

AMBOHIMANGA : STATE FORMATION AND THE SYMBOLIC ORGANIZATION OF SPACE

by

Susan KUS

"The claims of Antananarivo to be the capital of Madagascar are not of very ancient date. For a long time indeed it has been the chief town of Imerina : but it is not the original capital of even this province. That honour belongs to Ambohimanga, a town picturesquely situated on a well-wooded hill ten or twelve miles north of Antananarivo. In public proclamations the names of Ambohimanga and Antananarivo are often linked together, and it is customary for the sovereign to recognise the claim of the ancient capital by paying it a visit of state once a year, shortly after the new year's festival"(1).

Anthropologists and archaeologists have offered various definitions of state organized societies. Often these definitions include a list of traits such as class-organization, full-time ritual, political and/or craft specialists, complex irrigation systems, standing armies, monumental architecture and urban planning (2). A number of these features make practical sense if you are organizing a system that involves a large number of people, a large variety of resources and productive activities, and a major investment of time and wealth. Some archaeologists have argued the point well that even the activities of building monuments and laying out cities according to symbolic systems serve practical ends in that they institute and routinize the *corvée* labor that is necessary to create and maintain early states and habituate the population to public service (3). While it can be acknowledged that practical ends are derived from such activity, these ends do not satisfactorily explain the form and content of such activity. That is, they cannot answer questions such as : why were the massive amounts of stone moved around the Nile Valley during pharaonic times used to build pyramids and sphinxes, rather than towers and roads ? Why was the Mexican city of Teotihuacan laid out in a grid pattern rather than a radial one ? Monumental architecture and city

(1) W. Cousins, *Madagascar of Today : a Sketch of the Island*, New York, 1895.

(2) As the reader can see, most all of these traits characterize the Merina State under Andrianampoinimerina.

(3) It has been further argued that such communal labor also serves as a check on radical fluctuations of surplus production from year to year thus serving to stabilize the economy.

planning serve **ideological** ends as well, for how else can one explain the investment of intellectual and aesthetic labor in such ventures? Such material propaganda is, in fact, still characteristic of contemporary states where pyramids and palaces have given way to White Houses and Red Squares(4).

A state's involvement in the symbolic investment of public space and public buildings becomes more understandable if we recall that the common citizens of most early states were non-literate. The activities of building monuments and cities not only physically involve people in symbolic acts but they also leave **material testaments** of such acts. In a sense, public conviction involves not only the experience of participating in the symbolic creation of social order, but also the possibility of the recall of such participation by reference to its material residue, two critical underpinnings of cultural meaning in non-literate societies (5). Thus the symbolic mapping of monumental architecture and public space can serve as a critical element in asserting a claim to "legitimate" authority.

Various authors (6) have discussed (some in admiration and some in disdain) the ideological significance of Andrianampoinimerina's rebuilding of the major gates of the town of Ambohimanga. It is not difficult to recognize in this rebuilding the symbolic statement of this ruler's claim to have achieved the critical political goal of the unification of Imerina. What I would like to suggest in this paper, however, is that a close reading of the passages of the *Tantara* which contain the description of the rebuilding of Ambohimanga can reveal some interesting details about the complexity of the symbolic field created at this "sacred" town, details that have not been fully discussed in the literature.

The description of the rebuilding of the ditches and the seven gates into the town of Ambohimanga in the *Tantara* (7) begins with a discussion of the division of labor. In this division of labor tasks were assigned to groups according to their territorial affiliations with one of the four main divisions of the Merina state, rather than according to kin group membership or social class. A seeming exception to this is that the three groups comprising the Voromahery of

(4) The restoration of the Statue of Liberty and the celebration of the anniversary of the Eiffel Tower are recent examples of the "ideological renewal" of public monuments.

(5) W. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*.

(6) Raombana, *Ilistoires*, 1 S. Ayache (ed.), Fianarantsoa, 1981.

V. Belrose-Iuyghues, "Structure et symbolique de l'espace royal en Imerina", *Les souverains de Madagascar : L'histoire royale et ses résurgences contemporaines*, F. Raison-Jourde (ed.), Paris, 1983.

