

Research Articles

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Malagasy rhetoric and preaching

Kabary-communication: To be embraced or rejected?

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Abstract: The article presents and discusses why two researchers seem to draw opposite conclusions regarding the usefulness of the Malagasy rhetoric art form of *kabary* for Christian preaching. The problem is stated as an investigation of whether and how *kabary*-communication may assist preaching in Madagascar. A description of the basic characteristics of *kabary* is furnished, the historical origins of the conflict and some of the tacit presuppositions underlying it are made explicit. The article concludes by asserting that it is not an issue to substitute the sermon by the *kabary*-institution as such. Nevertheless, communication aspects inherent in *kabary* are valuable contributions to preaching in Madagascar and even as a reminder for the universal Christian church.

Zusammenfassung: Der Artikel diskutiert zwei kontroverse Ansätze, die sich mit der Übertragbarkeit der rhetorischen Kunstform des *Kabary* auf die christliche Predigt befassen. Die Leitfrage lautet, inwieweit die *Kabary*-Gemeinschaft auf Madagaskar das örtliche Predigen anregen kann. Zunächst beschreibt der Beitrag die zentralen Merkmale sowie die Geschichte des *Kabary*, bevor er auf aktuelle Konfliktfelder verweist, die sich im Spannungsfeld von Predigt und *Kabary* ergeben. Der Artikel schließt mit der These, dass *Kabary* die traditionelle Predigt zwar nicht ersetzen, wohl aber mithilfe ihrer Kommunikationstechniken bereichern könne.

The relation between gospel and culture has been a burning question since the beginning of the Christian era and still causes discussion. When the first Lutheran missionaries arrived in Madagascar in 1867 they were rather reluctant to embrace traditional cultural practices. Evaluated in the climate of the 19th century this is understandable but what about the present situation? Is there a need for a fresh reflection on contextualisation issues today? This article reflects a context which

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is not too often part of the practical theological discussion in Europe and North-America. It contributes to promoting an international dialogue by describing the important ecclesiastical field of preaching in relation to a traditional Malagasy rhetorical art form.

In my recent book I have argued that the communicational skills in the public speech tradition, called *kabary*, have much to contribute to preaching in Madagascar. Being a Westerner and an outsider to the culture, I exhort Malagasy theologians to further explore this area but nevertheless, my opinion is that many aspects of this Malagasy rhetoric are worthy to be reflected on and taken into consideration in the preaching of the Malagasy Lutheran Church (MLC), where I have been working for nine years but also in other church families in Madagascar.¹

In his doctoral dissertation, Kevin A. Ogilvie seems to draw the opposite conclusion regarding the usefulness of *kabary* for preaching, namely that “it could not be accepted either by the nineteenth century missionaries or Christians of the twenty-first century”, and he adds: “There has been sufficient reason theologically and scripturally to resist *kabary* as an appropriate medium for sermon proclamation.”²

We have investigated the same phenomenon but have come to different conclusions. Do we talk at cross purposes? Do we focus on different elements in this Malagasy art form? Do we really disagree or is the conflict of views only seemingly contradictory? It has to be said that Ogilvie, too, mentions some aspects of *kabary* which may serve to promote the gospel, if recaptured by the MLC.³ His main conclusion, however, is rejection.⁴

This article will examine the arguments on each side and the main problem is to investigate whether and how *kabary*-communication may assist preaching in Madagascar, by assessing the validity of the arguments, which seem to lead in different directions. In my opinion, there are at least three reasons why this issue is important for the church in Madagascar. Firstly, there seems to be a renewed interest in *kabary* in recent times, witnessed by the relatively large number of

¹ Hans Austnaberg, *Improving Preaching by Listening to Listeners*. Sunday Service Preaching in the Malagasy Lutheran Church, in: Knut Holter (ed.), *Bible and Theology in Africa*, New York (Peter Lang) 2012, 210–218.

² Kevin A. Ogilvie, *Breaking Words: Towards an Oral Theology of Homiletics*, Pietermaritzburg (Dissertation) 2010, 241–244.

³ Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 246.

⁴ It is interesting to notice that his negative orientation is in line with a majority of my own informants who do not see it as advisable to insert lessons from the area of *kabary* into the sermon. Austnaberg, *Improving Preaching* (n. 1), 128.

Malagasy literature covering this field and the rise of educational centres teaching *kabary*, also including Christian services and prayer in some of these schools.⁵ A second argument is that the *kabary*-kind of communication is a specific Malagasy way of oratory, lying close to people's hearts and thus being of special value to them.⁶ Thirdly, preachers in the MLC are in need of more relevant communicational skills to connect with their communities, according to voiced criticisms.⁷

I will start by providing a brief sketch of *kabary* as a Malagasy art form and give some characteristics of *kabary* communication. Then I will present and discuss the arguments of the two positions. The conclusion does not only pretend to show the points of conflict, however, but will also, in line with a widely accepted method in practical theology, try to point a way forward.⁸

Characteristics of *kabary* communication

Kabary is an oral art form, a harmonious and strictly structured speech, characterised by the use of proverbs and artistic speech forms,⁹ indirect, circular, and imprecise.¹⁰ It is a lively speech by a skilful and trustworthy person, a sharing of respect and honour, and a communication of a message for a specific occasion. Its intention is to change practices and ways of seeing things, to stir, cause reflection and make the listeners' hearts jump, Rakotojaona asserts.¹¹ He is one of the many authors publishing textbooks on *kabary* these days.

