Interdisciplinary Studies in Musicology 25, 2025
DOI 10.14746/ism.2025.25.4

ŁUKASZ SMOLUCH
Institute of Musicology, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8236-2771

Ôkatrarana *Ceremony from Eastern Madagascar: Exploring the Soundscape Between Worlds*

ABSTRACT: This paper presents preliminary findings from field research conducted in 2024 on the island of Sainte Marie (Nosy Boraha), Madagascar, focusing on the *ôkatrarana* ceremony – a ritual of exhumation and reburial rooted in Malagasy ancestral traditions. The study is concerned with the performative and sonic aspects of ceremony, and specifically the role of singing, drumming, and dancing in mediating the passage between the world of the living and the world of the dead. This article argues that music functions as a 'ritual tool' that gives structure to time frame of the ceremony, guides emotions, and strengthens social cohesion. The *bingy bé* performance, characterized by polyrhythmic drumming and responsorial singing, is analyzed as a key element in generating collective affect and spiritual transformation. This study contributes also to a broader discussion on the connections between music, rituals, and cultural memory in the Indian Ocean region.

KEYWORDS: Madagascar, *ôkatrarana*, *famadihana*, soundscape, *bingy bé*, drums, dance

In this paper, I present the initial findings from the fieldwork conducted in July and August 2024 in Madagascar. This fieldwork was a collaborative effort with colleagues from various institutions, including Vienna (August Schmidhofer), Wrocław (Bożena Muszkalska, Joanna Kwapień, Joanna Złotkowska, Marcel Frąckowiak, Igor Lot, Jan Kozłowski), Poznań (Jakub Kopaniecki), and Słupsk (Krystyna Krawiec-Złotkowska).

We spent most of our month-long stay on the island of Sainte Marie (Nosy Boraha), located off the northeast coast of Madagascar. During this time, we documented a wide range of local musical traditions, met with artists and bands representing various genres and styles of traditional and popular music, attended a music festival, and participated in sacred ceremonies. This study centers on the *ôkatrarana* ceremony, with a focus on the performative functions of singing, dancing, and drumming as integral components of its ritual soundscape.

The role of *ôkatrarana* in Sainte Marie's ritual life

The term *ôkatrarana* is used on the island of Sainte Marie to refer to a ritual practice rooted in animistic and pre-Christian belief systems. This ceremony involves the exhumation of human remains from a temporary grave, followed by their solemn reburial. It usually takes place during the dry season, typically four to five years after the initial burial. *Ôkatrarana* is a deeply symbolic act that reaffirms the bonds between the living and the dead, and reflects a worldview in which ancestors continue to play an active role in the spiritual and social life of the community.

Rituals of this kind are performed in many regions of Madagascar. The most widely recognized term for them is *famadihana*, commonly used among the Merina people (Bloch, 1971). Other regional names include *famongarana* (among the Betsimisaraka ethnic group), *ranga an-dolo* (among the Sakalava), and *jamà* (among the Sihanaka) (Mauro, 2001, pp. 239).

Similar rituals can be found in different parts of the world. For example, in Indonesia, there is a reburial ceremony called *ma'nene* (Putra et al., 2023). During our fieldwork, some people from Madagascar casually mentioned Southeast Asia as the place where their ancestors originally came from. Although, it was more like a story passed down in the family, they were not able to prove this.

It's fascinating to see this idea overlapping with contemporary research in genetics and linguistics. Some studies have shown strong links between the Malagasy people and Southeast Asia, especially the Austronesian region (Tofanelli et al., 2009; Kusuma et al., 2016). So, both the local stories and the science seem to point in the same direction – toward a deep and lasting connection between Madagascar and the wider cultural and migration networks of the Indian Ocean.

