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BOŻENA MUSZKALSKA
University of Wrocław, Institute of Musicology
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0143-5669

# *Musical Expression of the Malagasy in Contemporary Christian Churches in Madagascar: Between Tradition and Inculturation*

ABSTRACT: The article discusses the process of formation and transformation of musical expression in Christian communities in Madagascar from the first attempts at evangelization in the 16th century to the present day. This phenomenon is presented in a broad historical and cultural context, taking into account the role of music as a tool for evangelization, a medium for sustaining cultural identity, and a space for religious and artistic syncretism. The evolution of Catholic and Protestant missionary strategies, the origins of the *zafindraony* genre, the significance of traditional *hira gasy* performances, and the impact of liturgical reforms initiated after the Second Vatican Council are discussed. It is emphasized that Christian music in Madagascar is a dynamic synthesis of elements of local and European culture, serving as an example of inculturation and adaptation of Christianity to the realities of postcolonial society.

KEYWORDS: Madagascar, Christian music, inculturation, religious syncretism, *zafindraony*, Catholic and Protestant missions

## Introduction

Madagascar, as a country and the largest island in Africa, is distinguished by its rich cultural and musical heritage. The encounter between European and local cultures gave rise to specific forms of religious expression, in which music played both a communicative and integrative role. Christianity, which arrived in Madagascar in the 16th century, was subject to processes of adaptation to local social, political, and cultural conditions from the very beginning. Singing and

dancing, present in the secular sphere, accompanied and continue to accompany religious rituals in Christian churches, as does the playing of instruments such as the *valiha* (a bamboo zither, shown in picture 2)[1] and traditional drums, which are a vehicle for historical memory and cultural identity. Incorporating elements of local musical traditions into liturgical practice was as important in religious mission strategies as educational activities, and was even one of the main aspects of the missionaries' "civilization" program (Mesple, 1995, p. 224; McGuire, 2012, p. 79). In recent decades, under the influence of the theology of inculturation proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council, which means the process of rooting the Gospel in different cultures using native elements, these practices have undergone further transformations (*International Theological Commission*, 1988, art. 119; John Paul II, 1995).

The aim of this article is to present the evolution of Christian music in Madagascar, taking into account the historical strategies of missionaries, processes of inculturation, the emergence of the *zafindraony* genre, and contemporary forms of musical expression in Catholic and Protestant churches.The analysis is based on historical sources, musicological, ethnological and missiological literature, ethnological and missiological literature, Catholic Church documents, as well as on the author's own observations and data from interviews conducted by the author and other members of an ethnomusicological expedition to Madagascar from the University of Wrocław and the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, which took place in July 2024.

We would like to express our special thanks to Father Mariusz Kasperski from the Oblate congregation, who gave us an extensive interview on the functioning of the parish community in Toamasina and enabled us to participate in a liturgy with rich musical accompaniment, as well as to meet with members of the choir (photo 1). This experience allowed us to directly observe how music, singing, and dancing contribute to communal prayer and how deeply rooted local sound aesthetics are in it. As people from Poland, a country with a long Catholic tradition, we were amazed to see how intensely the Malagasy people express their faith through singing, playing instruments, and dancing. Their expressiveness shows how music becomes not only a form of prayer, but also a space for building community and a vehicle for cultural identity. Thanks are also due to Dr. August Schmidhofer from the University of Vienna, without whose help in organizational and substantive matters the expedition would not have been possible.

[1] *Valiha* has strong aristocratic, ritual, and symbolic connotations; in the 19th and 20th centuries, it became the emblem of the "national" instrument of the Malagasy people (Adams, 2018, p. 142). Its presence in church practices was sometimes negotiated (sometimes supplanted by European instruments, sometimes restored as part of inculturation), reflecting the dispute over the boundaries of the sacred in music.

