

Border-crossing spirits

An anthropological study on the practice of magic and religion over sacred places in Imerina,
Madagascar

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Research background

This study is intended to examine shrines of spirits called "*doany*"⁽¹⁾ in the Imerina district (Merina residence area). *Doany* worship has become widely adopted among the inhabitants of the islands of the West Indian Ocean, stretching beyond ethnic barriers and national borders through a kind of spirit possession ritual named "*tromba*."⁽²⁾

The same as previously, this investigation was carried out around Ambohimanga,⁽³⁾ which is one of the central sacred places of *doany* worship. We focused on the hill of Mangabe, among five sacred places⁽⁴⁾ located around Ambohimanga. The sacred place Mangabe consists of three *doanys*.⁽⁵⁾ We mainly observed *Doany Andriantsivongo*,⁽⁶⁾ which was the central *doany*.

Research purpose and aim

Mangabe developed rapidly as a sacred place after Madagascar became independent in 1960. Mangabe has now become one of the eminent sacred places in Madagascar. Mangabe has attracted numerous pilgrims from Madagascar and abroad.

We thus intended to clarify the historical process by which Mangabe developed into a sacred place. We paid attention to guardians of *doany* (*mpiandry*)⁽⁷⁾ who played an important role in the sanctification of Mangabe and interviewed them.

Research achievements in our fieldwork

A village has formed around *Doany Andriantsivongo*, and all residents of the village are guardians of *doanys* and their relatives. Originally, there were only tombs of Andriantsivongo and others in Mangabe, but worshippers had begun to increase thanks to the activity of the *mpiandry*.

Mangabe has developed as a sacred place according to the following order of events.

- ① With the support of the politician, the village began to be formed from the 1980s on.
- ② Support from influential worshippers allowed the building of the *doany* to be completed in 1994.
- ③ A place to sacrifice zebu cattle was built in 2004.

As above, the activities of some key persons allowed Mangabe to develop progressively.

In the context of a history of conflict and harmony between Christianity and *doany* worship, it was revealed that Mangabe had grown. Various aspects of "the conflict and harmony between Christianity and *doany* worship" were observed in daily religious practices.

In August 2015, arson claimed two famous *doanys* in the suburbs of the capital (Antananarivo).⁽⁸⁾ Because of

the arson case, *mpiandrys* of famous *doanys* in the suburbs of the capital, including Mangabe, were summoned by the police, and government officers attended a meeting of *mpiandrys*. It is said that a government-sponsored meeting of *mpiandrys* will be held in the future. If the incident triggers organized *doany* worship in the future, it may be considered an interesting example from a religious studies perspective.

Implications and impacts on future research

Because the building of the *doany* was completed in 1994, *Doany Andriantsivongo* became required to pay a tax to the government. However, as a *quid pro quo* for paying tax, the government officially recognized *Doany Andriantsivongo*.

In 2001, UNESCO selected the hill of Ambohimanga adjacent to Mangabe as a World Heritage Site. The association of sightseeing in Ambohimanga (OSCAR) then recognized Mangabe as a cultural heritage site to attract tourists.

In this way, having given national recognition to Mangabe, it might have acted as a source of legitimacy to support the development of Mangabe.

Doanys are open-minded, and worshippers can practice religion and possession rituals as they please provided that they do not violate a taboo (*fady*). We think that one reason why *doany* worship, including Mangabe, prospered is that the space of *doany* had been worked as the "container" that could receive miscellaneous folk beliefs.

We want to deepen our research from now on to evaluate whether this hypothesis is appropriate or not. We think that it clarifies why *doany* worship has become widely adopted beyond ethnic barriers and national borders among the peoples of the West Indian Ocean.

Footnotes

(1) Sakalava used the term *doany*, although all places of worship in Imerina are now referred to as *doany* as well.

(2) Madagascar is the center of the worship, which spreads to islands around Madagascar such as Reunion, Mauritius, Comoros, Mayotte, and Seychelles.

(3) Ambohimanga (royal hill of Ambohimanga) comprises 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, UNESCO selected it as a World Heritage Site.

(4) Mangabe, Ankazomalaza, Ambatondradama, Mahazaza, and Amboatany. Each sacred place consists of multiple *doanys* with individual names.

(5) *Doany Andriantsivongo*, *Doany Rasoalavavolo*, and *Doany Andriamanalina*

(6) *Doany Andriantsivongo* enshrines astrologer (*mpanandro*) Andriantsivongo, who served the most famous King of Merina, Andrianampoinimerina. Andriantsivongo, who was active during the 18th century, is the most famous astrologer in the Merina Kingdom's history. *Doany Andriantsivongo* also enshrines Rasoalavavolo (wife of Andriantsivongo, mythologized as a mermaid), Andriantendro (younger brother of Andriantsivongo), Ramanalinarivo (mother of Andriantsivongo), and so on.

(7) Famous *doanys* have guardians called *mpiandry*. Their duties are to maintain and manage *doanys* as well as welcome worshippers (pilgrims).

(8) In August 2015, radical Christians burned down two famous *doanys* (*Doany Ambohitrimanjaka* and *Doany Ambohidratrimo*).

Scenes of *Doany Andriantsivongo*



Main building of *doany*



Main entrance



Shops for worshippers and pilgrims



Precincts of *doany*



Guest house for worshippers and pilgrims



Tombs of soldiers in the precincts



Place to sacrifice zebu cattle



Mangabe village (under a forest fire)



Mpiandry and I (at center)



Mpiandry who gives instructions about sacrifice



Main gate of *doany*



Worshippers who sacrifice to *doany*

Scenes of *Doany Rasoalavavolo*



Mpiandry who sweeps and cleans the precincts



Mpiandry and his family

Conflict and harmony between Christianity and *doany*



Anti-*doany* graffiti by Christians



Christian iconographics enshrined in *doany*

Doany arson case



Main shrine of Ambohidratrimo (before arson)



After the arson attack by radical Christians

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