

An anthropological approach to the sacred space of Ambohimanga

Practices at a tourist attraction in Madagascar

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Research background

Ambohimanga (royal hill of Ambohimanga) is comprised of a royal palace and tombs of the Merina Kingdom (16th century–1897) surrounded by different types of sacred places and villages (Scott, 2003). It is located in the northern part of Antananarivo. In 2001, it was selected as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

Ambohimanga is the most legendary sacred place among the twelve sacred hills of Imerina, the residential area of the Merina people. There are many places for spirit worship (shrines of spirit worship), named "*doany*"⁽¹⁾.

Although *doanys* were initiated by the Merina people, *doany* worship has become widely adopted among people from the islands of the West Indian Ocean, stretching beyond ethnic barriers and national borders through a kind of spirit possession ritual named "*tromba*."



Royal palace and tombs in Ambohimanga



Scene of *tromba* in Ambohimanga

Research purpose and aim

Ambohimanga has attracted numerous tourists and pilgrims from home and abroad. To elucidate the multilayered relationship among the ethnicity, nationality, and religion in Madagascar, we consider that it is of the essence to

clarify the religious practice at Ambohimanga. In our study, we focus on Ambohimanga, which is a leading sacred place for *doany* worship.

Doany worship is an ongoing religious practice evolving beyond the conventional framework of the Malagasy "traditional religion" (Blanchy, 2001). Our study is currently planned as follows:

1. Elucidate the actual situation of *doany* worship across ethnic groups and nations
2. Clarify major factors which support *doany* worship
3. Illustrate the ongoing religious practice and evolving tradition from the viewpoint of ordinary Imeria residents



Inside a *doany*, an altar with *mpiandry*



Doany Mangabe, one of the famous sacred places

Research achievements in our fieldwork

We investigated a number of *doany* in the Imerina region, including the five sacred places around Ambohimanga.⁽²⁾ It was found that famous *doanys* attract a lot of pilgrims from home and abroad even now. In addition, we confirmed the existence of *doanys* which enshrine other ethnic groups' spirits including Sakalava. We also found several *doanys* which were enlarged by the Order of the Royal Spirits that appear in "*tromba*." This demonstrates the ongoing development of *doany* worship.

We also observed coexistence and competition between *doany* worship and Christianity. Most of the Imerina residents are Christians,⁽³⁾ but many of them practice *doany* worship in secret. A lot of women who are called "witch (*mpamosavy*)" live in Ambohimanga. We recognized that the local religion is now developing as a mixture of Christianity and folk beliefs including *doany* worship.

In our fieldwork, we found that the guardians (*mpiandry*) of the *doanys* hardly have mutual interactions, which indicates that there is no evident systematic organization among *doanys*. The social and political relations of religious experts⁽⁴⁾ among the *doanys* seem to be highly hierarchical, rather than lateral.



New building built by the Order of the Royal Spirit



Doany for a safe delivery and healthy baby

Implications and impacts on future research

In this visit, the major theme of our study is to investigate the religious activity at *doanys* individually in Ambohimanga. For the next step, the role of *doany* worship in the daily lives of the Imerina residents should be studied in detail.

The religious experts, pilgrims, and objects of worship are not strictly classified in a hierarchical structure (Graeber, 2007). It is of importance to clarify the complicated social relations in order to deepen our understanding of the religious activity in Madagascar. The themes in progress are as follows:

1. Clarify the social relations around the *doany* in Ambohimanga
2. Elucidate the actual situation of the circulation and diffusion of spirits enshrined in *doany*
3. Elucidation of the relationships between religious experts of *doany*, practitioners of *doany* worship (pilgrims), enshrined spirits, the community, nation-state, and Christianity.

It would be interesting to extend our study of religious activity with *doanys* to other areas and compare them with Ambohimanga.



Mpiandry praying at an altar



Doany Andranoro, one of the famous sacred places

Footnotes

(1) The term *doany* has been used by Sakalava, although all places for worship in Imerina are now referred to as *doany* as well.

(2) We visited Mangabe, Ankazomalaza, Ambatondradama, Mahazaz, and Amboatany. Each sacred place consists of multiple *doanys* with individual names.

(3) Protestantism (FJKM) and the Roman Catholic Church are two major powers, and there are denominations such as Anglican and Pentecost. Minority non-Christians include the religious experts of *doanys*.

(4) In famous *doanys*, there are guardians called *mpiandry*. Their duties are to maintain and manage *doanys* as well as welcome worshipers (pilgrims). In addition, there are various kinds of religious experts (e.g., healers, fortune-tellers, magicians, mediums, and ritual musicians). Most ritual musicians are male, whereas the other religious experts are distributed between males and females.



Doany that was built 30 years ago by the Order of the Spirits



Altars are different in every *doany*



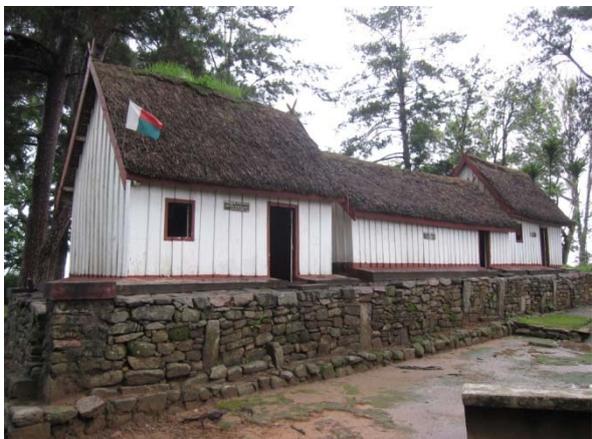
Sacred pond and altar



Doany that enshrines a huge stone



One of the places of worship



Doany Ambohidratrimo, one of the 12 sacred hills



One of the *doanys* in Mahazaza



One of the *doanys* in Ankazomalaza



Mpiandry and worshipers in front of a *doany*



One of the *doanys* in Amboatany



Doany compromising with Christianity



Doany of the source of water



An altar enshrined in a cave



Pilgrims at a *doany*



Doany with an Asian air



One of the *doanys* in Ambatondradama



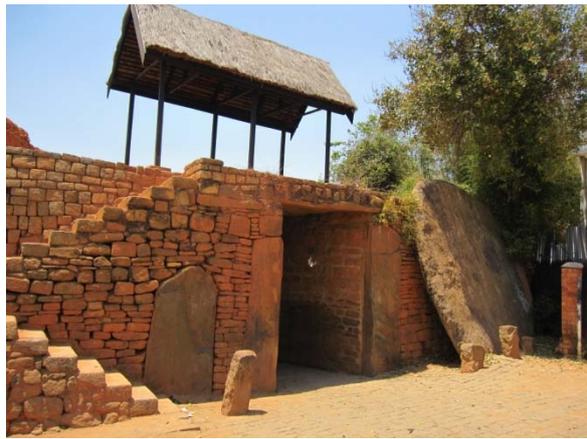
Doany which was built on a sacred well



Relaxing space of the Royal Spirit



Main street of Ambohimanga village



One of the gates of Ambohimanga

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