

LYRDV-2004

Lyrichord Discs and Multicultural Media Present

The Presence of the Past
Madagascar, Music, and Devotion
Notes on DVD and audio examples
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This project results from ethnographic research performed from 1993 through 1995, which centered upon connections between musical practice, spirit possession, recollecting the past, and the colonial era in Madagascar. The majority of this research occurred in the east coast Tamatave region of Madagascar, in both urban sites in the town of Tamatave-ville itself, as well as in outlying rural villages throughout this region. The video scenes presented here were shot originally on Hi8 videotape. The sound recordings were made with a Sony analog TCD5M cassette tape recorder and two Sennheiser MKH-40 condenser microphones. Photographs (represented as still frames throughout the video) were taken with a 1970s Minolta SRT-101 35mm SLR camera.

Madagascar is a large and diverse island, located in the Indian Ocean approximately 250 miles off the east coast of Africa. There are typically 18-20 distinct regional groups delineated for and in Madagascar. Distinctions between groups are based largely upon linguistic, historical, spiritual, and musical factors, as well as upon variances in means of subsistence. Perhaps half of the population of Madagascar (itself estimated to be 19 million people) espouses some form of Christian or Islamic belief. Other Malagasy believe in and practice *tromba* (in the Malagasy language, the letter "o" here sounds like the "ou" in "you"), a devotional practice that involves ancestral reverence and spirit possession. It is important to note that in tromba ceremony, Malagasy spirit mediums become possessed not by deities, but by the spirits of humans—often spirits of royal Malagasy that wielded power on the island prior to the colonial

period.¹ In addition, tromba practice varies in form, procedure, and by musical distinction across different Malagasy groups throughout the island. Even among Christian or Muslim Malagasy some amount of belief in ancestral spirits is often maintained, even if manifest as fear of or repulsion toward these spirits. Many Christian Malagasy also still take part in performances of *famadihana* or *tsaboraha* ceremonies, in which spirit reverence is integral.

Tromba ceremony is focally a healing practice, for tromba spirits have the knowledge and power to successfully treat numerous bodily and even psychic ailments. Yet these ceremonies are multifaceted—tromba spirits also intercede in daily problems and disputes, advise the living on paths to take and decisions to make, and provide the foundation for a devotional system and practice with a long history in Madagascar. In its capacity to reinvigorate the past, tromba ceremony may provide a means, in the postcolony, with which to come to terms with a past that has commonly been inequitable on global as well as other terms. Malagasy people may also encode and dramatize in tromba ceremony many other facets of their lived experience, including their particular relationships with other Malagasy or with foreigners, and their opinions of political issues, both at home and *ampitany* (literally, “out there,” or overseas).

Many of the most powerful tromba spirits are those of Sakalava royalty from the north and northwest of the island. These tromba represent powerful precolonial kingdoms that ruled large regions of Madagascar prior to the colonial era. Yet, when these tromba spirits visit Malagasy in the Tamatave region, for example, they become distant, powerful, invasive (though usually beneficial) foreigners here among local Betsimisaraka or Antandroy tromba mediums. Thus tromba practice relies upon, among many other things, the incorporation and internalization of non-localized, perceptually foreign power.

Tromba practice enacts unique perceptions of time and of the past. Several distinct temporal moments may converge in a tromba ceremony. For one, the royal court of an ancient queen or king is resurrected in the present

¹ Madagascar was officially taken over as a French colony in 1896, though there had been much prior French, and earlier British, involvement there. Madagascar became an independent nation in 1960.

moment, so that ancient personalities interact with the living. Here the tromba house becomes a multi-temporal space that conflates ancient court and everyday Malagasy dwelling. While kings, queens, and their attendants interact with the living as well as with each other, an array of other, less powerful tromba spirits, including deceased family members and colonial era personalities, may simultaneously enter into this space. Thus tromba ceremony may conflate numerous varied temporal moments and places into a sentient combinative present, merging multiple times, personalities, and situations.

While many sensual qualities imbue a tromba ceremony and contribute to its affect, among the people with whom I have worked in the Tamatave region, live musical performance is vital to such ceremonies. Ancestral spirits must be coaxed, appeased, and cajoled into appearing in the present—they typically do not arrive simply of their own volition.² They will make their desire to possess a particular potential medium known largely in the dreams of this person, who must then arrange an elaborate tromba ceremony in which she or he will become the desirous tromba's medium for the first time, and will continue to be a medium for this spirit for life. Royal tromba each have a particular specialized composition to which they will arrive. Musical compositions must be performed with the appropriate intensity, tempo, and improvisational activity, as well as with vigorous *kaiamba* shaker accompaniment, to appeal to ancestral spirits. The musical mix must be densely textured, with many accompanying and even ambient sounds occurring, such as the sounds of humans interacting, singing, making benedictions to the ancestral spirits, and joking amongst themselves.

