

A NOTE ON RAKOTOMANGA—RAMASONDRANO
AN EARLY MERINA EVANGELIST AMONG
THE NORTHWESTERN SAKALAVA

by
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In contrast to the early and late years of Colonial Rule in Madagascar, the period between the two great wars is not at all marked by violent events of some size which tend to receive most of the attention. Apart from a mass demonstration in Antananarivo in the 1920's, through which there was expression of desire for the rights that came with French citizenship, one finds nothing comparable with the Menalamba movement, with the so-called *VVS Affair*, with the British occupation or with the Revolt of 1947. Yet, it is almost certain that the real beginnings of the modern Malagasy nationalism are to be found in the inter-war years. Stress must be placed at once on the term modern which serves to qualify the notion of nationalism and which suggests at least three components that are absent from its purely ethnic antecedents prior to 1896. The first and most obvious component is the centrifocal, magnetic presence of Colonial Rule itself. The angles of vision and the reasons for reacting may have been different at different moments in time, within groups and individuals, but Colonial Rule was imposed on everyone. It thus allowed the angles and the reasons to intersect by its intrusive presence in Madagascar as a whole. The second component is what one could call *Legalism* or the use of existant colonial laws within the larger framework of Metropolitan culture in order to minimize both the real and psychological vagaries of Colonial Rule. Here, selective assimilation, which existed *de facto*, could be turned around to call upon the Rights of Man, difficult to maintain anywhere and hardly observed within the context of Colonial Rule.

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Legalism, however was nothing more than a method for seeking redress of specific grievances without any challenge to the legality of alien rule within Madagascar; and the presence of this rule as a dynamic factor could only be perceived as an essentially negative and ephemeral aspect of modern nationalism in Madagascar. Since modern nationalism did not cease to exist and to manifest itself with the departure of alien rule something beyond its contestatory phase. Here, one comes to the third component – an ability to transcend one's own inward-looking ethnicity, to come to see it not as antipodal but as complementary to being a Malagasy. To be sure, a few individuals had this ability even in pre-colonial times and one can think of Raombana, for example, who had, after all spent some seven years abroad. Yet, one would have to wait for the 1920's and Jean Ralaimongo to grasp that behind his own universalism there stood a trend which may not have been particularly articulated but which made it possible for the first time to look outward on a wider, if not yet massive, scale. Ralaimongo is rightly regarded as pivotal in the development of modern Malagasy nationalism; he now graces a national stamp and he has been the subject of at least one thesis, notably by Jean-Pierre Domenichini. One could mention others in public life both inside and outside Madagascar who have not escaped notice. Yet, there are other strands and vectors which point to the trend and which remain to be really looked at. In this connection I would simply like to mention a man who was born exactly one hundred years ago in the Highlands, who became a Protestant evangelist and who left his home at Amparibe to live and work among the Northwestern Sakalava at Nosy Be and in Ambalavao, after World War I.

What is particularly interesting about Rakotomanga-Ramasondrano are not his endeavors on behalf of Christianity but rather the fact that despite his Christian bias and his non-Sakalava ethnicity he does emerge as a sympathetic observer of Sakalava culture who made an effort to pass his observations to the widest possible Malagasy-speaking audience in a booklet entitled simply *Ny Sakalava* and published by Malvoisin in 1924 in BN Antananarivo. To stress that it is a part of a deliberate effort for the Malagasy to know their compatriots everywhere in the Great island, the booklet is subtitled *Malagasy manao izay hahalalana ny Malagasy*. Moreover, the preface states that the *moment has arrived to bring forth the neglected cultural patrimony of all the Malagasy – hence the reason for attempting to know one another; and if they remain silent (about themselves) the many paths of their (own) advancement that can be followed will run into an obstacle – hence this is also an attempt to speak out so that local voices can be heard.*

It is hardly my intent here to offer an analytical statement about *Ny Sakalava* or to go into the details of the author's life times but it is the purpose of this brief note to bring to the attention of those who are particularly interested in the less spectacular but often more fundamental aspects of the inter-war period how Rakotomanga-Ramasondrano saw his Sakalava compatriots and their culture. His booklet is subdivided into four broad areas or history,

language, religion and various aspects of society. There is no doubt that Rakotomanga–Ramasondrano had read some of the earlier materials found in Grandidier, in the *Notes, Reconnaissances et Explorations*, in Guillaïn and in the pages of the *Antananarivo Annual*. Because of this, his historical account of the Maroserana monarchy and the advent of Sakalava empire is not as original as it could have been, although certain details retain some interest. In the other three domains he did not refer too much or at all to the previous efforts and even where he did the personal experience tends to dominate the scribal culture. Thus, he notes the difference in the context of which the Merina and the Sakalava relate to their monarchs of yore. Both among the Merina and the Northwestern Sakalava the old monarchy was no longer present in the 1920's but, while the cult of royals ended in Imerina it continued among the Sakalava. As Rakotomanga–Ramasondrano saw it, this was because the Sakalava monarchs had entered into the intimate religious experience of the people through the *Tromba* which he perceived – in a somewhat round-about fashion – as the true Sakalava religion. It was also, according to his information, spreading beyond the Sakalava into other parts of Madagascar. He held that, as a religious service, the *Tromba* came to Western Madagascar from the Bantu-speaking Africans, more precisely from the Kiswahili *Muumba* for Creator or Divinity. But, what made the *Tromba* different from possession among the other Malagasy was its link to Sakalava nobility. As such, it was to be clearly distinguished from other possession phenomena like the *Bilo*, the *Salamanga*, the *Ramanenjana* and, ultimately, from the non-royal *Tromba* itself. He saw a connection between the *Fondy* and the *Tromba* as well.

One of the most interesting sections of *Ny Sakalava* deals with language for here no European author that I know has been as perceptive as Rakotomanga–Ramasondrano in pointing out to something more than just differences in vocabulary between the so-called *Hova language* and the *Sakalava language*. He notes, for example, that even grammatical rules are not quite the same, that identical words with opposite meanings are frequent, that dual vocabularies for royalty and commoners are normally present, that there appear to be more of the foreign word items in Sakalava idiom than in any other within Madagascar and that the presence of very old Hova words – words which were hardly in use in Imerina of his time – suggest some ancient contacts about which we are as yet singularly uninformed*.

* One should note his reference to the *body language* among the Sakalava.