At this stage of my research, I have not yet been able to determine the precise geographic distribution of the term *ôkatrarana*. Although commonly used on the island of Sainte Marie, it is unclear to what extent it is recognized in other regions of Madagascar. The only written source in which I have encountered this term is a monograph authored in Malagasy by Jean Aimé Bezandry (2006), which focuses on the cultural practices of the community in Andrangazaha – a village located on Madagascar's east coast. This reference suggests that the term is not exclusive to Sainte Marie and may be part of a broader regional lexicon. However, due to the limited availability of written documentation and the oral nature of many Malagasy traditions, further ethnographic and linguistic investigation is needed to map the full range of its usage.

Ôkatrarana as a rite of passage

The following fieldnote, recorded after the *ôkatrarana* ceremony in the village of Ambatorao on July 21, 2024, provides insight into the experiential aspects of the event.

> 'I sit leaning against the tabletop, still stunned by what happened yesterday. Maybe not even the "strangeness" of the ceremony, but the sudden change of the tempo of events. The day started lazily– with an interview with the band manager, soundscape recordings, and packing.... However, the afternoon accelerated. It was confirmed that an *ôkatrarana* would be held in the Ambatorao – neighbouring village. [...] We had been invited to this event by the family of Stefan – the resolute Malgash, leader of the drumming group we had been recording for the past two days. After half an hour of insane tuk-tuk driving, we arrived at the site.'

The *ôkatrarana* ceremony is an important moment in the social and spiritual life of Malagasy communities, since it is an opportunity for extended family to reunite often after long time of no see. On one side it is a solemn act of paying tribute to the deceased but at the same time it is a festive gathering that strengthens social bonds. In the case described above, the ceremony was organized by a wealthy family that was able to host dozens of guests and provide traditional refreshments, including besa-besa, a strong herbal alcoholic drink usually consumed from palm leaves rolled into makeshift cups.

Figure 1
Arranging the remains of the deceased in a small concrete sarcophagus.
Note. Author's own photo.

Reburial marks the end of a long liminal phase during which the spirit of the deceased – known as *lolo* – wanders between the world of the living and the world of the ancestors. This stage is characterized by uncertainty and spiritual unrest. To facilitate the *lolo*'s passage to the realm of the ancestors, he is reburied in a new grave along with some items such as a clean shirt, perfume, and a bottle of rum. They serve not only as a sign of respect but also as provisions for the journey to the afterlife that guide him toward his proper place among the ancestors.

Following Arnold van Gennep's classical framework of rites of passage (van Gennep, 1960), *ôkatrarana* can be interpreted as the culmination of an extended liminal period. The initial burial serves to exclude the deceased from the community of the living, but does not signify an immediate full integration into the spirit world. During this transitional period, the *lolo* is often observed as restless and unpatient. Islanders recount that

until the *ôkatrarana* is completed, the spirit may appear in dreams, expressing discomfort or impatience – complaining, for instance, that it is 'cold' or that it has yet to be rewrapped in a fresh *lamba mena* (burial cloth).

The performance of *ôkatrarana* brings to a close the ambiguous and transitional phase following death, during which the *lolo* remains in an indeterminate state between the world of the living and that of the ancestors. This moment is characterized by heightened emotional intensity. It also provides a ritual framework for collectively processing grief, longing, and memories accumulated over the years. The central point of this process is communal singing and dancing, which serve not only as an expression of mourning and celebration, but also as an embodiment of reconnection with the deceased and the world of ancestors.

The *ôkatrarana* ceremony means a lot to the Malagasy people. It's deeply tied to their belief that the world of the living and the world of the ancestors – the *razana* – aren't separate or in conflict. Instead, they're closely connected, almost like two sides of the same coin. Keeping that connection alive takes effort: rituals, communication, and care. Without the proper *ôkatrarana* ceremony, the *lolo* doesn't fully become *razana*, and can't really take part in the lives of the living.

Astuti and Harris (2008, p. 718) put it well:

> Decisions about what food to avoid, when to hold a ritual, where to build a new house, whom to marry, when to leave and when to come back, and so on, must take the ancestors into account – the ancestors' desires have to be met, their orders have to be obeyed, their curiosity about what goes on among the living has to be satisfied.