² This facet of tromba practice may bring into question the Lutheran exorcism practices viewed in Video Segment 7, in which attempts are made to dispel aggressive spirits from mediums' bodies.

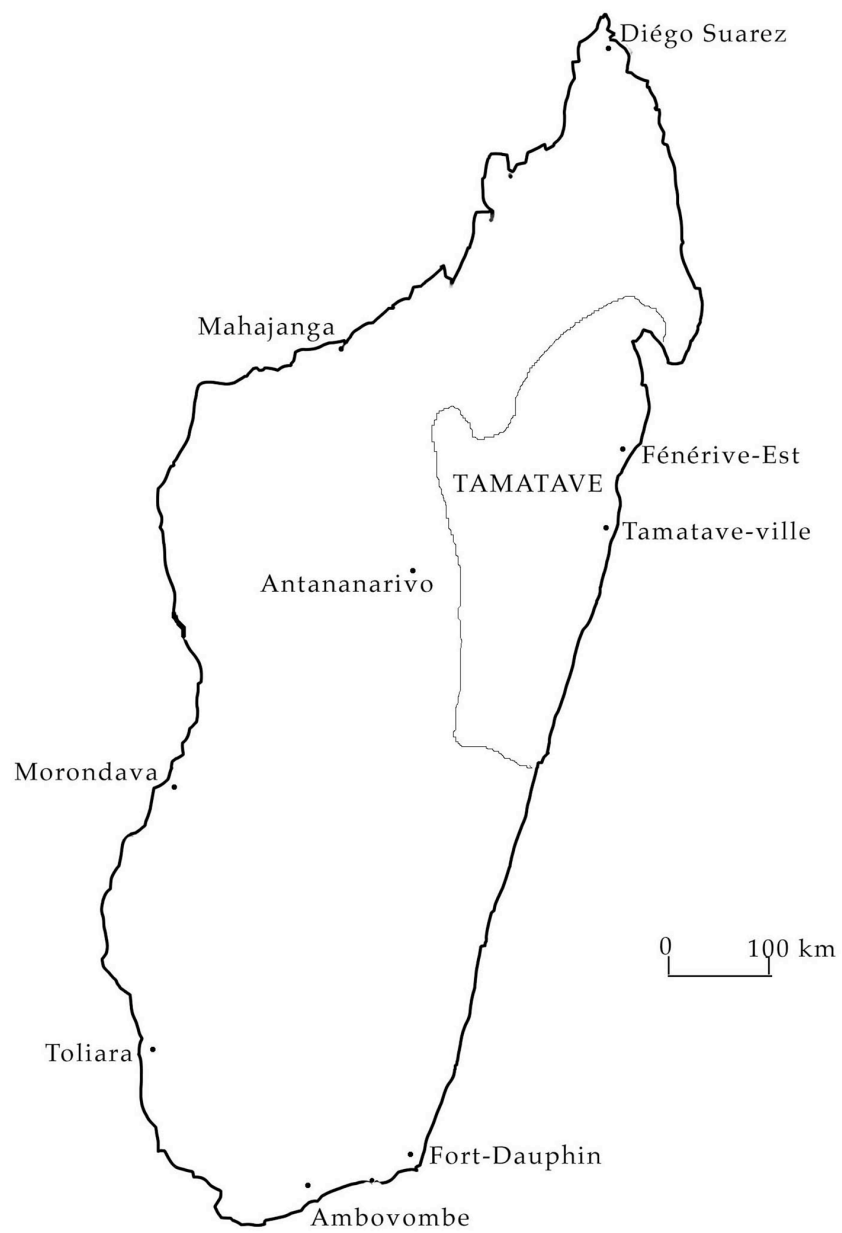


Figure 1: Map of Madagascar.



