

JOANNA ZŁOTKOWSKA

Institute of Musicology, University of Wrocław
<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8204-496X>

„Go With the Flow”. Madagascar Artists Facing the Challenges of the Modern Times

ABSTRACT: The paper examines numerous problems faced by Malagasy artists in the 21st century, their approach to the challenges of the market, largely dependent on geopolitical conditions, and finally philosophy of life, attitude towards the troubles they encounter. Referring to the interview with the internationally recognized artist Hanitrarivo Rasoanaivo, co-founder of the musical group Tarika, as well as conversations conducted with other active musicians from Madagascar having different backgrounds and financial status (carried out as part of field research in July 2024), the author outlines their situation, difficult for economic, social and political reasons. The steadfastness of the artists and the power of human creativity are shown; despite the lack of systemic support, equipment deficits, political and economic unrest, widespread piracy and many other problems, musicians do not give up, creating art and communities, building their legacy.

KEYWORDS: Field research, Madagascar, Malagasy artists, musicians in modern times, sociopolitical problems, poverty, piracy.

„Go with the flow”. Madagascar artists facing the challenges of the modern times

Musicians around the world today face new opportunities. The widespread availability of electricity and internet access, along with advances in computers and electronic equipment, not only significantly accelerate the creative process and make it more efficient but also enrich knowledge, expand the range of sound techniques, and enhance means of musical expression. At every moment, intercultural exchanges occur, musical styles from different regions and ethnic groups merge, transform, and evolve into new forms. In the era of globalization, the exchange of ideas and observations has become easier than ever – information flows rapidly, and artists can draw inspiration from creators living on the opposite side of the globe. Along with numerous possibilities, new

challenges have also emerged that contemporary creators must navigate. These challenges, already significant for citizens of highly developed countries, become even greater and more pressing in developing nations such as Madagascar, where additional barriers exist that do not affect wealthier societies as profoundly. The issues of the music industry of the island are highly complex, stemming not only from economic and infrastructural difficulties but also political and social factors.

In this paper, I explore this multifaceted issue. I chronologically review five conversations and present the most relevant statements and observations from the artists based on my areas of interest. In the conclusion, I attempt to depict the situation of artists in northeastern Madagascar working within reality of the 21st century – though undoubtedly in an incomplete way.

Methodology of the research

During an expedition to Madagascar (July–August 2024)¹, there were conducted interviews with numerous musicians, performers, and music producers of varying recognition, financial status and concert experience. The research group included Dr. August Schmidhofer from the University of Vienna, a specialist in ethnomusicology and African music, with particularly close research ties to Madagascar; Prof. Bożena Muszkalska, an ethnomusicologist and anthropologist from the University of Wrocław; Prof. Krystyna Krawiec-Żłotkowska, a philologist and literary scholar from the University of Pomerania; and two researchers from the University of Poznań: Dr. Łukasz Smoluch and Dr. Jakub Kopaniecki. Five students of the University of Wrocław studying in the class of Prof. Muszkalska also took part in the expedition: Marcel Frąckowiak, Jan Kozłowski, Joanna Kwapięń, Igor Lot, and Joanna Żłotkowska, the author of this paper.

The expedition took place in the northeastern part of the country: on the islands of Sainte-Marie and Île aux Nattes, as well as on the main island of Madagascar, in Toamasina, Andasibe and Antananarivo. The research was conducted in accordance with August Schmidhofer's research approach – triangulation derived from Denzin (1970) as a combination of different methods and data. The reference points were the bearers of the culture or tradition themselves, yet being subject to criticism; not because of distrust, but because of the assumption that each source presents one of many possible subjective perspectives². The study was conducted in accordance with the basic principles of participant observation, taking into account its challenges and limitations. We were striving for objectivity, while trying to meet and being aware of our interviewer assumptions and biases. Following Ron Emoff, we were „always participating yet never as *normal* participants, sometimes observing while always being observed, taking in this

¹The expedition report is available in Polish, English, and French on the website <https://etnomuzykologia.uwr.edu.pl/> (July 2024).

²This is why it is valuable and important to survey a large number of individuals. This allows to compare their opinions on the same topics to identify what differentiates them, and above all, what unites them. See more: Schmidhofer A. (2016).

new place, feeling few of the responsibilities implicite in observing and possessing little competence for participating”³.

