to be seen as a sign of royal power. These indications, confirmed by other reports,⁴⁶ reveal a general construction plan of the royal residence, comparable to most other regions in Madagascar at this time and even today, as far as an incomplete review of historical documents and literature suggests.⁴⁷

Another Dutch report in 1741 points for the first time to the existence of shrines including royal relics:

On nous a conduit dans une grande Kaaba⁴⁸, toute tendue de toile blanche du toit jusqu'à terre afin de la garantir du vent et de la pluie ; à l'intérieur, il y avait une riche collection de beaux et bons mousquets : nous en avons compté plus de cent ; puis, des meubles et des coffres pleins, nous dit-on, de vases et d'objets en argent et un grand trône laqué et doré [...], et, enfin, le reliquaire royal, qui se compose de quatre écussons représentant chacun un des quatre aïeux du roi : Andian Mesorre [Andriamisara], Andian Leyfoetse [Andriandahefotsy],

46 E.g. Westra and Armstrong 2006, 129 (concerning a 1715 report).

47 E.g. A. Grandidier and G. Grandidier 1903; A. Grandidier and G. Grandidier 1904; Nativel 2005.

48 The author uses the term *kaaba* repeatedly in his report to describe a particular Malagasy architecture. The association of the shrine with the Muslim Kaaba of Mekka, which at first seems so obvious, is therefore not possible, even if the term does have roots in the Islamic world.

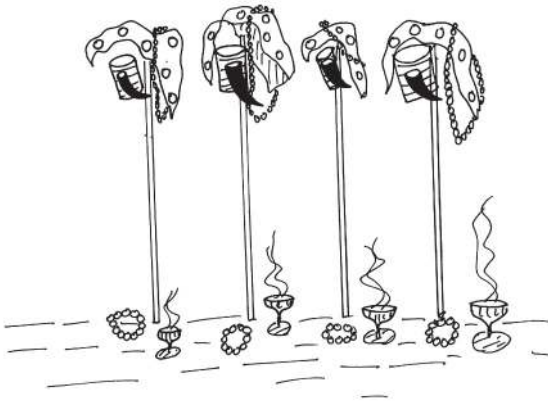


Fig. 4 The reliquary in 1741.

Andrian Chimenatte [Andriantsimanato, post-humously Andriamandisoarivo, the first king of Boeny] et Andian Tokaf [Andriantoakafo, the son and successor of the latter].⁴⁹

The four receptacles made out of gold and silver, one is informed later, are fixed to the top of four posts, and four large crocodile teeth are clamped to them (Fig. 4).⁵⁰ Some days later the Dutch negotiator is invited alone to participate at an intimate ritual of the king at the shrine, as a sign of particular confidence. The king, after praying “to Mohammed”, took a silver horn, filled it with “Malagasy spirit” and sprinkled it over the receptacles, before he burnt incense and formulated a prayer.⁵¹

This report is the only available testimony to the shrine in the heyday of the politically independent kingdom of Boeny. In this period – between about 1700 and 1820 – the royal residence of Boeny must have been the stage for regular gestures of submission and loyalty from the population to the king and the ancestors.⁵² In particular, the annual ritual of the anointing of relics (*fanompoabe*, *fitampoha*) as the most important acknowledgement of the socio-political order should have concentrated attention on

49 A. Grandidier and G. Grandidier 1913, 116. The same royal ancestors are still venerated today at the Doany Mirinarivo. It has to be noted that only Andriantsimanato (now called Andriamandisoarivo) and Andriantoakafo are the historical founding kings of the Boeny kingdom, whereas Andriamisara and Andriandahefotsy are central figures of the older Menabe kingdom and lived before the advent of the Boeny. Their reference (and their relics) are

included to claim the priority rights in the dynasty (see Lombard 1988, 22, for a discussion).