**Figure 1**
*Choir singing during Mass in Toamasina.*
Note. Photo by Łukasz Smoluch.

## Historical background

The first contacts of the Malagasy with Christianity were incidental. The Portuguese landed on the island in the early 16th century as part of Diogo Diaz's expedition, treating Madagascar as a stopover on their way to India. Although there were priests on board, attempts to introduce Christianity ended in failure. In the 17th century, the Lazarists, sent by St. Vincent de Paul, also failed to have a significant impact on local communities. In the 18th century, the island suffered from attacks by European pirates and slave traders. The French had already attempted to establish a colony, but with the outbreak of the French Revolution, interest in the area waned. Missionary activity was therefore limited, and the Malagasy themselves were more concerned with trading weapons and slaves and fighting for survival than with spiritual matters (Radke, 1999).

The beginning of the 19th century saw a breakthrough in evangelization. In 1835, the translation of the Bible into Malagasy was completed, which enabled Christian content to be more effectively introduced into the local cultural context (Radke, 1999). In the second half of the 19th century, missionary activity intensified thanks to Protestant missionaries associated with the London Missionary Society, Quakers from England, Lutherans from the US, and French Jesuits. Protestantism was supported by the British, while Catholicism was supported by the French. Already at that time, music became a fundamental tool for spreading the faith, both because of its emotional impact and its ability to build bridges between European and Malagasy cultures.

## Music as a tool for evangelization

Missionaries quickly discovered that singing was the most effective means of communicating Christian ideas. It not only allowed them to express their faith, but also to build an emotional bond with those attending church services. Protestant clergy were guided by the words of Martin Luther: "I am not ashamed to confess openly that, apart from theology, there is no art that can be placed alongside music..." (Luther, 1530/1930, p. 639)[2] and "After theology, I give music the most important place and the greatest honor" (Luther, 1532/1991, p. 265).[3] Luther believed that music, both vocal and instrumental, evokes genuine, deep, and personal emotions. William Ellis (1794–1872), a British missionary who conducted missionary work in Madagascar on behalf of the London Missionary Society and documented life on the island, wrote:

> Few Malagasy voices can be considered good or musical. Those of the men are generally powerful, but harsh, and sometimes strongly nasal ... The voices of the females, though better adapted for singing than those of the men, are for the most part deficient in sweetness and melody. There is indeed a softness in some of them which pleases, and might be made to charm, if well cultivated, and regulated according to scientific rules. They are most effective in chorus... [...] Singing may be heard in most houses in the evening, when music is most congenial to the feelings; and when it is moonlight the villagers often assemble, and pass a few hours in the amusements of singing, dancing, and clapping their hands, accompanied by whatever musical instruments the village can produce (Ellis, 1838, pp. 273–275).

The first missionaries were unfamiliar with the realities of the country. They were convinced of the universal nature of the religious rituals that were performed in their countries of origin. This resulted in the imposition of European models on the Malagasy people. Initially, Protestant and Catholic missionaries wanted above all to secularize local ancestor worship sites in order to give greater importance to Christian religious services. Ultimately, they intended to replace ancestor worship with the worship of the Christian God. To this end, attempts were made to secularize elements of the cult, removing them from their original context and transferring them to a foreign environment. An example of this is the use of the *valiha* zither, considered an object of supernatural power, as an instrument symbolizing the aristocracy, which was to provide entertainment at court and accompany poetry. The external appearance of the *valiha* was modified accordingly: it was decorated with velvet, ivory, and precious wood, and an image of an eagle, the symbol of the seven noble castes and two bourgeois castes of the Merina, the largest ethnic group in Madagascar, was placed on it. Traditional rituals were replaced by secular events, such as singing and dancing competitions, which were very popular among the local population and became a good opportunity to spread Christian ideas (Rakotomala, 2003, p. 136).

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[2] „Ich schäme mich nicht, offen zu bekennen, dass es nach der Theologie keine Kunst gibt, welche der Musik an die Seite gestellt werden kann ..."

[3] „Ich gebe nach der Theologie der Musik die nächste Stelle und die höchste Ehre."