Moving someone from a temporary grave to a sarcophagus among other clan members isn't just practical – it's full of meaning. The dead are seen as still living in a way, and just like the living, they need to be surrounded by family to truly enjoy that life (Bloch, 1971, p. 162).

Soundscape between worlds and its ritual function

Let's take a closer look at the soundscape[1] of the *ôkatrarana* ceremony. The sounds – music, laughter, conversation – aren't just background noise. They shape the mood, guide the emotions, and reflect the relationships between the people involved. You can feel the tension, the joy, the reverence – all through sound.

[1] Here I follow the classic definition of soundscape formulated by Raymond Murray Schafer: 'The soundscape is any acoustic field of study. We may speak of a musical composition as a soundscape, or a radio program or an acoustic environment. We may isolate an acoustic environment as a field of study just as we can study the characteristics of a given landscape' (Schafer, 1977, p. 7).

The ceremony we attended began with a speech by local leaders. It's called *kabary*, and it's not an everyday talk. Unlike *resaka*, which is casual and informal, *kabary* is structured, symbolic, and carries deep social meaning (Keenan, 1973, pp. 225–227). It sets the tone and shows respect, making it clear that something important is happening. From time to time, the speeches were interrupted by applause. After the official opening, young men began circulating among the participants, offering beer and besa-besa, a strong homemade drink made from sugar cane. The atmosphere gradually changed: the crowd became more and more lively, and the noise around us intensified, mixing with the rhythmic rustling of sand as the digging of the grave began.

After about thirty minutes, the remains of an elderly man were exhumed. Over the next fifteen minutes, they were reverently transferred into a concrete sarcophagus, wrapped in a new *lamba mena* (a traditional burial cloth), accompanied by symbolic offerings: a clean shirt, a bottle of perfume, and a flask of rum. Throughout the ritual, the air was filled with laughter and the men's joking remarks.

From the outset, the participants were spatially and functionally divided along gender lines. The men undertook the physical tasks associated with the exhumation, while the women remained seated slightly apart. As the sarcophagus was carried to its designated resting place, a chorus of female voices gradually emerged – singing and clapping. The singing grew more intense, and the women, sitting close together, passed around a photo of the deceased. Some cried, others joked, creating a poignant mix of respect and enthusiasm.

Although *ôkatrarana* is often perceived as a joyful occasion, it encapsulates a wide spectrum of emotions. The American anthropologist David Graeber, during his fieldwork among the Merina people in Arivonimamo, once asked a local woman why someone always would cry during *famadihana*, if it was meant to be a happy event. She looked at him with mild incredulity and replied that such individuals had just had their father's corpse laid across their lap. 'Well, how would you feel?' – she asked (Graeber, 1995, p. 269).

This moment invites a deeper reflection on the functions of music within ritual contexts, as articulated by Ellen Dissanayake in her article *Ritual and ritualization: Musical means of conveying and shaping emotion in humans and other animals* (2006). One particularly relevant function she identifies is the 'relief from anxiety and psychological pain'. According to Dissanayake, music – alongside other ritual practices – 'assures the safe passage of the deceased person's spirit to its ancestral home, provides an institutionalized outlet for individual pain, fear, grief, and anger, and at the same time reasserts group loyalties as members fulfill their ritual obligations.'

Equally pertinent is the function of 'establishment and maintenance of social identity through rites of passage' Dissanayake emphasizes that ritual music not only elicits emotional responses during specific segments of a ceremony, but also structures the temporal flow of the event. Elements such as pulse, repetition, variation, and silence – integral to musical expression – serve to mark the passage of time and imbue the ceremony with a sense of grace, coherence, and shared experience, perceptible to both participants and observers.

Performing *bingy bé* as a tool for creating communitas

Let us return once more to the events of last July. As the women sang, holding a photograph of the deceased in their hands, several additional graves were ceremonially refreshed by rewrapping the remains in fresh *lamba mene*. Eventually, the gathered community formed a procession at the cemetery gate. Led by the image of the deceased, the group began a slow, deliberate movement toward the family home.

