

## **sainte-marie (1)**

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Ile Sainte - Marie, according to tradition was first discovered by an Arab Sailor, named Ibrahim. The island, later occupied by his descendents, became known as Nosy Ibrahim. It was these Zaffin Ibrahim which Flacourt discovered in 1648. Flacourt suggested that they might be the remains of a Jewish colony, having knowledge of Noah, Abraham, Moses and David but neither Mohamed or Jesus Christ.

Houtman, the Dutch admiral, reports the existence of an Arab fort on the island in 1595, in which some mysterious Sheik spent the winter. Thus it is possible that Jews, from Yemen may have accompanied Arab traders on their mission to Madagascar. But whoever these people were, no real trace of them or their Hebraic tradition remains on Sainte-Marie today.

The name Sainte-Marie is due to Jesuit missionaries. The island is now about one third catholic, and it is not unusual to see Christian hymns sung along with ancestral melodies, for example in a 'return of the dead' (Mamam-pandriana) ceremony. These ceremonies take place three to seven years after the death of the individual, considerably longer than the interval among the Merina. The bones of the deceased are transferred from the ground to small dug out wooden boxes, amidst joyous singing, dancing and drinking of alcohol (Betšabetsa, Labajany). The eldest living male, invoking all the ancestral spirits from all the island's holy places, assures the deceased acceptance into the realm of the ancestors. The whole ceremony may be considered as a 'rite de passage' in the individual, although dead, passes from the limbo state of the dead into the role of an ancestor (razana). As an ancestor, he or she may receive petitions or offerings, especially in times of illness, among the living.

Circumcision is no longer practiced at Ile Sainte-Marie. Some elders say that it was practiced long ago and Petit de la Rhodiere, who visited the island in 1818 confirms this fact. According to one theory, the French doctors routinely performed surgical circumcision at the maternity hospital, before the infant returned home. The family was thus deprived of their opportunity and the ceremony died out. Another ceremony (Mitrambo) in which the mother and infant emerge from a week's seclusion does mark the child's entry into society.

Tromba cults flourish on Sainte-Marie. Sakalava monarchs are common spirit figures. But the major spirit, unique to the island is Botou Tsinguize. He was of the island (Antenosi) but worked as a French sailor. Proprietor of Nosy Alana, a sandy isle, he died with his foot trapped in a clam shell, drunk on

(1) (Based on observations at Ile Sainte-Marie July-October 1973, under support from the Canada Council)

rum. Appropriately when his spirit arrives, he inevitably demands great quantities of rum. Attired in a French Marine uniform, he is a common sight at zebu sacrifices and other major ceremonies. Being both French and Malagasy, his Tromba spirit is more powerful than either. Medical cures are attributed to him as well.