A. Razafintsalama, *Les Tsimahafotsy d'Ambohimanga : organisation familiale et sociale en Imerina (Madagascar)*, Paris, 1981.

(7) F. Callet, *Tantara ny Andriana eto Madagasikara*, Antananarivo, 1908 [l'histoire des Rois, Antananarivo, 1953] (p. 575-577). The pages refer to the Malagasy text though both this text and the French translation were consulting in preparing this manuscript.

Avaradrano (Tsimahafotsy, Tsimiamboholahy and the Mandiavato) were further distinguished and honored by being assigned individual doors to build.

While the Avaradrano groups are referenced by "deme" affiliation it should be remembered that these affiliations had been, **revalued** as "sobriquet" by Andrianampoinimerina, that is, they had been given singular recognition by the state. In effect, what we see in the assignment of tasks is the use of political/territorial references to organize the population. It is very typical of early states to create and/or use territorial divisions rather than kinship grouping to organize population in that kinship calculations become increasingly unwieldy for administrative purposes as the size of a polity increases. However, it is also the case that the reorganization of population along territorial lines serves the purpose of creating a political field of activity that is in some ways removed from the restraints of the older social order (8). What we have at this point in the *Tantara's* account is the designation of the territorial divisions of the newly re-unified Merina state that will participate in the symbolic re-enactment of unification under the direction of the head of state. While the discussion of the division of labor is interesting, it is the description of the spatial layouts of the gates that follows in the *Tantara* that is most intriguing. It is intriguing in the sense that **two successive and different accounts** of the spatial layouts of the gates and their rebuilding are contained in the passages of the *Tantara*.

In the first account the seven gates are referenced with respect to the cardinal directions.

GATES

DIRECTION

Andakana ambany	andrefana (W)
Miandravahiny	andrefana somary avaratra (W slightly N)
Amboara	avaratra (N)
Ambatomitsangana	atsinanana (E)
Antsolatra	atsino somary atsinanana (S slightly E)
Andranomatsatso	atsimo (S)
Ampitsaharana	atsimo somary andrefana (S slightly W)

All combinations of these directions are used to designate the location of the gates except for the Northeast. In the second account the seven gates are referenced with respect to seven destinies associated with the calculations of *vintana*.

GATE

VINTANA

(8) This is not say that the pre-existent kinship/social groupings are abandoned in early states, they are, however, displaced by alternative territorial designations in various situations.

Ambatomitsangana	alahamady
Andakana	adimizana
Miandravahiny	adijady
Antsolatra	asorotany
Amboara	alohotsy
Ampitsaharana	asombola
Andranomatsatso	alahasaty

Both of these systems map easily into a square or rectangular format and their articulation or overlapping would seem fairly straightforward (see figure 1). But if one looks closer at the spatial arrangements produced with reference to these two different systems it becomes clear that they are not perfectly overlapping. Take for example the major gates of the state, Ambatomitsangana and Andakana ambany (see figure 2). In the first account of the rebuilding of Ambohimanga they are said to lie East and West respectively. In the second account the *vintana* locations of these gates place Ambatomitsangana in the Northeast corner and Andakana ambany to the West with a slightly southern position. What to make of this seeming disarticulation of maps ?

One way to get at the heart of the problem is to recognize that both systems are systems of orientation that necessitate a center as point of orientation/reference. Eliade (9), the noted historian of religion, has had much to say about central points as *axis mundi* and their privileged position as points of orientation. Such arguments should ring familiar to those versed in the symbolic systems of the highlands of Madagascar where the central pillar of a house plays an important role not only in domestic activities and rituals, but also in the affairs of state(10). The interesting question then becomes : what points serve as the centers for the two spatial layouts and what is the relation, if any, between the two center points ?

(9) M. Eliade, *Le mythe de l'éternel retour*, Paris, 1949.

(10) Andriamasinavalona was advised by his counsellor, Andriamampandry, to designate as his heir to the united Imerina the son who had the habit of leaning against the central pillar of a room. By logical/symbolic extension Andrianampoinimerina should have had this same habit.