Historically, *kabary* is believed to have originated from Arab immigrants to Madagascar.¹² In the beginning this kind of speech was primarily limited to the political sphere, as means of governing the people. Royal *kabary* necessarily ended by the colonisation by the French in 1896, but it was extended to fulfil

5 Austnaberg, *Improving Preaching* (n. 1), 204, 130.

6 Danna Harman, In *Kabary*, the Point Is to Avoid the Point, in: *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 9, 2002, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2002/0509/p01s04-woaf.html>, last viewed February 28, 2012.

7 Austnaberg, *Improving Preaching* (n. 1), 1–2.

8 John Swinton / Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, London (SCM Press) 2006, 94–97.

9 Henri Ranjeva, *Le Kabary*. Entretien Avec Honoré Rakotoandrianoela, Mpikabary (Orateur), in: Pr. Siméon Rajaona (ed.), *Madagascar. 1. La Littérature D'expression Malgache*, Notre Librairie, Paris (CLEF) 1992, 29.

10 Harman. In *Kabary*, the Point Is to Avoid the Point (n. 6).

11 Herisoa Andrianaina Rakotojaona, *Handeha Hikabary*, Antananarivo (Trano Printy FJKM) 2009, 7–8.

12 Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 218–219.

important roles not least at the various rites of passage, of which the most developed is the marriage discourse.¹³ The structure of *kabary* is fixed and strictly observed, its form consisting in a sequence of excuses, greetings, main content, and a conclusion including good wishes.¹⁴ Especially the introductory part with removal of taboos (*aza fady*) and removal of blame (*fialan-tsiny*) is elaborate.¹⁵

Direct speech and confrontation are avoided and it is prohibited to single out individuals. The emphasis is on the community and *kabary* may be called a community rhetorical project.¹⁶ A skilled orator is able to vary his repertoire according to the listeners present, in order to captivate their spirits and stimulate their feelings.¹⁷ Proverbs and poetry are often taken from the listeners' everyday lives and the purpose is to encourage the listeners to reflect more deeply on their meanings. The speech ought to relate closely to the listeners' expectations, according to Andriamboavonjy and Gasstsar.¹⁸ The *kabary*-event fundamentally involves active participation by the audience and it establishes relationship, especially because of the requirement that the speech has to be answered. If it is not answered or answered unsupportively, it fails as a participatory act.¹⁹ Although *kabary* is a historically inherited oral art form, it is dynamic and adaptable to modern times and orators may include Christian prayer or a Christian service in its structure. There is even published a pamphlet called *Christian kabary*,²⁰ where references to the bible are interspersed in the structure.²¹

Kabary in the ethnic group of Bestileo always requires two speakers, each a spokesperson for a group of people and the speech is considered a dialogue between the two parties. Lee Haring, in his book *Verbal Arts in Madagascar*, interprets this feature by saying that the *kabary* takes place in a setting of contesta-

13 Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 219, 224–230. Ogilvie provides a brief history of *kabary* from king Ralambo through the most well-known king Andrianampoinimerina, mainly until the French colonisation.

14 François Rakotonaivo, Ny Riba Malagasy Eran'ny Nosy, Fianarantsoa (Ambozontany) 1997, 253–254; Hanitriniaina Ravaomalala Andriamboavonjy / Rakotondrandria Gasstsar (eds.), Faka Sy Kolo Mikabary 21.3, 2 edition, Antananarivo (Imprimerie 2000) 2005, 33.

15 Different authors refer some minor dissimilarity as to structure. Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 219, who builds on another Malagasy author.

16 Cynthia Holder Rich, *Indigenous Christianity in Madagascar. The Power to Heal in Community*, New York: (Peter Lang) 2011, 83.

17 Ranjeva, *Le Kabary* (n. 9), 30.

18 Andriamboavonjy / Gasstsar, Faka Sy Kolo Mikabary (n. 14), 21, 131.

19 Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 221–222.

20 Andry Tiana Rajaomaria, *Kabary Kristianina. "Ohabolana – Haiteny – Soratra Masina"*, Antananarivo (Imprimerie 2000), 2009.

21 Austnaberg, *Improving Preaching* (n. 1), 205–206.

tion and conflict. The language is built on riddles, which, by its evasive nature, allows for truth to be spoken through indirection.²² Rites of passage are characterised by contest and conflict, continuity and discontinuity. Through the structured dialogue which is a kind of contest according to Ogilvie, the destabilised situation is resolved. Thus *kabary*, the artful use of language, is a controlled use of power.²³ The orator, often hired for the occasion, is not the owner of the speech and thus ought to be attentive to what those who hired him/her want to communicate. The role of messenger has to be respected and the speaker has to dedicate time to the necessary preparation. This is especially important at burials.²⁴ When answering the first speech it is customary to start by repeating briefly what the other party's spokesperson said in order to show that the speech has been listened to attentively. The orator is advised to connect with the sentiments of the listeners, e. g. by using family concepts like "my child".²⁵

The arrangement of the speech differs from Western norms of literate composition and does not follow a linear logic. Ogilvie cites Elinor O. Keenan who says that each expression of indirect speech refers to the theme with equal weight and the meaning becomes clearer as the many expressions are "stacked". Keenan asserts that each new expression serves to narrow the possible implications of the other expressions; it is not about them being more and more specific.²⁶ This is in line with a Malagasy textbook saying that the images and proverbs are accumulated and presented in parallel to each other, but it is up to the listeners to interpret the implicit symbols and trace the connecting theme.²⁷

Spoken words have power to accomplish what they say, according to Malagasy philosophy, and this is exemplified by Ogilvie in the capacity of *kabary* to remove and break the power of blame (*tsiny*) in the introductory excuses of the speech. Speech has the capacity to restore good relationships (*fiavanana*). The proverbs and the sayings used in *kabary* are not only decorations, a Malagasy writer asserts, they carry amazing hidden power, thus giving power to the proclaimed word.²⁸

The orator (*mpikabary*) is surrounded by a strict set of expectations. Not only intelligence is needed but also an integrated personality because the orator is the

22 Referred to in Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 230–231.

23 Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 231–232.