Our research group collected data from interviews in the audio-video recordings of various performances by music and dance groups and Malagasy rituals during local initiatives, such as the annual *Festival des Balleines*, as well as in the course of individually organized meetings. Some of them were arranged in advance, before the travel, by Dr. Schmidhofer; with other artists we started cooperation on site, during the expedition. After or during the performances, our research group conducted extensive interviews in French⁴ and English. A detailed account and summary of the entire three-week expedition was included in the field journal written jointly by Marcel Frąckowiak and me. Members of the research group had differing interests, including performance studies, instrumentology, spirituality, ethnographic aspects, Malagasy popular music, linguistics. I had the opportunity to obtain answers to questions regarding the challenges faced by Malagasy artists in their creative journey, as well as their philosophy on life as a whole.

Malagasy heritage and its importance for the societies of northeastern Madagascar

Traditional music continues to play a significant role in Malagasy society to this day; even in the age of increasing industrialization, local traditions and rituals are cultivated in Madagascar. They are predominantly related to the cult of ancestors, the Malagasy belief in their life after death and possibility of their temporary return to earth in order to provide help to descendants who ask for it. The most significant example of such a ceremony is *tromba*, during which powerful ancestral spirits are invoked to heal illnesses, resolve interpersonal conflicts, and solve everyday problems⁵.

Malagasy people use ancient history to explain the world and reality around them; contact with spirits is most often accompanied by music. Ancestors connect with the present through an advanced interplay of textures, rhythms, and melodies between musicians, embedded in a universal three-part structure, tripartite sense of rhythm. Malagasy musical performance, especially in a ritual context, blurs the boundaries of what is past and present, creates a bridge between former and current times, disturbs the sense of time, recalling past events and history⁶.

³ See more: Introduction. Emoff R. (2002).

⁴ During the conversations conducted in French, we were assisted by Dr. Schmidhofer, a fluent speaker of the language.

⁵ The ritual of *tromba* is widely described in the works of: Sharp L. (1996); Emoff R. (ch. Spirit Practices on the East Coast. 2002); Schmidhofer A. (2016); Rossé E. (2021); It is also discussed in the article included in this publication (Kwapień J., 2025). To learn more about Malagasy spirituality as it manifests itself in rituals, historical events and artistic works, see: Schmidhofer A. (2020).

⁶ On the importance of cultivating memory, imagining and embodying the past in Madagascar, see: Lambek M. (2002).

Music is a vital element of life in the rural communities of Sainte Marie and Île aux Nattes. Locals know and regularly perform songs as part of all kinds of rituals – including *tromba* or ritual slaughter of the zebu, a local species of cow – as well as events and ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, and the *famadihana*, the traditional Malagasy second burial⁷. Folk songs also accompany the daily activities of the islanders – fishing, farming, cooking etc.. New pieces by local composers, with accompaniment of traditional instruments, are constantly being created, and they address a wide variety of topics: from everyday activities, through feelings and interpersonal relationships, to philosophical, ecological, anti-war issues. During the expedition, we didn't have to struggle to meet musically talented and creative people – music is one of the key elements of the lives of many Malagasy people.

There is a tendency in Western media and literature to trivialize and commercialize African art, including Malagasy music. Its value is reduced primarily to its sound qualities, ignoring the textual layer, which contains insightful social criticism. A significant portion of African music is sung in languages typically unfamiliar to Western audiences, and its reception is based primarily on sound, rhythm, and instrumentation. However, for diasporic audiences, these texts hold enormous significance and symbolism⁸.

It should be emphasized that many respondents representing older generations expressed a clear concern for the future of traditional music and the rituals cultivated by their ancestors. They noted that today's youth have made a decisive shift towards popular music, predominantly African, but also imported from the West. The problem seems to be more prevalent in urban areas. Artists like Fafass and Richard Falce, whose interviews I will be referencing in this work address these trends by incorporating elements of modern musical language – electronic sounds, samples, and beats taken from popular music – into their works, deeply rooted in the traditions of Madagascar.