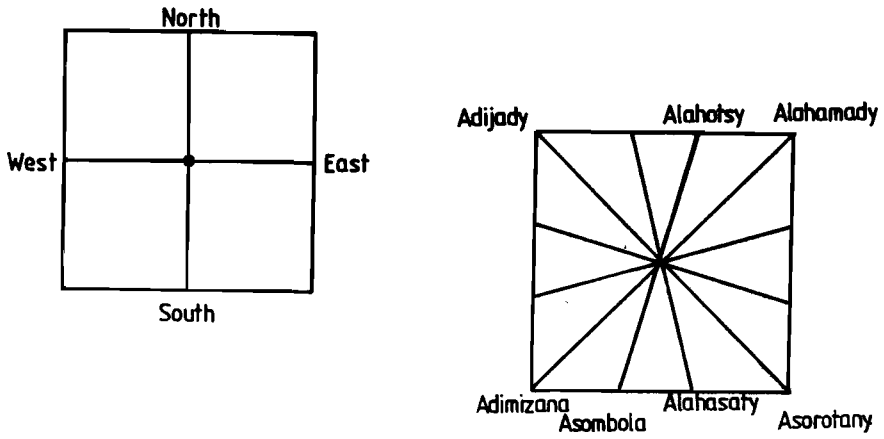


Figure 1
FOUR CARDINAL DIRECTIONS AND SYSTEM OF VINTANA

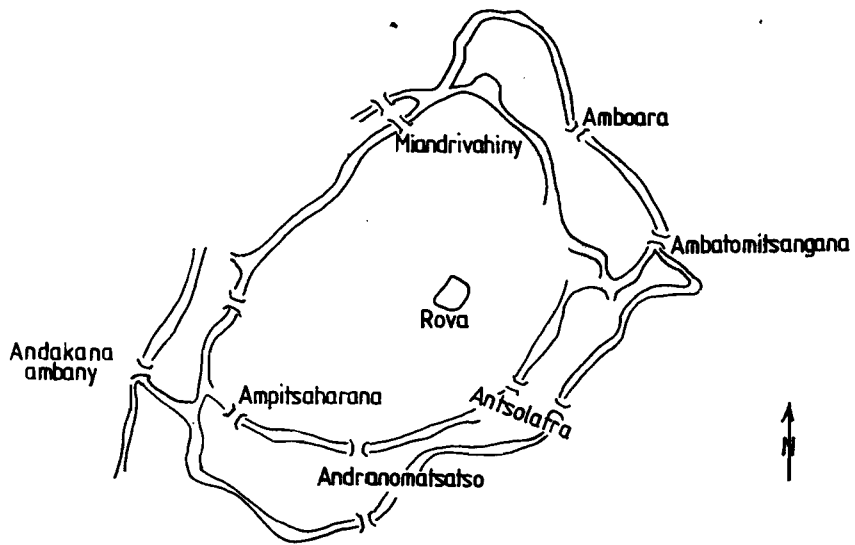


Figure 2
SEVEN GATES OF AMBOHIMANGA
(after Beirose Razifintsalama, Mille)

The first spatial layout of the gates of Ambohimanga described in the *Tantara* uses the *rova* as central point of orientation and the important gates of state, Ambatomitsangana and Andakana ambany are said to lie East and West of this location (see figure 3). The second mapping of the spatial layout of the gates, according to the *Tantara*, uses the village of Ambohimanga as its central point of reference (see figure 4).

The two spatial layouts, while sharing the reference points of the seven gates of the town, are further articulated, I think it can be argued, by the non-arbitrary relationship of their centers - the *rova* lies to the Northeast of the village (see figure 3 and 4).

