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SCHOOL OF MISSION AND THEOLOGY

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION
OF THE
MALAGASY LUTHERAN CHURCH'S APPROACHES
TO MALAGASY CULTURE:
THE ASA LAKROA VEZO IN CONTEXT OF MISSION

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List of Abbreviations

AP = Author's Picture, taken during fieldwork 2015

BPM= Baiboly Protestanta Malagasy (Bible Version)

DNA = Deoxyribonucleic Acid

Eng. = English

ESV = English Standard Version of the Bible

Fig. = Figure

FLM = Fianganana Loterana Malagasy (Malagasy Lutheran Church).

LMB = Lutheran Missions Board

LMS = London Missionary Society

MLC = Malagasy Lutheran Church

Mlg. = Malagasy

NMS = Norwegian Mission Society

NRSV = New Revised Standard Version (Bible version)

SD = Sakalava's Dialect

TPFLM = Trano Printy Fianganana Loterana Malagasy (Malagasy Lutheran Church Publisher's House)

ULCA = United Lutheran Church of America

VD = Vezo's Dialect

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The Fiangonana Loterana Malagasy (FLM) is pursuing a quest of Identity facing global issues (Ordination of women, Homosexuality, etc.) and local concerns (Traditional belief, Cultures, etc). Most of recent research tended to discuss about that first category of problem. It can even be affirmed that the very church has found solution and got clear common position toward each of those global issues. But it is not the case of the local concerns. The FLM, officially known as Malagasy Lutheran Church (MLC), presents different ways of approaching Culture. There is yet no common approach and it affects the identity of the very church, which is standing between the Gospel and eighteen different cultures. In this discussion, I will describe these different approaches.

The nation is constituted officially by 18 ethnic groups, and each of them has its own cultural identity. Forsaking these cultures would surely not make the MLC *Malagasy*, while importing values from them would not make her *Lutheran* genuinely. Being aware that behind cultural practices may lay some beliefs that go against the dogma of the church -like veneration of ancestors- the MLC wonders if her members should be allowed to keep those practices or not. So, what it is to be really the Fiangonana Loterana Malagasy (Malagasy Lutheran Church) and how to approach those varieties of Malagasy cultural customs and practices? To deal with each practice of the ethnic groups would require more time and more pages; I therefore pick up the Asa Lakroa Vezo in order to propose answers to those questions.

Generally speaking, it is the Malagasy Christians who are planting crosses on tombs to affirm their belongingness and their Christian identity. It implies that the practice of it may be seen in each ethnic group, wherein these Christians are. But it is not the case in Vezo context, to whom planting those crosses is a cultural event; both Christians and non-Christians are doing it, and this became a serious dilemma for the church. Some theologians and leaders of the church consider it as a socio-cultural event and some label it idolatry. The MLC has consequently different approaches to handle the issue, and as said, this affects her denominational identity. Is it still the same church although there are not only different approaches but even opposite ones? In such situation, there should at least be an ad hoc solution. Both Anthropological and theological research are needed to grasp the reality in those practices. This writing is thus a rediscovery of

one of them, the case of Asa the Lakroa. So here it is, the *Asa Lakroa Vezo in Context of Mission, an Anthropological Description of the Malagasy Lutheran Church's Approaches*.

Even though this discussion has the Asa Lakroa as main topic, I aim at the end to set an approach which would be applicable and effective to other cultural events or practices at the national level, i.e. suitable for each ethnic group. For doing so, it is first indispensable that the studied case is ascribed to a defined ethnic group. So after this Introduction (Chap 1) and few pages on Contexts and Method (Chap 2), the ethnicity of the Vezo will open the main discussion (Chap 3). If the Vezo are not a genuine ethnic group, the resulting approach from the description and evaluation would not be consequently practicable to the rest of the Malagasy ethnic groups.

The chapter 4 deals wholly with the Asa Lakroa: its origin, rituals, values, and practices. It helps to understand why there are different concepts of this event, for some say it is a cultural one and some claim it is a religious one. The MLC herself does not have a common understanding of it; that is why she has relatively different approaches, which are described in the next chapter (Chap 5). A brief evaluation of these approaches is presented in chapter 6, from which is drawn the approach that I personally qualify as *appropriate*, the Donovanist Anthropological Approach.

Chapter 2

CONTEXTS AND METHOD

This chapter explains how my personal experience became my source of motivation to contribute to the quest of Identity that the Malagasy Lutheran Church is pursuing. In it is detailed the statement of the issue, the aim of the research, the major theoretical starting points and a global view of the accomplished fieldwork.

2.1 Overview of the Issue and Purpose of the study

Dealing with Mission of the Church in Global and Local Contexts has always fascinated me, and exploring the ways Mission has been led from the time of Apostles to our time is my source of inspiration. So, personally, I did not intend to have the Asa Lakroa as a topic for an academic essay. But all this is primarily the fruit of what I myself experienced 10 years ago.

In 2006, I was invited to attend an Asa Lakroa organized by a Christian family in Salary Avaratra, the parish that I have been holding for five years. It was the first time that I heard about the Asa Lakroa event and I was both excited and curious. The ethnic group that I belong too also does Asa Lakroa, but we do not have special event for that. I started asking the congregation what it was about, and I have been told that it is a cultural event, and that usually it is the local priest who opened it with devotion. As the church does not have a liturgy related to it, my first reaction was to ask the dean of the district about it, who told me categorically that I must not even attend the event for it is idolatry, which enflamed my curiosity. I accordingly did not lead the devotion, but I attended the very event. My aim was to know what was going on during such event. Of course, the dean has been informed of my presence at the event and then called me for explanations. In fact, few colleagues also did not know the reasons why we could not attend Asa Lakroa events. There is here no need to tell the whole story, but from that time I have kept saying that if Church has to forbid something, or to encourage as well, there must be relevant reasons, and anthropological research must be led *at least*. This has led me to choose Missiology as field of specialization and to focus exclusively on contextualization facing encounters of religions and cultures.

What to do with these so called cultural events and traditional rituals that are/seem to be quite religious ones? Should they be prohibited? The Malagasy Lutheran Church has never had a

common answer. Some say Yes, and some say No; but the majority stays in between. Now is the time, I think, to find a uniform perspective and only one position; that is the purpose of this study. To do so, I am choosing the Asa Lakroa Vezo for a case to study.

2.2 Research and Theories

This entire thesis is about the Asa Lakroa and the position of the Malagasy Lutheran Church toward it, or technically its Contextualization. All this writing converges to these two things. Hence, I am not pretending to be the first to write academically on the Asa Lakroa Vezo. As far as I know, the latest research was led by the anthropologist Rita Astuti about twenty years ago. For Mission and Contextualization, I would refer to the survey of missions in contexts wrote by Stephen b. Bevans, who categorized six models of Contextual Theology.

2.2.1 Astuti and the Vezo

Rita Astuti is the one who made the Vezo famous. She wrote and published a lot about these people and her works have been given valuable considerations. In the *People of the Sea: Identity and Descent among the Vezo of Madagascar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), her main argument is that the Vezo does not constitute a genuine ethnic group and rather, it is an activity. In this writing, I would like to reopen the discussion for one purpose. The Asa Lakroa that I am talking of is not the same as the Asa Lakroa as it is in other ethnic groups. The Vezo have their own values and practice in doing it. Astuti herself described it in detail. Therefore, the attitude of the MLC toward them as an ethnic group might be generalized and considered also as the one that they are supposed to have toward the other ethnic groups.

Astuti's materials in that book are precious for by comparing them to the new collected data, we can draw the evolution of the ritual and the identity of the Vezo along these twenty years. In all of her works, she maintains that the Vezo does not constitute a genuine ethnic group, a theory that I would not share (Cf Chap.3). Nevertheless, the fact that she led her research in the Sakalava region (Morondava) instead of in the Vezo region does not really matter. The most important fact is that she provided a detailed report on the Vezo traditional religion and the rituals that display their identity, which will be used a lot in this study.

2.2.2 *Bevans and the Six Models of Contextual Theology*

The second main literature is *Models of Contextual Theology: Faith and Cultures* (New York: Orbis book, 2013) by Stephen B. Bevans. He has regrouped the ways of contextualization in six *models* which are according to their order in the book, Translation, Anthropological, Praxis, Synthetic Transcendental, and Counter Cultural models. After each description of them, he offered an evaluation of the described model by pointing out its relation with the Gospel and with Culture.

In my turn, I regroup these six models in only three models according to their implications on cultures. First, there are those ones that are not open to cultures (Translation and Counter Cultural); second those who welcome cultures (Anthropological and Transcendental); and lastly those that are in the middles (Praxis and Synthetic), which correspond respectively to the MLC's three positions concerning Culture. To be careful however, I would not discuss fully the issue of the Asa Lakroa in Bevans' frame (i.e. Classifying the church's responses according to those models), but instead, I will use the term *Approach*.

All these bring us to assume that the works of Rita Astuti and Stephen B. Bevans are being the pillars of this work.

2.3 Method and Fieldwork

The incidence of 2006 in Salary Avaratra certainly taught me what theologians and church leaders at that time thought and still think of the Asa Lakroa. But I was eager to know what the Vezo really think of it in order to report their statements to these leaders. From the confrontations of their views may result a better understanding of the Asa Lakroa Vezo and a common approach toward it for the church. Therefore, I am opting for a qualitative research, being wholly convinced that "The events and ideas emerging from qualitative research can represent the meanings given to real-life events by the people who live them, not the values, preconceptions, or meanings held by researchers"¹.

There are consequently two fields to explore: among the Vezo and within the church. Before starting the research itself, the delimitation of the geographical context was the first problem as scholars do not agree on the identity of Vezo people. Some argue that Vezo is a

¹ Robert K. Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2011), 8.

genuine ethnic group and therefore does not have homeland; some deny it. Marion Viano published in 2005 the *Carte des Ethnies* (Eng. Map of Ethnic Groups)² that helped me to choose the appropriate location, which is between Toliara and Morombe, the so called Vezo Region.

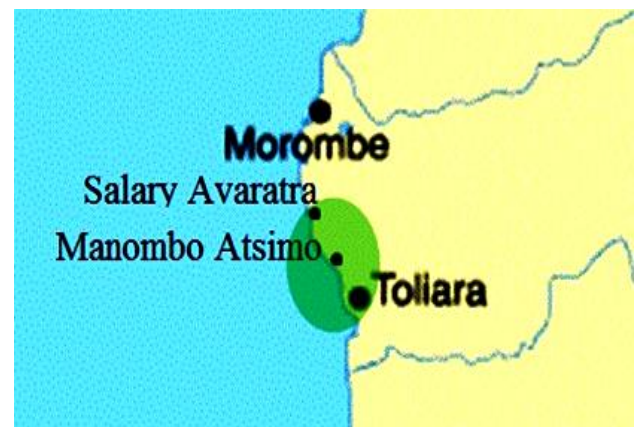


Fig 1.b Zone of Fieldwork

The fieldwork was done in July 2015, precisely from week 26 to week 31 of that year, during which I had the opportunity to revisit Manombo Atsimo and Salary Avaratra, two

² http://www.pandele.org/marion.viano/2004/dea/dea_chap2.html, accessed 15 Mai 2015.

³ http://www.pandele.org/marion.viano/2004/dea/dea_chap2.html, accessed 15 Mai 2015.

presumed *Vezo Towns* (VD Tanàm-bezo). I was convinced that Toliara, as a big City as it is today, is already a multicultural region even though it was formerly a Tanàm-bezo. Then I started the fieldwork among the Vezo in Toliara, moved to Manombo Atsimo, went to Salary Avaratra, came back to Manombo Atsimo, and finished the fieldwork in Toliara. That was not really my plan though, but technically it had to be so, as there is one and only one bus that connects Manombo Atsimo and Salary Avaratra, a bus called *Lemaintso* (Eng. The green). For example, if the bus is departing from Manombo on X day to Salary Avaratra, then there would be no bus from Salary Avaratra to Manombo on that day. All there who are in Salary have to wait for the coming of Lemaitso. At least, it did not hinder my research. I took instead advantage of it in having time to visit the cemetery of Salary Avaratra and collect more data.

2.4 Data Collection

Like in the majority of qualitative research, Observation, Structured Interviews and Unstructured Interviews (Qualitative Video-Interviews) are here the methods that have provided the majority of the collected data used in this writing. In addition, an unplanned debate worked out as a focus group during the Annual Meeting of the Fifohazana at Toby Betela (July 2015).

2.4.1 Experience and Pre-Fieldwork

This was not the first time that I have been in those places (Toliara, Manombo Atsimo, Salary Avaratra). I myself was born in Toliara, grew up there, and spent 26 years of my life there, but that is for little significance in this research. The fact that I served in Salary Avaratra for five years gave me uncountable opportunities to attend Asa Lakroa events and to know more about it. Unfortunately I did not know at that time that one day, or ten years later, I will write on it for an academic purpose. Otherwise, I would have already recorded everything. So in matter of participant observation, I would certainly have said much. But today, worrying that the discussion turns into an autobiography, I will present collected data instead of those personal observations.

Furthermore, I think I must affirm that Salary Avaratra was not the only place where I have been assigned to. I have been working in Masikoro Land also, like Ankilimalinike (2012) and Betania (2013). In those places, Christians were making Tomb Crosses *quietly*, without any

festivity like in the Vezo's context. This already presented the Asa Lakroa event as a practice proper to the Vezo.

Those Pre-Fieldwork in the past led me to conclude from that time that the Asa Lakroa Vezo is typically Vezo, and might be listed among their cultural events.

2.4.1 Informants

As stated above, I had two fields. Among church leaders and theologians, my research was oriented to the Missiological approach and Contextualization of the Asa Lakroa, while I was in quest of meanings among the Vezo. My informants in the first field are all either theologians or church leaders. In brief they are all Christians. The purpose of the choice is to obtain more accurate data on the position of the church. For the second field, they are all Vezo. But to have insiders' views of the Asa Lakroa, I chose both Christians and non-Christians to share their respective opinion. Hopefully I had a chance to interview two Vezo diviners, who are apparently the cultural priests, one in Toliara and one in Manombo Atsimo. In a society where people are painted Black (Gentiles) and White (Christians), I admit that it was hard to find a diviner. I tried to explain that if I planned to meet diviners or/and witches, it was only for the sake of my study, but it was in vain. Thanks to my Christians two gatekeepers who introduced me to them. I fully understand their will to stay anonymous, for not being *painted Black*.

The first time I met an informant, I informed her/him first of my studies and my intention, introduced the topic and ask if she/he has time to answer few questions. When they accepted, I asked permission to videotape the interview or at least to audio-record it. Two things motivated me to do so. First, as I mentioned in the introduction, my intention was to collect data so that I could report them to colleagues and mates to be discussed. But as they already knew my position, I need more relevant and accurate materials in order to make the Asa Lakroa worthy of serious discussion, and re-open the debate so that a final and definite position might be held⁴. Thus videotaping was my favorite method. My second source of motivation is this thesis, as I do need those veritable views and explanations from insiders.

In case media recording is not permitted, then taking notes is the last alternative, which they accepted generally.

⁴ A compilation of the Video Interviews in DVD format has been handed to them two months ago. Nils Christian Hoymyr (MHS, Archivist) and Øyvind Dahl (MHS, Lecturer) have also received each a copy.

2.4.2 Informal Focus Group

An informal focus group, if I may say so, took place in Toby Betela Toliara on 16th July 2015. The Annual Meeting of the Revival Movement (Fifohazana) began on 11th July and ended on the 19th. This annual assembly of the Fifohazana always lasts one week and the consecration of Shepherds is always the 18th of July. During the assembly, priests, theologians, church leaders and guests always have common breakfasts, lunches and dinners. So on the 16th, two days before the Great Day of the Fifohazana, I started talking about my topic to colleagues after the morning service, and it became our discussion during lunch. My aim was to know the main position of the Church, if she already has only one, so I asked only two questions:

- A. What do you know about Tomb-Cross making in the Vezo?
- B. Do you agree with its practice?

This reminded me again what I heard in 2006; there were the Yes, No and In Between groups. Although their arguments were not really serious (Jokes, Ironies, Sarcasms)⁵, they instead helped me to choose informants among priests and theologians. At least, I knew who were for and who were against the practice of Asa Lakroa. Participants in this informal focus group were from different ethnic groups, but that was not a big deal. What I learnt from it is that the MLC does still not have a straight and firm position toward it.

2.4.3 Structured Interviews

Structured Interview was the first thing I jot down on my research design paper before leaving Norway. As Yin always reminds, “The answers are probably more reliable and valid when a list is provided than when the question is asked in open form”⁶. I did not really ask the same question to my informants though. For informants from the first field, here below was the Guide:

- A. What is “Asa Lakroa”?
- B. Could you describe the ritual and the meaning of each step?
- C. What is the meaning of that “Cross”?
- D. Do you agree with its practice? Why?
- E. What can you say about the position of the Church?

⁵ That is why it would not be appropriate to report them in this study.

⁶ Robert K. Yin, 133.

During interviews, I asked the same questions even though they sometimes were not in that order. Often I do not need to ask the whole questions as while answering the first question, informants already answered D and E, like did Rakotonomenjanahary. When I asked him the question A, His first sentence was “It is idolatry!” (which already sums up the answers of D and E) and he went on explaining why he does not agree with its practice and promotes its prohibition.

For those interviewees in the second field, however, I stopped at question C. The target of the study itself concerns the church’s perspectives in doing Mission, and I wanted to stick on that; so I judged it useless to ask them about what they (non-Christians) think of the church’s attitude. Here, I discovered that Vezo people are doing Asa Lakroa for different purposes. The Christian block said it is cultural (Urbain Laporodody), and the non-Christian affirmed that it is a duty toward the dead (Dadibare). As long as interviews went on, my questions were refined, like adding after the B the question “Where is the Asa Lakroa from?” Although I served among the Vezo for 5 years, I had never known the account of the Voliagnara, the event from which the Asa Lakroa took its origin.

In this structured Interviews I had:

Personal Interview with Lars Armand, in Manombo Atsimo, 21 July 2015.

Personal Interview with Limbiraza, in Toliara 16 July 2015.

Personal Interview with Mahatsenga Flariot, in Toliara on 15 July 2015.