It was not until the second half of the 19th century, parallel to the intensification of strict Protestant trends in Europe, that the strategies of competing missionary communities began to diverge more clearly. Missionaries from Protestant traditions associated with the London Missionary Society emphasized the need to eliminate all cultural and aesthetic elements that, in their opinion, could hinder the transmission of doctrinal principles. In practice, this meant that English missionaries rejected all manifestations of ethnicity during evangelization. They eliminated local cultural elements in order to achieve dogmatic purity. Their hymns with Malagasy lyrics were simpler, based on popular English melodies. French clergy, on the other hand, showed greater flexibility, replacing banned national instruments with harmoniums and additionally including popular Malagasy melodies in their religious repertoire (Rakotomalala, 2003, p. 137).

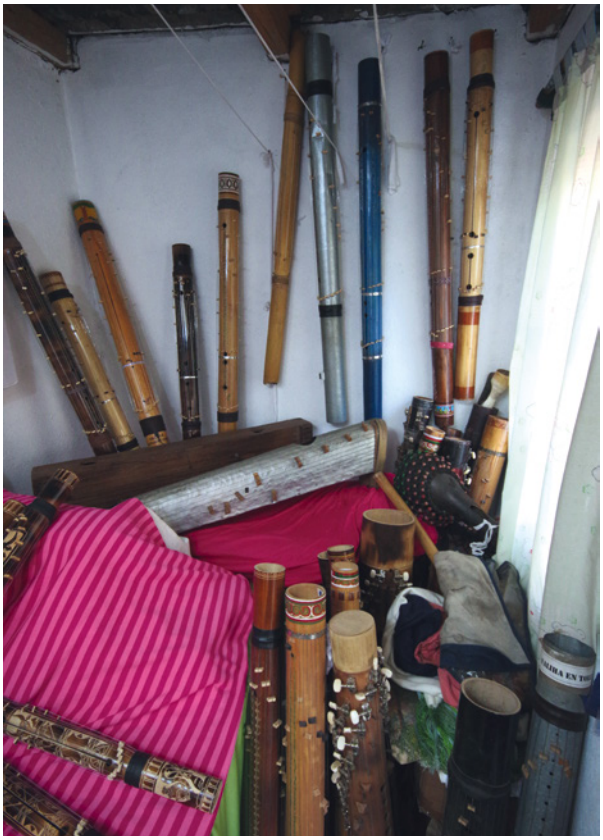

**Figure 2**
*Valiha citterns in the workshop of craftsman Ranaivovololona Ratovonirina in Antananarivo.*
Note. Photo by Łukasz Smoluch.

Protestant missionaries found allies among the aristocracy and educated elites of the Central Highlands of Madagascar (especially from the Merina ethnic group), who helped them in their evangelization efforts. They won them over with two arguments: the first was based on the natives' belief in the superiority of European songs over national songs; the second was to emphasize the social differences between rural and urban environments (Rakotomalala, 2003, p. 138). The Tonic Sol-Fa method, developed in the mid-19th century by John Curwen (1816–1880) based on a system created by Sarah Glover (1786–1867), served them as an aid in the practice of religious worship. The London Missionary Society (LMS) was the first missionary association to adopt this system. In 1862, it sent Reverend Robert Toy to meet with Curwen so that he could learn this method of teaching singing. Toy then went to Madagascar, where he used it together with other missionaries

in evangelizing the Malagasy people. In the Tonic Sol-Fa system, the staff notation was replaced with solfège syllables or their abbreviations (e.g., *l* for *la*), with *do* being chosen as the tonic of any key used (Southcott, 2004, p. 14). In 1888, James Richardson[4] published a treatise in Malagasy on the teaching of singing, entitled *Lesona amin'ny hira araka ny fomba tiona solfa: misy fampianarana maro* ('Teaching singing through solfège: methods') (Richardson, 1888/1980). In this way, singing became a tool of symbolic domination of Protestant communities over the majority of society attached to traditions considered unfavorable to social and cultural development. This period marked the beginning of the division of religious singing into the singing of the lower social classes originating in the countryside and Western-style singing practiced by the upper classes of the bourgeoisie.