50 A. Grandidier and G. Grandidier 1913, 117.

51 A. Grandidier and G. Grandidier 1913, 127–128.

52 A particular gesture of submission under Sakalava royalty, nowadays forgotten, was licking the knee of one’s master (slaves even licked the soles), as observed repeatedly by Drury (Drury 1826 [1729], 299).

the political, spatial and spiritual center of Boeny, i.e. the residence, including physical movement. To interpret the latter aspect as a purely religiously defined pilgrimage would be therefore certainly misleading under the given historical context. Unfortunately, there is no documentary evidence from the pre-colonial period concerning such customs, and it is only possible to deduce the practice from what has been described and documented since the end of the nineteenth century, and more abundantly in the last decades, by anthropologists and historians.

In the course of the first decades of the nineteenth century the kingdom of Boeny was increasingly under pressure from the emerging kingdom of Merina at the center of the island, and at the same time it was faced with a number of internal problems, such as the difficulties of defining a successor so typical of southern and western royalty. In 1824 the capital at that time, Marovoay, and the adjacent region of central Boeny near the river of Betsiboka fell to the army of Merina's King Radama. The shrine was not destroyed but became integrated in the sacral topography of the Merina kingdom, because the royal ancestors of the Boeny were interpreted formally as the ancestors of the Merina kings.⁵³ The captured shrine was transferred to the new fort of the Merina garrison in the coastal town of Mahajanga, just behind the house of the governor, the local representative and close kin of the Merina kings. Further, one remarkable innovation has to be recognized: the reliquaries were no longer fixed on a pole, but stored in a small "house with a steeply inclined roof"; as the French explorer Alfred Grandidier observed, called the 'house of destiny'⁵⁴. Such houses are not typical of the west coast but are found in the interior of Madagascar on the tombs of the Merina nobility, which again are images of royal houses.⁵⁵ These iconographic changes are therefore understandable as a material and ideological representation of the royal ancestors of the victorious Merina kings.

The Sakalava population continued their veneration of their royal ancestors throughout the decades of occupation. The rituals, however, changed because of strong security measures put in place to prevent attempts to recapture the relics by force, leading to a replacement of the anointing at the sea or the delta of the Betsiboka by an anointing inside the shrine-house (*zomba*), as continues today.⁵⁶ Importantly, the relics no longer formally legitimated the political power of the Sakalava dynasty, but the power of the new sovereigns in distant Antananarivo. For the first time the idea that the service at the royal residence was not necessarily a sacro-political exercise of the Maroseraña was introduced. The continual move of the local population towards the *doany* (as it can be labelled from then on) certainly has to be interpreted as the expression of continual political loyalty, but more 'religious' aspects and the expression of a particular socio-political 'Sakalava' identity were gradually included.

53 Ballarin 2000, 179–187.

54 *Zomba vinta*, A. Grandidier 1971, 28; translation by the author.

55 See e.g. Nativel 2005, 44–47.

56 Kneitz 2003, 319.

The direct transition of power, in 1896, from the Merina to French administration and its conception of a secular, modern and republican state led finally to a break in the interpretation of the relics. From then on it is grounded upon religion, tradition or identity, and the political meaning was driven underground. Another main consequence of the French conquest for the main shrine of the Boeny kingdom was that the relics, regarded now as purely religious objects, were given back to the Maroseraña dynasty after more than seven decades of control by the Merina authority. The French were very well aware of the potential political implications of the relics and they regarded all that concerned the shrine with suspicion at the beginning of colonization, fearing the possibility of a counter-movement.⁵⁷ The balance of power favored the Europeans sufficiently to prevent any such possibilities being realized, and at the same time enforced a further transformation of the *doany*. Rusillon⁵⁸ was the first to describe the new 'design' of the *doany* location, now in Mahajanga-Mahabibo (Fig. 5), although the change of symbolic meaning has to be read between the lines. Most importantly, the new central position of the shrine-house (*zomba*) can be noted, replacing the king's house. More precisely, one might interpret this modification as a move from the ancestors and relics into the former king's house and becoming therefore the main focus of attention. The living king (*mpanjaka, prince*), however, is relocated to a small building outside the inner compound of the *doany*, a building, which clearly no longer constituted the 'middle of the world,' even while it remained near to the spatial center. Whereas these arrangements more or less gained acceptance among all shrines on the west coast, one particularity of the Boeny shrine is the insertion of the wooden 'house of destiny' (*zomba vinta*) in the main shrine-building (*zomba*). One reason for the adherence to this architectural particularity inspired by the Merina, and in spite of their disempowerment, is most probably the inertia of a well-established custom apart, the creation of strong relationships between the Merina and Boeny-Sakalava dynasties through marriages and the development of new lineages.