Video Segment 1

(2:10-6:10)

Basesa

The Betsimisaraka people comprise a large east coast group predominant in the Tamatave region of Madagascar. The port town of Tamatave-ville has been the point of entry and settlement for varied foreign visitors to the island throughout the past and into the present, including European missionaries, Chinese merchants, Muslim Indian traders, early pirates of varied nationality, and French colonials. Thus, Betsimisaraka people typically are accustomed to considerable contact with foreigners.

Performing in Video Segment 1 is the family of Roger Jean Louis (who plays the accordion behind the dancers). At the time Roger is caretaker of the President's summer residence in Tamatave-ville. He and his family live in a small servant's quarters on the periphery of the grounds of this residence. Roger and his family comprise one of the only large troupes in Tamatave-ville that still performs traditional Betsimisaraka music and dance in ceremonial dress, as viewed in this scene. This is a public festival performance occurring on the beach of the Indian Ocean just in front of the Port of Tamatave (off frame to the right).

The 2-row Hohner diatonic button accordion, the "Corso" model, is popular among Betsimisaraka people. Accordions were introduced into Madagascar in the late 19th century, and were available for commercial sale or

trade by the first decade of the 20th century. Currently, new accordions are difficult to find or are prohibitively expensive, thus many accordions performed upon throughout Madagascar are old and worn.

The name for the music and dance genre seen in this segment, “*basesa*,” derives from the French colonial era negative evaluation of Betsimisaraka performance practices, “*quelle bassesse!*” or “how primitive, lowly, worthless,” etc. Betsimisaraka understood this French linguistic derogation, yet they cleverly turned its meaning around in adopting the term as a Betsimisaraka one, thus taking it on as the name for their own beloved music and dance.

As mentioned later in the video, non-tromba basesa differs in form and process from that of music specifically for tromba ceremony. In Track 1, Roger Jean Louis and his family perform an instrumental version of “Tananané Tanana Tamatave,” My Homeland, Tamatave (Tamatave is the colonial name for this town and region, *Toamasigna* the Malagasy/Betsimisaraka one—both are commonly still used). In non-tromba basesa, such as that for *tsaboraha* sacrificial ceremonies (seen in Video Segment 5), a composition consists of two sections. One of these is a replicated melodic phrase/motif that in part identifies the composition, makes it memorable, and distinguishes it from others. Then, the accordionist diverges from this melodic phrase, to improvise at length, thus to create entirely new musical material. After sometimes many minutes of improvisation the accordionist returns to the composition’s main melodic phrase/motif. On Audio Track 1, improvisational sections occur, for example, at 1:25 and 2:50. Such improvisational divergences may occur numerous times in the performance of one composition.

Tromba compositions among Betsimisaraka (as well as other Malagasy) consist of the melodic phrase/motif section only. This fundamental melodic phrase of the composition tends to be shorter in duration than in non-tromba basesa. Yet, in tromba compositions the musician does improvise, in this case in subsequent articulations of the basic melodic phrase itself (this mode of improvisation can be heard on Audio Track 3). In addition, the repertoire of compositions for tromba ceremony is distinct from that for non-tromba events such as *tsaboraha* or public festivals.



Video Segment 2

(6:11-9:24)

Sodina/famadihana

Merina people, from the central part of Madagascar, are well known for performing *famadihana* ceremonies, in which the remains of recently deceased family members are unearthed, celebrated with physically as well as spiritually, and eventually re-placed into the familial tomb. Days of music and dance may occur prior to the actual unearthing of the remains. The musicians continue to perform as the remains are unearthed, delicately and lovingly rewrapped in ceremonial *lamba* cloths, danced with and spoken to, and finally placed into the familial tomb, to be elevated to the status of *razana*, a term that refers to the collective of Malagasy ancestral spirits.³

The *sodina*, an end-blown flute with 6 finger holes and one thumb hole underneath, in the past was made from bamboo. More recently plastic or metal tubing—unlike bamboo impervious to the effects of change in humidity and temperature (bamboo contracts or expands with such changes, thus altering the

³ While the family of the deceased willfully allowed me to film this *famadihana* ceremony, I have chosen not to include scenes of the unearthing of the remains and the interactions of the living with them here, primarily to preserve the private sanctity of this moment for the family members.

sodina's hole spacing and tuning)—has been used to construct the instrument. The sodina has no mouthpiece—sound is created by forcing air at an angle across the open tube. Among Merina people several sodina are often played in ensemble in a complex contrapuntal texture, heard in the video.