24 Rakotojaona, *Ny Riba Malagasy Eran'ny Nosy* (n. 14), 16–17, 51.

25 *Ibid.*, 30, 34.

26 Referred to in Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 233.

27 Fikambanan'ny kabary eto Madagasikara, *Ambarion-Kabary*. Boky Ahafantarana Ireo Mpi-kabary Sy Ny Kabary. Boky I, 2009, 162.

28 Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 236–237.

instrument in performing the speech. He/she ought to be well prepared and no stuttering or hesitation when speaking is allowed.²⁹ The orator's integrity also is needed to preserve the institution of *kabary* as a characterisation of the Malagasy way of life; no changes ought to be made that may bring the institution into disrepute.³⁰ One of the Malagasy textbooks on *kabary* furnishes a long list of requirements for the orators: They should be worthy of respect, in words and deeds; be willing to carry on their shoulders the demands of *kabary*; be good listeners and enjoy continuing research; be humble and not make a display of themselves; be mature and stand firm on the truth. They ought to arrive at the appointed time and respect the length of the speech without endless repetition, respect the customs and taboos in the area, be tidy and clean, and dress appropriately.³¹ What a list of expectations to live up to!³²

Presentation and discussion of arguments

Ogilvie and I have a common point of departure in evaluating *kabary* positively in its proper setting. It is an expression of Malagasy wisdom, representing the treasures and values of Malagasy culture and it is enjoyed by its listeners. The renewed interest in this oral art form, witnessed today in the literature produced and the *kabary*-centres giving instruction in the art, may be a proper reaction to globalising tendencies threatening to make the younger generations forget the Malagasy values and heritage of the past. Today *kabary* may be seen as a preserving and conserving agent against the influence of modernity and globalisation and as such a valid expression of a Malagasy mind-set and values.³³

Another common point of departure is that both of us initially have been thinking that the foreign missionaries and the Malagasy converts too easily had rejected *kabary* as a useful tool in Christian preaching. Ogilvie has since the beginning of his research been wondering why the Lutheran preachers who grew up in this culture rich in oral art, did not use this art in preaching. In addition, he noticed from teaching homiletics that the students who mastered *kabary* also

29 Ranjeva, *Le Kabary* (n. 9), 30.

30 Rakotojaona, *Ny Riba Malagasy Eran'ny Nosy* (n. 14), 65.

31 Andriamboavonjy / Gasstsar, *Faka Sy Kolo Mikabary* (n. 14), 15, 17.

32 The purpose of the brief listing of characteristics above is to furnish a basic understanding of *kabary* as an introduction to the following discussion. The interested reader will find references to additional literature in Austnaberg, *Improving Preaching* (n. 1), 204–207; Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 203–248.

33 Austnaberg, *Improving Preaching* (n. 1), 130; Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 245.

were better preachers.³⁴ One of my assumptions was that the sermon which had been the foreign missionaries' customary way of preaching from the beginning, had suppressed other forms of communication. Another hypothesis was that the first missionaries supposedly did not know the communicational skills of *kabary* well enough and therefore, set it aside as an aid in spreading the gospel.³⁵ Our assumptions and uncertainty regarding the decision taken by the Lutheran church towards the use of *kabary* seems to have motivated both of us to investigate the issue more in detail.³⁶

Historical origins of the conflict

Ogilvie, referring to Françoise Raison-Jourde's work,³⁷ gives an example of orators (*mpikabary*) who had converted to Christianity after Christianity ceased to be a banned and persecuted religion in 1861, taking part in preaching. They often picked a verse from Proverbs or another small portion of a text as their theme, sometimes without any reference to the gospel. They preached by using a multiplicity of images which rather obscured than explained the text. As the speech had to be answered, according to tradition, the many respondents increased congregational conflict.³⁸ By reading how Raison-Jourde herself describes the years from 1861–1870, the graveness of the situation stands forth even more vividly. She tells that at Tsiroanomandidy the secretary of the governor also had the office of pastor, without knowing anything about Jesus. He had knowledge of reading and owned a bible but was totally ignorant about its content. He chose one verse here and another there, without anything combining them and he probably had found that the Proverbs were the best book to use in this way. Raison-Jourde calls this kind of preaching “church *kabary*” (“*kabary ecclésiastique*”). Members in the church subsequently stood up and had their own *kabary*, by improvisation, the content mainly being polemic against other persons or groups in the congregation. One observer notices that they just said what came through

34 Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 116, 223.

35 Austnaberg, *Improving Preaching* (n. 1), 209.

36 A Malagasy voice suggesting that the Christian mission among the ethnic group of Betsileo would have been more effective if the church had allowed traditional oral storytelling (in close proximity to the *kabary*-tradition) is Dieu-Donné Randrianirina, *For He Spoke and It Came to Be. The Significance of the Divine Word According to Christian Faith, with a View to the Mission of the Church in the Betsileo Cultural Setting*, Stavanger (Master Thesis) 1998, 43.

37 Cf. Françoise Raison-Jourde, *Bible Et Pouvoir À Madagascar Au XIXe Siècle. Invention D'une Identité Chrétienne Et Construction De L'état (1780–1880)*, Paris (Éditions Karthala) 1991.