Personal Interview with Rakotonomenjanahary, in Manombo Atsimo on 26 July 2015.

Personal Interview with Tsiambena, in Salary Avaratra on 25 July 2015.

Personal Interview with Urbain Laporodody, in Salary Avaratra on 25 July 2015.

Personal Interviews were performed as a dialog between me and the interviewees without gate keepers. They all have been conducted at the location of the interviewees. All these structured interviews permitted me to describe in one hand the position of the MLC and on the other the Vezo concepts of it. Still, being afraid that I might have missed something, I also did qualitative interviews.

2.4.4 *Qualitative Interviews*

In such situation, interviews cannot be reduced to a quiz like it seems in the structured interviews. Robert K. Yin is giving a good advice when he says “Having participants limit their responses to single-word answers would be a qualitative researcher’s last wish. On the contrary, the researcher tries to have participants use their own words, not those predefined by the researcher, to discuss topic”⁷.

When the informant said that he has much time, I took it as an opportunity to have a long qualitative interview. As I was given more time, the interview always turned into a lecture where and during which my informant is my lecturer. I asked just free questions, starting from “what do you know about the Asa Lakroa?” The next question then depends on what the interviewee has said and so on. It is not a directive one, but instead exploratory. I did it when it comes to the ritual in the Asa Lakroa because I needed more detailed information about each part or step of it. The advantage of this method as I see it is that questions are open and interviewees can express themselves freely without any external influence. I noticed that my informants had self-confidence during our talks as they understood that I am the one who learnt from them. When we had the informal focus group for instance, when I asked the first question (What do you know about Tomb-Cross making in the Vezo?), one pastor replied right back “Hum! Is it an exam?” and then laughed. And when it comes to the second question (Do you agree with its practice?), the same pastor reacted the same way asking me back the question and said “Tell us first your position!” I understood by this that our relation in some way influenced their thought. I have not experienced such reactions during my qualitative interviews. My interviewees were instead glad to be my lecturers and amazingly accepted videotaping. So I had

Video Interview with Bimba, in Toliara on 25 June 2015.

Video Interview with Felixon, in Toliara on 25 June 2015

Video Interview with Dadibare, in Toliara on 27 June 2015.

Video Interview with Daddy Eugene, in Manombo Atsimo on 28 July 2015.

Video Interview with Emmanuel, in Manombo Atsimo on 29 July 2015.

⁷ Robert K. Yin, 135.

These are the recorded videos that I am talking of in footnote 5. On that DVD, I did not mention that it was the topic of my thesis anymore. I just titled it “Asa Lakroa Vezo” and then directly follow those interviews. At the end, I left the question “What should then the Malagasy Lutheran Church do?” What I missed in my structured research questions was the social dimension of the subject, like the role of the *Fihavanana* and the *Enga* in the Asa Lakroa which never crossed my minds. From the collected data for example, I learnt that the Enga system is an expression of solidarity within the community, not only a contribution to support the family (Cf. Footnote 75). Thus, if there is no Asa Lakroa, there is no Enga; and if there is no Enga, it affects the social relationship, which already infers that the prohibition of the Asa Lakroa causes splits in the local society.

In those videos, there are often two or three people with the interviewee. One of them is certainly my gate keeper, and the others are mates or friends of the interviewee. As it has been video recorded, those persons also took part in the interview, by intervening in stressing some points, but never in contradicting what the interviewee was saying. I felt and enjoyed their vivid will to instruct and inform me.

2.4.5 Challenges and Technical Issue

My only serious challenge during the fieldwork was to interview fellow pastors, namely the one that does not have the same position as me towards culture. Answers were indirectly aggressive. It seemed like the interviewee is facing an opponent in a strong debate. As a researcher, I know that “qualitative interviewing requires intense listening and a systematic effort to *really hear* and understand what people tell”⁸. I tried several times to ease the atmosphere by saying that I was there just to collect information not to share my opinion, but I think I failed. Anyhow, even though we do not have the same position, I *had* to do my interview.

I have noticed also that I got used to Norwegian’s notion of time: 3 p.m means 3 p.m according to the clock. I forgot that in Madagascar, 3 p.m would be 3 p.m according to the sun, not to the Clock. I have forgotten also that in the Vezo region, the notion of time is sunlight related: Mangotinàna (Dawn) - Vakianjo (Sunrise) - Marainjay (Morning) - Midi (Lunchtime, ca. 1 p.m- 3 p.m) Atoanjo (Daylight journey) - Hariva (Dusk, ca. 3 p.m - Sunset) - Tsofotsanjo

⁸ Robert K. Yin, 135.

(Sunset, ca. 5 p.m - 7 p.m - Haly (No sun, ca. 7 p.m – 4 a.m)).⁹ So when I had that interview with Daddy Eugene for instance, we agreed that I would come the *Hariva*, and to be precise I proposed 3 p.m. I was there exactly at 3 p.m, but he was out and I waited for him almost one hour. When he was back and saw me, his first sentence was “Anjoany hariva tokoa moa fotoantsika iny?!” means “Today *hariva* is our appointment! Isn’t it?” So he kept the *Hariva* when I stuck on my 3 p.m. At the end, our 3 p.m was around 4h15 p.m, following the concept of *Hariva*. Yet the video interview went on well.

If I could not have a video interview with Urbain Laporodody in Salary Avaratra, it is not because he disagreed or did not want to. The simple reason was that the two batteries of my camera have run out of charge, just after having taken pictures at the graveyard named *Bekafaitsy*. Finding power was challenging because there is no electricity in that village (See below).



Fig 2 a. Salary Avaratra:
The seaside, July 2015 (AP)



Fig 2b. Salary Avaratra:
The village, July 2015 (AP)

I did not have the chance to charge the batteries until I reached Manombo Atsimo. There is no access to electricity too in that town, but most of the people have generators such

⁹ When we moved to Salary Avaratra in 2006, people are laughing at us when seeing us having lunch at noon; they said it was too early. Later, I noticed that if they have lunch at 2 p.m or 3 p.m, it is because they were waiting for the first return of the fishermen, who are expected to arrive by that time.

electrogene groups. They are veritably sources of income for some people because phones and electronics are brought to them to be charged, and fees generally depend on the item. That experience reminds me to have a bank power along with me next time I go to places where electricity is not accessible.

The fieldwork went on perfectly as planned with those small incidences. Data collected will be both used in this writing, and reported with analyze to the Association of Theologians and Pastors of the Lutheran Church in Fiherena Toliara. Concerning this discussed topic, I would stress that to give a model of approach to Malagasy cultures requires three things: an ethnic group, a cultural custom of that group, and evaluation of existing approaches to that custom. So, here they are: The Vezo, the Asa Lakroa, and the MLC's approach.

Chapter 3

IDENTITY OF THE VEZO

Twenty one years ago, Rita Astuti reported that “those scholars who have argued that Vezo do not constitute an ethnic group were working on the assumption that ‘a genuine’ identity must be fixed rather than shifting (if a person is ‘genuinely’ Vezo, she cannot become Masikoro), inherent rather than contextual, that it must be established through descent rather than be achieved through practice. From this perspective, the Vezo were perceived to be anomalous, for they did not fit the western ethnotheory of ethnicity (Linnekin and Poyer 1990:2)”¹⁰. Because of this theory, Vezo, as Masikoro and Makoa as well, is still listed among the clans of Sakalava. But some considerable facts were discovered lately and may change that view. Accordingly this part is intended to give more precisions about the identity of this clan and to claim that Vezo is a genuine ethnic group.

3.1 Understanding Ethnicity

This English term occurred in the early 1940s but its etymology is dated back to ancient Greek, where “the word *ethnos* was used to refer to a ‘distinct people’”.¹¹ The Greek term *ἔθνος* (*ethnos*), from which derived the adjective *ethnic* and the noun *ethnicity*, that globally means nation. In Ancient times context, one *εἰς ἕνα* infers one people, one homeland, one language, and one culture. It explains the extreme exclusiveness, for instance, of the Twelve Tribes of Israel who also added one Religion once they settled Canaan. The Israelite’s world was *Us*, and whoever outside their circle (non-Israelite; non-Jews) were *Them*. Therefore, the plural form *τὰ ἔθνη* has a connotation of non-Jews people and some biblical scholars (Ulrich Luz and all) translate it “Gentiles” instead of “Nations” (Hans Kvalbein and all)¹². Anyhow, the definition of ethnicity has developed from this etymological concept to contemporary contexts.

A standard concept of ethnicity features an ethnic group as a people living together, having and sharing the same system of beliefs and values. Some definitions tend to narrow this

¹⁰ Rita Astuti, *People of the Sea: Identity and Descent among the Vezo of Madagascar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 4.

¹¹ Dan Hiebert, “Ethnicity,” *The Dictionary of Human Geography 5th Ed.* (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishers, 2009), 214-215.

¹² Jostein Ådna and Hans Kvalbein ed., *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles* (Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 19.

concept by introducing more criteria, such a shared origin and ancestors, as Ben Campbell promotes.¹³ The weakness of such criteria is in the fact that it is possible to meet people from different origins in the same ethnic group. Ethnicity may be swallowed by citizenship because immigrants and non-natives are also among the citizens. Are they to be excluded although they adopt their host's life and follow fully all social systems? If yes, Ben Campbell's DNA argument is not defining an ethnic group, but rather a race for it would be based on physical characteristics.

Some emphasize the importance of the system of belief and culture (Cf. Fredrik Barth), but still struggle with the boundaries of these two.¹⁴ Anyhow all those attempts claim each that there are shared values and social interaction. Here is how Thomas Hylland Ericksen contributes to solve the boundaries problem:

The first fact of ethnicity is the application of systematic distinctions between insiders and outsiders; between Us and Them. If no such principle exists there can be no ethnicity, since ethnicity presupposes an institutionalized relationship between delineated categories whose members consider each other to be culturally distinctive¹⁵.

Who are the Vezo's *Us*, and who are the Vezo's *Others*? These would be Eriksen's questions. We will find the answers of these questions in two steps: the insiders' answer and the outsiders' answer.

Who do the Vezo people say they are? As Astuti emphasized, "The Vezo often point out that their name means 'paddle', a name which indicates who they are: 'people who struggle with the sea and live on the coast (*Olo mitolo rano, olo mipetsaky andriaky*)"¹⁶. In Vezo dialect, the word *Vezo* (Mlg. *Voizo*) is the imperative form of the verb *Mive* (Eng. To paddle, Mlg. *Mivoy*). So by explaining proudly and *often* -as she stressed- the meaning of their name, they not only want people to know their skills and livelihood, but also attest that they are different from

¹³ Thomas Hylland Ericksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological perspective Third edition* (New York: Pluto Press, 2010),87.

¹⁴ See Fredrick Barth, *Process and Form in Social Life* (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1981), 200. Barth listed four criteria. His first point meets Ben's Biological argument; the second and third is all shared values (culture and Communication). His last point is related to otherness and distinguishability, which is clarified by the concept of *Us and Them*.

¹⁵ Thomas Hylland Ericksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 23.

¹⁶ Rita Astuti, *People of the Sea*, 1.

neighboring *people who do not go to the Sea* (VD. *Tsy mandeha an-driaky*). Factually Vezo people see themselves as “People of the Sea” and are proud to be so. In contrast, there are People of the Land, the Masikoro, who are staying inland. We can read from Astuti’s testimony,

When I asked women whether they had ‘signs of Vezo-ness’ on their hands, they suggested I look at the hands of Masikoro women, which have a callus at the thumb which comes from the daily pounding maize and rice. It was thus the lack of a callus on the Vezo women’s hands that demonstrated their Vezo-ness.¹⁷

Why did those women suggest her to look at the hands of Masikoro women not at of any other ethnic groups’ hands, such Mahafaly or Bara or Merina? The attitude framed in this Vezo women’s answer is their conception of their world: their side, and the Masikoro’s side. If you are not Vezo, then you are Masikoro. Vezo men usually make fun of their fellows by calling them Masikoro when these last did mistake or went wrong in doing something, or in brief, “when someone fails to act Vezo effectively, s/he is rendered Masikoro”.¹⁸ Despite the difference of culture that exists between Vezo and Masikoro, daily activities are the first things that Vezo refer to while making the difference between them and their neighbors, which recently leads Astuti to repeat that “being Vezo is to live on the coast and do Vezo things, such as fishing, sailing, and eating fish, whereas being Masikoro is to live inland and do Masikoro things, such as cultivating, raising cattle, and – so Vezo say – eating ‘grass’”¹⁹.

By experience, I can confirm this Vezo saying “eating grass” (VD. *Mihina akàta*). When I have invited two men to join us for lunch, one of them, having seen that we were eating rice with spinach and leaves of cassava, said proudly “we are not cattle to eat grass”, and they were laughing at us. I thought in the beginning that it was a taboo to eat leaves and herbs as none of our neighbors were doing so. After their visit, I reported the statement of my visitors to our neighbors in small talks later; they kept saying the same thing, that they are not cattle to eat leaves and herbs. During our talks, they explained that it is not a question of taboo, it is a question of value. By this they meant leaves and herbs are *for only cattle*. Masikoro may not feel at ease with this famous Vezo saying for they are used to eating them. Anyhow, this Vezo’s

¹⁷ Rita Astuti, 41.

¹⁸ Rita Astuti, 16.

¹⁹ <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=b73a37d5-462e-46e5-a173-6e102010a8e1%40sessionmgr4002&vid=1&hid=4214>, 9, accessed 30 March 2016.

concept of food distinguish their culture from others' ones, and their pride is not built only on their activities but also on their concept of things such food as seen here. To this should be added the differences of customs and taboos, but they will be discussed later (3.4).

Whoever has written about the Vezo could not avoid talking more or less about the Masikoro as well. It is due to the fact that Vezo people tell you who they *are not* when you ask them who they *are*. Talking about Astuti's informants, it is not surprising that they always suggested her to have a look at the Masikoro for comparison, because Masikoro are the people *who they are not*. But is cultural comparison enough to assert that Vezo people constitute an ethnic group? This is the reason why combining the etymological definition of ethnicity (*One People One Homeland One Language and One Culture*) and Ericksen's theory on cultural identity (*Us and Them Theory*) is better than staying at the comparison. What follow are evidences that describe the identity of the Vezo following the combination of these two assumptions.

If Vezo people see themselves as People of the sea, *not of the Land* (Masikoro), let us now see who they are from the outside view.

3.2 Geo-Localization: The Homeland

It is quite not possible to understand why the Vezo was included in the ethnic group of Sakalava without retracing the history of the colonization of Madagascar. In 1895, French adopted the "Politique des Races" (Politics of Races) to colonize the Island. It consisted, according to B. Schlemmer, in " (1) Isolating and reduce the principal enemy, the centralized power of the Merina²⁰ (2) Promoting the autonomy of each important region, according to the principle of 'diviser pour regner' (3) Taking advantage of that very autonomy to colonize with less expense. ²¹ The point was that when the autochthonous clans began fighting against themselves, they were easy to defeat and to colonize. Therefore, as Fotomanantena Jeanne Razafiangy reported in detail, the western part was set as the region of Sakalava as it was the dominant clan in that side. This meant that all groups or communities dwelling in that region were all included in the large family of Sakalava. It is not surprising that most of the ethnic maps

²⁰ Merina, one of the dominant ethnic group in the highlands.

²¹ Fotomanantena Jeanne Razafiangy, *Etrangers et Malgaches Dans le Sud-Ouest Sakalava 1845-1904* (Aix en Provence: Université de Provence, 1982), 263.

present the whole west, from the south to the north as the region of Sakalava. This affects also the social relationship as colonizers succeed in making Merina to be the Sakalava's enemy. Of course, Vezo is involved.

Some scholars who had led research about the Vezo people investigated in the middle of this so named Sakalava region consequently, namely in the region of Morondava-Menabe, having the presumption that Vezo are Sakalava²². Rita Astuti, one of the experts in this study, for instance, had Morondava as area of fieldwork, and concludes in 1995 that “the Vezo are not a genuine ethnic group, nor a special race, nor a distinct people”. She defines Vezo identity as “an activity rather than a state of being”²³. In other words, Vezo are what they do, not who they are; one can become Vezo just by adopting their style of life although she or he is from the highlands. But if one asks in random Malagasy citizen *where the homeland of the Vezo is*, no one would say *the highlands*. Instead, the most probable answers would be either Morombe, or Manombo Atsimo, or Saint Augustin, but again neither Morondava nor Menabe²⁴. In fact, people who live in these three cities have many common crucial traditions which are not even seen in the Sakalava people, and it was perceived from the period of colonization, otherwise the region of Sakalava must have been between Soalala (North) and Saint Augustin (South), instead of between Soalala (North) and Ambohibe (South) as shown in the map from the *Supplement Au Journal Officiel- Septembre 1901*, that F. J. Razafiangy used²⁵. In this map, the Sakalava region ends in Ambohibe where begins the Vezo territory. In short, the homeland of the Vezo is the region between Ambohibe (Region of Morombe) and Saint Augustin (Region of Toliara) where they are statistically dominant and are called Sakalava Atsimo (Sakalava South).

A more precised localization of the Vezo region is proposed by Otto Chr. Dahl who wrote

“On the southwest coast of Madagascar, between the estuaries of the rivers Tsiribihina and Onilahy, there is an ethnic group called Vezo, who live in

²² Cf. Pierre V erin, *Madagascar* (Paris: Edition Karthala, 1990), 54. He claims that Vezo people are from Morondava and around.

²³ Rita Astuti, *People of the Sea*, 3-4.

²⁴ Sakalava are still dominant in Morondava and Menabe while Vezo are supposed to come from either Morombe or Manombo Atsimo or Anakao.

²⁵ Fotomanantena Jeanne Razafiangy, 273.

much the same way as the Bajau, particularly those of Bangka”²⁶.

This statement answers three crucial questions about the Vezo which are (a) *where do they live?* (b) *Who they are?* and (c) *Where they are from?*. Not only did Dahl give precisions on the geographical limits of the Vezo region, but he assumes that Vezo is a genuine ethnic group who has as ancestors the Bajau (An Austronesian ethnic group). To conclude that the Vezo is an ethnic group after only determining its geographical localization is too early, nevertheless we can now locate the Vezo homeland.