The system of *vintana*, as is wellknown to malagachisants, is a cosmological melting of time and space and it is symbolically appropriate that the village/society finds itself at the center of a cosmological order that emphasizes continuity of patterning. Belrose-Huyghues (11), among others, has suggested that the system of four cardinal directions, that serves as the symbolic layout of Ambohimanga oriented around the *rova*, is a more ancient system than that of the system of *vintana*. While this may be the case, it does not necessarily follow that the content of various symbolic systems necessarily will maintain the relative chronological relationship of the introduction of such systems. The system of four cardinal directions is in some ways a more "abstract" symbolic system than the system of *vintana*. This is to say, that the former system allows an easier reworking of symbolic content that the latter which is more explicitly tied down to a complicated temporal order of a calendrical cycle. While it is clear that the East-West orientation of the former system makes reference to a temporal cycle of sunrise and sunset, it is a "stark" order that can de-emphasize the temporal in favor of other symbolic content. I think we can follow Delivre's argument here that at various points in the *Tantara* one can detect the creation and reworking of symbols with explicit political content (12). The symbolic order of four cardinal directions/four corners united by the center comes to take on the explicit political ideal of the unification of the Merina State. This state, represented by its creative driving force, the *mpanjaka* or head of state, is put into a privileged position with respect to the system of *vintana* in that the *mpanjaka* is located Northeast with respect to this latter system, that is, located in the most privileged position according the calculations of *vintana*. This line of argument can be pushed further if we note that in the *Tantara* when the layout of Ambohimanga is described with reference to the system of *vintana* Andrianamponimerina is

(11) V. Belrose-Huyghues, *art. cit.*, (p. 143).

(12) A. Delivré, *L'histoire des Rois d'Imerina, Interprétation d'une tradition orale*, Paris, 1974 (p. 195-197).