Initiatives are organised, largely at the grassroots level, by the will and desire of the islanders, to preserve the cultural heritage of regions of Madagascar, saving treasures of the past from oblivion, and protecting the natural environment from destructive human activity. Later in this article, I will cite an example of such an institution, one of its kind: Antshow Madagascar, Malagasy Arts and Cultural Centre in Antananarivo, founded by Rasoanaivo Hanitrarivo. In Sainte Marie, there can also be mentioned the collective initiative of *dinabe*, which aims to restore the principles of “living together,” foster an atmosphere of hospitality on the island, and ultimately establish a deep bond between people, ancestral spirits, and the world of nature. The residents also decided to establish a nature conserva-

⁷ The second burial takes place four to five years after the person's death; the remains, along with belongings, mementos, and clothing, are transferred and placed in a new coffin made of a more durable material. The cemetery ceremonies, the procession to the deceased's family home, and the large, all-night celebration that gathers the local community are accompanied by joyful, highly energetic traditional songs. As part of the expedition, we had the opportunity to participate in the *famadihana* (on Sainte Marie Island also known as *okatrarana*) organized in the village of Ambatorao. A report from the event can be found on the Ethnomusicology website of the University of Wrocław. For more on *famadihana*, see: Larson P. (2001).

⁸ More on this topic, see: Zafimahaleo R.; Meinhof U. (2003).

tion zone, concept of the island’s sustainable development while simultaneously caring for the ecosystem, both on Sainte Marie itself and in the surrounding ocean waters. The initiative aims to define and implement fair and effective rules for the use of the environment, within a framework of shared management that takes into account the views of the residents⁹.

The interviews

1. Tamba Robert and Jean Louis (*Vola Soa* duet)

14 July 2024, Ambodifototra, Île Sainte-Marie

The conversation with a duo that has been performing for four decades, whom we had the opportunity to hear on the first day of *Le Festival des Baleines*¹⁰, introduced us to the reality of artists living in Sainte-Marie. The men primarily play the island’s traditional music but also arrange pieces from other regions of the country, Africa, and even the world. Among the instruments used by the ensemble there can be found valiha¹¹, Madagascar’s most important instrument, as well as percussion instruments: the dingy drum and the kaiamba rattle.

Both on the island of Sainte-Marie and in the rest of the country, there are no institutions for musical education, nor has a standardized teaching system been introduced. Many Malagasy musicians are self-taught, learn through observation, and the master-apprentice education model is also common – this was the case for the artists of the duo *Vola Soa*¹². Tamba began learning to play the valiha at the age of 15¹³, studying under Master Masa, who had settled in his village at the time. Soon after, Tamba started developing his skills



Figure 1
Tamba Robert and Jean Louis.
Note. Photo by Joanna Kwapień.

⁹ More on *dinabe* and the island’s conservation and development initiative, see: Aubert S.; Gaidet N.; Ralalaoherivony B.; Ranaivoson J. (2025).

¹⁰ The topic of the “Whale Festival” is addressed in the article included in this publication (Kopaniecki, 2025). See more: Sunzu MG (2024 January 26). *Le festival des baleines à Sainte-Marie: Une rencontre inoubliable avec les “Grands dieux”*.

¹¹ The topic of the valiha, the most characteristic instrument of Madagascar, is described in the article included in this publication (Frąckowiak, 2025).

¹² “*Vola Soa*” – loosely translated as “good money”; according to the musicians, the band’s name is meant to attract wealth.

¹³ Both men can play various instruments, including percussion instruments. When asked when they learned to play them, they reacted with slight amusement and answered that it was from childhood (around the age of 8–9). They did not consider learning these instruments to be anything extraordinary or surprising. Like other Malagasy people we spoke with, they conveyed that they have music “in their blood” and that playing rhythms comes naturally to them.

independently, eventually becoming a master himself and teaching others, including his own son.

Music is Tamba and Jean's greatest passion and a source of income, though not the only one, as both artists also engage in agricultural work and construction-related assignments. There are not enough local events for them to sustain themselves solely through their art, which is why they appreciated and praised the „Whale Festival” as an opportunity to earn additional income (we had the chance to hear them perform at this event the day before our interview). The duo performs at festivals organized on the island, as well as at various ceremonies and rituals such as weddings, *tromba*, as well as circumcision ceremonies and other traditional events. They build their own instruments (Tamba crafted his valiha using roofing metal sheets, wood, and wire).