Fig. 3 Madagascar. Approximate limits of Ethnic Groups.²⁷



Fig 4. Vezo Region

²⁶ Otto Chr. Dahl, *Migration from Kalimantan to Madagascar* (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1991), 98.

Vezo have in their north the Sakalava and the Mahafaly in the south. Masikoro, that they call *Olo matahotsy riaky* (people afraid of sea) are in their east. In Malagasy, Homeland means Tanindrazana (Mlg. Tany, Eng. Land; Mlg. Razana, Ancestors). If one asks a Malagasy person *where is your Tanindrazana* (Homeland)? , that person would tell where she/he will be buried after death. A Vezo would not indicate a region apart from the described above in that situation.

Despite the fact that the Vezo have their Tanindràza, the homeland argument is surely not enough to convince Michel Boulard who stresses that “ethnos signifies people sharing a same language and cultures”²⁸. So, after having dealt with the localization of Vezo’s region, let us now explore other evidences which differentiate the Vezo from the Sakalava, starting with the difference between their dialects.

3.3 Linguistic Research

The pioneer of the research about the Vezo dialect was Bernard Koechlin. In 1975, he published his *Tableau des sons phonologiques et morpho-phonologiques du parler Vezo-Sakalava* (Table of the phonologic sounds and morpho-phonologic of the spoken Vezo-Sakalava)²⁹. If he made that precision *Vezo-Sakalava*, it might mean he practically did not intend to take the Vezo out of the Sakalava, but he was ringing a bell to make known that the Vezo has their own phonological pattern, and linguists have to be aware of those differences. For a linguist, it might be a big deal, but matters of sounds are not sufficient to make the difference between two ethnic groups for ethnographers. F. J. Razafiangy is then right when she argues seven years later that differences in pronunciations are not enough to separate the Vezo from the Sakalava. Experts define such incident as *microvariation in linguistics*. She pointed out the case of the “Tr” Sakalava which becomes “ts” in Vezo, thus, Trano (Sakalava) becomes (tsano) but the meaning, *House*, is still kept.³⁰

However, it was not just a matter of spelling or pronunciation. The difference between the dialect spoken in the north and the one spoken in the south became clearer. Most of the terms

²⁷ Otto Chr. Dahl, 53.

²⁸ Michel Bouchard, “Ethnogenesis,” *Encyclopedia of Anthropology Vol 2* (London: SAGE Publications, 2006), 848-849.

²⁹ Bernard Koechlin, *Les Vezo du Sud Ouest de Madagascar Contribution à l’Étude de l’Éco-Système de Semi-Nomades Marins* (France: Mouton ε Co, 1975), 61-62.

³⁰ Fotomanantena Jeanne Razafiangy, 6.

in the *Lexique des Termes Sakalava* of Robert Jaovelo-Dzao (2001)³¹ seems to be from the northern dialect, not common to the whole Sakalava. Then Rasolonirina Florette accidentally helps in differentiating the two dialects. In fact, she aimed to clarify the interference between Kiswahili and Sakalava dialects from the evidence that Msakawala, which is rendered Sakalava later, was the name used to indicate the inhabitant of the west coast of Madagascar in Kiswahili. But at the end, she was able to point out which words in her Swahili-Malagasy mini lexicon are met only in the dialect of Sakalava Avaratra³². She used the term “Avaratra” to put in evidence the difference between Sakalava dialects: the northern dialect, and the southern dialect which is spoken by the Sakalava Atsimo³³.

If Bernard Koechlin and Rasolonirina Florette dealt with phonetics and vocabularies to give the Vezo dialect its genuine identity, Gerard Poirot is the one who fulfilled the last task. From 2014, all about the Vezo dialect are available online³⁴. Gerard Poirot includes more than phonetics and vocabularies therein, he even describes the Vezo Grammar and offers a Vezo-French and French-Vezo dictionaries. Such effort gives an identity to the dialect spoken by the Vezo. At least, one can now study online the Vezo and Sakalava dialects easily and understand their differences.

3.4 Cultural Identity

The decisive fact to define if a community really constitutes an ethnic group is surely its cultural identity. Let us answer T. H. Ericksen’s question *who are the Us and Them?* by comparing Vezo’s culture with their neighbors’ ones.

Vezo culture was surely influenced by the neighboring ones since they live in the so called Sakalava region. Decisive evidences are however seen between them. Otto Chr. Dahl consecrated some pages about what is common to the Vezo and the Bajau starting with dialects and ending in culture. In doing so, he could describe the Vezo culture explicitly, such the way Vezo bury their dead or make and manage their canoes, after what he concluded

³¹ http://www.zomare.com/lts_ab.html, accessed 12 January 2016.

³² Rasolonirina Florette, *Ny Fifanovam-Peon'ny Teny Malagasy sy ny Teny Swahili* (Toliara: Oniversite Maninday, 2005), 78-88.

³³ Vezo, Masikoro, Makoa, and Tsimiridy constitute the Sakalava Atsimo.

³⁴ <http://www.vezo.eu/sommaire.php>, accessed 13 January 2016.

“In my opinion, this presence of the glottal stop in Vezo dialect, together with the burial of the corpses with the head to the west, and the similarity in the life on and from the sea, prove that the Vezo are descendants of the Orang Laut/Bajau in the Riau-Bangka area”³⁵.

In his work when Dahl says Vezo, it infers something which is proper to the Vezo and not shared with Sakalava, for in other places he always precises that the thing is common to both the two ethnic groups. This leads to say that the Sakalava, which are likely Kiswahili speaking people and Vezo, as Dahl is picturing here, do not have the same origin.

In addition to Dahl’s list of evidences that make the Vezo an ethnic group, I would also propose two facts, the taboo and the *Savatse* (Circumcision). It is well known that Vezo do not eat sheep, they are *faly aondry* people (SD. faly, Mlg. fady; Eng. Taboo; SD. aondry, Mlg. ondry; Eng. Sheep). The fact that their culture has sheep as taboo while eating sheep is not prohibited in Masikoro prove that these two groups also have each their own identities even though they are called Sakalava, or precisely Sakalava Atsimo as defined previously. The large Sakalava is then between these two poles, there are those who may follow the Vezo and keep sheep as taboo, and those who do not, like Masikoro. In the documentary produced by Ben Ulm “Gross Food”, it has been demonstrated that taboos on food defines societies and clearly differentiates them. It is possible to guess where one person is from just in knowing what *particular food* she/he eats or do not. We can learn from this documentary that some people are eating snakes, cockroaches, bugs and so on, while some do not. And it is true that “A delicacy for someone is disgusting to others. What we eat says a lot about who we are”³⁶, and at the end, it is concluded that “Food is what makes us”³⁷. Likewise, not eating Sheep (VD. Aondry) makes the Vezo One people and differentiates them from their neighbors, Sakalava in the north, Masikoro in the east, and Mahafaly in the south, who may have these animals on their delicious menu.

After the food, we have The *Savatse* which is furthermore the decisive fact. The term *Savatse* does not mean only the circumcision but the whole ceremony of it, a traditional event that last 3 to 4 days. This ritual is common to the whole Sakalava, except the Vezo. Circumcision

³⁵ Otto Chr. Dahl, *Migration from Kalimantan to Madagascar*, 103.

³⁶ <https://youtu.be/fz7VK0Zd7OM>, starts at 31 sec, accessed 16 April 2016.

³⁷ <https://youtu.be/fz7VK0Zd7OM>, starts at 45 min31 sec, accessed 16 April 2016.

has never been in the tradition of Vezo, and it is a bit confusing to read paradoxically from Wikipedia about Vezo, under the section Culture

(...) The circumcision ceremony typically lasts from 4 am until 9 am. The parents ask a wise elder to suggest the best date and time for the ceremony, and identify a nurse or doctor who knows how to perform the circumcision. Family members are invited to attend the ceremony, and one of the uncles holds the child during the ceremony. After the physical cut, there is drinking of alcohol. After the ceremony the child is called savatse.³⁸

Such publication draws my attention because as I mentioned before, I lived among the Vezo for 26 years in the region of Toliara and 5 years in the region of Manombo, unfortunately I have never heard about Vezo celebrating Savatse. I would however understand the point of the author of this article if she or he, in the way of Astuti, defines Vezo as “all people of the sea”, which includes three ethnic groups practicing the Savatse -Masikoro, Mahafaly and Sakalava- for they are also living in the west coast. When Pietro Lupo has described the rites of circumcisions, he mentioned two things: *Sambatra*, the Rites of circumcision of the Antambahoaka of the south east, and *Savatse*, the Rites of circumcision of the Masikoro and the Sakalava.³⁹ Did he miss accidentally to add the Vezo in the list of those who practice Savatse since he knows very well differences between Sakalava, Masikoro and Vezo?

It is now time to clarify the identity of the Vezo and understand Vezoness. As we are already talking about Rita Astuti, let us start with her deduction. According to her, Vezo is a group which defines itself as people whose life depends on the Sea. “Swimming, eating fish, sailing, and paddling a canoe”, those are the daily main tasks of a Vezo and she concludes that “people are Vezo when they perform Vezoness”.⁴⁰ It goes without saying that anyone from other ethnic groups can become Vezo when they are acting *Vezo-ly* as she claimed. Only in this condition can we talk about Savatse Vezo, or hear accounts of Vezo not *faly aondry*. In reality,

³⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vezo_people#Ethnic_identity, accessed 12 January 2016.

³⁹ Pietro Lupo, *Dieu dans la Tradition Malgache*, 185. The way Lupo takes out the Masikoro from the Sakalava ethnic group in this assumption infers his awareness of the misconception of the Sakalava ethnicity, which in fact includes vastly some ethnic groups.

⁴⁰ Rita Astuti, 153.

they are not genuine Vezo but *Vezoized*, if it can be said so. They are acting Vezo-ly, but they are still keeping their own authentic culture⁴¹.

While Tandroy (A malagasy ethnic group) do not eat tortoise, Vezo do not eat meat of sheep wherever they are. Respecting this taboo is one of the criteria for being Vezo. So, if a Tandroy lives among the Vezo and adopt the local livelihood, he or she will still not eat tortoise and eat sheep though; he/she surely shows vezoness in his/her daily life but does not *become* Vezo. *Vezoized* would be the appropriate term. It is surprising that literatures about Vezo people do not spend some words about this taboo. Besides, since Vezo do not practice Savatse, which is the common festival seen in all Sakalava clans, this very group may have its own ethnic identity.

3.4 Summary

Vezo was not considered as a genuine ethnic group in the beginning and this was historically due to the colonizers' politics. Instead, this group was defined as either a Sakalava clan (F. J. Razafiangy) or a mode of life (R. Astuti). Historians, linguists and ethnographers had later led research among the Vezo people in their respecting fields and they were all able to make the distinction between the Vezo and the Sakalava by providing their evidences. If one has a project related to this ethnic group, between the regions of Morombe (North) and Toliara (South) would be the appropriate area of fieldwork, not the northern Sakalava.

In all, there are today more and enough reasons to say that Vezo people constitute an ethnic group; they have their homeland, their own dialect, their own culture as well as the Sakalava has also their owns, and they are sharpening their identity.

⁴¹ A sub clan of Masikoro called Tsimiridy joined the seaside of Toliara. Once they lived Vezo-ly among the fishermen communities, they are called Vezo, but until now they practice Savatse.

Chapter 4

THE PRACTICE OF THE ASA LAKROA

Seeing a cross planted on a tomb usually brings people to think that the buried person is a Christian. Some, like the attorney Bill Weinberger who raise his voice to ask the US government to remove all crosses from American military cemeteries for the sake of religious freedom⁴², are not at ease with this general thought. Planting crosses on tombs of course may be an external or visible way to confirm religious identity, but it is not really the case in the Vezo region, the Asa Lakroa is indeed a cultural event in their context.

4.1 Today's Ritual

In order to understand who is doing what during the Asa Lakroa, let us start with describing the main causes of the event and grasp what are expected during the event.

4.1.1 Contexts and Preparation

When a Vezo dies, a wooden cross is planted on his/her tomb on the day of the burial. On it are written usually the name, date of birth and date of death of the dead person. And as death is always unexpected, the tomb itself is only a provisional one, just a pile of stones (Fig.3). But a day will be decided to build the permanent tomb (Fig.4). It generally depends on the financial situation; some do it few days or weeks after the burial, some may do it after some years. This is the Asa lolo event that Astuti detailed.⁴³ But what next will be the Asa Lakroa be done.



Fig. 5 Provisional Tomb (AP)



Fig. 6 Permanent Tombs (AP)

⁴² <http://www.duffelblog.com/2014/06/atheist-crosses-lawsuit-military-cemetery>, accessed 14th February 2016.

⁴³ Rita Astuti, 130-135.

Why and when the Asa Lakroa would be done may depend on three causes, shared Daddy Eugene: a dream, a family remembrance, and the Fetin'ny maty (The Saints' Day) which refers to 1st or 2nd of November. He explained

Either one member of the dead person's family had the dead in her/his dream, and consequently the family had to gather and take it as a serious concern. Most of the time it ends in doing something on the tomb of the dead: cleaning and painting, or replacing the wooden cross by a concrete one if it has not been replaced yet.

Or the whole family remembered the dead and just decided the Asa Lakroa like this; it might be for instance during the dead's birthday, or a banal party et cetera.

The third context is the Fetin'ny maty. When they missed the dead too much on that day, it pushes them to be back to the cemetery and try to find out if there is anything they still can do or have to do. In this case, the Asa Lakroa would be in the same week generally. We, for instance did that last year, not on the Fetin'ny maty, but the day after.⁴⁴

Whatever the case is, the family has to gather and plan the event. The dead's spouse, siblings and children are here the so told *family*. During these meetings, participations and tasks sharing are done, and of course expenses also are shared. They can choose by themselves the period of the Asa Lakroa or ask for a diviner's assistance to do so. Once the period is set, the whole lineage of the dead and her/his in-laws families are informed. Those informed have also in their turn to prepare for the event, as *Enga* are expected from them.

The Enga is an offering that invited people have to bring with them while they or their representative attend an event, such birth, circumcision, wedding, death and so on. It is common to the entire Malagasy people as a proof of relativeness and close relationship; in today's context, it is generally an amount of money. The Enga system is simple: If A was invited by B and brought X_A as Enga, B's Enga would be $X_B \geq X_A$ when A's inviting. Considerable amount of

⁴⁴ Video Interview with Daddy Eugene, in Manombo Atsimo on 28 June 2015.

money is moving from families to families in the society via this system. It practically affects not only the social relationship but also the economy of the local society.

4.1.2 The Ritual

The Asa Lakroa lasts generally two days and a half or sometimes three days. Anyhow it includes two nights during which the waking parties take place.

Moment	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3
Morning (Marainjay)	- Meeting of the family - Cross moulding	- Cross drying - Cross painting - Payment of Enga	- Processions to the cemetery with the Cross - Planting the cross on the Tomb - Meeting of the family
Lunchtime (Atoanjo)	Large Family meal	Communal meal	
Afternoon (Hariva)	Cross drying	- Payment of Enga	
Evening until Sunrise (Haly)	First Waking Party (Miaritory)	Second Waking Party (Miaritory)	

Fig.5 The Ritual of the Asa Lakroa

The first day starts with the dead's family meeting to review the program of the event and to check if all needed things are there. It is opened by a speech of the representative of the lineage, who is supposed to mention the reason of the gathering and remind what had been decided before about the shared tasks. The family checks if the building materials, food, drinks, power and light for the waking parties are all there, exactly according to the decision. When everything has been checked, the work can begin, starting with moulding the cross. A large family meal is prepared by the women while men are working. Cousins, uncles, aunts and other relatives are invited to join the meal, an opportunity to the generations to know each other.

The first afternoon is spent to prepare the first waking party which usually starts after dinner. The representative of the lineage, an old man, gives a short speech, welcomes everybody and makes a brief introduction, after what he gives the floor to a Church leader, priest or layman, to lead a short devotion or to say a prayer. It even occurs although the dead person is not Christian. After this Christian service, the representative retakes the floor and explains the rules of the party. It consists in enumerating the dos and don'ts, basically in order to make peace reign such *When you are drunk, please don't make a mess, just sleep. We prepared a place for you over there to sleep...Each team can play, but please respect the turns; when on team plays, let's watch and listen to them, etc.*

Miaritory means literally to bear (Mlg. Miaritra) the sleep (Mlg. Tory) or exactly to fight against the sleep and stay awake. All who attend the event are set in several teams. Each team has its turn to play according to an agreed rotation. Songs, short theaters, dances, poems, storytelling and jokes are expected until the sunrise (Mlg. Vakiandro). The last standing team is the winner and would be awarded by the dead's family. In addition, each team also can make a benefit from the party. While watching a team playing, people are holding branches. If they are satisfied of the play, they will stick money - called Kijory in Vezo dialect - on those branches and raise them to express their gratitude and satisfaction. The team has then to move and come closer to take the money smoothly. One person holding a branch may wave the branch to ask the team to keep playing or to replay. If she/he is moving, the team has to follow her/him in keeping playing, which often makes everybody laugh, but at the end the team always gets the money. Members of a team have to share the kijory they have earned after the party. Most of the time, it is the local Christian choir who earned the maximum kijory and won the family prize.

The second day should be considered as the climax of the event. Cross is left aside to dry and the dead's family is gathering in on place to receive the informed (VD. Nanambarà). It should be noticed first that the term to inform (Mlg. Manambara) is the replacement of to invite (Mlg. Manasa) in the context of the Asa Lakroa. If one person is nanambarà, the family who manambara does more than inviting that person, it is a respectful way to confirm that this very person is included in the community where the inviting family is. A non-nanambarà person/family is likewise considered as one outside that community. The nanambarà person comes with the representatives of her/his family to give the Enga, which will be recorded in the *Family's Enga Book*. That is how one can remember how much a relative's Enga was. After

exchanging some words with the family and having paid the Enga, they had to retire and give place to other people to do the same thing. The communal meal is then offered to all who are present without distinction. The local society itself is invited and the event becomes a social event. That is why the last waking party is fully crowded.