On Audio Track 2, Rakoto Frah (since deceased), seen in Video Segment 2, performs a solo version of *Afindrafindrao*, a composition that accompanies what is sometimes referred to as “the national dance of Madagascar.” Notably, the drums used in Video Segment 2 are colored in red, white, and blue, the colors of the French flag. Among other Malagasy, the Merina are commonly said to have been the most aggressive in pursuing relationships and aligning themselves in other ways with French colonials on Madagascar (while Betsimisaraka, for example, are better known for their part in the 1947 insurrection against the French).⁴

⁴ Thus, while Betsimisaraka may be more accustomed to foreign contact, as suggested earlier, this is not to say that they have dealt with such contact without opposition.



Video Segment 3

(9:25-22:02)

Betsimisaraka

tromba ceremony

The woman performing on accordion here is named Jily (from Julianne). While Malagasy women may become musicians for devotional ceremonies, they do so less frequently than men. Jily is a very popular tromba musician throughout the Tamatave region, and she is commonly hired to perform for ceremonies both in town and in the villages throughout the Tamatave countryside.

Betsimisaraka tromba ceremony commonly becomes, in comparison to Antandroy tromba in Tamatave-ville (to be addressed momentarily), a highly animated and effusive event, with many different mediums becoming possessed simultaneously by many different tromba spirits (themselves from differing time periods and social statuses). In these ceremonies there is often much interaction between tromba spirits themselves, as well as much engagement between them and the living. Betsimisaraka tromba adherents commonly say that tromba spirits desire, even demand much interaction with other tromba spirits. Evidence gathered from my ethnographic research (based primarily on the narratives of older Malagasy in the countryside of the Tamatave region) suggests

that Betsimisaraka throughout the past, even in rural areas, were well aware of the boisterous *bals* (dances) thrown frequently by French “*administrateurs*” during the colonial era (often with accordion accompaniment and the display of colonially popular French dance forms such as the *valse*). Such colonial performance practices, embedded in the memories of numerous elder Betsimisaraka, might likely have as well influenced the aesthetics of Betsimisaraka performance practices (for elaboration and supporting evidence, see Emoff 2002a).⁵

In Audio Track 3 one hears Jily perform the replicated melodic phrase with internal alteration typical of tromba compositions. The proper execution of such phrase-internal alteration yields *maresaka*, not only an aesthetic for musical performance but a performative quality (and quantity) that determines the efficaciousness of a spirit ceremony, for one, as tromba spirits may not even appear if they are not coaxed with musical performance resplendent with the proper musical acuity. The composition on Audio Track 3 is entitled, “*Hira taona*,” Tempting Song, a title that connotes the composition’s (and musician’s) own power to entice particular tromba spirits to appear in the present moment.

As does much other Malagasy music, Malagasy ceremonial music relies upon a sense of a tripartite rhythm in which groups of 6, 3, and 2 pulses combine. On Audio Track 3, one may hear the triple meter-like component of this complex rhythm being kept in the melodic phrase itself (played with the right hand on the accordion), while Jily emphasizes the rapid 6/8 meter-like component with her left hand.⁶

⁵ This is not to suggest that earlier Betsimisaraka simply imitated, or even parodied the colonial masters—the taking in and on of colonial influences was a much more complex matter, also discussed in Emoff 2002a.

⁶ Individual right hand buttons on these accordions yield melodic tones while left hand buttons produce bass and chordal accompaniments.