While Protestants advocated rigor, rejecting any compromise with ethnic culture, which did not prevent them from imposing elements of their own tradition, the Jesuits tried to inspire enthusiasm for their religious ideas among the Malagasy using a different method: they used their favorite melodies to convey the Gospel message. Encouraged by the positive response of those being evangelized, they took further steps to deepen the spiritual commitment of the faithful by encouraging them to compose songs. They taught the Malagasy the principles of solfège, which enabled them to create songs in the local style and thus preserve their traditional cultural heritage (Rakotomalala, 2003, pp. 139–140); McGuire, 2012, p. 79). This practice, which was sophisticated for the 19th century but is common today, contributed to the expansion of the number of believers, especially among social classes that had previously occupied a lower place in the hierarchy. It offered a new source of inspiration and the opportunity to translate artistic expression into one's own language. Activities in this area intensified after the Second Vatican Council. The decisions of this Council, set out in particular in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963, point 119) and the instruction *Musicam sacram* (1967, chapters III-IV), emphasized the need for the active participation of the faithful and allowed the use of local languages in the liturgy.

## The *zafindraony* genre

The frustrations suppressed in rural communities due to the feeling that they occupied a lower place in the hierarchy ultimately had beneficial consequences. They led to the development of a new religious genre – *zafindraony* (literally "mixed race"), drawing on texts from the Gospel but based on local languages and melodies. This process can be described as inculturation, responding to the real needs of the population, as it allowed them to preserve their own traditions while integrating into a new cultural environment. Catholic clergy, recognizing the effectiveness of *zafindraony* in spreading the biblical message, supported its dissemination. During the colonial period, however, enthusiasm for

[4] Rev. James Richardson (1844–1922) was an LMS missionary and editor of the dictionary A New Malagasy-English Dictionary (Antananarivo, 1885).

songs belonging to this genre was sometimes suppressed by secular authorities, who feared a rise in nationalist sentiment and a potential threat to socio-political stability. The importance of these songs as a means of communication with ancestors and a way of drawing on their supernatural powers was emphasized, which strengthened the sense of strength and power in the community (Schmidhofer, 1993, p. 454). Similar abilities were attributed to *valiha*, which was associated with divinity and authority (Adams, 2018, p. 142).

Cultural duality – manifested, among other things, in the simultaneous use of the local language and French, participation in Christian liturgy and ancestor worship practices – is a phenomenon typical of everyday life among the Malagasy. A special case is the Betsileo ethnic group, inhabiting the Central Plateau. *Zafindraony* occupies a central place in religious ceremonies here. Although regional melodies and performance styles have been adopted in songs, the language of Christian texts remains the official Malagasy language, the language of books, especially religious ones. This is an example of an oral genre considered typical of the region, but based not on the dialect of the region, but on the literary language. For local poets, Malagasy is neither their mother tongue nor the language used in everyday life. However, they use it in their texts, which promotes the spread of the religious repertoire created within the group throughout the country (Noiret, 1995, p. 50).

*Zafindraony* consists mainly of Catholic songs, although some of them are also performed in Protestant communities. The texts are usually taken almost literally from the pages of biblical history, catechism, or church songs, with a particular emphasis on the Paschal aspect. Importantly, this practice also remains alive among less educated believers: even people with poor literacy skills sometimes compose songs during their daily activities, drawing inspiration directly from the Holy Scriptures (Noiret, 1995, p. 51; Mesple, 1995). In Ambodifototra on the island of Saint Marie, in an orphanage run by nuns, which we visited during our research, the composer of the songs we recorded was a local gardener.

## Liturgical renewal and post-conciliar repertoire

The actual evolution of liturgical practices, enabling Christians to pray in their native languages, express their faith in terms of their own culture, and celebrate the liturgy in a manner rooted in local traditions, took place as a consequence of the decisions of the Second Vatican Council (*Second Vatican Council*, 1963/2002). In Madagascar, this change manifested itself in the clergy's growing conviction of the need for inculturation of the Gospel. The Church made increased efforts to promote catechesis in rural areas, as evidenced by the 1976 document *Fonds communs*, devoted to reconciliation, which also referred to the issue of the cult of the dead (Randriamanalina, 1999, p. 412).