38 Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 239.

their mind. These orators really prepared themselves thoroughly when performing *kabary* in the political or social settings, while in church they only improvised without any preparation. The reaction of the missionaries was to spread bibles in great numbers, to teach adults to read and to give biblical instruction to the autodidacts, especially by starting theological institutions.³⁹ Needless to say, this uncontrolled activity of *kabary*-orators in the first congregations greatly contributed to the discredit of a *kabary*-style of preaching.

Historically, preaching turned its back to *kabary* because of its compositional style, but also because of despise for what was considered a capricious and non-logical fashion of communication. Raison-Jourde criticises G. Mondain for overlooking the aesthetic dimensions of *kabary*, built on a different logic. She is critical to the condemnation of the language of images found in the church in the 1860ies and accuses the first missionaries to only have condemned, without having investigated the spirit of this kind of communication and without having searched for the path to the people's real convictions.⁴⁰

Cynthia H. Rich also traces the conflict between sermons and *kabary* for use in worship in the conflicting understanding between missionary and Malagasy views. The first missionaries crafted their sermons based on their educated understanding of the bible, due to their studying of homiletics and hermeneutics. Thus, the biblical text had to be central in Christian worship. Moreover, the missionaries came from a context where they did not open up for dialogue and discussion during worship while they came into a context where ritual speech always included response. The missionary style was internal reflection rather than public response. Rich concludes by saying that the missionary understanding of the sermon was alien to the Malagasy.⁴¹

The treatment of *kabary* in my book does not enter into its historic origins but there are a few references in my empirical material pointing to what happened historically, e.g. one who says that if *kabary* had been used in sermons from the beginning it would not have caused any problems today. If it is to be inserted now, however, she thinks it would cause reactions and be considered strange.⁴²

The presentation above seems to show that there are historical reasons why *kabary*-communication has not been used as a strategy for evangelistic work. Incidents of misuse in addition to a lack of knowledge of this Malagasy kind of rhetoric seem to have contributed to the conflict.

³⁹ Raison-Jourde, *Bible Et Pouvoir À Madagascar Au XIXe Siècle* (n. 37), 565–567.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 572–574.

⁴¹ Rich, *Indigenous Christianity* (n. 16), 82.

⁴² Austnaberg, *Improving Preaching* (n. 1), 129–130.

Underlying assumptions as a cause of conflict

Ogilvie uses much space in his chapter on *kabary* to spell out the Malagasy understanding of speech. Spoken words have an innate and hidden power. In a context of seen and unseen forces and powers, spoken words have an important task. Through speech it is possible to restore what is broken, even the most precious of all Malagasy values: relationships (*fihavanana*). Speech may remove blame and thus it becomes the means for restoring true relationships. The underlying thinking sees the word as free-flowing, “endlessly enraptured by its own art”.⁴³

Why does speech have power according to Malagasy thinking? What is the source causing the spoken word to accomplish what it says? Put another way: What is the authority behind the *kabary*? Ogilvie does not answer this question directly, but he lists as a major reason for the non-acceptance of *kabary* that it relies on a different canon than does the Christian faith. It makes heavy use of proverbial material and the wisdom of the past. In a way, this becomes the authority that carries the words of the speech.⁴⁴ Of course, the proverbial material does not need to be at odds with Christianity but Ogilvie’s point here is that other sources than the Christian biblical story lies underneath *kabary*. I have suggested that one of the reasons for my informants’ reservations to draw lessons from the area of *kabary* into the sermon may be the presuppositions underlying its structure. Starting with a lot of excuses, the removal of taboos and the removal of blame or retaliation points towards a traditional Malagasy worldview, where the forces of taboos and retaliation are destructive and fearful for people.⁴⁵ The Christian preaching, to the contrary, emphasises that Jesus is victorious over these forces.

Kabary takes place in a context of dialogue, conflict and contestation which is especially visible in its frequent use in rites of passage. Ogilvie sees this as an important cause for its non-acceptance into preaching, probably because the features of conflict and contestation underlying the *kabary* are considered alien in the sermon.⁴⁶

I suggest that the strict hierarchical thinking undergirding *kabary* may be one of the reasons to my informants’ reservations. Traditional society in the ethnic group of Merina is characterised by a fundamental hierarchical structure. God is at the top, below him the ancestors, then the elders, and at the bottom ordinary

⁴³ Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 221, 236–237, 244.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁴⁵ Austnaberg, *Improving Preaching* (n. 1), 128, 208–209.

⁴⁶ Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 230–231, 241.

people. To communicate with those on higher levels, one has to go via the next level of the chain.⁴⁷ This hierarchical structure may have been considered to stand in opposition to the egalitarian orientation of the New Testament (e.g. Gal 3: 28).⁴⁸

The underlying assumptions continue to have an effect on a custom although they are tacit and unnoticed for most people. The institution of *kabary* has its origin before Christianity made its entry to Madagascar. As such, it is characterised by pre-Christian, traditional thinking that in some respects may be at odds with Christianity. When the Christian faith is communicated into a new context, however, it necessarily has to take some of the flavour of this context, and I will investigate the contextualisation-issue more in detail in another subchapter. An interesting question here is whether a traditional custom may be replanted into a Christian context without, at the same time, bringing the original underlying presuppositions.

Ogilvie criticises the Malagasy notion of a free-flowing word. He asserts that it is broken or disciplined, at the Cross of Christ, which functions as a canon for the speech.⁴⁹ In this way, he also sets forth the different authorities behind *kabary* and preaching. The sermon rests on the authority of God in Christ, which is not the case with *kabary*.⁵⁰ I agree with Ogilvie in his evaluation, but we will further on see how the notion of words performing what they say is an important reminder for preaching.