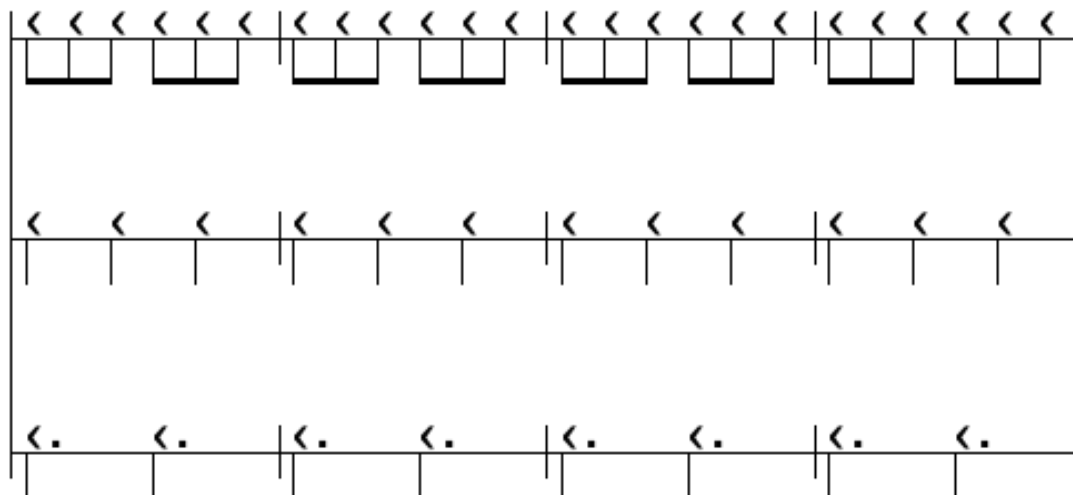


Figure 2: Tripartite rhythmic structure of Malagasy ceremonial music.⁷

Audio Track 4 exemplifies the Betsimisaraka valiha playing of Jean Dedier, who is seen in Video Segment 3 performing for the tromba ceremony in which Sadam Hoseny appears. I discover later that the medium for Sadam Hoseny, Honorine, has a small black and white tv on which she views, very sporadically (due to lack of a power source or strong tv signal), images of Saddam Hussein, who at the time is embroiled in the Gulf War with the elder George Bush. Most tromba spirits have numerous mediums to which they will come (though to only one at a time). Hoseny is unique in that he comes only to Honorine, to no other mediums that I encounter throughout Madagascar.

⁷ In Western musical terminology, “hemiola” refers to the simultaneous use of triple and duple meter, which thus creates in part a syncopation of rhythmic pulses. Malagasy do not use this term to describe their tripartite rhythm, which is distinct from hemiola, for one in its very tripartite structure. In addition, unlike in most uses of hemiola, any of the three component Malagasy metrical configurations may be accentuated in performance by itself, or in any combination with the other two—thus this Malagasy mode of rhythmicity is often unfixed in form, reliant upon improvisation, and subject to the implicit sense of non-occurring components (for even when not overtly accentuated, *all* three rhythmic components are heard or felt in Malagasy musical experience).

Sadam Hoseny becomes in part here a powerful combinative figure, part foreigner, yet central personality among Malagasy royalty. He is also evidence of Honorine's incorporation into her tromba practice of her own personal experiences of and in the world.



Video Segment 4 (22:03-30:33)

Antandroy tromba

Many young Antandroy have migrated from their homeland in the south of Madagascar to Tamatave to seek wage labor. The south is arid, often plagued by drought, and it is commonly very difficult just to subsist there. Antandroy tend to be regarded as very tough, resilient Malagasy people in part for their capacity to survive in such rugged terrain. They are also commonly thought to be very adept in spiritual matters, perhaps even too adept. Thus, Antandroy are often both revered for their strengths but also to varying degrees sometimes feared by other Malagasy people throughout the island.

It is their reputation for toughness and for evoking apprehension that make Antandroy desirable guardians among shop owners in Tamatave. Antandroy spend their nights in front of these shops, a visible sign of power to other Malagasy. These Antandroy commonly make encampments out of refuse, positioned against the walls of the shop they guard, and they live here with their typically large families. In the daytime, they sell fruits, vegetables, and French-style baguettes from these spaces just on the side of the road. At the beginning of Audio Track 9 one may clearly hear the street sounds that occur continually at these roadside sites of much Antandroy music-making. This track features masterful Antandroy accordionist, Magnampy Soa (seen with his twin brother, Very Soa, also a masterful accordionist, in the concluding scene of the video).

Antandroy tromba ceremony is distinct in several ways from that of Betsimisaraka. For one, only one medium becomes possessed at a tromba ceremony of Antandroy in Tamatave-ville, thus no boisterous interaction between varied tromba spirits occurs. Antandroy tromba is much more somber and solemn in mood than the effusive and socially interactive Betsimisaraka tromba practice. As young Antandroy tend to remain tightly bound in small social groups in Tamataville-ville, exclusive of other Malagasy, Antandroy in the past as well tended to retain their insularity in the rugged southern regions of Madagascar—this has encompassed as well insularity from contact with foreigners, including French colonials.