The ritual of *famadihana*, which involves the exhumation and reburial of the dead, plays a special role in this context (photo 3). It is seen as a celebration of life and joy that brings together family, friends, and the village community. The idea of transformation—of sadness into joy, mortality into immortality, death

into resurrection—is the foundation of this ritual. However, *famadihana* was long considered by missionaries to be a manifestation of paganism, which was an obstacle to the spread of Christianity. The Second Vatican Council and the subsequent reaction of the Church changed this perspective, pointing to the need for a positive approach to traditional religions (*International Theological Commission*, 1988, art. 119; John Paul II, 1995). In light of the theology of inculturation, *famadihana* can be interpreted as a practice that carries values consistent with the Gospel, especially by showing victory over death and affirming community life. This new perspective allows us to interpret this ritual in an Easter context, thanks to which the Malagasy, by participating in *famadihana*, can at the same time bear witness to their Christian faith (Randriamanalina, 1999, p. 3). This explains the atmosphere of celebration and joy accompanying the ritual, which we experienced during our expedition and which contrasts with European funeral practices. In Poland, funerals and other rituals dedicated to the deceased are commonly associated with mourning and lamenting those who have passed away.

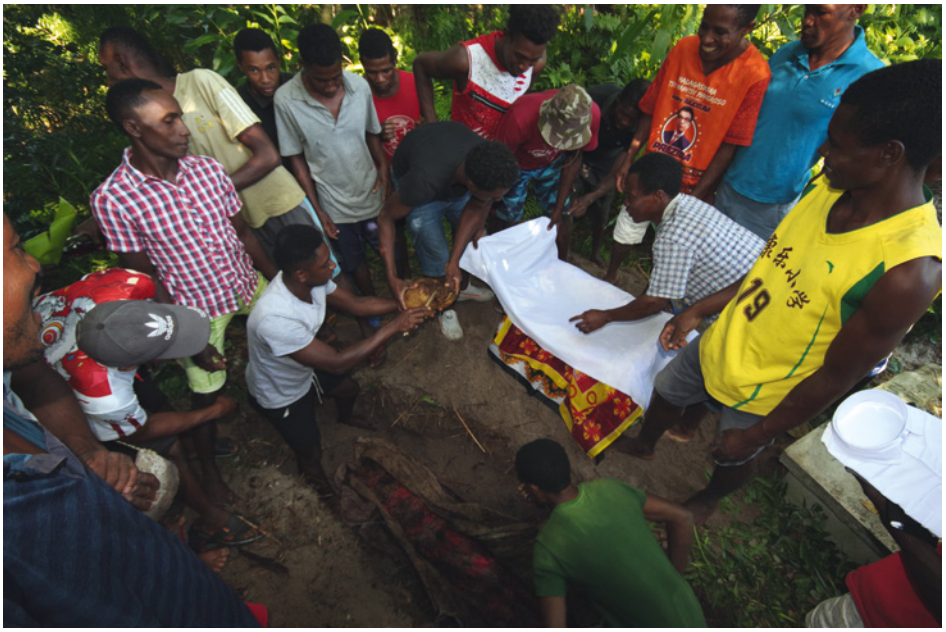

**Figure 3**
*Exhumation of bodies during the famadihana ceremony in Ambatorao, Sainte Marie.*
Note. Photo by Łukasz Smoluch.

In order to promote liturgical reform through song, the Ankalazao ny Tompo ('Let us praise the Lord') ensemble was formed in 1970, composed of members from different parts of Madagascar. The diverse composition of the group made it possible to create a repertoire in local dialects, using traditional melodies and adapting the songs to the cultural realities of individual regions (Joel-Harison, 2005, p. 214). As the Catholic Church in Madagascar did not have a single official songbook, musical creativity developed rapidly. The most important collections of

Catholic songs from this period are *Herinandro Voalohany* (1972), *Herinandro Faharoa* (1974), *Vavaka Hatory* (1975), *Herinandro Fahatelo* (1977), *Noely – Masina Maria* (1983), *Herinandro Fahaefatra* (1989), and the Easter collection from 1996. Each of them documents the process of inculturation and the gradual penetration of musical styles.