The narrow, dusty road was densely filled with people, whose movement was guided by the rhythmic pulse of drums and the powerful, charismatic singing of women. This vocal expression – distinct from the more restrained singing at the graveside – was bold, forceful, and emerged from bodies immersed in a trance-like state of dance. The crowd transformed into a single, cohesive organism, absorbing all present and carrying them forward in a kind of temporal and spatial suspension.

On Sainte Marie, this form of ritual singing and dancing, accompanied by drums and rattles, is locally referred to as *bingy bé*. According to our interlocutors, the term *bingy bé* (literally 'big drum') denotes a musical form that constitutes a central component of many ceremonial contexts. However, interpretations of the term varied. For some, the defining feature was timbral: the loud, resonant sound of at least two double-headed *bingy* drums – typically constructed from large metal paint buckets with skin membranes and played with wooden sticks – combined with the rustling of *kaiamba* rattles, often made from repurposed spray cans filled with sand, shells, stones, or glass fragments.

Others emphasized structural aspects. Rather than offering a verbal definition, they demonstrated *bingy bé* by tapping out a dense, fast-paced cross-rhythm. This rhythm is embedded within a four-beat metric framework common in sub-Saharan Africa, where each beat is subdivided into three equal pulsations (Anku, 2000, Burns, 2010, Toussaint, 2003). This 12/8 structure that underpins much of the region's polyrhythmic complexity is realized usually by at least two *bingy* drums and one *kaiamba* (usually more) creating interlocking rhythmic lines.

An important element of *bingy bé* is responsorial singing, performed between a soloist (*mpiziza*) and a responding choir (*mpiosa*). During the procession, the choir repeated the phrase *Agny anareo* – 'you, the ancestors, are there' (i.e., in the land of the dead) – followed by *Avy anareo* – 'you are here' (i.e., present among us). In the ecstatic dance, often performed with raised hands, the ancestor was invoked, and his liminal presence – between the worlds of the living and the dead – was articulated through this dual invocation. The final refrain, *Tsara havana* ('good family' or 'good kin'), affirmed collective belonging and pride in lineage[2].

The dancing procession marked the culmination of the *ôkatrarana* ceremony. In this moment, the entire clan – no longer divided by gender – was united and

[2] Many thanks to August Schmidhofer and Christiana Razafimarolaza for their help in translating the song text and interpreting it.

carried forward by the music. The deceased, symbolized by the photograph, was present within the crowd, once again participating in the joy of life before transitioning definitively to the world of spirits.

This moment of collective movement and emotional intensity may be interpreted as an instance of communitas – a form of social unity that, as Victor Turner (1969 [2011], pp. 96–97, 131–165) argues, emerges in liminal contexts. Communitas arises in opposition to hierarchical structure, within sacred time and space, and often at the threshold between worlds. In this case, it unfolded at the boundary between the living and the dead.

Upon arrival at the courtyard of the deceased's family, the celebratory dimension of the ceremony intensified markedly. Numerous dances were performed, accompanied by the resonant rhythms of *bingy bé*. The atmosphere grew increasingly exuberant: participants laughed, shouted, and whistled with mounting enthusiasm. Among the women, some appeared to surrender entirely to the music's hypnotic pull, entering states of trance. In moments of collective euphoria, these women were lifted aloft by the crowd and carried above the heads of the celebrants, gliding on a sea of outstretched hands[3].

Figure 2
Dancing and singing in front of the family home of the deceased.
Note. Author's own photo.