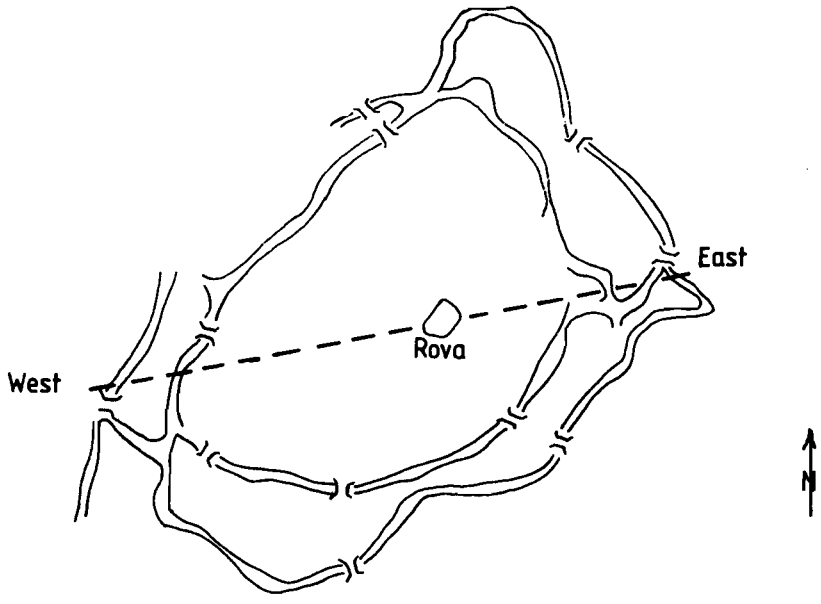


Figure 3
ROVA AS CENTER

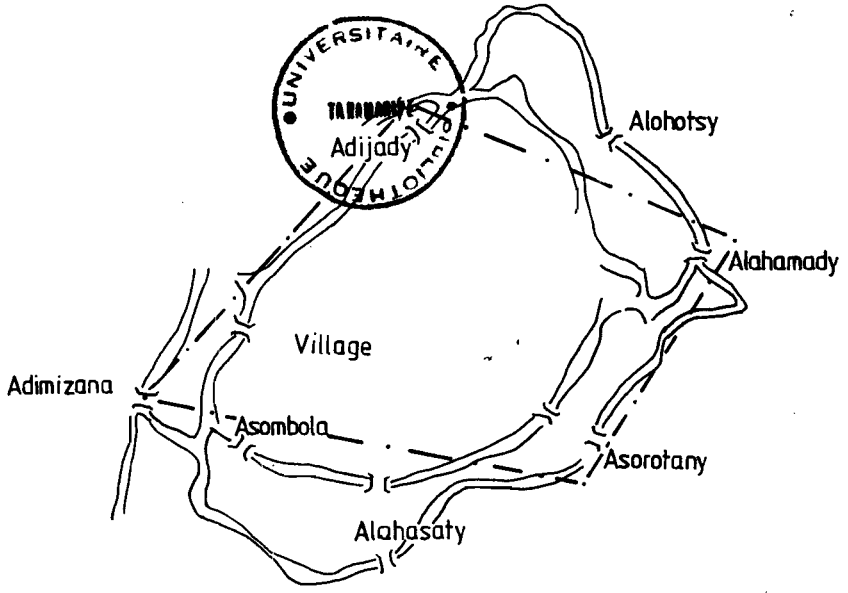


Figure 4
VILLAGE AS CENTER

said to have consulted *ombiasy*, however when the system of four cardinal directions is described, Andrianampoinimerina is solely responsible for directing activities.

Belrose-Huyghues (13) argues that *mpanjaka* such as Ralambo and Andrianampoinimerina brought in specialists from the Southeast of the island to "complicate" the symbolic organization of space. It is not unusual for heads of early states to attempt to monopolize certain forms of knowledge so as to place the state in a central mediating position with regards to the proper functioning of the cosmos. Such manoeuvres make the population even more dependent upon the central political authority since not only the social order but the cosmological order as well is within the charge of state. However, I do not think that we should ignore the usefulness of the strategy that places a certain range of political activity under the singular and immediate control of the head of state(14).

The dual mapping of Ambohimanga finds an echo in the duality of the Merina capitals of Ambohimanga and Antananarivo. Various sources contrast the two capitals either in terms of age (Ambohimanga of more ancient date), activity (slumbering rural capital to thriving metropolis), size (small village to urban center) or significance (sacred to profane). To leave the description of the relationship of the two capitals in terms of a duality is symbolically problematic if we note that the political "propaganda" involved in Andrianampoinimerina's rise to power made continued reference to Imerina's unity under a unique sovereign.

There are a number of symbolic reference to sovereignty and "uniqueness". Some references like the term *andrianlokana* (15) or the offering of *vola tsy vaky* as *hasina* place emphasis on "oneness" and the symbolic field that can be played off of these ideas. But there is an interesting alternative way of suggesting "uniqueness" that uses the image of *tsiroa* or "not two". We see this in the reference to certain *mpanjaka* as *masoandrotsiroa*. Uniqueness is emphasized by suggesting that there is no parallel, no rival and thus no discord. Razafintsalama has remarked: "Le thème de non-partage de la suzeraineté est très connu sous la royauté *merina*: beaucoup de noms de lieux ou de talismans l'expriment, par exemple: *Tsi/roa/no/mandidy*, Il-n'y-à-pas-deux- qui-commandent, *Tsi/an/olon/droa*, Qui-n'appartient-pas-à-deux-personnes, *Manjaka/tsi/roa*, Qui-nè-règne- pas -à-deux, etc. (16).

Manjakatsiroa, it will be recalled, was Andrianampoinimerina's preferred *sampy* according to tradition. The image of the *ombalahibemaso* is also easily

(13) V. Belrose-Huyghues, *art. cit.*, (p. 143).

(14) For a discussion of this issue see S. Kus, "Matters material and ideal", *Symbolic and structural archeology*, I Hodder (ed.), Cambridge University, 1982.

(15) F. Callet, *op. cit.*, p. (387).

(16) A Razafintsalama, *op. cit.*, (p. 82 note 17).

associated with the proverb : "*Ombalahy tsy roa ambala*"(17). This "not being two" is highlighted in reverse by a form of punishment that certain individuals were threatened with by Andrianampoinimerina if they attempted to "separate" or sow discord among citizens of the state. The punishment was to be cut into "two equal parts" (*lapahiko roa mitovy*), thrown to the dogs and have one's immediate family sold into slavery.