When asked about the characteristic moon and star motifs on Tamba's instrument, musicians explained that music represents a “connection between performers and the stars,” allowing both musicians and the audience to experience extraordinary states – great joy, euphoria, and even trance. Described as a medium between humans and the stars, music in Malagasy culture is seen as something exceptional, beyond ordinary understanding, enabling people to touch the metaphysical. Music allows individuals to break away from the dullness of everyday life and step into a different, joyful world, even if just for a moment.

During the interviews, we asked the artists about various concepts, aiming to better understand their perception of reality and philosophy of life. Among other things, we wanted to learn how they define and view states such as anhedonia or depression. Tamba and Jean were not familiar with the specific concept of depression, but that does not mean they are unaware of feelings and notions of prolonged sadness, anger, and frustration. They responded by translating it into the language of music: when someone is sad and overwhelmed, he or she lacks the energy to dance, make music and create. Through their art, they strive to bring people joy and entertainment, encouraging them to stand up and join joyful dancing and stomping to the rhythm of the music.

2. Fafass

22 July 2024, Ambodifototra, Île Sainte-Marie

Fafass is a vibrant figure on the music scene of Sainte-Marie, whom we had the chance to hear performing live with his band on the night of July 13 during the *Festival des Balleines*. He performs alongside musicians from various parts of Madagascar¹⁴. In addition to a drum kit, electric guitar, and bass guitar, the instrumental setup also includes a drum played by the leader himself (who

¹⁴ Fafass also mentioned that he is open to international collaboration and has even included a French musician in his lineup. However, he stated that it is not easy for non-native musicians to truly master Malagasy music without being raised in and deeply immersed in Madagascar's culture from an early age. According to Fafass, outsiders “do not know and do not feel” Malagasy music. In contrast, island residents learn various forms of local musical expression with ease.

also serves as the lead vocalist), the *farai* (a bamboo instrument struck with sticks by multiple female performers) and *kaiamba*. Fafass was accompanied in the vocal layer by a choir consisting of five singers dressed in colorful local scarves. Due to logistical difficulties and transportation costs, he decided to form three separate performer lineups for his band – two performing on Sainte-Marie Island and the third on the main island of Madagascar. High travel expenses have prevented him, despite his willingness, from performing outside the country thus far.

In Fafass' compositions, a fusion occurs between island's traditional sounds and rhythms with modern electronic techniques, production, and mastering. Songs are tailored to today's audiences eager for party music accompanying celebration and dance. Fafass preserves what is most valuable in the art of his ancestors (and, as he emphasizes, this is precisely what his fans want; this is their musical preference), at the same time wrapping it in a modern framework to meet market expectations. His longtime producer, Richard Falce, encouraged him to take this step toward a broader audience (I refer to my conversation with him later in the text).

Professionally, Fafass is involved in many things – besides musical performance, he co-organizes festivals, teaches music, constructs instruments, collaborates on music videos for his own songs, engages in roofing and carpentry. He is a self-taught artist who started learning at the age of five and debuted before a larger audience at eight. He has been releasing albums since 2009 and has been a member of the local creators' association ever since. To this day, he remains a thriving and evolving artist, despite the numerous challenges of the modern market that he must face.



Figure 2
Fafass' performance with his band at Festival des Baleines.
Note. Photo by Łukasz Smoluch.

According to him, music production in Madagascar is a significant challenge, as there are few specialists in this field with high quality sound production facilities. Fafass also pointed out that in the past, it was much easier for artists to start their musical journey, “break through,” and most importantly, sustain themselves through their craft. Years ago, he had no trouble selling large quantities of albums and spreading his art. Nowadays, CDs have largely fallen out of favor, with music being duplicated and shared through USB drives and other portable storage mediums.. The issue of piracy in Madagascar is widespread and extremely difficult to resolve.

For Malagasy music to reach listeners, it must also be broadcast on local radio stations. However, musicians not only receive no payment for their aired songs, but quite the opposite – they must pay to have their songs played. Artists are faced with a tough choice: either preserve their own funds but fail to reach new audiences, relying solely on word-of-mouth promotion, or risk their financial stability by paying radio fees. Membership in the creators’ association has also brought Fafass no tangible benefits; he has not received any royalties for his copyrighted work in the past 15 years.