As usual, the waking party begins with the speech of the dead's family representative, followed by a devotion, and opened officially by the representative after having reminded the rules. As it is attended by almost the whole community, there are more teams and more fun. Teams have more chance to gain a huge Kijory. Tea, coffee, drinks and snacks are offered by the family to keep the whole crowd awake until the sunrise. When the sun brings up his first glow, the party is over; everybody can sleep.

Then comes the last day. The cross has been dried enough to be carried to the tomb. The family, surrounded and followed by the crowd, brings the cross. Songs and hymns are sung during the procession. Arrived at the cemetery, the cross is planted on the tomb; the representative of the family thanks everybody and declares loudly that everything is done and that the Asa Lakroa is finished. The crowd can now disperse and go home while the family stays for the last checking at the cemetery. A last meeting will be held at the family's house (The house where they took the family meal) for a report. After having received the equitable part from the Enga, each member can go home.

4.2 The Ancestral Ritual

The Asa Lakroa event is the result of the mixture of a cultural tradition and Christianity. Nobody can comprehend it unless the origin of the practice, the Voliagnara, itself has been explained. Therefore it is now time to know where it is from and how it was primitively conceived.

4.2.1 The Voliagnara

The ancestral tombs had never had crosses on. Instead, there were what Vezo people call Voliagnara. It was formerly a wooden stele on which was incised the dead's name, wherefrom the monument's name is (Mlg. Voly, Eng Planting; VD. Agnara, Eng. Name). There was no date, told Dadibare, because life is not limited by time and space; the person is not dead

but just left the body⁴⁵. To engrave dates seems to be nonsense as, in the ancestral concept, birth is not a beginning of the soul's life, and death is not its end. Only pictures are drawn on the stele and those pictures are to help the living to remember the buried there.

The wooden monuments surely do not last at all because of decays. The gravure would certainly need multiple retouches, if not the whole stele had to be replaced. The living people would take care of the *Voliagnara* once the dead manifested (*Working for the dead or living for the dead*, Astuti). What has been said in 4.1.1 is still valid here, except the cross. The coming of the cement permitted later to build gravestones. This time, the dates of birth and death, and sometimes nicknames, were written on the gravestone (Fig.6).



Fig.7 A *Voliagnara* at Bekafaitse, Cemetery of Salary Avaratra (AP)

The *Voliagnara* permits to locate where the person is buried exactly and remember her/his birthday and date of death. Most of the time, French terms such *Ne(e) le...Decede(e) le ...* (Eng. Born....Died....) or *Ici git* (Eng. Here lies) are seen on Malagasy tombstones⁴⁶. It might also be written on the tomb itself. But as Vezo's ancestral tomb is just a long line of pile of stones, the information had to be written somewhere else, evidently on the *voliagnara*.

⁴⁵ Video Interview with Dadibare, in Toliara on 27 July 2015.

⁴⁶ Rita Astuti, 141.

4.2.2 The Cross Ritual

The Cross itself became the voliagnara from certain time which gave birth to the Asa Lakroa. The Ancestral ritual lasted longer than today's within two more Aritory. These two waking parties are organized by the youth and seem just like hangouts where young members of the family and children have fun with their local friends. The family is financially self-supporting for these first two days. Expenses are shared only when members of the large family start arriving.

Moment	Day 1	Day 2
Morning		
Afternoon		Local Checking
Evening until Sunrise	Miaritory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Family Dinner - Hosting the Large Family - Miaritory - Expecting the coming of families

Fig. 8. The Two more Days of the Ancestral Ritual

The first Aritory is intended to inform the whole community that an event is going to occur in the family. The best found way to do it is to have a loud sound system and fancy lights. The Aritory itself is not even opened by a senior or a representative of the family. Young members of the family and their friends begin to dance. No regulations are shouted and no teams are set. This is just to make the passing by people ask *what is going on over there*. These last may join the party at any time. Later it is crowded; the place becomes an outdoor dancing club. Unexpected people may bring desks and plant stands around to sell local alcoholic beverage (VD. Toaky), snacks (VD. Tsaky) and cigarettes. The youth would do their possible to bring down the house; that is why it is called fihisà (Eng. Game, fun).

The next morning there is no fihisà. The music may still be loud but there is no dancing. The whole community now knows that this family is organizing an event. The family takes a breath during the day in order to be ready to receive the large family members soon. These last are used to come the evening before the large family lunch which would be the next day. The

second Aritory helps then the family to stay awake and welcome relatives that are arriving. What next are the last two days and a half as described in today's ritual.

In Astuti's table, the Asa Lakroa lasted longer, six days (See Fig.8). It is similar to the ancestral ritual described above but only with only one major variant. The event she described concerned a collective Asa Lakroa; several crosses had been planted, but the ritual was almost the same⁴⁷. If it was an account of only one cross, it would have been done within five days, including four Aritory, not five.

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6
MANILY LAKROA moulding of crosses at the village	crosses are left to dry	crosses are left to dry names are engraved on crosses	wood moulds are removed crosses are painted	guests begin to gather 3 o'clock MANANGA LAKROA crosses are raised ENGA contributions paid to "masters of the work" SAKAFO communal meal	ATERY AN-DOLO processions carry crosses to the cemetery FA VITA ritual is over people disperse and return to village
NIGHT	NIGHT	NIGHT	NIGHT	NIGHT	
MIARITORY wake with few people (only "masters")	MIARITORY wake with few people (only "masters")	MIARITORY wake with few people (only "masters")	MIARITORY wake with a few more people ("masters" and friends)	MIARITORY FISA wake and feast with huge crowd	

FIG.4: THE CROSS RITUAL

Fig 9. The Asa Lakroa in Rita Astuti's Table⁴⁸.

A part from the length of the event, one major difference between today's ritual and the traditional is then the active participation of the Church during Aritory. In today's, the Aritory is opened with a devotion as the local Church is invited, and the Choir is the expected representative. In the traditional ritual, the family has to hire an *Orkestra* to play. What Vezo mean by *Orkestra* is not an Orchestra; in facts it is the name given to any famous band or

⁴⁷ Cf. Rita Astuti, *People of the Sea*, 135-138.

⁴⁸ Rita Astuti, 136.

musician group that can play, sing, and make people dance. The instruments of an *Orkestra* are a primary electric guitar, a bass guitar, and a drum kit.

4.3 The Christian Origin of the Design

Who had brought the Cross in the Vezo region? There are two alternatives, either it has been brought by the French, or it is a heritage from the Norwegian missionaries. Anyhow, there is no doubt to say that it has a Christian origin. There are nonetheless more evidences to say that the second alternative is right.

The problem is surely not solved by pointing who came first, but who did similar thing first. Here is a quick view on Churches History. The first Vezo village to welcome the Gospel was Saint Augustin. In 1845, the Roman Catholic Church represented by the Jesuits started evangelizing in this village, a mission led by the Rev Dalmond⁴⁹. This attempt unfortunately failed. F.J. Razafiangy wrote

R. P. Cotain, one of the missionaries who accompanied Rev. Dalmond, remarked the fear of the Sakalava seeing them coming with a 'ship with too many mouths of fire'⁵⁰.

“These French missionaries used the French warship to travel, and that was the cause of the failure”, precised Razafiangy later. The Norwegian mission started where they left. According to the NMS’s report, “the evangelization in the region of Sakalava began in 1874, Lars Jakobsen Røstvig, Arne Farteinsen Valen, David Olaus Jakobsen and Knud Olsen Lindø were the pioneers who arrived in Tulear.⁵¹ As seen below, the Vezo region is part of the Sakalava area⁵².

⁴⁹ Fotomanantena Jeanne Razafiangy, *Etrangers et Malgaches Dans le Sud-Ouest Sakalava 1845-1904*, 169.

⁵⁰ Fotomanantena Jeanne Razafiangy, 172.

⁵¹ Misiona Norveziana, *Atopazy ny Masonao: Ny Asan'ny Fahasoavan'Andramanitra aty Madagasikara Andrefana tao anatin'ny Dimampolo Taona 1874-1924* (Tananarive: Imprimerie de la Mission Norvégienne, 1924), 5.

⁵² Emil Birkeli, *Fra Tamarindernes Land – Madagaskars Vestkyst* (Stavanger: Norske missonsselskaps Forlag, 1920), 311.

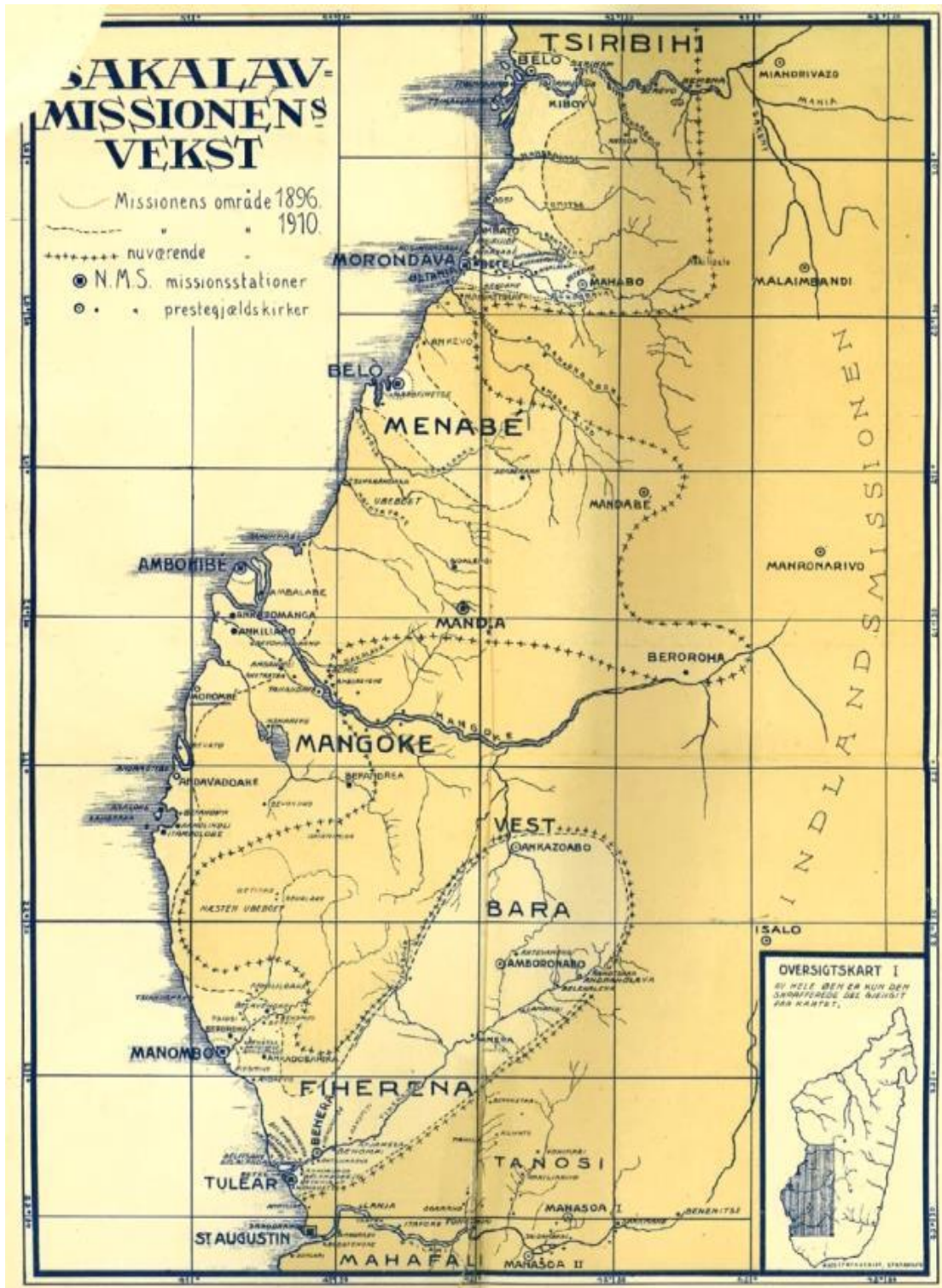


Fig. 10 The Sakalava Region, NMS's Map

In the very NMS's report is read

“Evaluation of the first 20 years (...) 4 missionary stations were built, Morondava, Toliara, St Augustin, and Manombo. The majority of the Christians were Makoa, and the Sakalava made fun of them⁵³.

If we refer to fig. 2, only one station was built in the Sakalava region (Morondava) while the other three stations were built in Vezo region (Toliara, St Augustin, Manombo). Here comes the point. In his work *Misjonærgraver På Madagaskar*, Nils Kristian Høimyr had recorded basic information of Norwegian missionaries who had been in Madagascar: their names, spouses' names, dates of birth, dates of death, and surprisingly the cemeteries where they were buried with even picture of their tombs. All of them have crosses; either the tombstone itself was designed as a cross, or a cross was curved on the stele. Our attention should however turn to only two cemeteries, the one in Toliara where there are 8 Norwegian tombs, and the one in Ivory Avaratra (Fianarantsoa) that has 19. In St Augustin (3), Manombo (2) and Morombe (1), there are only personal tombs, not a whole cemetery⁵⁴.

In Toliara, what Vezo people call today *An-dolo kristiana* (Eng. Christian's Cemetery) was formerly named *La Cimétière Norvégienne* (Eng. Norwegian's Cemetery). This French name is still its official and legal name, but it is not now used in daily language anymore. The land was bought by a Norwegian priest, Ole Aarnes, who gave it to the Church⁵⁵. Therefore the burial in that place followed the Christian ritual, where should have started the history of the tomb cross. Norwegian missionaries had then their own cemeteries although, in contrast, *An-dolom-bazaha* (Eng. Foreigners' Cemetery) is only about 15 meters west of the *An-dolo kristiana*, the theirs. Paradoxically the steles on the missionaries' tombs are built in different shapes and forms, not cross-designed. This is also the case for the three gravestones in St Augustin and the one in Morombe. It is definitely sure that the Tomb Cross planting was not a

⁵³ Misiona Norveziana, *Atopazy ny Masonao*, 13.

⁵⁴ Nils Kristian Høimyr, *Misjonærgraver på Madagaskar* (Stavanger, 2014), 181-185.

⁵⁵ To be buried outside the family's cemetery was considered as both a curse and an extreme supplice (It is now still the case). Those who were banished by the family for certain reasons had to bear that ordeal, and it was the case of those who became Christian. According to oral traditions, that was the historical origin of Ole Aarnes' initiative. While he was the priest of Betania, he bought two lands, the first is where the Betania's Lutheran church is now, and the second is this cemetery. Documents on their purchase are at this told Church's archive.

direct heritage from Norwegian missionaries who worked in the Vezo region, for the simple reason that they did not do so.

Daniel Aas remarked that “Jonasy, a Sakalava from Toliara, who lived in Manombo, was the first Christian in the south. People called him Tsaray”⁵⁶. In the previous chapter, it has been explained that where a Malagasy person is buried is her/his homeland. Jonasy was buried in Manombo Atsimo and it is clear that he was Vezo. But again, there was no Tomb Cross on his tomb, and still there is not (Fig.10).



Fig.11 The Tomb of Jonasy Tsarae in Manombo Atsimo (AP)

In one hand, we may say that the priest would have forgotten to practice the Asa Lakroa, or at least he should have reminded it, considering the fact that Jonasy was the first Vezo converted. On the other hand we may agree that he surely would have said nothing at all about it because he himself was not familiar to such practice. Where is then the Tomb Cross from?

⁵⁶ Misiona Norveziana, *Atopazy ny Masonao*, 14. Jonasy Tsaray and Jonasy Tsarae is the same person. There was probably a misspelling.

Let us turn to the second cemetery. If Toliara was a Vezo land, Ivory Avaratra was the Priests' land. There was built in 1896 by the NMS the first cradle of studies in Theology for the southern part of the Island, where evangelists and priests were trained at that time. This is now the unique Lutheran Graduate School of Theology in the country⁵⁷. Nearby is the Norwegian cemetery (fig.10).



Fig.12. Norwegian Cemetery in Ivory Avaratra⁵⁸.

Here are the famous cross-designed gravestones. The reason why all the history is here about Norwegian missionaries is that they were the first to investigate in the Vezo region, and that the Malagasy Lutheran Church is the result of their missions. If Lutheran Church is dominant in that region, it is because of an agreement that Protestants' missions made between them. Marianne Skjortnes says that "The Malagasy Lutheran Church has traditionally its core presence in the southern part of Madagascar, which was the part allotted to the Lutherans when Protestants divided the island amongst themselves in 1913"⁵⁹. Additionally, this agreement was updated in 1937, with the so called *Actions Area Delimitation for Lutheran Missions*. The ULCA

⁵⁷ In the beginning, it was called *Seminera Teolojika Loterana* (STL), but from 1989 it has been changed to *Sekoly Ambony Loterana momba ny Teolojia* (SALT), a graduate school. There are now six seminaries where priest are trained, and SALT is the only institution that offers Theology as an academic discipline.

⁵⁸ Nils Kristian Høimyr, *Misjonærgraver på Madagaskar* (Stavanger, 2014), 86.

⁵⁹ Marianne Skjortnes, *Restoring Dignity in Rural and Urban Madagascar: On How Religion Creates New Life-Stories* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2014), 51.

worked in the South (Tolagnaro), the LMB started from the South West (St Augustin), and the NMS in three regions: The Betsileo Land, the Bara Land, and the Sakalava land⁶⁰. That is the reason why Lutheranism has its stronghold in the whole southern part of the country.

It is now time to guess who may have brought these designs into the Vezo land even though it is impossible to give names. First of all, they must have seen these Tomb Crosses, in order to be able to reproduce the same designs. This means they should have been in Ivory Avaratra. Secondly, they must have known the ritual of the Voliagnara, otherwise the ritual of the Asa Lakroa would be totally different from it (Cf, 4.2.1). Thirdly, if they were able to set a Cross as a substitute for a voliagnara, they must have had certain influences in social life. In short, they were probably Vezo priests and/or evangelists. In doing so, they left the ritual intact, only a new design of the voliagnara has been introduced: *the shape of the cross*. The voliagnara event became the Asa Lakroa thereby.