The *doany* of the Boeny kingdom was at the beginning of colonization first established near the inner city, but later changed its position repeatedly, each time transferring to a more peripheral place (see Fig. 2). The reasons included difficulties in enforcing the respect necessary for a shrine in a fast-growing and polyglot city, in which the influence of political Sakalava authority diminished. Conflicts within the dynastic lineages attributed as well to this development, as their princes and leaders fought intensive legal battles for succession and the right to control the relics. The colorful history of the shrine in twentieth century includes a long legal quarrel which started in colonial times, the theft of the relics, the total destruction of the shrine-house (*zomba*) by fire

57 Ballarin 2000, 217–224.

58 Rusillon 1912.



Fig. 5 The Boeny-doany in Mahajanga, ca. 1910.

and at some period the existence of two competing shrines with two relics each.⁵⁹ Conflicts within the dynasty continued until recently, as the manifold problems of finding a widely acceptable successor to Prince Dezy in the years after his death (shortly after 2006) reveal. Nonetheless, the placing of the four relics at the Doany Miarinarivo at Tsararano-Ambony for nearly forty continuous years is remarkable and is the longest period of stability since they were guarded by the Merina in their fort. The main recent innovation is the total reconstruction of the main shrine location, including the palisade (*valamena*), from concrete in 1999–2000, replacing the wooden structures seen until then as sacrosanct and obligatory (see Fig. 6, a photo of the wooden shrine in 1998, just before the reconstruction). The shrine palisade offers a unique image with its 444⁶⁰ concrete posts, sharpened at the end (Fig. 7–8). The reconstruction was explained expressly as a step to combat serious security problems, enhanced certainly e.g. by the memory of the destruction of the shrine building by fire some decades earlier, and to establish the *doany* permanently at the Miarinarivo location. But the changes are appearing at the same time as an evolution towards further sacralization along the lines of Christian iconography. For example, the erection of a (*zomba*) made out of stone can more easily be associated with the image of churches and therefore with a ‘pure’ religious place – a profound difference from the original symbolism, namely the dialectal

59 See Ballarin 2000, 355–390, and Ballarin 2008 for an extensive investigation.

60 Information supplied by Prince Dezy (1999). The number 4 (and its repetition) is among others a reference for the four cardinal directions and alludes to the perfection of royalty.



Fig. 6 The Doany Miarinarivo in Mahajanga, 1998.



Fig. 7 The Doany Miarinarivo, 1999: the shrine (*zomba*) has been rebuilt in stone.



Fig. 8 The Doany Miarinarivo since 2000: the wooden palisade (*valamena*) has been replaced by concrete poles.

opposition and competition between the ‘cold’ royal tombs (*mahabo*), the place of the dead kings and their family, made out of stone, and the ‘hot’ royal residence, the place of the living king and the government, built out of wood or vegetable materials.⁶¹

Another particular ‘religious’ dynamic still has to be described: the development of the ‘new’ *doany* of Boeny into a center of possession cult of the royal ancestors of the Maroseraña dynasty, far beyond the former boundaries of the Boeny. As long as an independent kingdom of Boeny existed, the possession of royal kings was impregnated by political authority and therefore severely controlled and regulated, at least as far as we can deduce from the rare reports. Further, it was obligatory for the population living within the boundaries of the Boeny state to accept the power of royal ancestors, as an expression of political loyalty. The new situation of powerlessness was therefore decisive

⁶¹ Baré 1980, 237.

for a new flourishing of possession, induced by an important number of mediums, often ‘occupied’ by several royal ancestors (and additional non-royal ghosts as well).⁶² As the four ancestors in Mahajanga are remembered as founding personalities of the ‘strong’ kingdom of Boeny, and the magician Andriamisara in particular as the root of its victory and prosperity, it was the Doany Miarinarivo, which became the center of attention.⁶³ The ‘Church of the Sakalava’ is therefore not just the continuity of the old established cult of royal ancestors, but it also contains a new and decisive religious dynamic.

