

The Feraomby and the Christian Mission in Amparafaravola, Madagascar: Custom and Faith

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Abstract

It is said that Malagasy culture and the Christian religion have their own specificity. Each culture has its own characteristics. It is evaluated through the coexistence and behavior of each person. In order to draw rules of conduct to fulfill the different obligations, all the context about the culture and the mindset. According to the survey in the rural commune of Anororo, district of Amparafaravola: conservators only believe if they see something tangible to convince them; 75% of those questioned confirmed that fact. They are very protective of what they inherited from their ancestors. During worship at the time of Feraomby, they ask for blessings from the Creator God and the ancestors. For their part, Christians try to express the beauty of Jesus Christ, through their language and their actions. Everyone emphasizes their own beliefs. A country or a society has its own beliefs and customs, which cannot be compared with others, therefore they are considered important and correct. This way of highlighting the identity of each subject, based on the comparison of cultures (cultural relativism) will highlight different ideas, to accomplish the Christian mission; based on reality. The main objective is not to change the social system, but to announce the Good News, which will change the world. However, it is not easy to reconcile the views of conservators and Christians. It is important to find ways to reconcile them, because it is one of the paths to peace and development.

Keywords

Madagascar, Feraomby, culture, belief, missiology



I. Introduction

The arrival of Christianity in Madagascar had an impact on Malagasy society. It changed the faith, so that some Malagasy became passionate Christians, abandoning their beliefs and traditions. There are those who have confessed the Christian religion, but they still maintain their traditions. People are oppressed by worry and anxiety, so they look for other forces to rely on to save them in their daily life. They pray and go to church, but they also worship and ask for the blessing from their ancestors. The reason which motivates to choice of topic “the Feraomby and the Christian mission in Amparafaravola.”

Why confrontation is inevitable when Christians and conservators meet, but peaceful when they follow their own customs? People will not confuse different cultures, when the value of faith and morals will be established. Traditional belief and Christian faith will always go hand in hand, unless Christianity can impact whole person and all the people. Can the Gospel and tradition coexist? And why do Christians and conservators often clash? What can be done to harmonize coexistence and ensure the success of the gospel?

This observation will try to provide answers, even if only partial, to these questions. In view of the situation and according to the survey carried out among some groups of people, in the district of Amparafaravola, region of Alaotra Mangoro, especially in the rural commune of Anororo, in the year 2023. The existence of preparatory school for lay people (Sekoly Fanomanana Laika FJKM) facilitated the consultation. Religious leaders, deacons, shepherds (mpiandry). and on the other hand, the civil authorities and the conservators were consulted. The investigation was focused at the Feraomby festival. Here is the number of people who gave their opinion:

CHRISTIANS		OTHERS	
Samples	Number	Samples	Number
Religious leaders	05	District head	01
Deacons	10	Mayors	10
Shepherds	05	Preservers	04
TOTAL	20		15

Everyone has their own opinion, when asked why people mix religions.

II. Review of Literature

Traditional Malagasy emphasizes belief in the creator God (Andriananahary) and ancestors. He also believes in the power of sacred things. This is reflected in his actions and can be heard in his language. The symbols and expressions people use are important in the study of society. Most towns in Madagascar have doany: place where the king's tomb is dedicated to pray and ask for blessings. The reasons why they pray are: belief in Almighty God who created the universe. He does not know how to approach and speak to this Creator, so he thinks that the ancestors are his mediators between them; and the research for tangible and visible things, to justify their faith; therefore, he built a place of worship with sacred things.

All Malagasy people have the same custom, in general, but the practice is different. For example, the “*Feraomby*” Sihanaka festival is different compared to the “*Fananganam-bato*” Betsimisaraka (Razafiarivony, 1994). When the Christian religion arrived, traditional culture and Christian culture were mixed. It seems to be just a habit of praying to ancestors and going to church. People have become lukewarm: neither hot nor cold, says Holy Scripture (Revelation 3: 15-16). Syncretism is much worse than atheism, says Visser't Hooft, 1964: “Syncretism is much more dangerous for the Christian Church than the most vigorous atheism.”

Supporters of doany worship are very proud. They believe that there is a savior god in this place. But they also go to church. All the villages in the Amparafaravola district have doany and many churches. Here, for example, are the different churches in the commune of Anororo: Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar (FJKM), Roman Apostolic Catholic Church (ECAR), Malagasy Lutheran Church (FLM), Rhema, Pentecostal, Indigenous Evangelical Mission of Madagascar (METM), International Evangelical Community of Madagascar (CEIM), Vahao ny oloko, Ieshua, Adventist and Firaisambavaka.