The first collection (*Herinandro Voalohany*) contains psalms and songs similar in character to Gregorian chant, but with elements of Malagasy melody. The second volume (*Herinandro Faharoa*) already features biblical songs and psalms in a new style, composed in accordance with the traditional rhythmic system, which gained considerable popularity thanks to Father Rémy Ralibery's radio broadcasts. The collection *Vavaka Hatory* (1975) brought evening songs[5] inspired by the music of the Merina and Betsimisaraka ethnic groups, while *Herinandro Fahatelo* (1977) expanded the repertoire with stylistic elements of Antandroy music (with clear African influences) and Negro spirituals, choral songs inspired by European music, and works in the Anglo-Saxon aesthetic. In turn, the collection *Noely – Masina Maria* (1983) is distinguished by the presence of pieces referring to the traditions of Eastern Christianity (including through modality and melismatics characteristic of Byzantine repertoires), as well as ecumenical songs intended to be performed jointly by communities of different Christian denominations, which emphasizes the pluralistic dimension of liturgical renewal. The last volumes – *Herinandro Fahaefatra* (1989) and the Easter collection (1996) – contain songs in a purely Malagasy style, especially in the aesthetics of *hira gasy*[6], often performed with clapping, which is an expression of the synthesis of theatrical and musical tradition and Christian liturgy (Joel-Harison, 2005, pp. 215–217).

Ankalazao ny Tompo's songs can be divided into two main groups. The first consists of songs inspired by European harmony, written in simple meters (2/4, 4/4, 3/8), characteristic of the early collections from 1972. The second group includes compositions rooted in Malagasy tradition: new church songs in traditional style accompanied by electronic instruments, folk songs, usually with piano, folk music performed on drums, bamboo flute *sodina* and violin, songs accompanied by *valiha* zither, recitatives, often without accompaniment, as well as religious songs combining European and Malagasy elements (Joel-Harison, 2005, pp. 219–220).

Currently, vocal-instrumental arrangements of Gospel texts are common in the capital and in the provinces. Their special feature is the preservation of their original spontaneity, which makes these compositions strongly emotional. It has

[5] In Malagasy tradition, evening songs serve as a form of home and community prayer performed at the end of the day. They bring spiritual calm and serve to strengthen family and community ties (Noiret, 1995, vol. 1, pp. 101–112).

[6] *Hira gasy* is a complex spectacle combining spoken word, singing, dance, and instrumental music with a dialogical structure and a moral and ethical function. As an art form inscribed on the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage in 2023, hira gasy provides melodies, rhythms, and forms of interaction that are transferred to church practices, especially processional and responsorial chants (UNESCO, 2023).

been understood that spreading the Christian faith requires adaptation to the local culture so that the message of the Gospel reaches its potential audience.

One of the key issues in the process of adapting church music in Madagascar, and more broadly in Africa, remains the problem of rhythm. Rhythm is not understood here as an abstract measure of time, but as a phenomenon rooted in bodily experience and sensory perception of accents, which is reflected in movement. Transforming rhythm into movement – both through the use of percussion instruments and through bodily expression – initially seemed difficult to reconcile with the essence of church music as understood in Europe. As early as the 1930s, missionary Henri Dubois pointed out the fundamental differences between European and Malagasy music, especially with regard to the function of the drum (Dubois, 1938, p. 1157). In the context of the work of the Ankalazao ny Tompo ensemble, many clergymen emphasize that rhythm is more important than the lyrics of a song, and that singing should sometimes be accompanied by dancing. Since the Second Vatican Council, rhythmic compositions accompanied by drums and dancing have been gaining popularity in Madagascar.

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The history of music performed in Christian churches in Madagascar shows how important a role it has played in the process of inculturation. From the first attempts at evangelization, through the liturgical adaptations of Protestant and Catholic missionaries, the emergence of the *zafindraony* genre, to contemporary religious compositions, music has been a continuous testimony to the dialogue between European and Malagasy traditions. As a result, Christianity on the island was not shaped by a simple cultural transfer, but became a dynamic synthesis of local aesthetic patterns and theological content. Musical expression has served and continues to serve as a tool for evangelization, a vehicle for identity, and a space for social integration, where the sacred intertwines with the heritage of ancestors.

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