The historical retrospective shows therefore a gradual strengthening of the sacred aspect of the royal residence since the disempowerment of the Boeny kings in about 1825, even if the tendency is far less linear or teleological when considered in detail. Nonetheless, the implementation of the modern state with its separation of the religious and the political made it essential for the responsible actors to adapt the institutional forms. As the living king holds no power and it was no longer possible to compel donations by the public, those actors at the center of the Boeny had to find solutions. That for Doany Miarinarivo means establishing a sedentary and eternal *doany* to secure property rights to the shrine. Such solution is certainly inspired simultaneously as well by the dominant position of Christian belief in the modern Malagasy state and a public discourse, which puts ‘traditional belief’ on the defensive. The outcome is an avant garde *doany* which comes closest to the image of a pilgrimage site, to attract supporters at home and abroad. Nonetheless it should not be forgotten that behind the new image lies the older requirement of the dynasty to observe the authority of the ‘master of the land’ (*tompon-tany*), as shown in the rituals. The principles of sacredness therefore merit detailed analysis.

6 The enactment of the sacred at the Doany Miarinarivo

The principles of a sacred place, as evident today at the Doany Miarinarivo, rely essentially on the same criteria which applied when the living king was visited by his population. Among these it is noticeable that the *doany* village (the former residence) can only

62 This situation is not new, but can be seen as a return to the original situation at the advent of the Maroseraña dynasty. Historical documents sketching a very strong possession movement on the west coast, with the ancestors of the respective families or clans at the center of attention (see e.g. the famous letter of the Portuguese missionary Mariano in A. Grandidier and G. Grandidier 1904, 224–232, and Kent 1983–1984).

63 Andriamisara (who, as a historical person, lived to the south of the later Menabe kingdom at the be-

ginning of the 16th century) is also venerated at the *doany* in Belo-sur-Tsiribihina, the center of the Menabe kingdom, but he occupies a much less important position than in Mahajanga (where he, paradoxically, never lived). It is only because the victory of the Boeny kingdom (at the end of the seventeenth century) was attributed to him, as represented by relics and mediums, that he became a widely respected personality, not only on the west coast but throughout Madagascar.

be approached on certain days, and that there are a number of rules of conduct, allowing only behavior adjudged 'suitable' for this special area (e.g. it is forbidden to run, to cry aloud, to take weapons). The rigor of applying these rules and the number of rules increase as one is approaching the shrine, whose center is situated asymmetrically in the north-east of the shrine village, while the spatial center of the village is still occupied by the king's house.

A particular feature of the spatial iconography is the alternate obscuring and unveiling of the most sacred part, the 'secret' of the shrine.⁶⁴ The approaching visitor is confronted again and again with barriers of different kinds which conceal the secret from the eyes of the public, but these barriers are never impenetrable or hermetic but offer a vague impression of the 'mystery' one is approaching. This structure may be understood as a discrete invitation to proceed, but only on certain conditions. It is possible, for example, to see the shrine house (*zomba*) from a distance, but the surrounding huts of the *doany* village, the mango trees and finally the palisade prevent an unhampered view. After entry is finally permitted, the principle is repeated again: the big white curtain (*safoday*) in the north-east corner secures the inner secret of the shrine, but nonetheless offers a vague impression of the wooden house on stilts (*zomba vinta*). Even if one is allowed exceptionally to go beyond the white curtain and to approach the small entrance door bending or kneeling, one finds four recipients of a rather modest outer appearance, and the 'real' relics are again well secluded before the eyes in the interior. The idea seems to be, among others that access to the royal ancestors or the living kings, and therefore the secret of their power and their sacredness, is possible, even desirable, but one has to pay a price for it. The closer one comes to this center, the more one has to surrender oneself to a set of regulations, just as when a celestial body enters the gravity of a planet or a star. Formal subordination to the laws of this place is interpreted by its people as a sign of implicit surrender to the forces at work here.