Given the symbolic field surrounding duality the image of two capitals merits closer examination. To suggest equality is to foster rivalry and potential dissension. How does one circumvent this aspect of duality ? One alternative is to demonstrate that what might first appear as "two" are, in fact, identical in form. Such an image can found in the notion of twins (*kambana*) and in the close identity of the offspring of two sisters. This latter image, according to the *Tantara'* was evoked by Andrianampoinimerina in certain circumstances as when he refers to the relationship of the populations of Ambohidratrimo and Ambohimanga. "*Dia izao angaroi'ko Ambohidratrimo sy Ambohimanga, fa atao ko zanakolona mirahavavy hianareo Marovatana sy Tsimahafotsy*". (18). As regards Antananarivo and Ambohimanga however, I have not found any such reference in the *Tantara* (19). As concerns the notion of "twins", it does not appear that this image was explicitly used either. While Andrianampoinimerina is quoted as using the terms *kambana* and *fikambanana* several times in discourse at Andohalo addressed primarily to the residents of Ambohimanga and Antananarivo (20), these words have been translated by Chapus and Ratsimba in terms of the images of "joining" or "uniting". Despite the lack of use of the images of "twins" and "offspring of two sisters", nevertheless there is a consistent confounding of the "two" capitals to be found in the *Tantara*.

Various accounts of activities, encounters, speeches, etc. that take place at the individual sites of Ambohimanga and Antananarivo are duly noted with no confusion of locale. Yet, there are certain situations of state when activities are deliberately repeated in the two locales. This is especially true of important rituals of state, e.g. the Royal Bath and when various regions and rulers acknowledge submission to Andrianampoinimerina.

Not only do the *rova* of the two sites serve as residence for the "unique" sovereign and his favorite *sampy Manjakatsiroa*, but certain names of buildings are the same within these *rova*. "Ary Andrianampoinimerina nampitovy ny anaran-trano anaty rova aty Ambohimanga sy ny any Antananarivo. Ny anaran-trano

(17) It is interesting to note that this proverb was recently used in a political editorial in *Lakroa*.

(18) F. Callet, *op. cit.* (p. 551).

(19) Raharijaona, in their discussion of the relationship of Ambohimanga to Antananarivo, does evoke this image. Raharijaona, Mme et Dr "Anciennes résidences royales. Essai de monographies sur Ambohimanga et Ambositra", *Bulletin de l'Académie Malgache*, 1931, t. 14.

(20) F. Callet, *op. cit.* (p. 707-708).

aty Ambohimanga, Manjakamiadana ; dia nasiana Manjakamiadana koa antananarivo, & ; ireo trano aty nalain'ananana any (21).

Andrianampoinimerina's discourse, as contained in the *Tantara*, also includes various metaphoric images of the identity of the two sites. The residents of Ambohimanga and Antananarivo are said to be like "a guinea fowl without two color's of feathers"(22). The two sites are referred to as the *foibe* or "center" of Imerina. At one point in the oral traditions Andrianampoinimerina is figuratively described as standing at the central position of Ambohimanga and Antananarivo holding the threads of the four corners of the silken cloth that constitutes the unified Merina state(23). Over and over again in the *Tantara*, like in a litany, the names of Ambohimanga and Antananarivo are cited together, in a formulaic statement : Ambohimanga sy Antananarivo (24), when the unified state is referred to in official pronouncements. The opening quote from Cousins testifies to the continued use of this formula during the last reigning years of the Merina monarchy. But perhaps the most direct statement of the identity of Ambohimanga and Antananarivo is when Andrianampoinimerina declares himself to be these "two" sites : "*fa Ambohimanga sy Antananarivo tsy misy hafa : izaho no Ambohimanga sy Antananarivo*".

The confounding of the sites of Ambohimanga and Antananarivo accomplishes the same ideological function as the double mapping of Ambohimanga. The state/*mpanjaka* is given monopoly of the privileged positions of center and Northeast corner in major symbol systems of traditional Merina worldview. So the state/*mpanjaka* is constituted as the necessary, legitimate and active force in the preservation of cosmological harmony and the creation of socio-political order.