Kabary leans heavily on proverbial material. It is interesting that one of my informants sees the similarities between several Malagasy proverbs and biblical teaching as an indication of God's wisdom being present in the Malagasy wisdom tradition even before Christianity arrived. This raises the questions of natural revelation and the work of the Holy Spirit prior to the arrival of Christianity. Is the similarity an indication of God having revealed himself to the Malagasy forefathers and – mothers? My informant thinks that this kind of similarities may be used as a point of connection in missionary preaching.⁵¹ May this informant's sayings be taken as an indication of the porous borders between Christianity and at least some of the material used in *kabary*?

47 Karina Hestad Skeie, *Building God's Kingdom in Highland Madagascar. Norwegian Lutheran Missionaries in Vakinankaratra and Betsileo 1866–1903*, Oslo (Dissertation) 2005, 58–59.

48 Austnaberg, *Improving Preaching* (n. 1), 148, 209.

49 Ogilvie employs majuscule when writing "Word" in this paragraph which in Christian usage may indicate Jesus as the Word. I am uncertain as to what his intention with the majuscule is at this point.

50 Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 244.

51 Austnaberg, *Improving Preaching* (n. 1), 214.

Differences between *kabary* and sermons⁵²

Ogilvie states his point in one of the headings saying: “*Kabary*: Proclamation that is not a sermon”,⁵³ indicating his position, and he lists three reasons why *kabary* could not be accepted as a vehicle for sermon proclamation: “This interplay between the language of command and the language of the wise and respected elder, the fact that *kabary* by its nature is dialogical and even conflictual, and the fact that *kabary*’s heavy use of proverbial sources is, in a sense, a reliance on a different canon, these reasons among others, are, in the end, why it could not be accepted [...]”⁵⁴

Historically, the sermons brought by the missionaries were considered authoritarian commands, in line with the “top-down”-commands of the French colonisers. Hence, they were called “*kabary* without a response” (*kabary tsy valiana*). Thus sermons were understood as a specific form of *kabary*, unlike the most common kind which always required a response.⁵⁵ It seems as this confusion in understanding of the *kabary* and the sermon respectively is what Ogilvie calls the “interplay between the language of command and the language of the wise and respected elder”, stating this as a reason for the non-acceptance of *kabary*. His second reason indicates that he understands the sermon as a monologue and non-conflictual, in opposition to *kabary* which is fundamentally dialogic and thus inherently a contest between two parties. The third difference is the canons the two kinds of speech rely on, proverbial material and the Christian bible. This third reason points to the underlying assumption of authority behind the speeches, referred to in the subchapter above.⁵⁶

In relation to the question of underlying authority, Ogilvie mentions the power-issue of the *kabary*-institution, allowing truth to be spoken to power by way of indirection. In *kabary*, language functions as a controlled use of power.⁵⁷ In contrast to this feature of *kabary*, he presents the sermon as “the ultimate power speaking truth”. To preach is an act of confession, trusting in Christ’s power which is able to raise the dead. While the main direction of *kabary* is towards the past, Ogilvie asserts that sermons point people to the future, setting people free from

⁵² My point in the following is not to generally define what a sermon is or ought to be in relation to the understanding of *kabary* given above. Rather I present and discuss *kabary* in relation to the understanding of sermons found in the two contributions.

⁵³ Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 223.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 240–241.

⁵⁶ “Underlying assumptions as a cause of conflict.”

⁵⁷ Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 232.

the perils of rites of passage. Ogilvie also notices a difference connected to the hierarchical structure of *kabary*. In the beginning, only the nobility were allowed to be public speakers, while nowadays women also may speak. From the very beginning of Christianity, however, even a slave could preach.⁵⁸

A recurring issue among the informants in my research was the difference in content between *kabary* and sermons. As obvious as this difference seems to be, my impression is that this fact played a major role when most of my informants were negative to using insights from *kabary* in sermons. They saw the two genres of speech as incompatible. My interpretation of their rejection is that in their minds *kabary* and sermons belonged to separate spheres of life and they had a hard time finding any links between the two, in spite of me emphasising that I did not think of the *kabary*-institution as such but possible learning outcomes drawn from its communication skills.⁵⁹ Another difference mentioned by my informants is that *kabary* consists of human words while the sermon is God's word. A variant of this opinion is that to use insights from *kabary* in sermons would be to make use of human wisdom in spreading the gospel. The informants surely will agree that the preacher uses human words, too, but their sayings may point to the authority behind the two speeches. What they may want to express is that sermons are more than human words because of the presence of God the Holy Spirit.⁶⁰ Another issue mentioned in my material is that *kabary* is eloquence while the sermon is teaching, making Jesus' salvation known to people. Some say that *kabary* is a display of knowledge while in the sermon the message is important. These sayings again underline the content noticing the difference between the two speeches. The orator becomes the focus of attention in the *kabary*, another informant asserts and this is seen as contrary to Christian preaching where the message is the most significant. He sees this as a difference between the two and a reason to reject the use of *kabary* in sermons. One informant's interpretation is that *kabary* conceals issues, causing what is not good to appear positive through decorative words. Contrary to this, he thinks the sermon ought to be clear, simple and straightforward. This ethical objection causes this person to reject *kabary* from his Christian viewpoint.⁶¹

The many differences between *kabary* and sermons are evident both in Ogilvie's view and among my informants. Although some of the differences refer to specific elements in the *kabary*, most of the issues concern the *kabary*-institution as such seen in relation to the sermon.