3. DJ Tigana

22 July 2024, Ambodifototra, Île Sainte-Marie

Tigana is a 27-year-old musician, sound engineer, and producer from Sainte-Marie. Like other Malagasy artists, he is unable to sustain himself solely through music despite a flourishing career as a DJ, so he also works in a hotel.



Figure 3

Interview with DJ Tigana. In the photo with Dr. August Schmidhofer.

Note. Photo by Lukasz Smoluch.

Tigana performs both on his home island and across the main island of Madagascar. He started his career as a DJ in nightclubs, but after building his personal brand, soon began handling the musical arrangements for larger events and celebrations. Today, Tigana covers all four annual music festivals organized on Sainte-Marie. He is self-taught and learned to play the MIDI keyboard and synthesizer on his own.

His playlists are largely shaped by Malagasy entertainment music and tropical African sounds, yet they also feature Indian compositions and Western tracks in genres like R'n'B, house, and reggae. Given that Sainte-Marie serves as a tourist destination welcoming visitors from around the world, a variety of musical styles find their place in his sets.

The DJ tailors his repertoire to specific audiences – whenever concertgoers from a different nationality are expected, he conducts research to find the most popular artists from their homecountry. However, Tigana states that he prefers to promote the music of local artists, which resonates with him the most. Working as a sound engineer and producer offers him an opportunity to stay updated on the latest musical trends emerging in Sainte-Marie, enriching his music library.

To acquire the necessary sound equipment and software for DJing, traveling to Reunion Island – about 700 kilometers from Madagascar – is the only viable option. It is the closest place where second-hand equipment in good condition can be purchased, as new gear is even harder to obtain both in terms of availability and affordability. However, even used equipment comes at a steep price. Financial barriers make this industry accessible to only a select few – on the entire island of Sainte-Marie, aside from Tigana, only one other DJ is active. Despite this, the two do not see each other as competitors.

4. Richard Falce

24 July 2024, Île aux Nattes

Richard Falce is a music producer from Monaco, who has permanently settled in Madagascar. Between 2006 and 2018, he ran his own recording studio on Sainte-Marie. Currently, he resides on the neighboring Île aux Nattes, managing an outdoor bar, with plans to establish a new studio there in the future. His work includes producing tracks for artists like Fafass, shaping traditional Malagasy music into dancefloor-ready compositions (integrating music samples such as big drums, percussion). His releases blend local musical narratives with new techniques and global sounds – currently with Caribbean and Haitian *zouk* serving as his main inspirations (though, as he stated, it changes all the time).

The early stages of his music production journey took place in France, where he grew up among immigrants and acquired initial skills in sound processing. Moving to Madagascar was a direct response to local demand – his Malagasy clients and acquaintances expressed a need for a professional music studio in that part of the country. According to Richard, many aspiring producers in the region attempt music production but often lack experience and technical expertise, particularly in handling DAW software channels. Reflecting on the equipment in

his former studio, he admitted that, while not top-tier, it proved entirely sufficient and was more than adequate for producing quality music when paired with skill and dedication. As he put it, “it all depends on how you work with what you have.

Richard stated that the island is home to many musically gifted individuals, making talent scouting unnecessary – there is never a shortage of people eager to make music, yet the number of projects he can take on remains limited. Often, he has to turn away interested artists and refer them to other facilities. As an outsider living among the Malagasy people and collaborating with them daily, Richard



Figure 4
Interview with Richard Falce.
Note. Photo by Jakub Kopaniecki.

considers their financial constraints to be the most fundamental challenge. At every stage of music production – from purchasing instruments to covering production costs, advertising, and distribution – funding shortages present a major obstacle. Another serious difficulty comes from frequent power outages on the island, which pose a constant risk of losing material. The lack of stable energy infrastructure has forced him to postpone plans to open a music studio on Île aux Nattes, as setting it up independently would require an exorbitant investment.

Richard values collaborations with Malagasy artists and describes them in a highly positive manner. He appreciates their musicality, professionalism, and relaxed yet enthusiastic approach to work. However, he also notes that the absence of formal musical education

– particularly in tonal harmony – sometimes leads to mismatched vocal arrangements, which can be problematic in studio productions meant for radio distribution. Richard believes that introducing music education on the island would significantly streamline the process of creating new songs, as Malagasy artists often have to learn technical aspects during production that European musicians typically master beforehand.

