Research project at the

Centre for Advanced Studies "Multiple Secularities", University Leipzig

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Negotiating the Boundaries of the Secular State Project on Madagascar: The Trend towards Institutionalization and Heritagization of *"fihavanana gasy"* (Malagasy solidarity) since Independence (1960)

Abstract: The ambition of my ongoing research is to elaborate how the secular state on Madagascar, principally a French colonial legacy, is subject to a long-standing dynamic of change, linked, among others, to a discourse of a normativity of—religiously fraught—Malagasiness. I will work out, based on an important corpus of recently established empiric and qualitative data as well as historical research, a monograph describing how the long-standing fear that old and fundamental values might be lost and should therefore be strengthened is laying the ground to a more recent dynamic of institutionalization and heritagization of Malagasy solidarity (*fihavanana gasy*), with the 2013 created constitutional entity "Council of Fampihavanana Gasy" (CFM; Council of Malagasy Solidarity) as the most visible result. This ongoing dynamic, again, reshapes the particularity and the boundaries of Malagasy secularity due to the increasing dissolution of a clear frontier between the secular and religious on Madagascar.

Introduction

The research project presented aims to uncover, in a first explicit study, the main characteristics of Malagasy secularity by studying a long-term tendency towards creating increasingly ambiguous boundaries between the secular and religious. A main focus will be on the normative idea of "Malagasy solidarity" (i.e., of the morality of consent and mutual respect on all levels of society). This idea developed in the context of opposition to French colonialism and colonial secular state and later became (and until today) a main pillar of Malagasy identity, pride, and common sense. It is linked to long-standing pre-colonial religious beliefs of unity (*aina*) and of individual sacred distinction (*hasina*). My main hypothesis is that the introduction of European (modern) secular practices were (and are) interpreted in an emic Malagasy view as "power not under control of transcendental forces," creating a multitude of new cultural responses and dynamics, including attempts to link secularity and sacrality. While the diverse attempts to re-integrate sacrality within a transcendental Malagasy world view (and to control it) necessarily fail due to the autonomy and speed of the new secular movements, the efforts and practices invented visibly change Malagasy society and are about to create a distinct form of "Malagasy secularity."

The process of secularization on Madagascar

In 1861, the newly enthroned King Radama II, ruler of the island-dominating kingdom of Merina, decided to open up his country to European secular and (Christian) religious influence, which was a step overthrowing the strict conservative, isolationist and anti-European politics of his mother and predecessor Queen Ranavalona I. This sudden step rebuffed the main part of the population and provoked violent responses, leading finally in 1863 to the killing of King Radama II by a mighty coalition within the elite that felt threatened by the new king's politics. Among the various reactions to the new politics of King Radama II, the so-called epidemy of "*ramanenjana*" (the rigids) appears especially significant (Allier 1912). Those recognizable as affected by the *ramanenjana* were essentially people possessed by royal spirits, mainly slaves, arriving from many parts of the country in Antananarivo, the capital. They performed a particular kind of dance and pretended to be sent by the former Queen Ranavalona I (and other ancient kings), who were said to be opposed to the changes of her former political decisions, requesting that King Radama II resign. Without going into further details, a main feature appears—secularization was perceived in parts of the Malagasy population as a fundamental threat to a culture that builds heavily upon the authority of sacred or transcendental beings, including the reigning dynasty and royal ancestors (Raison-Jourde 1991: 269–275). The fear generated led (and leads until today) to actions aiming to re-install or to re-valorize the endangered principle of sacredness. The original reaction in 1863 foreshadowed the later dynamic to come, once secularization became installed as a central new principle of society in the context of the French Conquest of 1896 and the erection of a colonial regime.

While minor elements of secular practices, linked and not linked to Europeans, most probably were already existent in different spheres in pre-colonial Madagascar, it is, apart from a few indications, difficult to be more precise; no systematic studies on this topic are available. The general picture of Madagascar in the centuries before colonial times is clearly that of a cultural horizon deeply dominated by a sacred interpretation of the cosmos, following, for example, the strong dynamic towards the creation of kingdoms, whose sovereigns and dynasties were perceived as part of a transcendent world (Raison-Jourde 1991: 77–112). A main exception, and probably the starting point of Malagasy secularization, was the reign of King Radama I (1810–1828), ruler of the very dynamic and expansionist kingdom of Merina in central Madagascar. He opened up his country to European know-how as a way to become independent from the complex aspirations power of local elites for power, which was hidden behind the sacred facade of ritual practices (Kneitz 1996). The development of early literature in Madagascar due to the new politics of King Radama I allowed for growing access to a diversity of secular European philosophic and socioeconomic ideas (Gabriel Rantoandro, personal information).

The main breakthrough of the secular world on Madagascar was the later erection of French colonial power (1896–1960), which abruptly negated any political legitimacy to the hitherto sacred authority of kings and transformed the former practices of legitimizing power related to the transcendental world into a "pure" religious act (Kneitz 2003: 57–78). The secular state project installed became a European legacy for the independent Malagasy Republic. While the coherence of the national state in nearly six decades of independence was never at stake, a strong popular dynamic of the valorization of what is perceived as original Malagasy values slowly started to change or to transform the boundaries between the secular and religious.