58 Ibid., 245–246.

59 Austnaberg, *Improving Preaching* (n. 1), 128, 208.

60 Ibid., 131–132, 214–215.

61 Austnaberg, *Improving Preaching* (n. 1), 129, 215.

Understanding of contextualisation

Both Ogilvie and I are well aware of Christianity only occurring in a specific cultural “dress”; thus, the need for contextualisation.⁶² Ogilvie traces the contextualisation issue back to Helmut R. Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* (1951) and makes use of studies from the Lutheran World Federation, especially the Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture of 1996. He sets forth the principle of “dynamic equivalence” as a useful model for considering “the possibility of the inculturation of Christian homiletics in Madagascar through use of the *kabary* forms and characteristics [...]”.⁶³ Dynamic equivalence can be described as a four-fold process: 1) A thorough examination of the historic liturgical rites. 2) A discernment of what may be labelled cultural “dress” in these rites. 3) Potential cultural forms for re-expressing the gospel are studied closely. 4) A reflection on the formational and pastoral benefit for the worshiping community to so re-express the gospel. Ogilvie labels the third step in this model as key to assess the usefulness of *kabary* for preaching. In passing, Ogilvie mentions a second means of contextualisation, “creative assimilation”, defined as “adding pertinent components of local culture to the liturgical ordo in order to enrich its original core.”⁶⁴ In none of these means of contextualisation, Ogilvie draws any conclusion about its usefulness, but he insists on that any contextualisation has to be authentic to the historical and incarnational aspects of the Christian faith, as well as meaningful to a given people in a given context.⁶⁵

I also propose a model of contextualisation in order to assess “whether elements from this [*kabary*] tradition may assist preachers in making the gospel more understandable to the listeners.”⁶⁶ My model is Paul G. Hiebert’s critical contextualisation, taken from his book “Anthropological Insights for Missionaries”.⁶⁷ The model consists of an examination in four phases: 1) To deal biblically with all areas of life in order to discern customs and traditions in need for further study. 2) To gather and analyse all possible information about the issue in order to understand it as far as possible, not evaluating it. 3) A thorough bible-study done by the congregation, led by a theologically trained person, to learn what the bible teaches about the issue. 4) The congregation evaluates critically the issue in light of their

⁶² Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Maryknoll N.Y. (Orbis Books) 1992, 10.

⁶³ Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 243.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 241–244.

⁶⁶ Austnaberg, *Improving Preaching* (n. 1), 216.

⁶⁷ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, Grand Rapids (Baker Book House) 1985, 183–187.

deep knowledge, of its content and their biblical knowledge of the issue. The congregation itself decides whether to make use of the custom or tradition or not. The outcome of the process often will be either keeping the custom, or rejecting it, or modifying it. I admit that this contextualisation model is not directly applicable to *kabary* as a local tradition since my informants consider this custom appropriate in the cultural setting and they do not have any problems taking part in it. Nevertheless, I suppose that the model may be useful when assessing *kabary*'s fruitfulness to assist preachers in presenting the gospel to their listeners.⁶⁸

Both Ogilvie and I present contextualisation models which have to be somewhat adapted to fit to the issue in question. Ogilvie takes his model from the area of worship and I present a model which would be more relevant when assessing whether Christians may take part in a controversial practice in the culture or not. However, both models may help discerning the possible usefulness of *kabary* for Malagasy preaching to a certain degree. The model Ogilvie mentions in passing, however, namely “creative assimilation”, in my view would be the most appropriate for the question we are discussing here. None of us insists that the *kabary*-institution as such can be used as a means to re-express the Christian faith. It is not about substituting Christian proclamation by way of sermons with *kabary*. It is more a question of what components from the local culture will enrich the sermon, which is what creative assimilation is about. I would like to give more weight to this model that in Ogilvie's dissertation is just mentioned in passing. I think this model contributes substantially to my main focus when discussing *kabary* in relation to preaching, i.e. to ask what elements from *kabary* communication could be added to make the sermon a more fruitful means for mission.

What is under discussion?

Ogilvie tries to show in his dissertation how oral communication forms and an oral theology shapes the preaching in Madagascar and as a part of this project he presents Malagasy *kabary* in order to compare the sermon material with what he calls “internal cultural standards of oratory.”⁶⁹ In his chapter on *kabary* he talks about “the oral art of *kabary* for use in Christian preaching”⁷⁰ but also about whether *kabary* is “an appropriate medium for sermon proclamation”.⁷¹ He mentions “use of *kabary* forms and characteristics” and of “*kabary* as a key homileti-

⁶⁸ Austnaberg, *Improving Preaching* (n. 1), 216–217.

⁶⁹ Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 4.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 244.

cal form”⁷² and he asserts that “in its stricter forms, it may have little to offer to the church catholic because of its limited transcultural mobility.”⁷³

The sayings above may point to *kabary* as a cultural institution entailing its tacit presuppositions, its structure, and communication forms. Can the sermon be held in *kabary*-style and still be a Christian sermon? Ogilvie rejects this and says that *kabary* is not an appropriate medium for this. My interpretation of Ogilvie is that somehow the whole institution of *kabary* is in his mind when he rejects it as useful for Christian preaching. This may also be his opinion when he talks about *kabary* “forms” although it may point to structuring the speech in a *kabary*-like way. In the conclusion of the chapter, however, Ogilvie seems to open the scope for an alternative use of insights from *kabary* in the sermon when he talks about recapturing *kabary* to promote the gospel.⁷⁴ Then he mentions some features that *kabary* may contribute to the sermon.