Magnampy Soa and Very Soa have internally altered the reed structure of their accordion (a variant model of 2-row Hohner diatonic accordion, the “Vienna Style” model), so that it no longer produces the “wet”-tuned sound with which it comes from the factory. A wet tuning indicates that a tone is accompanied by a reed or set of reeds tuned just slightly higher or lower in frequency, thus a wavering or tremolo effect is created by very close frequencies interfering with one another. Magnampy Soa and Very Soa replace these wet reeds with either unison or octave pitches, to obtain a “dry” reed effect. They alter the left hand bass and chordal accompaniment buttons on the accordion as well, tuning out the I-IV-V harmonic capacities factory-tuned into these instruments, and replacing these reeds with bass and chord harmonies that allow both chordal ostinato patterns as well as some amount of contrapuntal

accompaniment to be obtained with the left hand. The two brothers explain that this makes the accordion speak in an Antandroy voice—the Betsimisaraka accordion, which remains with wet-tuned reeds and I-IV-V harmonic dominance, is not capable of producing this same communicative voice.

There are several accomplished Antandroy performers upon the Antandroy version of the valiha, the *maro vany* (many strings), in Tamatave-ville. In Video Segment 4, Velontsoa, who also builds highly valued maro vany, performs. Another Antandroy migrant to Tamatave and excellent maro vany player, Miria Soa, may be heard on Audio Track 5. The pine plank body of the Antandroy maro vany gives it a voice quite distinct from that of the sheet metal body Betsimisaraka valiha. In addition, unlike the unraveled individual bicycle brake cable strands used for strings on the Betsimisaraka valiha, Antandroy employ a much thicker industrial cable strand to make strings for the maro vany, which contributes to its unique timbral quality. Antandroy play replicated phrases on the maro vany (also with improvisation in subsequent articulations of the phrase) entirely distinct from those compositions played on Betsimisaraka valiha, and Antandroy instrumental music is typically performed at a much more rapid tempo (notable for one in the rapid tempo kept by the kaiamba shaker).

On Audio Track 7, two young Antandroy women migrants in Tamatave, Toronasy and Vatsimbinee, along with a young Antandroy man, Mandimby Soa, perform a multipart Antandroy song. They are evoking varied ancestral spirits in the song text, making sung benedictions to them. In Antandroy healing songs a similar style of singing is incorporated with a guttural breath-singing style called *ndrimotra*, from the verb *midrimotra*, to heal.



Video Segment 5
(30:34-36:30)
Betsimisaraka
tsaboraha

Ownership of *zébu* cattle is a sign of wealth, prestige, and social status in much of Madagascar. Malagasy periodically perform a *tsaboraha* sacrificial ceremony in which a *zébu* bull is slaughtered, a collective event to honor ancestral spirits. While *tromba* spirit possession typically does not occur at a *tsaboraha* ceremony, the sacrificial act, the consumption of the meat, and the celebrating with much music and dance are all shared with the *razana*, the collective body of ancestral spirits, who attend or experience the proceedings though here in disembodied form. As part of a *tsaboraha* ceremony, elders perform a *kabary*, a lengthy speech about, to, and with the ancestral spirits.

At a Betsimisaraka *tsaboraha* ceremony, *basesa* is commonly performed on accordion and danced by everyone present. Occasionally, an accordionist will play a *valse* (waltz), though as one may observe in Video Segment 5, Malagasy waltz dancing appears rather stiff, imbalanced, perhaps unnatural, while the participants at this ceremony dance the *basesa* with more bodily ease. The appearance of the *valse* in Betsimisaraka repertoires (and *not* in those of Antandroy), may again suggest a differing experience between these groups of

foreign or colonial contact. On Audio Track 6, rural Tamatave accordionist Tsiariagna plays a virtuosic waltz.

In the still frame scene of Video Segment 5, in which differing sections of a basesa are explained and exemplified, the accordionist performs a beloved Betsimisaraka basesa composition, *Viavy Rose, Rosy Woman*.



Video Segment 6
(36:31-41:00)
Fahavoazana

Antandroy who have migrated to Tamatave-ville in search of wage labor commonly experience much longing for their distant homeland and their *havana*, their kin in the south. In the south Antandroy commonly carry silver-tipped hardwood spears for use in herding their zébu cattle though these serve as well as sign of Antandroy power, strength, and social cohesion (the latter of course is disrupted by the need to migrate in search of sustenance). In Video Segment 6, Antandroy spears, typically held and manipulated by dancers during a *fahavoazana*, are replaced by sticks and umbrellas in Tamatave-ville.