I will now summarize some of the more central architectural and iconographic aspects of the *doany* compound and the shrine observable today:⁶⁵ the Doany Miarinarivo in the broader sense of a village comprises an irregular area measuring roughly 300 to 400 meter. A number of residential and ceremonial houses, built from the *satrana* palm and without access to a modern infrastructure of canalization, electricity or paved roads, together create the image of a village. A number of families live here, regularly including mediums, often assuming hereditary tasks. The area is not at all shielded from the neighborhood, but embedded in the local network of footpaths. The *doany* (the actual shrine building) is located in the north-eastern corner of the village.

In front of the shrine building, which appears today as the architectural successor of the royal residence, is a forecourt which was formerly a court between an outer pal-

64 Kneitz 2003, 177.

65 Kneitz 2003, 176–215.

isade (today only marked by the line of the mango trees) and an inner palisade. Along this outer line one finds a row of ceremonial houses, which ordinary are only in use during the more important rituals. They are hardly distinct from the residential houses by a more substantial way of construction. The most northern of these buildings, more or less in the spatial center of the *doany* village, is reserved for the living prince (*mpanjaka*), and used by him when he attends a ritual. A more careful construction apart, it is not particularly distinguished in comparison to the neighboring buildings. The other ceremonial buildings are assigned to mediums of the various subdivisions of the Boeny kingdoms – and thereby represent the respective royal ancestors and dynastic lineages of these regions.

The royal attribute of a sharpened post, a symbol of power and decision-making, appears for the first time and particularly insistently in the palisade (*valamena*), which is made out of several hundred sharpened concrete posts, with two doors at intervals. The south door is for the members of the royal dynasty (including its mediums), and the west door is used by everyone else. Above these doors are two crossed wooden sticks representing spears (*volohazo*). The shrine building (*zomba*, the *doany* in its more distinct meaning) has stood out since 1998 as the only stone building of the *doany* village. It is a rather modest, rectangular building surrounded by a small court (*valamena*, the red court), used among others for the sacrifice of zebu cows, the ceremonial dance of kings (*rebika*) on the final day of the ‘big royal work’ (*fanompoabe*), and, most importantly, the procession following the completion of the anointing of the relics which winds once around the shrine building. Entrance to the north-east corner of the interior is restricted to the most important people, like the guardians, the mediums (when possessed) and the members of the royal family. Here one finds the inner shrine, a wooden pole construction in the form of a stilt-house (*zomba vinta*), under which a number of seemingly old weapons (spears, halberds, sabers and guns), symbols of royalty, are stored. Beside a number of secondary accessories (e.g. earthen jars, needed to produce mead, a fermented liquid made out of honey and used for the anointing of the relics), a safe attracts attention; it is used to store important offerings of money or precious items (Fig. 9). The four receptacles of the relics (*dady*) are to be found in the small room inside the wooden shrine: they comprise elliptical massive boxes, “like ink jars”⁶⁶ of tarnished appearance. Here the actual relics of the four Andriamisara are stored, including, according to the literature, finger bones and toenails, teeth and hair.⁶⁷

The differences between the early royal residences of the Boeny kingdoms as described in the above documents and their appearance today are significant. They are not only the result of a turbulent history, including the theft of relics, quarrels about

66 Estrade 1985, 73, translated by the author.

67 Rusillon 1912, 73; A. Grandidier and G. Grandidier 1917, 16.



Fig. 9 The reliquary, 1999: the wooden stilt-house (*zomba vinta*) for storing the relics, and the safe.

property rights and the burning down of the *doany* in 1970, leaving it a matter of dispute if and which of the relics and their receptacles were saved or not, or if and which of them were reconstructed or not, but also the result of the assignment of very different meanings to it. The historical changes are revealing in so far as they suggest that not only the general structure of the political capital of Sakalava royalty changed over time but the objects as well: for example, the receptacles and even perhaps the relics may not be original. Therefore it is clear that the principle of historical originality is not a decisive one for the *doany* personnel in terms of creating the necessary confidence between the worshipper and the worshipped. Rather, it is possible to use a number of techniques to create and trigger authenticity ‘on demand,’ for example by transferring authenticity

and sacral power from objects, relics or places regarded as ‘original’ to new material, without reducing religious power.