In my research, I tried hard to communicate to my informants that it was not the *kabary*-institution as such that I wanted their opinions about. I admitted that the oral art form of *kabary* was utterly different from a sermon in content and that its structure did not only mirror the Malagasy culture’s notion of respect but also entailed a pre-Christian worldview. What I was interested in and asked my informants about was the possible learning to be obtained from the communicational skills inherent in this Malagasy rhetoric. How could elements of communication in *kabary* assist preachers in making the gospel more understandable to people?⁷⁵ Either most of the informants did not really understand what I was asking about or they agreed with Ogilvie in evaluating the contribution of *kabary* negatively with regard to Christian preaching, since a large majority held it not advisable to insert lessons drawn from *kabary* into the sermon.⁷⁶ Some of my informants, however, saw possibilities for Christian preaching in elements of this art form and this encouraged me to reflect on possible learning outcomes further on.

In sum, it may be said that Ogilvie seems to talk about the *kabary*-institution as such while I emphasise only the communication aspects of *kabary*.

72 Ibid., 243.

73 Ibid., 246.

74 Ibid., 246.

75 Austnaberg, *Improving Preaching* (n. 1), 216.

76 Ibid., 128.

Conclusion and suggestions regarding kabary's possible contribution to Malagasy preaching

Historical arguments about the misuse of *kabary* seem to be a major reason why the missionaries and the first Christians in Madagascar rejected it as a strategy for spreading the gospel. A scrutiny of the historical development also indicates, however, that the first missionaries condemned this custom without really understanding its potential and so the church missed a significant path to people's real convictions. The European sermon format was alien to the Malagasy in the beginning but has now become the main vehicle for the gospel proclamation.

The presuppositions underlying *kabary* point to a different canon than Scripture and rest on a pre-Christian worldview. The features of conflict and contestation underlying *kabary* may be considered alien to the sermon and its hierarchical structure may stand in opposition to the egalitarian New Testament orientation. The question is whether these tacit presuppositions of *kabary* preclude its use altogether in Christian communication. My proposal is that while some features of *kabary* have to be rejected in the contextualisation process there are still significant elements that contribute positively to preaching.

The presentation and analysis has shown that there are many differences between *kabary* and Christian sermons: The content, human words against God's word, human wisdom against the folly of the gospel, ornamented words against a profound emphasis on the message, to mention some. Some of these differences are obvious while others are discussable, in my view, e.g. the preacher of a Christian sermon is obliged to use human words, too, and most preachers hold that human wisdom and good skills may serve the gospel. Some preachers are more eloquent than others, but if they consider their eloquence a gift to God's honor this may promote the gospel. It cannot be denied that both orators and preachers may love to be the focus of attention but then they are not living up to the guidelines for their profession.

The main problem of this article has been to investigate whether and how *kabary*-communication may assist preaching in Madagascar. A dividing question is what exactly in the oral art form of *kabary* we think could assist preaching. It seems as Ogilvie mainly has the *kabary*-institution as such in mind when he rejects its use while my intention has been to look for possible contributions to be obtained from its communicational skills. In my view, Ogilvie's reference to "creative assimilation" may point a way forward because this model focuses on what components from the local culture are able to enrich an imported Christian practice. My intention is not to substitute the Christian sermon with the institution

of *kabary* but rather to add communicational skills that are really embedded in the culture. With this limitation, my answer to whether *kabary*-communication may be used in sermons is “yes” and in the following, I will focus on how the communication aspect of *kabary* may assist preaching.

In spite of his negative evaluation of *kabary* as such to re-express the Christian message, Ogilvie nevertheless has spotted something that has drawn his attention. If *kabary* is recaptured by the church, he thinks it may serve to promote the gospel.⁷⁷ Ogilvie compares the “recapturing” of *kabary* with recapturing the rhythms of Malagasy music which has been going on lately in the Malagasy Lutheran Church and I interpret his meaning to be that the church deliberately has to delve into the issue in order to critically evaluate its potential, an exhortation which I share.⁷⁸

In concluding his dissertation, Ogilvie sums up significant features belonging to the very nature of *kabary* which he applies to preaching, namely that Malagasy rhetoric is “communal and powerful and identity-forming [...]”.⁷⁹ In a way, these three features belong to the deep structure of *kabary*, rooted in Malagasy culture and philosophy. *Kabary* is not directed to individuals, but its purpose is community formation. This feature is evident in the repetition and reinforcement of ideas structured as a dialogue between two parties. *Kabary* invites involvement and participation.⁸⁰ This emphasis on community is one contribution from *kabary* which perhaps is already absorbed into Malagasy preaching.⁸¹ Ogilvie thinks this emphasis on community is especially appropriate for the church in the West which so long has concentrated on the individual’s relationship to God, and as such this is one of *kabary*’s contributions to the universal church.⁸² The dialogical nature of preaching is a question discussed in Western homiletics⁸³ and one of my informants seems to echo a similar understanding in the Malagasy context. She calls for sermons of a certain length, provided they give listeners the opportunity

77 Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 246.

78 Austnaberg, *Improving Preaching* (n. 1), 216–217.

79 Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 263.

80 *Ibid.*, 247, 222.

81 It is interesting to notice Ogilvie’s analysis of the sermons in this respect. He finds that the sermons’ compositional style invites the listeners to understand the gospel by participating in it. The style “invites people to know the Gospel by being absorbed into the totality of reality preached”, Ogilvie states. He sees traces of an underlying oral worldview here (Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 158). This style of participation is close to the nature of *kabary* even though the sermons most probably were monologues.

82 *Ibid.*, 247.