The producer also touched on the issue of piracy, assessing it as largely negative, though with some complexities. Artists receive no protection despite the formal existence of copyright laws and an organization representing creators. Illegal distribution channels and widespread music sharing via USB drives have rendered the CD and DVD business entirely unprofitable, while streaming services generate almost no revenue in Madagascar. Live performances remain the sole source of income for musicians, yet even those come with very modest payouts. Despite his opposition to piracy – believing that musicians deserve to earn from their craft and talent – Richard acknowledges that it has played a crucial role in Fafass’ rise to fame. Widespread unauthorized sharing has cemented his client’s

place in Malagasy playlists and even brought him to the attention of the Ministry of Culture. While strongly against illegal distribution, Richard accepts the reality of the situation, admitting that change is unlikely anytime soon.

5. Hanitrarivo Rasoanaivo vel Hanitra (band Tarika Be)

31 July 2024, Antananarivo

Rasoanaivo Hanitrarivo is a charismatic artist living in Madagascar’s capital, who rose to fame as a member of Tarika, Malagasy music group that gained worldwide recognition in the 1990s. She currently performs with Tarika Be, a group established to continue the legacy of the legendary Malagasy ensemble with brand new music material. She also runs Antshow Madagascar, Malagasy Arts and Cultural Centre in Antananarivo – a community center and guest house funded by her own efforts. In an extensive, multi-hour conversation, Rasoanaivo provided insight into over three decades of stage performance and widespread recognition that extended far beyond her home island. She shared her experiences on the local music scene, as well as the realities of building a career abroad, reflecting on her journey as a Malagasy woman and artist.

A pivotal moment in Hanitra’s life came in the early 90s, when she moved to London to work at the Malagasy embassy. During a vacation, her sister Rahaimalala visited, and the two would often sing together – music was a natural part of their lives, woven into various daily activities. Familiar melodies helped ease the deep longing for home, their sacred land of Madagascar. One day, while performing casually in the streets, women were approached by a BBC producer who had never encountered such music before. Intrigued, he proposed recording and broadcasting their singing, as Malagasy sounds were absent from the Western music scene at that time. Just a week after the program aired, news came that the segment had caused a sensation – viewers overwhelmed the station with inquiries about the talented sisters.

Despite initial hesitation about pursuing a professional music career – Hanitrarivo feared losing her well-paid job¹⁵ – the sisters agreed to produce a single album. As it turned out, this was only the beginning. Over two decades, Tarika released 40 albums and toured extensively, particularly in the U.S. and Europe. In 2001, „Time” magazine listed the band among the “10 best bands on the planet Earth”¹⁶. At the height of their popularity, following the 9–11 attacks, Tarika withdrew from long touring schedules, choosing to return to Madagascar to spend more time with loved ones. However, just a few years later, in 2005, they resumed performing – though at a much slower pace. Hanitra continues to make music today with a new musician lineup and repertoire.

¹⁵ Hanitra recalled that, at first, the family of sisters was deeply skeptical about their choice of career. The idea that anyone could make a living from music seemed implausible to them. To their minds, singing was simply a natural part of life, something everyone did, making it hard to grasp why someone else would want to pay for it.

¹⁶ For more information on the origins and activities of the band Tarika, see: Romero A. (2018).

The musical style of Tarika (now Tarika Be), as Hanitra put it, “grew up with them”. The group blends ethnic sounds and traditional Malagasy elements, adapting them for a global audience. The vocalist does not shy away from addressing significant themes and is deeply invested in topics such as the status of African women, environmental issues, climate change, politics, corruption and war. These messages are conveyed through uplifting musical tones – sometimes lively and danceable, at other times melancholic – using rhythms rooted in traditional Malagasy music and a vibrant instrumental palette. Hanitra embeds deep reflections and complex lessons into her lyrics through euphemisms and metaphors. For example, instead of stating, “I am very sad,” she might express the emotion through phrases like, “The birds have flown home”, “The cold has arrived”, or “The sky is full of gray”.