This implies two things. The Asa Lakroa was not being a Christian ritual anymore even though the cross was introduced. Non-Christian also already did the Asa Lakroa from the time it has been contextualized. Church leaders and theologians that are not familiar to the vezo's rite of voliagnara are confused while seeing non-Christian practicing the Asa Lakroa, which is actually a cultural event. The second implication is the mere role of the cross, which may have nothing to do with Christianity. The Asa Lakroa in Vezo's context illustrates this perfectly well since the cross as just a design has the same role and value as the Vezo's voliagnara. It might not be the case of the crosses in some cemeteries, like in that American military cemetery that Bill Weinberger talked of.

4.4 Values in the Practice of the Asa Lakroa

Both Christian and non-Christian practice the Asa Lakroa, but the use of this new design unavoidably affected some values in the practice. In one side, non-Christian stick to the tradition of the voliagnara and its relating belief, in which the Asa Lakroa is a veneration of the dead. On the other side Christian brought new various meanings of the new design but claim that it is not a religious ritual at all but a cultural event; the third position is a wide range that stayed in

⁶⁰ http://madarevues.recherches.gov.mg/IMG/pdf/omaly29-32_3_.pdf, accessed 15 February 2016. Cf. *Omalysy Anio*, N27-32, 1989-1990, 27.

between. Knowing well these three positions will help us to understand the perspectives of the Malagasy Lutheran Church.

4.4.1 Beliefs in the Ritual

Belief in life after death is common to Sakalava and Vezo. It may be even said that it is common to Malagasy people. But the abolition of the veneration of ancestors drew the clear fence of Christianity, as it is true that “Christian faith and Christian values represent added value in people’s lives, and express value systems that are tied to ethical and moral action”⁶¹.

Vezo traditional belief maintains that ancestors have the power to bless, and that providing what they may need is a duty for the living people to be safe and accordingly blessed. Dadibare explained

If the dead has manifested, she/he assuredly might need something, like food, or drinks, or clothes, or blood. Then her/his family has to satisfy her/him to remain living safely. When they fulfill the need, they are safe, if they don’t, the dead will curse them, and they will be sick, or bankrupt, or whatever; but they will be in serious trouble⁶².

This might be the motivation for non-Christian to go back to the tomb and do something.⁶³ They will consult a diviner who will tell them what the dead required or asked for. What would be done may be summed up with Rita Astuti’s term *Working for the Dead*.⁶⁴ Organizing a Asa Lakroa if the wooden one was not yet replaced is in this case a duty toward the dead. But what would happen if the Asa Lakroa was already done and the dead still appear in dreams? Dadibare answered that the “cross has nothing to do with it, the living people are subject to dead people’s desire”. The Asa Lakroa is hence the first visible form of the obedience that living people may express to the dead. Other forms will come afterward, like bringing food or tools that the dead asked for (Fig.12).

⁶¹ Marianne Skjortnes, 158.

⁶² Video Interview with Dadibare, in Toliara on 27 July 2015. Original text: “Lafa ty mate ro miseho, ie misy raha ilàny zay, mety raha hohaniny na hinominy io, na hoe akanjo, na lion-jaha. Ka mila manatanteraky ty sitsapony amy zay ty fianakaviany laha mbo te ho velo soa. Lafa vitan-droze raha ilà zao, afaky roze, fa laha tsy vitan-droze, le hanozo androze azy mate ine, ka harary rozy bakeo, na kinty, fa ie tsy maintsy hisy raha hahazo androzy avao”.

⁶³ See the first reason told by Daddy Eugene in 4.1.1.

⁶⁴ Rita Astuti, 123.



Fig. 13 A Plate and a Cup in front of the Tomb (Manombo Atsimo, AP)

This at least makes the difference between Christian tombs and non-Christian tombs even though they all have crosses planted on. Vezo Christian had abandoned the belief in ancestors or dead's power and are convinced that they are set free from ancestors' duties. Urbain Laporodody testified

One day, I dreamt my Grandfather. He was paddling his canoe while his *Vintanangisy* (Eng. Calmar hook) fell into the sea and sank. He was not able to dive and then called me. I was in another canoe with my brothers, but it was me that he called to fetch it for him (...) In situation like this, we, Christian, go to church, ask the priest to pray for us, and that's all. That was what I did, no need to worry about the dead. But if I was still a gentile, I would have asked a diviner, and I can guess that he surely would have recommended me to leave a *Vintanangisy* at my grandpa's tomb.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Personal Interview with Urbain Laporodody, in Salary Avaratra on 25 July 2015. Original Text: "Njaikanjo zaho nanonofy dadilahiko. Nao niven-daka zao ie le nilatsake andrano any vitanangisiny. Ie fa tsy mahay magnirike ka nikaiky ahy. Zaho aminio nefa laka raiky amy zokiko reo, fe le zaho ro kinaikiny hila raha ine ho azy. (Le nandeha zaho nila azy le niazoko bakeo nameako azy). Amy raha manao hoy io moa tsika kristiana mandeha andegilizy le managataky vavaky amy Rapasy, la ie zay. Le zay koa ty nataoko, tsy mampiasa zay ahy ty fa mate. Fa laha mbo ny jentilisa zaho, fa namonjy ombiasa zay, ary mety ho nivola miko ie hoe anatero vitanangisy dadilahinao".

Vezo Christians generally do not plan to have recourse to diviners' recommendations. They also already left the *Working for the dead* – belief, although it is true that “The most prominent characteristic of ancestral Malagasy religion is the ancestor cult, and the relationship between the living and the dead”⁶⁶. The Asa Lakroa is considered as only a commemoration rather than worship, and they organize it freely by just agreement between families. Through this sight, the event is merely a good opportunity for the dead's lineage to meet and to know each other.

Nevertheless, there is still a third pole, the in between position that conceives the Asa Lakroa as both a duty towards dead people and as a remembrance of them. This party is what the MLC is scared of, for it inducts syncretism in local churches. It should be comprehensible that conversion is always progressive. The transition takes time as the converted is paddling between the previous system of belief and the new one. Concerning the first Vezo Christian for instance, the legendary Jonasy Tsarae, Sigmund Edland told that “He already heard the Words of God for longtime, but he mixed Christianity with the ancestral customs – sikidy, sns. Røstvig was a bit disappointed and did not expect any change”⁶⁷. The first serious challenge of the protestant missionaries was this cult of ancestors which they saw everywhere in the country. Catholic missionaries did not have the same issue as it fits to some features of the dogma on *The Saints*. Holiharifetra Rakotondramiadana noticed three years ago

In fact, Sakalava cultures are quite adaptable to the Catholic's doctrine and practices, especially in terms of ancestor's veneration. While the Sakalava have the practice of helping the departed, by means of a proper funeral, prayer, sacrifice to achieve the ancestral abode, the Catholic Church has the practice of helping the dead, by means of prayer, to rescue from the purgatory.⁶⁸

In her dissertation H. Rakotondramiadana explained why the Sakalava are joining easily the Catholic trends than the Protestant's ones. She pointed out in sum that it is related globally to culture and belief, as Sakalava consider the ancestors as mediators between God and the living

⁶⁶ Marianne Skjortnes, 39.

⁶⁷ Sigmund Edland, *Tantaran'ny Fiangonana Loterana Malagasy* (Antananarivo: TPFLM, 2002), 102. Sikidy may have the same meaning as divination.

⁶⁸ Holiharifetra Rakotondramiadana, *Sakalava Perspective on Afterlife as a Challenge to the Christian Mission in the North West of Madagascar*, Master thesis (Stavanger: School of Mission and Theology, 2013), 66.

people in the same way that the Saints are in Catholicism. Vezo's traditional belief also holds this Sakalava concept. Therefore the Protestant missionaries prohibited from the beginning all practices that may be related to the veneration of the dead. In short, their teaching sounded like *when a person dies, that person would never have any power to bless the living people. Dead are dead; no need to be back to tombs and perform rituals in order to expect things from them.* On the other side, Vezo people have a reply to this that some Church leaders qualified as tricky. Rakotonomenjanahary argued that

Since Vezo people practiced this Asa Lakroa, we cannot know who is who. Both Christian and Gentiles⁶⁹ do it. Our problem is not with these gentiles, but rather with those who are already Christian. They are taught and they are able to repeat what we taught them when asked about what they are doing. Do they really believe according to those teaching? No! Unfortunately there is no guarantee⁷⁰.

Some leaders of the Lutheran Church think that Vezo Christian are *hiding* their real belief beside the *Crosses*, as they often say “Are we doing something wrong? We are just planting crosses, even the missionaries did that. Didn't they?”⁷¹, on which those leaders have almost nothing to say at all. We have two groups of adepts in this in between position. There are first Vezo Christian who do the Asa Lakroa may be just as a simple *Voliagnara*, a remembrance, but may be also in hoping that ancestors contribute to their welfare if they really are able to do so. Second, there are the Vezo non-Christian who do it to satisfy the dead, but also hoping that the famous merciful Jesus of the Christian may do something for both the dead and the living family. Dadibare said confidently that “it is always good to have more Spirits and powers to support you”.⁷² He inferred by this that humankind may have as resorts all possible *invokable* powers. What more amazing is to hear from a non-Christian that “the cross has the power to make evil spirits flee”.⁷³ As a result, planting a cross on a tomb is like installing a security system. It might be concluded that the traditional belief has imported some values from Christian faith and that

⁶⁹ Mlg. Jentilisa, the borrowed term used to name non-Christian in Madagascar.

⁷⁰ Personal Interview with Rakotonomenjanahary, in Manombo Atsimo on 16 July 2015.

⁷¹ Personal Interview with Rakotonomenjanahary, in Manombo Atsimo on 16 July 2015.

⁷² Video Interview with Dadibare, in Toliara on 27 July 2015.

⁷³ Personal Interview with Tsiambena, in Salary Avaratra on 25 July 2015.

converted are keeping some of the traditional convictions. All these make this metis position the most appreciated by both some non-Christian and some Christian.

4.4.2 Persons and Relationship

If there are three different thoughts in the system of belief, at least there are common cultural values. The *Filongoa* and the *Enga*.

Filongoa (VD.), or Fihavànana (Mlg.) is among those term that could not be translated directly into other languages. In the words of Øyvind Dahl, “It is impossible to give the term *fihavànana* a correct translation. The root is *hàvana*, which means parent/kin/lineage”.⁷⁴ A Vezo call primordially *Longo* (Mlg. *hàvana*) any person that has a blood tie with her/him. All persons having the same ancestors are *Mpilongo* (Mlg. *Mpihàvana*, Eng. Relatives). But close friends and best friends also are called *longo*. If they have to tell you that “your best friend is looking for you”, they would say “Your *longo* is looking for you” (VD. *Mila anao longonao*), although they have the term *Nàma* for the words *Friend*. So Filongoa or Fihavànana denotes not only relativeness but also a very good relationship. Ø. Dahl explains

Fihavànana is also a synonym of peace, harmony, and good relationship. The expression in the Bible, “For He is our peace” (Eph.2:14) is translated into *Izy no fihavanantsika. Mampihavana* means to make friends, to conciliate.⁷⁵

This describe how important is Fihàvanana in Malagasy society. If you are not a *longo*, in Vezo context, then you might be a threat. Here comes the importance of the Ambara told in 4.1.2. The one who gets the Ambara is considered as a genuine *longo* even though that person may not be from the same ancestors. Mutual respect and support are the characteristics of the Filongoa. Through it is maintained the peace.

Talking about values in the ritual of the Asa Lakroa, R. Astuti said that “who contributes what and how much plays an important role in defining relationships among the living”⁷⁶. This is indisputably true. One who received the Ambara and does not attend any of the waking parties

⁷⁴ Øyvind Dahl, *Meanings in Madagascar: Cases of Intercultural Communication* (Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1999), 85.

⁷⁵ Øyvind Dahl, 85.

⁷⁶ Rita Astuti, *People of the Sea*, 143.

deliberately excludes her/himself out of the local community because she/he breaks the Filongoa (Peace) of the community. Consequently she/he cannot expect any help or support from the very community from that time. During the waking parties for example,

“Ideally, everyone should contribute loudly to the common songs; yet the fact that most people do not do so is not considered especially significant. The main expectation, and what people will be thanked for, is that they be present at the wake rather than being asleep in their houses⁷⁷.”

In brief, only presences are esteemed. Those who attend the Asa Lakroa event are expressing both their belongingness to the community and their Filongoa to the organizing family. That is why a family must always send at least a representative if not all coming to the wake. The absence during an event that has something to do with a dead (Funeral, Voliagnara, Asa lolo, Asa Lakroa) is hard to be tolerated, while not showing up during birth or wedding or inaugurations (ex. new house, new canoe, new boat or ship...) is fairly accepted. The filongoa does more than tying the Vezo people; it maintains peace in this ethnic group wherever they are.

The second value is the Enga. It is “customarily paid by in laws family, namely sons in law and fathers in law”⁷⁸ and relatives. The extension of the system however involves the whole community. As explained in 4.1.1, the enga is not necessarily paid by money but generally so. Those who got the Ambara should bring their enga to the family from which the Ambara was. An enga works like a boomerang; it is supposed to return to the sender after a while. This is how Dadibare explained it

If you are paying enga, it is like you are making a deposit at BNI. What you gave is still yours and will be returned to you, for it is yours but only in someone else’s hands. You will certainly receive more than you gave (...) If you are paying enga although you did not receive *Ambara* from the families, it means you are bringing a *Filongoa* request.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Rita Astuti, 111.

⁷⁸ Rita Astuti, 143.

⁷⁹ Video Interview with Dadibare, in Toliara on 27 July 2015. BNI is a bank, Banque Nationale d’Investissement. Original text: “Laha iha manenga manahaky mametsaky djala amy BNI ao. Ahinao avao iny nje any ary mbo hipoly aminao, zany hoe ie anao avao fe an-tànan’olo. Sady iha aza mbo hahazo mihoatsy azy omeanao iny ka (...) Fa laha iha tsy nahazo ambàra baka amy fianakavia io nefa manenga, iha mila fihavàna amindroze zay”.

A Filongoa may start from the time one has given engas without having got the Ambara. So even though that person has no blood tie with the family, she/he is integrated into the community where that family is, and will receive Ambara each time this family organizes a familial event. But in return, that person also has to send an Ambara to that family when planning to do so because the bond is set. If Vezo people are engaged actively in the engas system, it is fully for the sake of the filongoa. So during the event of Asa Lakroa, there is nothing for the dead in the engas system. Money and gifts are in circulation amongst the living as mutual financial support.

4.5 Deduction

In a whole, the Asa Lakroa has been given different meanings despite its cultural origin. All this only because the usual gravestone, the Voliagnara, has been designed as a cross as did Norwegian missionaries. It is not surprising if M. Skjortnes finishes saying “Ever since I came to know Malagasy people, I have been amazed by how religion is integrated in their daily lives, and how daily events are given religious explanations and related to a religious universe”.⁸⁰ Meanings are borrowed, interchanged, mixed up, adapted and readapted. That is why there are those three different ranges of beliefs (4.4.1). There would be other meanings if steles were not cross shaped but in banal design.

Whatever meanings are, the cultural values are kept intact. The pillars of the Vezo relationship, Filongoa and the Engas, are preserved both by Christian and non-Christian. They bound the Vezo in a peaceful community in which they express their sympathetic relativeness and their readiness to take care of each other. It is deducted that the Asa Lakroa is a genuine cultural event; but convictions are presumably arbitrary. Despite the common ritual, Vezo people do not share today the same conviction and belief.

⁸⁰ Marianne, Marianne Skjortnes, 155.

Chapter 5

MALAGASY LUTHERAN CHURCH'S APPROACHES

From the three conceptions of the Asa Lakroa in 4.1.1 is begotten the three approaches of the Malagasy Lutheran Church. These approaches are supported by three distinct groups, and each group is composed by theologians and Church leaders. Those who take the Asa Lakroa as a religious event condemn its practice while those who see it as a cultural event promotes it. The third range remains between these two poles. Their position is defined syncretism by prohibitionists and indecision by the nationalists. This chapter is set to describe the foundations and context of these three approaches and the nuance between planting a Tomb Cross and organizing an Asa Lakroa.

5.1 The Prohibitive Approach

When missionaries came to Madagascar, they certainly first observed and tried to understand Malagasy system of belief. The testimonies of Borchgrevink and Lars Vig show how shocked they were while seeing people worshipping the Dead, as at their coming, “Malagasy had a pious religious soul, but lost in idolatry”⁸¹. The initiative of Ole Aarnes to buy that land in Toliara and made of it a Christian Cemetery (Cf.4.3) pictures the challenge that missionaries were facing at that time. All rituals or practices that may trace cult of ancestors were forbidden; among them was the ritual of Voliagnara.

Those buried in the *Andolo Kristiana*, the Norwegian cemetery, are buried following the Christian liturgy and ritual, and no ancestral practices were allowed there. Although the Voliagnara ritual became the Tomb Cross ritual later, it was consequently still forbidden. Mahatsenga Flariot, a Vezo priest, assumes that

Behind the Asa Lakroa lies the traditional idolatry, the need of blessing from ancestors pushes them to do it. They are pretending to build a cross but it has nothing to do with Christianity. That is why *Jentilisa*

⁸¹ Pietro Lupo, *Dieu dans la Tradition Malgache* (Fianarantsoa: Editions Ambozontany, 2006), 52.

also are doing it. They expected assistance and providence from the dead⁸².

The *them* in Mahatsenga's first sentence refers to the entire Vezo people, Christian and non-Christian; the *Jentilisa* (Eng. Gentiles) embraces all Vezo non-Christian. As he himself is Vezo, he knows what is going on during the rituals, and he is familiar to the values of the practice of the Voliagnara. So whatever the form of the Voliagnara would be, its ritual is considered as a cult of ancestors. As priest he suggests that "the Church should take a firm decision on it. It should be forbidden"⁸³.