83 Cf. Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word. Preaching in the Roundtable Church*, Louisville (Westminster John Knox Press) 1997.

to take part in the sermon. Today, listeners are too passive and they ought to be given room to ask a couple of questions to be answered in the sermon, she thinks. Her opinion is that this kind of dialogue within sermons might assist the listeners to concentrate on the content.⁸⁴

The power of the spoken word, so evident in Malagasy philosophy, is another feature of *kabary* significant for preaching. The power of the word to create what it says belongs to its hidden power and the orator solves problems by means of words and not by his/her actions.⁸⁵ This is close to a biblical theology of God's word (Is 55:11) and *kabary*-communication might assist preachers to reclaim these theological roots. A renewed awareness of the *viva vox evangelii* may also be a significant contribution to the universal church.⁸⁶

The third aspect mentioned by Ogilvie is *kabary*'s capacity to form people's identity. In this connection he talks about forming a Christian identity to enact the Word in ordinary, daily contexts. As *kabary* today forms a Malagasy identity preserving the past against modernity and globalisation, Ogilvie seems to think that it is also part of preaching to form a Christian identity against all kinds of counteracting forces.⁸⁷ Perhaps he also has in mind the forming of a Malagasy identity in preaching making Christian preaching in Madagascar truly relevant for the Malagasy?

In line with the three means of persuasion in rhetoric, constituting the theoretical framework of my research, I have listed *kabary*'s possible contribution to preaching according to ethos, logos, and pathos. The *kabary*-orators ought to be skilful and trustworthy, willing to listen and eager to deepen their knowledge, showing humility and respect for the role of messenger, be truthful and respect the word at their disposal. Such a list could directly be applied to Christian preachers. In theological language it is about the preacher's integrity of words and deeds, a deepening of the skills of listening to God and other people, a continuing search for a deepened knowledge of God and the biblical message, and respect for the role of messenger for the living God. *Kabary* is oral proclamation and the orators do not need any manuscript, one informant says, because they live their daily lives within this reality. When anything happens in life they reflect secretly and incidents from everyday life are often made use of in *kabary*.⁸⁸ It is important for Christian preachers to live their lives in the middle of the community but also to be truly immersed in and live by their own message.

84 Austnaberg, *Improving Preaching* (n. 1), 103.

85 Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 247, 236–237.

86 *Ibid.*, 247.

87 *Ibid.*, 263, 245.

88 Austnaberg, *Improving Preaching* (n. 1), 133.

Listeners will notice whether the message is a learned doctrine or if it is something precious to the preachers themselves.⁸⁹ With regard to the character of the preacher, the *kabary*-institution may not offer elements which are not found in the biblical guidelines for Christian preachers as well. What I find especially noticeable, however, is that the requirements to orators in this traditional custom coincide with the biblical message to a large degree. In this way the requirements to preachers obtain a double grounding: both, from the traditional context and the bible. Ogilvie has noticed that students in homiletics who were good orators also were better preachers although their sermons were not structured in *kabary* style. He interprets this feature as *kabary*'s more general conditioning towards public speaking.⁹⁰ Nevertheless, it is interesting that practising the oral art form of *kabary* seems to contribute positively to preaching.⁹¹

What then about the logos of rhetoric, the use of words, arguments, reasoning, and other building blocks in speeches? As the orator takes close notice to the audience at hand so Christian preachers have to give specific sermons in specific situations. Variation in form and respect for the length of the speech is another contribution to preaching from *kabary*. I suggest that *kabary* as an art of allusion also may contribute to sermons. Since what preachers say always is interpreted by the listeners who decide its meaning, I opt for a more open-ended way of preaching, furnishing the listeners with building blocks for their own interpretations. This will exhort the listeners to be active when hearing sermons since their minds will be stirred to reflection.⁹² Such a way of preaching will be more dialogical even though the actual sermon is a monologue.⁹³ Although *kabary* has a clear structure its aggregative style has caused missionaries to accuse it for lack of logical sequence and clarity, according to Ogilvie. Its ability to convince does not lie in linear logic but in its use of examples and references to the ancestors. Ogilvie compares this style of preaching to what is called the “jewel or facet

89 Ibid., 210–211.

90 Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 116, 223.

91 This conditioning through public speaking may also be a challenge to teaching homiletics, according to voiced criticisms. Many students consider preaching as something they already know and think it is only to start talking and then a sermon develops (Austnaberg, *Improving Preaching* (n. 1), 2.). This is, however, contrary to *kabary*-instruction where a thorough preparation is said to be mandatory.

92 See Bob Mayo / Sara Savage / Sylvie Collins, *Ambiguous Evangelism*, London (SPCK) 2004. The authors of this book suggest that a more open-ended way of preaching and teaching will attract young people in the Western culture. Will this be the case also in a Malagasy setting?

93 Austnaberg, *Improving Preaching* (n. 1), 211–213.

sermon” in Western homiletics and asserts that this style also is found in Scripture.⁹⁴

In the literature on *kabary* I have found a certain emphasis on the pathos-element of the speech. The intention of *kabary* is to change things with the spoken word by moving the listeners and causing them to reflect. *Kabary* causes changes by connecting to the sentiments of the hearers, by stimulating their feelings, and captivating their spirits. My research has shown that listeners find emotions important in preaching although this means of persuasion may be under-communicated in actual church preaching. By learning from *kabary*-communication my suggestion is that preachers could be more open to show their listeners that they care and to be passionate in the way they communicate their message. This is not an exhortation to stir feelings in order to manipulate but a call to be genuine and integrated as a person and let it show that the message is significant to the preacher. This may enhance the impact of preaching.⁹⁵

Learning from *kabary*-communication may teach Christian preachers to be more skilful in communicating the message. The use of decorated words gives the sermon a pleasant appearance that may assist the hearer to better understand the content.⁹⁶ Ogilvie also mentions the beauty of language present in *kabary* which may open the heart and mind of the listeners to the message. This skilful use of proverbs and conventions of speech is another contribution from *kabary* to Christian preaching.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Ogilvie, *Breaking Words* (n. 2), 246.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 213–214.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 130–131.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 246.