Towards the institutionalization and heritagization of Malagasy solidarity

One of the main normative notions in contemporary Madagascar is the term "*fihavanana*," literally meaning "making of kinship," but usually used in the sense of "solidarity" or "mutual respect" (Kneitz 2016a: 25). On all levels of society, the idea of *fihavanana*, and more particularly "*fihavanana gasy*" (Malagasy solidarity), is regularly remembered and evoked as a central idea of morality (e.g., in the context of a family or neighborhood meeting or within periods of local or national crisis) (Kneitz 2016b, Kneitz *in press-c*; see as well contribution in Kneitz eds. 2016). The idea of *fihavanana* includes several religious aspects, such as the idea of a basic unity of life (*aina*) between all members of a given *fihavanana*-group and the intrinsic authority (*hasina*) of those personalities chosen to resolve conflicts (Bloch 1986) and to thereby re-install *fihavanana*.

The invention of this idea as a pillar of national identity and pride started during colonial times, as a means to re-discover one's own originality in times of French cultural dominion but was intensified later in the period of decolonization. Slowly, a process of institutionalization and heritagization started, leading in the 1990s to the inscription of *fihavanana* as an essential Malagasy value into the constitution, and more recently, in 2013, to the establishment of a new kind of constitutional institution called the "Council of Famipihavanana Malagasy" (CFM, Council of Malagasy Reconciliation). The tasks of this special "*gasy*" institutional structure are including the mediation of present conflicts on local, regional and national levels. For example, the CFM was working towards conciliation of the political crisis in the context of the presidential election of 2018. The CFM tasks included further the negotiation of amnesty for politicians, the elaboration of a strategy towards the refoundation and reconciliation of the nation, or, more recently, the preparation of an application to propose "*fihavanana gasy*" (Malagasy solidarity) as an immaterial cultural heritage within the heritage lists of the UNESCO, i.e. of the United Nations Educations, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Razafindrakoto 2015, Kneitz 2016a, Kneitz *in press-b*).

The increasing importance of the normativity of *fihavanana* within the secular Malagasy state and of the CFM institution (as it is hypothesized) should be understood as the latest result of a long-established negotiation of the place of secularization on Madagascar. The arriving of secularization, including the secular state as a particularly pertinent structure, provoked a new kind of dynamic—an orientation and invention of what is perceived nowadays as original Malagasy, urging further integration of these values as part of the secular structures on Madagascar. A clear-cut distinction between the secular and religious, as favored by European secularity, becomes thereby increasingly difficult.

State of the art and my ongoing research

The particularities of the historical dynamic of secularization on Madagascar has never been studied in a systematic and explicit way. However, innumerable historical and anthropological studies have inevitably touched, directly or indirectly, elements of secularization on Madagascar, the socio-cultural responses to it, or are giving clue to trends (Feeley-Harnik 1991, Raison-Jourde 1991, Cole 2001, Galibert 2009, Raison-Jourde and Roy 2010).

Since 2010, I've been working on the topic of the normativity of *fihavanana* (Malagasy solidarity) inspired, at first, by the observation of an extraordinary turn from war to peace on Madagascar since colonization. In a first step, I studied local conflict solution processes within the district of Besalampy on the west coast (2010–2013), as part of a DFG funded project on "The 'peaceful' postcolonial state" (Kneitz 2016a, 2016b, Kneitz 2016 ed.). A second research period on this topic was financed by the Marie-Curie-Action within the EU Horizon 2020 research program ("The dynamics of solidarity on Madagascar", 2016–2020). This time, I gathered empiric and mainly qualitative data on the institution "Council of Fampihavanana Gasy", on village conventions and vigilantes, and on the difficult political process leading to the presidential election of 2018 (Kneitz *in press-a*, *in press-b*, *in press-c*).

A main finding throughout these investigations was the discovery of the importance of a deep conservative impetus on Madagascar, effecting the sociocultural evolution on Madagascar in many ways, including the establishment of a morality based upon what is seen nowadays as "truly" Malagasy concepts of solidarity and respect, allowing, among others, to explain the above mentioned turn in the 20th century towards consent and the avoidance of physical violence. A more silent subtext of the valorization of Malagasy values is the often unformulated and indirect critic on modernization or secularization, provoking a dynamic to adapt and to change the secular Malagasy state by the integration of elements of Malagasiness.

Fellowship objectives

The central objective of my fellowship is to finish a manuscript of a scheduled monograph on "The dynamics of solidarity on Madagascar," elaborating the sketched results in a systematic way. My work is based on the hypothesis that the arrival of secularity triggered a new sociocultural dynamic—an orientation to the Malagasy past and the conscious elaboration of Malagasy identity. The negotiation and discussion of related ideas, as well as the sociocultural changes they provoked (and provoke), are an important part of a process that reworks and adapts the boundaries of the special Malagasy secularity, as it developed in 20th century.

Main objectives of the fellowship are:

(1) to describe the complex historic process of secularization and sociocultural change within the Malagasy society since the 19th century;

(2) to elaborate the special dynamic linked to the notion of Malagasy solidarity (*fihavanana gasy*) until today;

(3) to use the important corpus of empiric and qualitative data collected since 2010 for establishing case studies on the ongoing negotiation of the boundaries between secularity and religion, based upon the trends of institutionalization and heritagization of *fihavanana*.

An additional short stay (two-three weeks) on Madagascar during the fellowship might be useful for specific research question.

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