In reality, the Voliagnara ritual has already been forbidden from the time of Norwegian missionaries as it is linked to a worship dedicated to the dead. Conversion seemed like leaving the traditional practices and welcoming foreigners' practices. People lean on any ritual proposed by the Church once converted, and these rituals became kinds of laws and rules. Here is stressed the importance of the rite of baptism in the Lutheran liturgy for example. In the rite in the book *Ritually Lutherana* of 1878, we may read

- a. Mahafovy ny devoly va hianao? (Do you forsake the devil?)
- b. Eny. (Yes)
- c. Sy ny asany rehetra? (And all his works?)
- d. Eny. (Yes)
- e. Sy ny fombany rehetra (And all his forms/habits?)
- f. Eny. (Yes)⁸⁴

Those who answer "Yes" are aware that from the time they said it, they are supposed to leave their traditional system of beliefs that was classified as idolatry. To say Yes is one thing, but to act according to it was and is quite another one. As the pioneers Daniel Aas, Lars Jakobsen Røstvig and fellows remarked, Vezo Christian did not forsake their traditions and cultural values. That must be the reason of the readjustment of the question in 1973, which became

- g. Mifady ny devoly sy ny asany rehetra ary ny fombany rehetra va hianao?" Are you making *taboo* the devil, all his works and all his forms/habits?"⁸⁵

⁸² Personal Interview with Mahatsenga Flariot, in Toliara on 15 July 2015. Original text: "Misy fanompoantsampy ambalik'io fanaova Lakroa io. Filà fitahia baka amy rāza mahavy androze manao ie io. Manao mamboatsy Lakroa roze fe tsy misy ilirany amy ty maha kristiana zao io. Zay mahavy jentilisa reo manao koa io. Mitamà fahasoaava baka amy raza".

⁸³ Personal Interview with Mahatsenga Flariot, in Toliara on 15 July 2015.

⁸⁴ Den Norsk Mission, *Ritually Lutherana: Nohafohezina* (Antananarivo: Den Norsk Mission, 1878), 5.

Although it is the second question that the minister or baptizer has to ask, this is still the first crucial question that defines Christian identity. The use of the “Fady” (Taboo) in any ritual implies a new belongingness, and Malagasy people are very strict on its respect. In a recent Canadian Television show (2015), investigators testified how amazed they were in exploring varieties of the Do’s and Don’ts of Madagascar, to the extent that Madagascar has been called “Iles des tabous” (Eng. Island of Taboos).⁸⁵ It is to say that despite those hundreds of years of evangelization, taboos that are linked to the traditional religion are still respected. Each Malagasy ethnic group has its Fady, and once one thing is Fady it is vital. Let us talk for example the case of the Tandroy. Every year, they face a starving period (January-March), and the whole nation contributes in providing them basic needs. There is no place in the world where tortoises live safely than in the Region of Androy, as Tandroy are *fady* tortoises; which means they have not eaten tortoises and still do not eat tortoises despite these hard starving times. One who does not understand how the *fady* works would ask why they do not eat tortoises like the other Malagasy ethnic groups if they are really starving. Fady is both a religious and cultural law. All this to affirm that if one thing or action is declared *fady*, one who goes against it is sued by the community and, more than that, will be punished by the ancestors according to traditional belief. That is why Fady is taken as a serious concern in Malagasy context.

The adjustment of the ritual seemed then effective. Now that *devoly* (Eng. devil) becomes the taboo of Christian according to the rite of baptism, one who answered “Yes” to the question talked above is making a solemn and public vow, promising that she/he will forsake anything related to idolatry: the cult of ancestors first, and the consultation of Ombiasa in second. Even though this question remained untouched from that edition until today, its meaning has been developed because of the clause “all his works and all his forms”. Christian should consult priests or Church leaders every time they are uncertain of their decisions and actions in front of traditional practices. As doing the Asa Lakroa is considered by some as worshipping the dead, it becomes a Christian Fady. How to do things then when becoming Christian?

⁸⁵ Fiagonana Loterana Malagasy, *Ny Litorjia sy Ritoaly* (Antananarivo: TPFLM, 1973), 61. The edition of the Ritual in 1973 was the result of its correction done in Manakara 22-29 October 1970 during the 8th General Synod of the Malagasy Lutheran Church after one year of workshops starting from the Fort-Dauphin session, 6-10 June 1969. To say that the MLC cares about the edition of her practice seriously.

⁸⁶ <http://tv5.ca/tabous-et-interdits?e=z246f6eplsas3>, accessed 06 March 2016.

The book of liturgy plays here the role of a guardian; it is more apologetic than just practical. It cites which traditional practices Christian can keep and how to practice them and this draws clearly the difference between Christian practices and non-Christian practices. Practices that are not listed in are labelled non-Christian and therefore supposed to be forbidden, like the Asa Lakroa discussed here. Being added to the Sunday's service liturgy were some *Christianized* rituals, such the *Fandevenana* (Ritual for burial), *Fanaovana trano* (Ritual for house building), *Fanaovana fasana* (Ritual for tomb building) and so on in the book. In the last edition (2015), the *Asa sy Fampaherezana* (Eng. Exorcism and Spiritual strengthening) was also added,⁸⁷ to say that the church also is in her way of identity building and a contextualization of a practice is always validated by including it in the told book.

Once the dead is buried in Christian way, or precisely according to that Book of *Liturgy and Rituals*, there is no need to organize any event related to the dead, such the Asa lolo or the Asa Lakroa (in Vezo's context), or the Famadihana (in Vakinankaratra's context) which still reflect the subsistence of the worship dedicated to ancestors. While asked if Christian must not plant crosses on tombs because that practice is not listed in the book *Ny Litorzy sy ny Ritoaly*, Mahatsenga Flariot answered,

If Christians want to build a tombstone, they do not need to consult *Ombiasa* (Eng Diviner, Shaman), because it is against what Deut. 18:10-13 commands. Still, they can choose the date by themselves, and do it without ritual. The traditional ritual is a pure idolatry, and the family has to spend lots of money to organize the event⁸⁸.

Mahatsenga's point is that to leave a solid inscription on the tomb as just a reminder is not a problem and it is common, but what matters is the related ritual. A ritual always has certain meanings. As explained in the previous chapter, families formerly consult Ombiasa before organizing a Asa Lakroa, as Ombiasa are famous for their so called ability to mediate the dead and the living people. Not only people expect him to choose the date, but also to precise if there is anything special that the dead may need. Hence the prohibition is biblically based. In one side,

⁸⁷ Cf. Fianganana Loterana Malagasy, *Litorzy: Fombam-Pivavahana* (Antananarivo:TPFLM, 2015).

⁸⁸ Personal Interview with Mahatsenga Flariot, in Toliara on 15 July 2015. Original text "Laha te hanory Voliagnara Kristiana reo tsy raha mila mamonjy Ambiasa zao, raha fa raràn'ny Deotornomia 18:10-13 zao. Azondrozy atao ty mifily andro tsy misy fombafomba. Ka Fomban-draza rey la fanompoantsampy, ary be ny fianakavia lany jala amy ty hanaova azy".

there is the first commandment in the Decalogue (Exo. 20:3-6) and on the other side the condemnation of divination and fortune-telling in Deut. 18:10-13. But currently, it is more liturgically based instead, for the sake of identity. As Rakotonomenjanahary said (Chap.4, Footnote 29), if Christians continue such practice, differentiation would not be possible between Christian and non-Christian. Christians have now their own way to do things according to the book, like how to bury the deceased. Conversion is consequently defined as a shift of Fady and the liturgical book became the rules on rituals.

To sum up, it is not the tomb-cross planting that the Church wants to prohibit but rather its ritual and the event that comes with it. In Bevans words, it is “Counter-Cultural not anti-cultural”⁸⁹. According to this approach, Christians are not supposed to organize such event, and are encouraged to plant the tomb cross *quietly* if they want to do so. Priests and Christians holding this position does not attend the Asa Lakroa event although invited, which is not a shared attitude.

5.2 The Laissez-Faire Approach

Unlike the previous approach, this one allows Christian to organize Asa Lakroa events and attend them. The terminology Laissez-Faire is here borrowed because of its literal meaning (Let them do, let it be) which matches exactly with the attitude of its practitioners. They let Christian do Asa Lakroa and more or less participate during the event without having any problem with the practice. They may be divided in two groups: Nationalists and Donovanists. In this discussion, nationalism is that “kind of semantic space that expresses through its major discourses a variety projects, identities, interests and ideologies”, in other words precised Gerard Delanty, “forms of social practice”⁹⁰.

The first group sees the Asa Lakroa as a traditional cultural event. One of their representatives, Daddy Eugene, argues that Christian surely can keep this tradition, because

We are Fiangonana Loterana *Malagasy* (*Malagasy* Lutheran Church), not African, not American, not Norwegian, but Malagasy, which means we have to

⁸⁹ Stephen B. Bevans, 118-119.

⁹⁰ Gerard Delanty, “Persistence of Nationalism: Modernity and Discourses of the Nation,” in *Handbook of Historical Sociology*, ed. Gerard Delanty and Engin F. Isin (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2003), 292.

take care of our national identity. Sure I am a priest, but I am also Vezo from here (Manombo Atsimo). It is not because the Asa Lakroa is not in our *Litorjia sy Ritoaly* that we are going to commend Christian not to do it. Whatever, I have never forbidden it.⁹¹

The Asa Lakroa event is a great opportunity for families and lineages to meet, and also to support financially each other. As Christians do believe in God, they just have to remove all ritual that may smell idolatry and that is all. These are the two main arguments of this group. Daddy himself, he said, has organized a Asa Lakroa last November (2015) and it was during his own birthday, where he had the chance to meet his all grandchildren. The cross was for one member of his family who died few years ago. He shared that everybody was happy; children were playing all around, young were having fun and knew each other, he and his siblings could talk whole days.

Attending a Asa Lakroa organized by a priest or a church leader like this gives the attenders the advantage of knowing a model of it, a model that can be used as reference. This first group promotes indigenization principles and often ends up in a vague perspective of inculturation. That is why for its practitioners, the Asa Lakroa is a proof of double belongingness, a religious identity and a cultural one. Bimba, a Christian, said accordingly

The Cross is the symbol of Jesus Christ's resurrection. I really do not understand why the Jentilisa also do Asa Lakroa, because it is the mark of Christianity⁹².

This meant that the cross is not like any *Voliagnara*; it is not a simple design, but has extended values. Bimba's attitude assumes that not only the Asa Lakroa should not be prohibited, but it *belongs* to only Christians. In other words, it is claimed to be a Christian practice. Nationalists would be very satisfied if the Church records a ritual for the Asa Lakroa and includes it in the *Litorjia sy Ritoaly*. This apparently support the declaration of African

⁹¹ Video Interview with Daddy Eugene, in Manombo Atsimo on 28 June 2015. Original text: "Tsika koahe Fiangonana Loterana *Malagasy* fa tsy afrikana na amerikana, na norveziana fa Ma-La-Ga-Sy. Zany hoe mila henteantsika avao koa ty maha Malagasy antsika. Zaho pastora, fe zaho koa Vezo baketoa. Tsy hoe tsy anaty Litorjia sy ritoaly ao le Asa Lakroa ka hosakàna kristiana reo tsy hanao azy. Zaho aloha mbo tsy nanàka e!"

⁹² Video Interview with Bimba, in Toliara on 25 June 2015. Original text: "Le Lakroa aloha mariky ny fitsangàna Jesosy tamy maty!" Tsy haiku aloha mahàvy jentilisa reo manao koa io, nefa raha io mariky maha kristiana".

theologians during the Pan-African Conference of the Third World Theologians held in Accra (Ghana, 17-23 December 1977) that said

We believe that African theology must be understood in the context of African life and culture and the creative attempt of African people to shape a new future for themselves (...) Our task as theologians is to create a theology that arises from and is accountable to African people⁹³.

That is exactly the ideology of the nationalists. The second group nevertheless does not try to *enculturate* the Asa Lakroa like those nationalists. Nevertheless, its promoters allow fully Christian to organize the Asa Lakroa event, which they themselves understand as a social and cultural event. I am calling them Donovanists as they hold the same principle as Vincent J. Donovan. Those who are familiar with *The Anthropological Model of Contextual Theology* of Stephen B. Bevans surely know that the missiological perspective of this priest was considered by scholars as source of indigenization policy. Personally, I do not agree with those who say that this missiologist was an *Indigenizer* though. He surely invites the Church to *let believers free* to decide, but does not ask the Church to importing values or practice from local culture. There is an important nuance between letting people to do something and inciting people to do something. That is why I here prefer the term *Laissez-Faire* instead of *Indigenization or Inculturation or Anthropological model* which are tightly bound with Nationalism.

According to Donovan, “the task of the missionary is to present the gospel, and the task of the people who respond to it is to express that gospel and its meaning in their own language and within their own thought forms: The field of culture is theirs. Ours is the Gospel”.⁹⁴ This is exactly what this second group is claiming and doing. The Asa Lakroa is a social event like wedding or birthday. Whatever Vezo Christians are doing during these social events, these theologians and church leaders *let them do*. Supporting this perspective, Lars Armand said

They are Christians, they know what they are doing.
They are taught and still being taught. Everything
else is between them and God⁹⁵.

⁹³ Francis Anekwe Oborji, *Concepts of Mission: The Evolution of Contemporary Missiology* (New York: Orbis Book, 2006), 184.

⁹⁴ Stephen b. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology: Faith and Cultures* (New York: Orbis book, 2013), 65.

⁹⁵ Personal Interview with Lars Armand, in Manombo Atsimo, 21 July 2015.

This group does not give much care about what Christian may do or not do during the event and this is what I would qualify as a pure Laissez-Faire approach. As Lars Armand stressed, Vezo Christians have been taught. They know the Christian Creeds; they believe in resurrection and in everlasting life. They are taught that the dead are dead and would never have the ability to bless or to harm the living anymore. Once they know it, the mission is done. The rest is up to those persons, not to the preachers. This Donovanists' group is critical to the normative aspect of the prohibitive approach. We can hear from its members the echo of Matt 7:1 in their frequent question *Who are we to judge them?*

While non-Christian families organize the event and invite the Church, nationalists still participate actively following the tradition, but Donovanists restrain themselves during from taking part. During the waking parties, for instance, the former's performances are expected by the whole community; but the other group would even not pay a Kijory if it was possible. What they have in common is just their non-critical position to the Asa Lakroa, and their understanding of it as a cultural event.

5.3 The Opportunist Approach

It has been explained that both Vezo Christian and non-Christian practice the Asa Lakroa. For this group of theologians and church leaders, any social event is an opportunity to do mission since the church is invited. Practitioners of this approach are usually known as *Mpiantafika* (Eng. Warriors) or *Mpanarato* (Eng. Fishermen). Their motivation seems to be based on 2 Tim.4:2, "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (ESV); and they stress the clause "be ready in season and out of season" which was translated *at any time* in Malagasy bible (BPM), exactly in the way of the NRSV that reads "whether the time is favorable or unfavorable".

When the family that invites the Church is a non-Christian family, opportunists usually take advantage of this opportunity to evangelize. And this happens for all social events not only for Asa Lakroa. Therefore they are not prohibiting Christian to make Asa Lakroa as it gives them chance to make disciples those present at the event (if not Christian), and to strengthen believers' faith. During a debate, one of them argued against the Prohibitionist saying

If you read the Holy Scriptures, you will see that Jesus preached everywhere: On the shore, around the lake, in mountains, in public places, etc. Do you remember that He joined the wedding at Cana? That was a cultural event. And when He raised Lazarus from the dead, that also was a cultural event for crowds were still with Lazarus' family at that time. If we attend those events, we surely may not perform miracles, but we have to preach the Gospel, not to admire the event.⁹⁶

To forbid Christian to have Asa Lakroa event or to order them not to attend it does not make sense to them. They consider it as an act of exclusivism. If there are places where Christian must not go, the Gospel will never reach those places. The mission of the Church is to make all nations disciples of Jesus Christ, but how can the Church reach *all the nations* (pa,nta ta. e;qnh in the Great commission, Matt 28:19-20), if not going out from the so called Christian world to the non-Christian one. Meanwhile, they are criticizing also those who attend the events and do nothing during (Laissez-faire). The purpose in allowing Vezo Christian to make an event is for this group to make people know what the Gospel says about that event. Unlike those adopting Laissez-faire approach who are more or less staying passive, the opportunists are acting and are always in mission. There is no need to describe their eagerness to lead devotions before the waking parties of the Asa Lakroa, and their piety when performing during them. Most of the time, their plays (songs, poems, dances, etc) are about idolatry, making fun of it and its nothingness. Opportunists remind that it is not easy to reach the Jentilisa because they do not join the Church yet. When the Mpiantafika are evangelizing, they usually invite people to gather in certain places: at the market, under trees, or at any famous public place. But as Asa Lakroa is an event where Vezo people are gathering, they do not have to do so; what they have to do is to communicate the Gospel during the opening devotion and in their plays.

What differ this approach to the Laissez Faire is its missiological motivation. The Laissez Faire approach is engaged only because of social relationship for the sake of the community and

⁹⁶ Personal Interview with Limbiraza, in Toliara 16 July 2015. Original text: “Laha vakianao Soratsa Masina io ho hitanao fa Jesosy koa nitory mbetia mberoa. Tamoron-jiake, tamoron-jano ka, tan-tenjombohitsy ka, amy toera maro olo ka. Ie aza namonjy fanambalia ta Kana tany iny, tiaronao? Iny zao fomban-draza iny. Lafa nanànga an'I Lazarosy tamy maty koa ie, olo rey mbo teo iaby, mbo fombadraza avao koa natsehiny iny satsia olo rey mbo samby teo iaby nampahery ty fianakaviane. Ka tsika laha hamonjy fotoa hoy reny mety tsy hanao fahagagà, fa tsika mila mitory ny Filazantsara, fa tsy hoe manenty avao”.

Vezo people unity. If nationalists focus only on the promotion of the culture, and Donovanists enjoy and respect the cultural diversity, the opportunists strive actively in evangelizing in all circumstances. “If the mass of people are not especially religious, organized religion often seek public role as a result of the belief that society has taken wrong turn and needs an injection of religious values to put it back on the straight and narrow”⁹⁷, said Jeff Haynes, and that is what the opportunists intend to do.