The Art Center founded by Hanitarivo stands as a unique institution on the island, is a deeply personal project into which the artist has invested considerable time and financial resources. The center attracts musicians from all over Madagascar, showcasing a diverse range of musical styles, from traditional and popular Malagasy sounds to Western genres like blues and jazz. This place is more than just a cultural venue with guest rooms – it was envisioned as a hub for human connection, a place for exchanging ideas and enjoying time together. The center provides Malagasy artists with opportunities for musical growth, career development and exposure to the works of fellow musicians¹⁷.



Figure 5

Tarika Be performing at the Art Center in Antananarivo.

Note. Photo by Łukasz Smoluch.

¹⁷ Many of Hanitra’s fellow citizens still struggle to grasp the purpose of a cultural center like hers. Even today, she encounters questions about why she doesn’t simply rent out the space for a shopping mall instead. According to the artist, awareness of Madagascar’s fading cultural heritage and its invaluable role in shaping national identity remains limited within society.

The artist shared insights into the struggles faced by Malagasy musicians. Years ago, at the beginning of her music career, achieving success and making a living seemed considerably easier; at that time talents were actively scouted by representatives of record labels. However, with the decline of thousands of small studios in favor of industry monopolists, opportunities have become scarce for aspiring artists. Streaming platforms also came under the artist's criticism – despite Tarika's presence online, to date neither the band nor any of its members have received financial support from global platforms like Spotify or YouTube. The same applies to Madagascar's creator association, which Hanitra joined more than a decade ago.

Like Richard Falce, the artist raised concerns about frequent power outages, which disrupt the work of musicians and producers alike. She also addressed piracy, an issue in Madagascar that has reached an unprecedented scale. As she stated, though no performer explicitly supports unauthorized distribution, most reluctantly accept it as the only viable path to wider recognition. According to Hanitra, change seems unlikely without a shift in societal attitudes and intervention at the national level. Unfortunately, copyright enforcement remains a low priority in a country struggling with numerous pressing issues.

Due to this, securing funding for artistic initiatives, structured educational programs and cultural heritage preservation is unattainable for most musicians, even those as accomplished as Rasoanarivo. Despite her international acclaim, no institutional backing has been provided to support and assist her initiative in promoting Malagasy heritage, which she believes is gradually disappearing. Her courage at addressing difficult and sometimes controversial themes in the form of music, led to years of unfavorable treatment from authorities.

Looking back on the highs and lows of life abroad, Hanitra recalled gaining enormous popularity. Yet, she also faced racism and sexism. The artist described the music industry at the time as being “run by young, white men”. As an African woman, she struggled against condescension and dismissive attitudes. After two years, she chose to leave the label and return home permanently, summing up that chapter of her life with a smile. “Music was sacred to me – it wasn't about ‘Give me lots of money, and I'll do whatever you want.’ I preferred to return to Madagascar and eat rice”.

Challenges don't deter the musicians for whom art is an inseparable part of life. Tarika Be regularly performs in small venues across the capital, using online platforms to actively participate in what Hanitra calls the “new game”. Her strong sense of determination comes from a spiritual connection to performing and a life philosophy deeply rooted in Malagasy beliefs: she is convinced that every life is guided by a greater force leading the way. Being aware of many moments of good fortune and favorable circumstances, she never hesitated to seize opportunities or invest in her craft. Now, Hanitrarivo helps others reach their own milestones, acknowledging that the market has become increasingly competitive with growth of AI technology and other software advancements. Moreover, securing collaborations with producers tied to major music corporations is an ongoing challenge.

The band has ambitious artistic plans, including a European tour. In 2020, Tarika Be was fully prepared to travel, but the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted

the arrangements. While restrictions have lifted and international travel is once again possible, costs have highly increased and many pre-pandemic events were cancelled with no plans for revival. Nevertheless, the group continues its efforts to bring Malagasy sounds to new audiences across the world.

Final remarks

Conversations referenced in the paper, along with numerous interviews conducted with other performers during the research expedition, have helped to identify the most significant problems of the artists in the northeastern part of Madagascar. The most pressing issue remains economic hardship, with high levels of poverty and even extreme deprivation among citizens. Madagascar ranks among the poorest countries in the world¹⁸; many artists struggle to secure basic necessities, let alone access materials for their craft or funds for promotion. Frequent power outages only add to the difficulties. Many are forced to take on multiple side jobs to ensure financial sustainability. Releasing new songs does not guarantee financial prospects. Although popular and widely enjoyed, Malagasy music does not generate profits due to rampant piracy across Madagascar.