CONCLUSION

What I have chosen to present to the audience of this colloquium is a working sketch of the argument that : what we have in the "dual" mapping of Ambohimanga and in the "confounding" of Ambohimanga and Antananarivo (as presented in the *Tantara*) is the articulation of two major symbolic images to the

(21) *Ibidem*, (p. 599)

(22) "... fa akanga, sy roa volo i Merina Ambohimanga sy Antananarivo ". (p. 707).

(23) "Hevi-panjakana lehibe ny nametrahan'Andrianampoinimerina ny vady ny rehetra samy mitondra lova tsy mifindra intsony, tany ny tendrombohitra lehibe rehetra hampandry ny tany sy ny fanjakana sy hampiharo any Merina volo : dia ny vady ny natao ny ohatry ny landy nasiana ny vazantany efatra, fa izy ampovoana aty *Ambohimanga sy Antananarivo* no nitana ny landy". (My emphasis-p. 715).

(24) The following pages list a few of the places where this formula is used in the *Tantara* : pages 672, 706, 872, 910, 1022, 1053, 1056.

advantage of the state. What I hope to gain from participating in this colloquium is the critical help of the collective knowledge of other participants so as to be able to turn this working sketch into a well-argued thesis.

FAMINTINANA

Nisy foto-kevitra tiana nampitaina tamin'ny fandaminana ny rafitr'ireo trano sy kianja teo amin'ny vohitra fahiny dia ny fanamafisam-pahefana. Araka izany no nananganan'Andrianampoinimerina ny tananan'Ambohimanga ho sarin'Imerina miray. Raha mandalina bebe kokoa ny Tantara anefa dia hita fa tsy tsotra tahaka izany ny sary raketin'ny tanàna masin'Ambohimanga. Nozaraina araka ny antony politika sy ara-paritra fa tsy araka ny rohim-pihavanana loatra ny asa tamin'ny fanorenana azy. Fa ny toeran'ny vavahady no mahalasa eritreritra indrindra raha jerena izay voalaza ao amin'ny Tantara. Misy fanazavana anankiroa mantsy ao : ny iray dia hoe sarin'ny vazantany ny vavahady fito ary ny fuharoa kosa dia sarin'ny vintana fito. Tsy misanandrify hatrany anefa ireo fomba fijery roa ireo satria tsy mitovy ny ivo iaingany — ny rova sy ny tanàna. Ilevitra roa samy hafa, fifangaroan-kevitra, fitovian-kevitra hita taratra daholo izany amin'ny firafitry ny renivohitr'Imerina (Ambohimanga sy Antananarivo). Raha ny marina ,ny hevitra roa ssamy hafa raiketin'ireo fandaminana ireo toerana ireo dia samy maneho sary roa mavesa-danja natalao hanohanana fitondrana mampivondrona ny fanjakana : firindran'ny tontolo ary filaminana ara-piaraha-monina sy ara-politika.

RESUME

L'organisation symbolique de l'architecture des monuments et espaces publics a une portée idéologique : légitimer une autorité. Ainsi, Ambohimanga fut créé par Andrianampoinimerina pour symboliser l'unification de l'Imerina. Cependant, une lecture plus approfondie des *Tantara* montre que la symbolique de la reconstitution d'Ambohimanga, ville "sacrée" est beaucoup plus complexe. Les tâches de reconstruction ont été réparties selon des critères politiques et de territorialité plutôt que des critères de parenté. Mais c'est surtout la disposition spatiale des portes qui intrigue le plus si l'on se réfère au *Tantara* qui en offre deux explications différentes selon lesquelles les sept portes correspondent d'abord aux points cardinaux puis aux sept destins ou *vintana*. Mais les deux systèmes ne coïncident pas toujours car leur point central d'orientation diffère (le rova et le village). Dualité, confusion, identité se retrouvent également au niveau des capitales de l'Imerina (Ambohimanga et Antananarivo). En fait, la dualité de l'organisation de l'espace, dans les deux cas, véhicule deux images symboliques fortes au service d'un état centralisateur : harmonie cosmologique et ordre socio-politique.