Of particular importance for the construction of sacredness at the Doany Miarinarivo is without doubt the structuring of time and therefore the access to this location. Entrance to the shrine house (*zomba*) – always accompanied by the guardians (the *fahatelo* or one of his acolytes) – is only possible on Monday, Friday or Saturday, from dawn until midday or until 3 pm at the latest.⁶⁸ On Tuesday and Thursday mornings access is denied to the *doany* village, a rule related to the days the founding kings died. The interpretation of the position of the moon and the astrological significance of particular months account for even more restrictions: consultation when the moon is waning, and in particular before a new moon, is normally seen as inauspicious, and the door of the *doany* will remain closed, even on the above-mentioned opening days. Moreover, the *doany* remains locked throughout the month of August, which is perceived as an unfavorable month. A comparably small ‘window’ of opportunity remains of about 80 to 100 days per year. A Sakalava pilgrimage therefore requires reasonable experience and knowledge of the specific conditions.

7 Pilgrims at the Doany Miarinarivo

Who, finally, visits the Doany Miarinarivo and why? Can we characterize visits to the shrine more precisely? Some important clues are revealed by results collected during my stay at the *doany* village between May and October 2000, including a census of pilgrims on a day-to-day basis.⁶⁹

The survey of arrivals at the shrine on the ‘opening days’ reveals at first a strikingly low number. With the exception of July, which includes the annual ritual of the anointing of relics (*fanompoabe*), only about 50 to 250 people visit the *doany* every month (excluding those active in performing rituals and the population of the *doany* village). Two months (other than July) are marked by lesser rituals attracting a more significant number of pilgrims.⁷⁰ A different image emerges when those 2500 to 3000 people are included who arrive for the main ritual (*fanompoabe*) in July. Nonetheless, considering the importance of the Doany Miarinarivo to the Boeny kingdom, the west coast and the overall cult of royal Sakalava ancestors throughout Madagascar, the number of pilgrims is surprisingly meagre. Further, given that the number of those identifying themselves

68 After 3 or 4 pm local astrology deems the next day to have begun.

69 Kneitz 2003, 220–222.

70 The ritual *toa mainty* (the production of a particular form of mead, used later for the anointing of receptacles and weapons) in June; the ritual *asara be* (a final cleaning of the shrine compound) takes place in September.

as Sakalava has increased to something between one and 1.5 million,⁷¹ the importance of the Doany Miarinarivo appears marginal, to say the least. Is the ‘Church of Sakalava’ nothing more than an institution embedded in a strong dynamic of decline? But why, on the other hand, is the importance of this shrine nonetheless constantly underlined by various actors? A true interpretation of these results, it will be shown, is only possible by adding knowledge on the structure of the possession cult and its organization to the available data.

First, I would like to look at the geographical origin and the ethnic distribution of the pilgrims. Interviews with almost 100 people showed that more than half of the visitors lived in the town or surrounding region of Mahajanga, and more than a third beyond, i.e. other regions of Madagascar (mainly the west coast, the capital Antananarivo, and Tamatava, the main town on the east coast), from the islands of the Indian Ocean (the Comoros archipelago, La Réunion) and as far away as France. The ethnic identity of visitors corresponds to this finding: only about half of the informants regarded themselves as Sakalava, whereas more than a third labelled themselves as belonging to other identity groups of Madagascar or beyond, among them two people of white European (mainly French) descent. These findings are interesting as they suggest that the attraction of the Doany Miarinarivo radiates far beyond the former frontiers of the kingdom of Boeny and the almost exclusive adherence of a Sakalava population. One important conclusion is that the mobility of the Sakalava population has considerably broadened and is nowadays characterized by a far-reaching mobility, typical of the age of (modern) globalization. Another point is that consultation of the *doany* is no longer the preserve of those of a specific Sakalava identity. Rather, it has gained an universal character as those responsible of the *doany* like to underline when they talk about the ‘Church of Sakalava.’