Moreover, low purchasing power and economic instability in society push artistic interests and preserving the cultural heritage lower on people's priorities. There is a lack of early educational initiatives for children as well as institutional support for cultural programs. As a result, younger generations start to lose touch with tradition and increasingly look abroad for musical inspirations. Various political issues contribute to this state of affairs: corruption, nepotism, mismanagement of public funds, instability linked to government changes and military coups and a general lack of institutional transparency and support. These topics were not readily discussed by interviewees; cautiously posed questions on such matters were either left unanswered or met with vague responses, likely due to disinterest, concerns over safety or a lack of hope for meaningful change.

During three weeks of expedition, our research group encountered countless individuals whose lives are deeply intertwined with music. Among them were church choirs composed of both children and adults, members of local rural bands, musicians entertaining crowded bars in the capital, traveling performers selling CDs of their songs alongside handmade seashell jewelry. Many play on handcrafted instruments, often built from readily available materials and repurposed everyday objects like wood, roofing sheets, empty deodorant cans, paint tins, and fragments of glass, all creatively transformed into tools of musical expression. Music adds

¹⁸ Numerous international organizations continuously raise alarms about the humanitarian crisis in Madagascar, driven by climate change, natural disasters, food and water shortages, high inflation, and devastating political decisions. The country faces a high illiteracy rate, with many citizens living in extreme poverty despite the island's wealth of natural resources and potential of tourism development. These hardships contribute to rising crime rates. In rural areas, extreme poverty occurs at twice the rate observed in urban regions. For further information, see: Victor Sulla, *The World Bank* (2014); *Doctors of the World* (updated in 2025); *Madagascar Crisis Response Plan 2024* (2024); „*The Economist*” (2021).

vibrancy to their routines, serves as an occasion for gathering and joyful celebration with friends. Malagasy people form tight-knit communities, strengthening social bonds, sharing time, supporting one another through hardships, and collectively navigating life's challenges. At the same time, it preserves the cultural heritage of the region – traditions rich in sound, movement, and color.



Figure 6

Viay Mitambatra Ifotatra – “Ifotatra Women Community”, a group uniting the residents of a small village on Sainte-Marie. The women perform various traditional songs and dances from the island. The photo depicts a dance incorporating a fishing basket.
Note. Photo by Joanna Kwapien.

Life in the northeastern regions of Madagascar – known for having far better living conditions than the south plagued by natural disasters – may still appear, to an outsider, as being dominated by concerns over meeting basic needs. The island's future remains uncertain, largely shaped by forces beyond the control of its inhabitants, with the understanding that everything can change overnight. Yet, Malagasy artists have shown that they navigate the hardships of existence with resilience, perceiving their fate and daily lives in a positive light. Fully aware of the limitations stemming from their country's economic, political, and social landscape, they find ways to maneuver within this reality.

Determined and resourceful individuals, open to various income opportunities and willing to work hard – even without political connections or wealthy backgrounds – can still achieve success at local, national, and even international levels. Conversations, however, reveal a bittersweet truth: without affiliations or financial backing, sheer luck and being in the right place at the right time often determine one's chances. If great opportunities fail to materialize or fortune suddenly takes a downturn after a period of success, one must adapt, accept the shift, and move forward. Some may resign themselves to a more passive approach to life, while others seek new paths and solutions.



Figure 7

Mitory An-kira Zagnahary – “preaching God through song”. Two choirs—one for children and one for youth—have been active since 2018, established at the Parish of Our Lady of Lourdes in Toamasina. Note. Photo by Joanna Kwapien.

Hanitrarivo summarized this philosophy well. When asked about overcoming challenges of life, she offered a simple perspective on behalf of the Malagasy people: “Go with the flow.” In her view, destiny is fluid and open to creation; many doors remain shut, but others open in their place. The key is allowing oneself to be guided by life’s currents, staying attentive, and responding positively to opportunities, whatever they may be. It is undoubtedly a lesson worth remembering and incorporating into one’s own life in these times of immense pressure, relentless competition, and the ever-present uncertainty about tomorrow – a challenge that societies across the world must navigate each day.

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