5.4 Summary

The three approaches of the MLC are the respective results of those three concepts of the Asa Lakroa dealt with previously. The prohibition is inherited from missionaries, and this tradition is keeping the thought that the Asa Lakroa is idolatry. Missionaries were defending Christian identity by setting standards for believers to follow like recording new practices in the ritual and liturgical books. Whatever is outside these books are not Christian practice. The Laissez-Faire has risen generally from Vezo priests and Church leaders, who maintain that it is a cultural event not a religious one. Some nationalist partisans go further in aiming to elaborate a *Christian practice* of the Asa Lakroa in order to include it into the Christian ritual book. With them but not having the same aim are the donovanists, who just let believers to do it freely. The third approach is neither for nor against the Asa Lakroa event. Its promoters, who are mostly pious evangelists, take advantage of all contexts and circumstances to share the Gospel. They attend social events such Asa Lakroa, and try to convert people by condemning publicly idolatry and inviting them to have faith in Jesus.

⁹⁷ Jeff Haynes, *Religion in Global Politics* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 1998), 19.

Chapter 6

THE ASA LAKROA IN CONTEXT OF MISSION

The question *Should the MLC allow Vezo Christians to practice the Asa Lakroa?* has three answers as seen in the previous chapter: No (Prohibitive), Yes (Laissez-Faire), and Whatever (Opportunist). These three approaches will now be evaluated in reference with their impacts in social life and from the comparison will be deduced the appropriate one in today's context for the MLC.

6.1 Mission and Contextualization in the MLC's Context

It is well known that the Mission of the Church is formerly based on Jesus' message in Mat. 28:19-20, a verse that has been given different meaning by exegetes and scholars. Despite the variation of their conclusions, those last at least agree on the presence of two activities: to preach (to go) and to teach (to make disciple). So these are the two principal actions in Church's Mission. In giving the Great Commission, Jesus is inviting the Church to do Mission by describing clearly the aim of the Mission and what to do, but He did not precise where, when and how. Because of these "where when and how", we can talk about missions. If Mission is the *What*, Contextualization is its *how*; from this *how* are born missions.

How Malagasy theologians define contextualization may not be the same as it really means. The theological and technical Malagasy term for it is *Fampanaraham-bolontany* that means literally *The action of following the color of the soil*. This conception is rooted in a Malagasy philosophy of behavioral change *Mena tany mena trandraky* (Red soil, Red hedgehog); the color of the hedgehog depends on the *color of the soil* where it lives. So if the soil is brown, the hedgehog is being brown. *Mena tany mena trandraky* is a proverb that is usually used when changes are necessary or unavoidable. Applied in theology, this philosophy defines contextualization as inculturation. So to be careful I am talking of the Asa Lakroa in Context of Mission, not Contextualization of the Asa Lakroa that has this connotation of inculturation.

In his *Transforming Mission*, a survey of the mission theology, David J. Bosch explained how the Mission turned into missions from the time of the Apostles to the years of postmodernism, and said at the end "We know that our mission, like the church itself, belongs

only to this age, not to the next”⁹⁸. So the question to which the Church has to answer remains the same: What is it to be the Church in *this current* context? Once the answer is found, the corresponding mission is also defined.

In the LWF’s document *Mission in Context: Transformation Reconciliation Empowerment*, the Church is expected to act and do something in every context, “locally, regionally, and globally to advocate for the establishment of justice and peace and the eradication of poverty and killer diseases⁹⁹. Those are for instance missions of the Lutheran Church all around the world. As we are talking about the Asa Lakroa, a cultural event, we will focus only on the establishment of peace and eradication of poverty. Does the MLC reach these two goals through these approaches?

6.2 Evaluation of the MLC’s Approaches

As Stephen B. Bevan stressed, there is no good or bad contextualization, everything depends on contexts. He has presented each of the models of contextualization that has been performed with its strengths and weaknesses, which is the frame that I also am borrowing. In this evaluation, we will turn to four main factors for each approach: (a) Social Relationship, (b) Local Economy, (c) Cultural Identity, and (d) Church Identity.

6.2.1 The Exclusivist Prohibitive Approach

(a) This first approach is visibly a picture of exclusiveness. Not allowing believers to organize or attend Asa Lakroa events is breaking social relationship in some way. As detailed in 4.4.2, the union and the peace are based upon the *Filongoa* in Vezo community, and attending social events is part of the respect of it. Some people are joining Asa Lakroa event, or any social events, just because of the *filongoa*, otherwise they will not be considered as *longo*. And if believers are not attending the event, they are practically withdrawing themselves from the community, which means they are not *longo*, and being so, the community would not rely on them and will never expect any help from them. This approach has broken families and is still

⁹⁸ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shift in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis Book, 2007), 510

⁹⁹ <https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DMD-Mission-in-Context-EN-low.pdf>, accessed 30 March 2016.

breaking families instead of *Reconciliating* as prescribed in the LWF's vision. So socially speaking, this approach is a threat.

(b) However, it is economically beneficial for Christian. At least, they can save their money for something else instead of organizing an event for a Asa Lakroa during which they will have to provide food and drinks during those Aritory; expenses for them depend on how many people are going to the event. And as Aritory is always opened for the whole community, meaning that anybody can join, expenses are hard to guess in advance, but organizers always have to do estimation and be ready for any circumstance. Hopefully believers are set free from all these.

(c) The Asa Lakroa event and the voliagnara event are the same thing. Only the stele was replaced by a Cross but they are all gravestones and the ritual for them is still the same. As deducted in 5.1, Christian can make a tomb-cross but without the event. Forsaking the voliagnara event is also leaving cultural values and customs that come with it, such the filongoa already told above and the enga. So it affects Vezo's culture in a way that introduces individualism. In short, believers may do Asa Lakroa, but should not follow the voliagnara event that folds secular values and involve the whole community.

(d) The prohibitive approach is intended to be apologetic and it is so. Set a little apart from the society, believers can easily preserve their Christian identity, and there is less risk of values interexchange. It is always during social events that there are encounters of religion which permit such exchanges. Consequently, if there are fewer events, there are fewer encounters as well. In addition, as Christians do not follow any traditional ritual, there is also less risk of idolatry.

6.2.2 The Nationalist Laissez-Faire Approach

(a) This second approach makes the MLC a Peace keeper. As believers are free to attend and organize Asa Lakroa event, they are not feeling far or totally different from their fellows. Unlike in the case of the previous approach, there is no black (Jentilisa) and white (Kristiana) painting of the society. The Vezo are living in harmony and can enjoy fully the event. There will certainly encounters of religion, but the two sides (Christians and non-Christian) are both aware

of the importance of the filongoa and try to keep it safe. Social relationship is tightened and secured.

(b) As Christians are taking part in the filongoa, they have to follow the same ethic and customs of the ethnic group. In acting so, they have to make sure that everything is managed according to the ritual, such satisfying people during the event by providing food and drinks during the Aritory. And these are not the only major expenses, power, lights, sound systems during the event, the buffet after the collect of the enga, and other items also must be supplied. In case the total sum of the collected Enga cannot cover the whole expense, then the organizer has a lot to lose. One of Astuti's informants informed her that the only way to save the necessary sum for such event is "to set aside 1000, 500 or even 200 FMG from their daily earnings"¹⁰⁰. We do not have to be expert in economy to guess that it might be a constant source of poverty. Most of the time, analysts are talking about political crisis, bad leadership, lack of management skill, growth of population as main cause of the poverty of the Malagasy people, but maybe we could add culture also to that list. If a Vezo has to save such amount daily, how many percent of her/his daily income would it be? This is to say that organizing Asa Lakroa, like all Malagasy social events, is financially too demanding, knowing well that Madagascar is among the poorest country in the world.

(c) There is no best way to keep culture safe than allowing Christians to organize traditional social events. By keeping the Asa Lakroa untouched, its practitioners let Vezo people to express their cultural identity without the fear of being judged by the Church and Vezo Christian to express fully their pride of their cultural identity, which is a promotion of the Vezo culture. In this perspective, it is seen that the Church is really *among* the *world* not *out of* it. The denomination *Malagasy* Lutheran Church itself makes sense then.

(d) Although Nationalists and Donovanists are for the practice of the Asa Lakroa, they are not sharing the same target. Donovanits are open to culture and promote religious freedom for the whole community, while Nationalists want to Christianize the Vezo culture. Their intention to adopt a Christian *Practice* of the Asa Lakroa and record it into the book *Litorjia sy Ritoaly* seems not relevant. First, the Asa Lakroa is originally a cultural event, so should all cultural events be Christianized? If so, the nationalism of the church will certainly give more

¹⁰⁰ Rita Astuti, 128.

importance to the identity of the Nation instead of holding the preciousness of the identity of the Church. This is what the prohibitionists are afraid of because this approach may be a door to syncretism and/or idolatry. Difference of interpretations and values may even push the church to build a local systematic theology, which may not be shared. Secondly, the other Malagasy ethnic groups also are making Tomb-cross, and each has its own ritual. So why should Vezo's ritual be taken as reference? Until now, what is written in the *Litorjia sy Ritoaly* is applicable to all Malagasy people because these events are common and fit to each culture. The Vezo Asa Lakroa is a particular one, not common. Thirdly, if the Asa Lakroa is to be Christianized, what about the rest? This will surely incite the Merina to include also the Famadihana, and the Masikoro to put in the Savatse, and so forth; such movement would create strong disagreement and serious theological issues that may lead to the schism of the MLC instead of solving the problem concerning the Asa Lakroa.

In all, this approach is favorable to culture, but the way nationalists are overstepping may affect the unity of the MLC.

6.2.3 The Perplex Opportunist Approach

The Opportunist Approach is an in between position. It is eventually nor for neither against the Asa Lakroa event. It has the same (a) as the Laissez Faire, and shares in common (d) with the Prohibitive Approach.

(a) As the proverb says "silence gives consent". The defenders of this approach say nothing about the prohibition and/or promotion of the Asa Lakroa. Their silence surely means that both have less importance, but it infers also that Christians can attend and even organize the event. Their zeal in participating during the Aritory leads the community to conclude that they are not against the practice, which has the same implications as the Laissez Faire: Solidarity of families and peace in the community.

(b) The decision to keep or not the practice of the Asa Lakroa belongs totally to believers. This Opportunist Approach does not influence their choice in the beginning, but judgment is whispered later. There is consequently no much thing to emphasize concerning the matter of economy except what have already been said for the two previous approaches.

(c) (d) Of course, Christians are facing perplexity. Because of the existence of these two previous approaches, they are having difficulty to express their double identity. A Vezo will be considered as a reliable Christian by the prohibitionists when she/he forsakes the Asa Lakroa event. But while doing that, she/he surely will have in mind what the community would think about her/his faithfulness and loyalty toward the filongoa. And vice versa, if she/he keeps following that Vezo tradition, prohibitionists would wonder about her/his belongingness to the church. Usually, the decision of the believers depends on statistics. If Christians constitute only a minor group in the Vezo community, they are joining the Asa Lakroa and are even organizing it in the traditional way. But if the majority is Christian, they do not even attend it. In short, this approach solves the problem by giving back the problem to the members of the church.

What the opportunists are doing during the Asa Lakroa event is however describing a firm position of the Church. As said in 5.3, the mission that they have set is to *fish people*. Their plays, jokes, songs and poems are all apologetic for they always start from talking about the nothingness of idolatry to its condemnation in humoristic ways, and are ended with an invitation to faith in Jesus. This portrays so the exclusiveness of the Church but in a fair way. The community is still painted black and white, and Vezo Christians are left in confusion. It does not give a straight answer to Christian but instead leave them in perplexity.

6.3 Donovanist Anthropological Model as One Good Alternative

This entire problem is due to the lack of anthropological research and misunderstanding of Culture in the MLC. So if an appropriate solution is to be found, reconsidering deeply human context is needed. The reason why the Anthropological Model of contextual theology may solve the problem in a better way is that it “has the advantage of allowing men and women to see Christianity in a fresh light. Christianity is not automatically the importation of foreign ideas. Rather it is a perspective on how to live one’s life even more faithfully in terms of who one is cultural and historical subject. To be Christian, insists the anthropological model, is to be fully human”¹⁰¹. But yet, here must be displayed the difference between how the nationalists conceive their anthropological model, and how Donovanists manage theirs.

¹⁰¹ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 59-60.

6.3.1 Terminology

What I want to infer by Donovanist Anthropological Model is the combination of what Bevans call Anthropological Model and Vincent J. Donovan's theory that will be explained below. In his writing, Bevans cites two figures of the told model, Robert E. Hood (who surely supports the nationalist group) and Donovan. Hood has imported values from human contexts to his theology to the extent that he "allows other cultures as well as Greek culture to set the agenda for theology and doctrine"¹⁰². Such perspective leans the identity of the Church on cultures and may affect even the doctrinal foundations of the Church's teaching. It is not surprising if "instead of becoming Christians by submitting themselves to the worldview and doctrinal system of the Christian Church, African Americans appropriated them into their traditional religious systems"¹⁰³. So talking about contextualization within the MLC, those nationalists I am talking of in 6.2.2 are doing the same thing, striving to give a theological meaning of X although X is borrowed from the Malagasy *culture*. But my point, in order to preserve the Identity of the Church (and Christian dogmatic), is: Let Culture be Culture, and Religion be Religion. That is why I opt for Donovan's tendency.

I am not trying to surpass Philip Jenkins or Paul Hiebert in defining what culture is, but if I am asked to make the difference between culture and religion, I would say simply that culture is a human-human relationship, while religion is a human-nonhuman relationship. Thus, their difference is constituted by belief. Culture is the answer of the question *what are they doing?* and Religion is the answer of *What are they believing in doing it?*

Mathematically, if for some

$$\text{Culture} = \text{Practice} + \text{Belief}$$

I instead maintain that

$$\text{Culture} = \text{Practice}$$

$$\text{Religion} = \text{Belief}$$

In the case of the Asa Lakroa, it is possible to practice it without believing in anything, thus the event is cultural. It is religious in the contrary case. The way a cultural practice is

¹⁰² Stephen B. Bevans, 63.

¹⁰³ Stephen B. Bevans, 62.

performed describes first the cultural identity of its performer, not necessarily their religion. They may do the same thing, but they may not have the same belief.

Now that those terms are clarified, let us move to the description of Donovanism.

6.3.2 Donovanism and Its Perspective in Mission

First of all, Donovanism here is not touching how Vincent J. Donovan brought the Gospel to the non-Christian Masai of Tanzania. It instead has to do with what happened next when those people were converted, for our main issue here concerns those Vezo already Christian. In order to not bring all his whole life experience in this theory, let us define the principle that makes an approach Donovanist.

As already affirmed before, Donovan adopted an Anthropological Model of contextual theology in which Mission is to proclaim the Gospel not to *own* those who receive the Gospel. The root of his theology may be summed up in his affirmation “The way they (those having received the Gospel) express their faith is completely their concern”¹⁰⁴, which is exactly the principle of what I call Donovanism. Concerning the MLC, she has a tendency to suppress that notion of Donovan, and that is the pillar of her prohibitive attitude toward cultures. But how can she control or master her members’ belief? To believe in Jesus Christ itself is not done by human effort but rather is a divine action (Matt 16:16-17). So, back to Donovan, the Mission of the Church is to share continuously the Gospel; conversion is fully the work of the Holy Spirit, not the result of human attempts, and expression of Christianity is a personal and individual matter.

Donovanism takes care both of the national identity of the people and their Christian identity. In other words, it is an open approach, an approach in which we are invited to stop judging other cultures by the standards of our own.

6.3.3 An Open and Peace Keeping Approach

Most of the MLC’s Theologians are keeping this Prohibitive Approach inherited from foreign missionaries in the field of culture because it just became the tradition, while the Revival Movement is also supporting them by displaying its critical view on all *Old cultural traditions*. I

¹⁰⁴ Stephen B. Bevans, 66.

am not here saying that what missionaries did was bad. Surely, they did the right thing at that time, in their context. But the Translation and Counter Cultural Models they applied in the field of contextualization are not today relevant. Accordingly, keeping their way as heritage would keep reviving the black and white painting of the society, which is not really what the Church is called for in today's context.

Thus, first, an open approach is needed for “we cannot possibly dialogue with or witness to people if we resent their presence or the views they hold” said David J. Bosch.¹⁰⁵ This puts in evidence the irrelevance of exclusivism of the church and by the same time rejects the automatic prohibition of cultural events that the MLC usually recommends. By doing so, the MLC herself is losing her Malagasy identity. What should be done instead is to understand what is cultural and what is religious in order to find a field for interreligious dialogue. The lack of understanding and consideration of the role that culture plays in communities mislead the church to mix up culture and religion. It is not surprising that the MLC defines conversion as a shift of Fady, during which the converted forsook her/his culture with her/his traditional religion.

Second, Church however does not have to build her own cultural identity for believers already have theirs. Importing cultural practices and Christianizing them as seen in the development of the *Litorzy sy Ritoaly* is therefore irrelevant. Church does not have to always adapt a new ritual corresponding to a local ritual. If missionaries had started doing so in 1878, it was for the simple reason that they planned to have a common liturgical book. And again, it should be reminded here that NMS is a society, not a church; which means missionaries were from different denominations. Agreements on liturgy and practices were indisputably required. But now, in today's context, the MLC is already a great institution and has her identity, there is no need to add more rituals to prove that it is really *Malagasy*. Some nationalist colleagues are not at ease with my frequent question “How should a Malagasy Lutheran person eat rice?” Creating new practices is building new social borders; theologians that are doing it always end in isolating the church from the society, instead of accepting to be part of it. In today's contexts,

“The role of the trained theologian is not that expert who tells people the best way to express their faith. Rather her or his role is that of reflector and thematizer, the one who is able to provide the

¹⁰⁵ David J. Bosch, 483.

biblical and traditional background that will enable the people to develop their own theology”¹⁰⁶.

“People, said Paul G. Hiebert, express their deepest beliefs, feelings and values in rituals.¹⁰⁷ In brief, if Christians affirm their Christian identity through their cultures, it is theirs. If Vezo Christians want to express their Christianity through the Asa Lakroa by giving the Cross other meanings, it’s theirs, but not the church’s. As said above, such expression is individual and personal.