The interpretation of the surprisingly low figures needs now to be interpreted by using additional information concerning the particularities of the possession cult of Sakalava royal ancestors. As already mentioned, available estimations match in that perhaps about one-third of the Sakalava population (on the west coast and in international diaspora) and about two-thirds of women (of different origins) on the west coast have an intimate relationship with one or several Sakalava royal ancestors, in other words, they are mediums possessed by ancestors. Furthermore large numbers of mediums of very diverse origin or identity, particularly in major cities, have Sakalava ancestry and are attached to Sakalava *doany* as well. Even though these are admittedly quite rough

71 This figure is a rough estimation based on the last population census (including ethnic affiliation) at the beginning of the 1970s. On the basis of about 470 000 Sakalava (more than seven million inhab-

itants) and a tripling of the total Malagasy population, the above number appears to be a reasonable indication.

estimations, as a formal census is not possible, the general finding is evident – including major consequences for the immediate social environment of the medium and for society altogether. It should be noted that it is often members of the family who have not only to acknowledge the presence of the spirits, for example via the establishment of rules of conduct or interdictions (the famous *fady*), but must assist in the case of active possession. Further, mediums of royal Sakalava ancestors are linked to the Doany Miarinarivo by different ways, either via the direct possession of one or several of the ‘Blessed Four Brothers Andriamisara’ or indirectly via the possession of one or several of other Sakalava royal ancestors, who are seen as subordinate to and dependent on the founding figures of the Doany Miarinarivo, especially Andriamisara.

The dependence is evident in the annual anointing of relics (*fanompoabe*) at the Doany Miarinarivo (Fig. 10). Those mediums who are officially recognized as ‘vessels’ of one or several of the ‘Four Andriamisara’ numbered about 500 worldwide in 2000,⁷² and are obliged (personal problems apart) to participate personally at the *fanompoabe* and to offer a sacrifice or contribution, mostly money collected from their clients but cattle as well.⁷³ These mediums are particularly easy recognizable during the ritual in July as they sleep during the night before the anointing (*tsimandrimandry*) at the edge of the western palisade, as part of their obligation. Most of the other mediums and their clients outside Mahajanga cannot afford to come or participate directly, but act through a fellow medium (mostly of a person possessed by one of the four Andriamisara) or sometimes just any another person intending to pilgrim. These messengers function as an intermediary to reveal thereby the loyalty and respect to be payed by all persons connected to Sakalava royalty. Therefore a rather small number are representative of whole regions or important social networks of mediums’ clients. ‘Pilgrimage’ in the sense of a movement through space to a sacred place can in the cultural context described here be delegated and executed in a manner located in a particular conception between the experience of a personal movement and an ‘inner’ transcendent journey.⁷⁴

Apart from the need for mediums and their clients to testify to their loyalty and their gratefulness for the protection of the royal ancestors, a multitude of reasons can be identified for praying to the ‘Four Andriamisara’. The interviews revealed in particular the need to overcome misfortune (e.g. disease, unemployment, familial difficulties), including the need to exorcise ‘bad spirits’, i.e. unidentified and unregulated spirits, and also to examine the appearance of particular Sakalava royal ancestors in front of the local authority of the Doany Miarinarivo. Many of the pilgrims are accompanied by mediums, attesting to their extraordinary difficulties and their wish to overcome them. It has to be added that these pilgrims have already consulted royal Sakalava spirits (including

72 Kneitz 2003, 258.

73 See Lambek 2002, 143, for details.

74 See Gülberg 2012 for a similar situation in Japan.



Fig. 10 Prince Dezy (at the right, with scarf), surrounded by guests, mediums and the guardians of the *doany* in 2006.

one or several of the ‘Four Andriamisara’) before arriving at the Doany Miarinarivo, and are advised to present their problems directly. Participation in possession cults appears therefore to be a preliminary stage in a spatial movement towards the shrine, i.e. pilgrimage in a closer sense.