Conclusion

The *ôkatrarana* ceremony, as observed on the island of Sainte Marie, offers a compelling example of how ritual, music, and collective experience converge to mediate transitions between the worlds of the living and the dead. Interpreted through the lens of Arnold van Gennep's theory of rites of passage,

[3] The role of music in facilitating trance and spiritual communication in Malagasy ritual contexts has been extensively studied by Schmidhofer (2004), particularly in relation to Tromba ceremonies among the Sakalava.

the ceremony marks the end of an extended liminal phase in which the spirit of the deceased – *lolo* – remains suspended between ontological states. The reburial, accompanied by symbolic offerings and ritual gestures, aims to facilitate the final reintegration of the deceased with the ancestors.

Drawing on Ellen Dissanayake's insights, we can understand the sonic dimension of *ôkatrarana* – particularly the responsorial singing, drumming, and dancing – as fulfilling multiple functions: providing psychological relief, reaffirming group identity, and guiding participants through the emotional and temporal arc of the ritual. In this way, the soundscape becomes a medium through which the community processes mourning, celebrates continuity, and affirms its cosmological orientations.

The collective singing and dancing in a trance-like procession that usually marks the culminative point of the ceremony – can be interpreted as the emergence of *communitas*, in Victor Turner's sense of the term. It is the moment in which social hierarchies dissolve, and participants experience a shared sense of unity and transcendence. The photograph of the deceased, carried at the head of the procession, symbolically reanimates the presence of the ancestor, allowing the community to momentarily inhabit a space 'between worlds' – between life and death, past and future, structure and anti-structure.

Ultimately, *ôkatrarana* serves as a rite of passage for the deceased and a performative act of cultural continuity for the living. It reaffirms ancestral ties, negotiates identity across generations, and – through its rich soundscape – creates a liminal space in which memory, emotion, and belonging are sonically and socially reconfigured.

References

Anku, W. (2000). Circles and time: A theory of structural organization of rhythm in African music. *Music Theory Online*, *6*(1). https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.00.6.1/mto.00.6.1.anku.html

Astuti, R., & Harris, P. L. (2008). Understanding mortality and the life of the ancestors in rural Madagascar. *Cognitive Science*, *32*(4), 713–740.

Bezandry, J. A. (2006). *Fomba amam-panao sy fivavahana nentin-drazana ao Andrangazaha* [Master's thesis, Université d'Antananarivo].

Bloch, M. (1971). *Placing the dead: Tombs, ancestral villages, and kinship organization in Madagascar*. London: Seminar Press.

Burns, J. (2010). Rhythmic archetypes in instrumental music from Africa and the Diaspora. *Music Theory Online*, *16*(4). https://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.10.16.4/mto.10.16.4.burns.pdf

Dissanayake, E. (2006). Ritual and ritualization: Musical means of conveying and shaping emotion in humans and other animals. In S. Brown & U. Volgsten (Eds.), *Music and manipulation: On the social uses and social control of music* (pp. 31–56). New York: Berghahn Books.

Graeber, D. (1995). Dancing with corpses reconsidered: An interpretation of famadihana (in Arivonimamo, Madagascar). *American Ethnologist*, *22*(2), 258–278.

Keenan, E. O. (1973). A sliding sense of obligatoriness: The poly-structure of Malagasy oratory. *Language in Society*, *2*(2), 225–243.

Mauro, D. (2001). Images des cultes malgaches: le famadihana. *Journal des anthropologues*, *84*, 239–250.

Putra, A. S., Hijjang, P., Tang, M., & Badollahi, M. Z. (2023). Ma'nene' ritual: Ethnographic study of Ma'nene' ritual practices in Toraja. *Journal of Advanced Zoology*, *44*(4), 404–408.

Schafer, R. M. (1977). *The tuning of the world*. New York: Knopf.

Schmidhofer, A. (2004). *Musik und Trance auf Madagaskar: Studien zur Musik im Tromba-Ritual der Sakalava*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

Toussaint, G. T. (2003). Classification and phylogenetic analysis of African ternary rhythm timelines. In *Bridges: Mathematical Connections in Art, Music, and Science* (pp. 25–36).

Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing.

van Gennep, A. (1960). *The rites of passage* (M. B. Vizedom & G. L. Caffee, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.