I would like to underline however that to be open to Vezo culture does not mean to import the Asa Lakroa event into the Church as nationalists may aim. Culture is culture and it has to remain so. By the way, cultures themselves would anyway evolve under circumstances without necessarily the intervention of the church. “Serious historical studies of the missionary period invite theologians (and here I add church leaders) to pass from critical attitudes to informed, constructive attitudes that see the shortcomings of the missionary era in context”¹⁰⁸, concluded Francis Anekwe Oborji after having presented the different concepts of Mission from the period of Vatican II to today’s context. This is what I define as the inside openness of the Church.

6.3.4 An Approach with a Lutheran Perspective

The alternative that I am proposing is also based on the re-understanding of the Great Commission and the LWF’s motto *Transformation-Reconciliation-Empowerment* for today’s context. When Jesus called the Church to make *ta. e;qnh* (Eng. The nations) His disciples, it should be understood that one nation which was *made His disciple* is still a nation. In other words, Vezo people can become Christian and at the same time conserve their culture. “When a people or a culture accepts the truth evangelization and commits itself to the Christian God through baptism, Donovan says that the way that they express their faith is completely their concern”.¹⁰⁹ Since Vezo believers take the Asa Lakroa as a cultural event, the MLC should not forbid it anymore. By allowing it at the other hand, the MLC stands as a peace keeper and succeed in the reconciliation perspective, as its prohibition has broken social relationship and is

¹⁰⁶ Stephen B. Bevens, 58.

¹⁰⁷ Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids. Baker Academic, 2009), 156.

¹⁰⁸ Francis Anekwe Oborji, 205.

¹⁰⁹ Stephen B. Bevens, 66.

still doing so. In fact, those Vezo believers are the well positioned, not theologians and priests from other ethnic groups, to produce a model of a Christian Asa Lakroa event, from which the whole Vezo society may learn. That will certainly satisfy those who are looking for a common and uniform ritual/practice of the event.

The MLC is not only supposed to allow it, but also to respect believers' choice. In fact, the zeal of the MLC to defend the Identity of the Church leads her to forget that Christians are first of all free human beings living within certain community, sharing some common values and ethics, and those are what the anthropological model would remind. Believers that practice the Asa Lakroa should have peaceful mind and conscience, not to bear the unspoken judgment from the church. In the matter of evangelization, the mission of the church is, affirms Donovan, "to present the Gospel; the rest is up to the people hearing the message. They can reject it, and that is that; but if they accept it, *how* they accept it is up to them".¹¹⁰ If non-Christians are practicing the Asa Lakroa, they may have their own convictions and that is theirs, but as Lars Armand confirmed, "Vezo Christians know what they are doing". Therefore, the church has to be careful for It is not because they follow the same practice and ritual as the non-christians that they automatically hold the same thought and belief with them. And this is what I am qualifying as outside openness.

The freedom of the Vezo to organize their Asa Lakroa permits them to adjust the ritual in their own, like reducing the number of aritory or fixing the enga. In this case, expenses are well managed. This reminds us what Mahatsenga concluded about the ritual (Cf.5.1). Christians, he said, may do it "quietly". Taken literally, "quietly" means without extra power and system sounds. It demonstrates that the decision about the budget for a Asa Lakroa depends fully on the Christian organizer possibility, not to the traditional ritual which is too demanding. This last itself has already passed from one week of event to only two days and a half without the intervention of the church. In future, who knows, it may last only 24 hours: starting at 5 p.m of day 1 for instance, one Aritory, planting the cross in the morning of day 2, Enga paying after lunch until 5 p.m of day 2, and that is all. And if a Vezo Christian has lots of money to spend for an event, it is quite her/his concern not the church's. There is no reason to think that the amount is *spent for the dead* at all, since the Asa Lakroa is just a cultural event, not idolatry.

¹¹⁰ Stephen B. Bevans, 67

6.3.5 Donovanism in Formula

This approach understands Culture as self-expression of each ethnic group and gives importance to the roles that it plays in societies, but also revives the identity of the Church by sharing and reminding the Christian creed. Let us see how it is applied for instance to the Asa Lakroa Vezo.

The Asa Lakroa event is an expression of identity and belongingness for the Vezo. That is why both Christians and non-Christians are doing it. So when the Vezo Christians are practicing it, it should be seen as their expression of their ethnicity (and here we talk about Asa Lakroa as a cultural event). By doing that, they confirm their belongingness to the ethnic group and confirm their will to preserve peace and to make it last in the community where they are. Such expression of cultural identity is not against the Gospel. No matter where one is from or what ethnicity she/he belongs to once she/is a Christian, for in Christ, People of God are only one people. They might be Greek, or Jews, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian or whatever, but they are still God's people (Gal 3.28; Col 3.11). Culture regulates the human-human relationship in each group and that is what the Vezo people are experiencing during the Asa Lakroa event; it makes them who they are. "We need to appreciate other cultures and their ways. But feelings of superiority and our negative attitudes toward strange customs run deep and are not easily rooted out" noticed Paul Hiebert¹¹¹.

The Asa Lakroa however should never be a response to the dead's request. Of course, the Vezo Christians are already aware of that. The church is then just invited to remind and remind the doctrinal basis of Christian teaching: the Creed. If those Christians give a Christian meaning of the cross, as Donovan would say, "that is theirs". Believers are free to express their Christianity through their culture. They may adopt many rituals, that is theirs; they may add or remove some Aritory, that is theirs, they may do it *quietly*, that is theirs. This approach gives them the opportunity to organize the event in their own, which relatively helps them to manage financial matters in balancing expenses. That is why, institutionalizing the event (nationalist tendency) is also limiting their freedom; it may even be like just removing the traditional yoke and putting again a new one, a Christian one. The church should pay attention to the dilemma

¹¹¹ Paul Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, 196.

that those who do not practice the Asa Lakroa would face, in case it is recorded to the *Litorjia sy Ritoaly* as wished by some.

In short, here are the steps in this approach

- a. Drawing clear difference between cultural and religious in the ritual
- b. Removing all religious act that are opposite to Christian faith
- c. Allowing the ethnic groups to do the ritual according to their culture
- d. Reminding the Doctrinal bases of Christian faith
- e. Not trying to create a standard ritual for all members of the church

Talking about Asa Lakroa Vezo for example, we have these following sets of responses:

- a. Consulting *Ombiasa* is a religious act, as he is seen as mediator between the living and the dead. *Ambara*, *Enga* and *Aritory* are cultural for they are concrete expression of human-human relationship.
- b. Consulting *Ombiasa* is then to be removed (as well as all instructions from the dead) while *Ambara*, *Enga* and *Aritory* are kept.
- c. The cultural event consist in informing and inviting people (*Ambara*), supporting each other mutually (*Enga*), and having fun together during waking parties (*Aritory*).
- d. During the event, church may remind that *dead are dead* and that fear of ancestors is consequently not relevant.
- e. Church is invited to enjoy cultural diversity in the light of Acts 17:26, which infers that nations (and I add ethnic groups) have their identities and have been given each a land to dwell, but they are all God's work. This leads to say: let Vezo culture remain theirs and enjoy the diversity of Malagasy cultures.

This approach may solve the problem that leaders of the church are facing in local cultural contexts, like the *Famadihana* of the Merina or *Savatse* of the Masikoro, etc. Both the identity of the ethnic groups and of the Church may be preserved, which was not seen in the other approaches.

Here below is thus a simple comparison of the four approaches:

Approaches	Prohibitive	Nationalist	Opportunist	Donovanist
(a) Social Relationship	Brings troubles	Brings peace	Brings peace	Brings Peace
(b) Financial matter	Not demanding	Too demanding	Not demanding	Not demanding
(c) Culture	Critical	Non-Critical	Fair	Non-Critical
(d) Church's Attitude	Exclusive	Inclusive	Exclusive	Inclusive
LWF's Goals Reached:				
Peace Establishment	Failure	Success	Failure	Success
Poverty Reduction	Success	Failure	Failure	Success

The outside openness presented in this Donovanist anthropological approach is inviting the Church to rediscover the meaning of *nations* (Mlg. Jentilisa) as neighbors. The time of black and white painting of the society should be over, and as the LWF stresses, the Church is to be a peacemaker who will show the model of how to *Live together as one*, exactly as reminded by Tulo Raistrick, "The local church is called to be a caring, inclusive and distinctive community of reconciliation reaching out in love to the world".¹¹²

All in all, if the MLC wants to establish peace in the Vezo Community, she just has to be really The Malagasy Lutheran Church in witnessing these three identities through the Donovanist Anthropological approach: (a) Her Malagasy identity should be shown by her openness to Malagasy culture with inclusive missiological perspective facing the Malagasy cultural context that might be encountered in each ethnic groups. (b) As for her Lutheran Identity in term of missions, fulfilling her missions according to the LWF's goals -*Establishing peace and reducing poverty*- will undoubtedly confirm her belongingness to that very Federation. (c) Finally, by avoiding carefully the nationalist tendency, she lets the door open to both the Church of which she herself is a part, and the World where diversities are in range. Nationalism today seems to be equal to anti-globalization attitude or anti-western approach and it affects local theologies. A

¹¹² Brian Woolnough and Wonsuk Ma ed., *Holistic Mission God's Plan for God's People* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 138.

warning bell was rang by Oborji when he noticed that “In nearly all theological works emanating in the Third World, traditional Western theologies are attacked, at least indirectly”.¹¹³ As for me, the first contextual mission of the MLC is to become who she is, the genuine Malagasy Lutheran Church, that means open to Malagasy, open to the Lutheran, and being God’s people among the others in humility, without claiming to possess all truth and righteousness.

¹¹³ Francis Anekwe Oborji, 203.

Chapter 7

CONCLUSION

This essay is certainly among those that describe the challenges of the Church in standing between the Gospel and Cultures in local contexts. It described the three Malagasy Lutheran Church's approaches toward the Asa Lakroa Vezo. If the Vezo do not constitute a genuine ethnic group, then the approach that I am proposing is not relevant. That is why it has been needed to prove that they truly do so in chapter 3. They have their dialect, their homeland, and their culture. So their identity fits to the definition of ethnicity. In addition, their saying "if you are not Vezo (*Us*), then you are Masikoro (*Others*) meets relatively the requirement set by the anthropologist Thomas Hylland Ericksen to define an ethnic group; what differ them from the *Others* are already detailed by Rita Astuti in the *People of the Sea*.

Most of the Malagasy people are planting crosses on tombs, but Vezo have their own practice and their own ritual as discussed in chapter four. Any cultural event is part of the identity of the ethnic group that owns it. In our case, that is why the discussion is about the Asa Lakroa Vezo, not Asa Lakroa Masikoro, or Asa Lakroa Fisakana, or Asa Lakroa Sakalava. As seen in that chapter, it is the result of the combination of a Vezo traditional ritual (Voliagnara) and a missionaries' practice (Cross-designed gravestone), which explains why both Christians and non-Christians are doing it. Later, the cross itself has been given different meanings. The event itself is kept between religion and culture. Facing this, the Malagasy Lutheran Church is not able to decide if Vezo Christian should be allowed to practice it. Thus we have those three different approaches in chapter 5. Prohibitionists has a categorical "No" to that question, it is not to be allowed. The main reason is that it is perceived as idolatry. The Laissez-Faire Approach practitioners however argue against this position and claim that it is just a cultural event (not a religious one) to infer that it is not idolatry. Some, pushed by nationalism, even aim to integrate its practice into the MLC's practice. Finally, The in between group is trying to draw clearly the difference between Christian and Jentilisa in waiting for an agreed alternative.

Such situation is experienced in all Malagasy cultural rituals. It might be strange for Christians that what the previous pastor has forbidden is allowed by the next coming one; all this just because the MLC does not have a common approach. Here may come the contribution of this writing. The evaluation of these approaches in chapter 6 has shown that the MLC's attempt

to defend her denominational identity in a whole failed; she through these approaches defends it in partial, depending on the situation. Either she affirms to be only the Church, or she emphasizes only her national identity.

The donovanist approach that I am promoting does more than that. As it is open in both local and global context -I mean open to the limited area, and open to the worldwide Church's network- it may help the MLC to be really Malagasy Lutheran Church. In applying this approach to the Asa Lakroa for instance, as seen in chapter 6, it was demonstrated that the MLC was able to present herself as Malagasy (Being open to Malagasy Culture), Lutheran (Fulfilling the goals set by the LWF) and the Church (Being the People of God on Earth). Theologians are now invited to separate what is cultural from what is religious in Malagasy rituals. This Asa Lakroa event is only one of those traditions that compromise the identity of the MLC, but this proposed approach is at least applicable to the rest of Malagasy ethnic groups' cultural customs, a new way of looking at **ta. e;qnh** of the Great Commission.

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APPENDICES

A. Interview Guide:

A1. Field 1

- A. What is “Asa Lakroa”?
- B. Could you describe the ritual and the meaning of each step?
- C. What is the meaning of that “Cross”?
- D. Do you agree with its practice? Why?
- E. What can you say about the position of the Church?

A2. Field 2

- A. What is “Asa Lakroa”?
- B. Could you describe the ritual and the meaning of each step?
- C. What is the meaning of that “Cross”?

B. Data Used from Fieldwork

B1 Fieldnotes

Footnote	Interviewee	Location	Date
65	Urbain Laporododo	Salary Avaratra	25 July 2015
70, 71	Rakotonomenjanahary	Manombo Atsimo	26 July 2015
73	Tsiambena	Salary Avaratra	25 July 2015
82, 83, 88	Mahatsenga Flariot	Toliara	15 July 2015
95	Lars Armand	Manombo Atsimo	21 July 2015
95	Limbiraza	Toliara	16 July 2015

B2 Video Interviews

Footnote	Interviewee	Location	Date	Length
44, 63, 91	Daddy Eugene	Manombo Atsimo	28 July 2015.	12min 54sec
62, 72, 79	Dadibare	Toliara	27 June 2015	22min 24sec
92	Bimba	Toliara	25 June 2015	13min 39sec

GLOSSARY

Akàta: Grass. Traditionally, Vezo notion of Grass embraces all kinds of herbs and leaves; that is why they did/do not eat them (Cf. Footnote 20). But today, some start enjoying spinach and leaves of cassava.

Ambàra: Literally means *information*, something to be announced and made known. If the verb *manambàra* means generally to inform in Malagasy language, it denotes an invitation in cultural communication. Thus, *manambàra* becomes in fact to invite (not to inform), and *nanambarà* means invited (not informed). Receiving or not *Ambara* tells a lot about social relationship.

Aondry: Sheep (*Ovis Aries*); Mlg Ondry.

Aritory: Wake, waking party.

Asa: Work.

Atoanjo: Daylight journey.

Bekafaitse: Name of the graveyard of Salary Avaratra that means full (be) of bitterness (*faitse*). It is located 2km north from the village.

Devoly: The Evil.

Enga: A Present from a family to a family that confirms their union. It may be an amount of money, or animals, or drinks; a thing that those families have to give mutually during cultural events from the time they are bound in relationship. Each family has its Book of Enga on which are recorded all donations and gifts from the others. When those others are organizing an event in their turn, it is time to pay all these back with some added values.

Faly: Taboo; Mlg. Fady.

Fanompoan-tsampy: Idolatry. From Mlg. *Manompo*, to serve and *Sampy*, Idol.

Fetin'ny maty: Feast (Fety) of the Dead (Ny maty), refers generally to the Saints' Day.

Fifohazana: Awakeness. Name given to the Christian Revival Movement, especially in Protestant churches.

Fiherena: Name of a river in Toliara.

Fihisà: Games, party, performance in social event.

Filongoa: Relativeness, familial relationship; Peace (See Longo).

Hariva: Dusk.

Jentilisa: Gentiles. Malagasy concept of Gentiles is rooted in the biblical translation of the term.

It points out whoever is not member of the Christian churches.

Lakroa: Cross, from French La Croix.

Lolo: (1) Butterfly. (2): Ghost. (3) Cemetery. The third meaning is used in this discussion. Lolo

Kristiana means Christians cemetery, or Christians' tombs.

Longo: A member of the family; a member of the lineage (seen clearly at the genealogical map); a person that behaves like a family member on whom the family can rely. More precious than a *nàma*.

Mahafaly: An ethnic group living in the southern part of Madagascar.

Makoa: A clan of Sakalava living in the forest in the south west of Madagascar.

Mangotinàna: Dawn.

Marainjay: Morning.

Masikoro: A clan of Sakalava living in the south west of Madagascar but inland.

Matahotsy: To be afraid of. Mlg. Matahotra.

Miaritory: To stay awake; to join a waking party.

Mihina: To eat. Mlg. Mihinana.

Mipetsaky: To sit; to dwell.

Mitolo: To struggle with; to disrupt. Mlg. Mitolona

Mive: To paddle. Mlg. Mivoy

Mpanarato: Fishermen (men and women included) using exclusively *Harato* (Nets) while fishing. In contrast with *Mpaminta* who are using *Vinta* (Hooks).

Nàma: Friend, acquaintance, mates.

Ombiasa: Diviner. Parsed etymologically - Ona (person), be (many, full) hasy (holiness) - it is the title given to a person that may have the ability to mediate the living people and the dead. The term is usually translated according to the functions of the person. Some translate it *Priest* or *Cultural Priest* (as he is responsible for sacrifices and spiritual rites); some chose *Traditional Healer* (as often he prescribes and prepare natural medicines); some prefer *Astrologist* (as he tells people which days are good and which are bad).

Rano: Water. But in Vezo context, like in *Mitolo rano*, it refers instead to the sea. If one asked, *Aia Vorona?* (Where is Vorona) and that the answer is *Vorona fa anjano* (Vorona is in/at the water), it means Vorona is already on the sea.

Sakalava: An ethnic group living in the west coast of Madagascar.

Sampy: Idol.

Savatse: A cultural event celebrated by some Malagasy ethnic groups during which boys are being circumcised.

Tanà: Village; Mlg. Tanàna

Tandroy: An ethnic group living in the extreme south of Madagascar. Mlg. Antandroy.

Tanindràza: Land (Tany) of the Ancestors (Ràza). Mlg. Tanindrazana.

Tsofotsanjo: Sunset.

Vakianjo: Sunrise.

Vezo: An ethnic group living in the south west region of Madagascar.

Vintanangisy: Calmar hook (VD. Vinta, hook; Angisy, Calmar).

Voliagnara: A monument on which are engraved the name, date of birth and date of death of a dead person. It may be made with wood or stone.