Visits to the Doany Miarinarivo have many other causes, especially for those coming from far away, and they are subject to important changes related to the ongoing process of modernization. Sakalava pilgrims, i.e. people of Sakalava descent or connected to the Doany Miarinarivo in other ways, take advantage of the modern technologies of transportation and communication, as does everybody else. As mentioned above, many such persons nowadays live abroad, often on neighboring islands of the Indian Ocean, in France, and in a number of other European countries or in North America. While the connectivity to the shrine often continues or is newly re-enforced, through spirit possession, as clients of mediums or as part of family traditions, new reasons for traveling are emerging: Sakalava pilgrims coming from abroad do so today to revive family relations or to enjoy the unique social environment of their origin, to renew and confirm cultural identity, to (re-)integrate themselves into the cultural particularities of Sakalava or more general Malagasy culture – or even just to take a holiday. The new communication tools utilized by mediums, believers, and guardians of the shrine allow them as well to stay in close contact even while a physical visit is not possible or deemed not necessary. Global developments of technology and modernization are thus contributing to the next step in the articulation of a unique set of cultural action, the Sakalava pilgrimage.

8 Conclusions: the Sakalava pilgrimage as a royal service

The present west coast of Madagascar is distinguished by a neo-traditional institution difficult to categorize, the 'Church of Sakalava' and its main material concretization, the *doany* or shrine, which oscillates between the former status of a residence of the politically independent Sakalava royalty and the position of a religious institution. Within the new socio-cultural framework, the meaning of the Sakalava institutions shifted increasingly to a religious direction, with the act of moving to the *doany* can be understood as a form of new pilgrimage following Christian or monotheistic examples.

Appreciation of the historical evolution of these *doany* locations, in particular the Doany Miarinarivo, the successor of the royal residence of the Boeny kingdom, and a closer recognition of the established understanding of these sites by the visitors, has allowed us to acknowledge important continuities and ambiguities in the understanding of the local cultural practice, a dialectical moment quite typical of Sakalava culture altogether since political independence decreased. The movement towards a *doany* – as a movement in space, delegated to mediums or even performed indirectly by participating in a possession cult of a particular royal ancestor – is not only a religious, individual service, but also implies submission to the authority of the dynasty, a royal service. Unlike former times, though, it is mainly perceived as a service towards royal ancestors, and the living representatives (the princes or kings) occupy during their lifetime only a secondary role.

The Doany Miarinarivo is therefore an example of a new pilgrimage phenomenon outside the well-known monotheistic practice, which is historically much older. The 'new' religious *doany* of the Boeny certainly converges in many ways with the practice of 'pure' pilgrimage, and the iconography of a religious shrine, attracting pilgrims not only locally but on a global level, seems to follow this turn. Nonetheless the originality of a royal residence and submission to the political influence of the dynasty of Maroseraña persist, enforcing the interpretation of the Sakalava pilgrimage as a royal service (*fanompoa*), including silent political sub-meanings. It is predictable within the given context of modernization and in the light of the socio-cultural pressures that the Sakalava pilgrimage will approach more and more the 'true' pilgrimage phenomenon, at least at the Doany Miarinarivo, but the persistence and ongoing reformulation of Sakalava kingship will at the same time not allow a process of simple convergence or fusion.

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1 Peter Kneitz and Monika Feinen. 2 Peter Kneitz and Monika Feinen. 3 Valentyn 2002 [1726], 151. 4 Sketch by the author according to a Dutch report in A. Grandidier and G. Grandidier

1913, 117. 5 Rusillon 1912. 6 Ballarin 2000. 7 Peter Kneitz. 8 Peter Kneitz, photo taken at the *fanompoabe* in 2008. 9 Peter Kneitz. 10 Peter Kneitz.

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