Antandroy equate this mode of combined song, dance, and hand-clapping with Christian prayer –“When a Christian dies, the living pray. When an Antandroy dies, we dance.” This performative mix embodies another mode of maresaka, in the complex combining of densely textured sounds, bodily movements, and social interaction that affectively communicates with ancestral spirits (as well as with the lamenting living who overhear these activities and obtain strength from them, as explained in this video segment).



Video Segment 7

(41:01-49:44)

Lutheran exorcism

The Lutheran exorcists seen in Video Segment 7 have cleverly deployed the Malagasy belief in the communicative power of music and sound. Over the singing of hymns, they shout into the ears of people with tromba spirits. Because of the sensitivity of tromba spirits to music and sound, it is believed that this aural mix will drive tromba spirits out of the Malagasy body. On Audio Track 8, one hears another Christian appropriation of tromba belief. Here, Edmund

Justin, himself once a tromba musician, performs on valiha a Protestant hymn, aural proof of his conversion and resultant denial of tromba practice. When I ask him to perform something from his old tromba repertoire, he responds with some apparent apprehension, “Tsy mahay izaho!” (I don’t know how to do that anymore). The hymn heard on Audio Track 8 is called “Toearana Roa,” which means “Two Places.” The title and the hymn’s lyrics refer to choices made in everyday life that will lead one to either of two places, heaven or hell.

Some of Video Segment 7 contains some very small video glitches—the video camera on occasion responds this way under such combined conditions of very low lighting and extremely high temperature and humidity.

Video Segment 8 Finale 49:45–53:36

Glossary of Malagasy terms

Administraté	from the French, “Administrateur”; name of a colonial era foreign spirit that appears at Betsimisaraka tromba ceremonies
Antandroy	group of Malagasy from the south of the island
basesa	Betsimisaraka music/dance genre
Betsimisaraka	group of Malagasy predominant in the east coast Tamatave region of Madagascar
fahavoazana	literally, “to be struck”; Antandroy funereal ceremony
famadihana	ceremony performed in parts of Madagascar in which the remains of family members buried in the ground are unearthed, celebrated over and with, rewrapped in ceremonial lamba cloths, then placed into the familial tomb
Jesosy	Jesus; term used in Lutheran exorcism ceremonies
kaiamba	shaker of varying form that accompanies much music-making throughout Madagascar
lamba	ceremonial cloth for rewrapping the remains of the dead, as well as clothing used in tromba ceremony; also an everyday version which is worn by both men and women throughout the island

maresaka	“good talk”; is also used to refer to a pleasing, densely textured combination of varied sounds; may also refer to lively social interaction
maro vany	“many strings”; Antandroy valiha made of pine planks
Merina	group of Malagasy from the central part of the island
razana	collective of Malagasy ancestral spirits
Sadam Hoseny	name of foreign spirit that appears at Betsimisaraka tromba ceremonies
Sakalava	northwestern group of Malagasy to which many royal tromba spirits belong
Satany	Satan; term used in Lutheran exorcism ceremonies
sodina	Malagasy flute
Tamatave	also known as Toamasina; a large east coast port town through which foreigners have historically entered Madagascar; also denotes the surrounding rural region on the east coast
tromba	belief system involving spirit possession by Malagasy ancestors; a royal or other Malagasy ancestral spirit
tsaboraha	zébu cattle sacrifice for and with Malagasy ancestral spirits

valiha	family of stringed instrument of varying form used throughout Madagascar
zébu	variety of cattle in Madagascar

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See also:

Nielssen, Hilde

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The Presence of the Past
 Madagascar, Music, and Devotion
 Audio examples on disc accompanying documentary video
 (all recordings made in Madagascar by Ron Emoff)

<u>T</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Artist</u>	<u>Time</u>	<u>Recorded</u>
1	Tananané Tanana Tamatave	Roger Jean Louis and family	4:03	Tamatave 1/5/95
2	Afindrafindrao	Rakoto Frah	0:55	Antananarivo 9/14/93
3	Hira taona	Jily	3:47	Tamatave 3/8/94
4	Tromba composition	Jean Dedier	2:23	Tamatave 3/28/94
5	Tromba composition	Miria Soa	7:02	Tamatave 4/8/94
6	Valse	Tsiariagna	4:02	Fénérive-est 3/12/94
7	Antandroy song	Toronasy, Vatsimbinee, and Mandimby Soa	4:51	Tamatave 10/15/93
8	Toerana roa	Edmund Justin	3:26	Fénérive-est 12/20/93
9	Tromba composition	Magnampy Soa	5:42	Tamatave 10/3/93