III. Results and Discussion

3.1 The Feraomby

Feraomby is a culture famous for Sihanaka. It is best known in the commune of Anororo, district of Amparafaravola, province of Toamasina, commune located on the shore of Lake Alaotra, in the center-east of the Madagascar. This municipality has 14,312 inhabitants. (Amparafaravola District, 2019) The people's livelihoods are fishing and rice cultivation. There are primary and secondary schools. It can be seen as a form of progress.

Thousands of people serve at the “feraomby” doany: a sacred place for the worship of ancestors. The place is sacred because the former king of Anororo Indrianampanjaka (Ndriana) died there. According to Ramambason, (1999) the Malagasy attach great importance to the sense of community which includes the dead. (p.139) “The Feraomby is a ritual ceremony held in the Lake Alaotra area every two years. It is also the name of the sacred place, the main center of the different elements of the manifestation. » (Ranjivason, 2012) At the time of Joro or ancestral worship the oldest and wisest of the community invokes the God-Creator, the one who “created the hands and the feet” and “the sky that we carry on the head.” “The Zanahary, meaning “sun” or “creator”, is a boundless pantheon of divine beings such as ancestors, celestial Bodies, dead kings, and a myriad of other spiritual entitie” (Anders & Arnaud, 2017). Omniscient and omnipresent God. He gives blessing to men.

The word “feraomby” is a combination of two words “fiaro” and “aomby”, which is a fence (bako or fefy) to protect the place where the scepter of Indrianampanjaka was found. This place was hallowed. Some also say that the words "fera" and "aomby" were combined; it is the defined limit of sacred place. Place to worship and ask for blessings from the spirit of King Ndriana. According to the investigation carried out by Rabetaravona (known as Lenoir, 75 years old, December, 2023) in Anororo, King Ndrina declared: “This village will be big. I will go, he said, and I will bring this scepter. And wherever you find it will be the healthy place: to put a fence. This is where you ask and pray. » Traditional Malagasy people emphasize their belief in the Creator God, ancestors and the power of sacred things. During Feraomby, people ask God and ancestors that the rice grown will be fruitful, that they will be healthy, that pregnant women will give birth easily; all wishes can be requested there.

Before he leaves, the king announced all the rituals to be performed. When he finished his message, he was no longer visible. Later, people found the king's scepter, northwest of the village, on the road to Antsahamanga. The place is surrounded by trees with thorns, called: rombaza. The root is cut into thin slices and added sombeo wood (hasina, sacred wood). This is done at the time of the full moon, every two years, which must be Tuesday, in the month of Asarabe (November). But the service can be carried out in any year, if the need arises; as if someone had burned or desecrated the doany. Those who look for the thorny trees are young tsara anarana, whose parents are alive. Trees can be cut at sunset in Sahamaloto, a village about 25 km from Anororo.

During the ritual, the young “tsara anarana” are welcomed with the tree. They play and run with while singing. After changing the fence of the sacred place, they offer the ox and pronounce: “we will kill the cattle because of the work done, we will ask God the creator; these families gathered here ask you, King Ndrina, because of your word, call me on good days... » (Rabetaravona, 2023) Then each person pronounce a wish. After that, the meat is distributed to each district: north, center and south. Around 1924-1926, story said that the spirit of King Ndriana had risen to Andriatsimitoviaminandriana. This person has performed many miracles: healing, magical hail, rain, increased rice production, etc. The

Tagnororo (people of Anororo) worship the one who can produce rice and increase their wealth.



Sacred place “Feraomby” tightly fenced



The tombs of Anororo

Figure 1. (Photo taken on September 15, 2023)

The essence of the Malagasy’s beliefs revolves around the grave and death.

Many people come to the feraomby, whether government leaders or farmers, from far and near. Thousands of people attend the worship of ancestors: pagans and Christians. So, what must be done so people become Christians converted, accepting Jesus Christ, following and imitating Him? It is the mission of the missionary, to proclaim the Gospel, to establish faith in God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

3.2 Discussions

There are many ways to convince people. For example, good practices and behaviors, charity and development. Highlighting the good value, the man intention is to touch people's lives; so they can live in peace and love, unity and mutual aid.

a. Highlight Customs and Beliefs

The Malagasy believe and fear God. There are three main holy things for them: Creator God, ancestors and creatures (idols). This Creator is the source of life; he created the world. Belief in God is revealed by mentioning his characteristics: He judges. He sees what is hidden. The ancestor said: “Do not think yourself hidden in the desert valley, for God is above your head”, “If we do not deceive fools, it is because we fear God.” (Holder, 1960). People avoided doing wrong things, in life and in society, because God will reward everyone according their acts.

Highlight traditional values; like “fihavanana” and friendship. Malagasy people are characterized by “fihavanana” (peace). It arises from two sources: first, of common blood and second, because of the community, neighbors and those who share everything. He spares no effort or money in the pursuit of peace. He says, “it is better to lose money than to lose fihavanana.” Peace is better than money. People love and care for each other. Malagasy has a wisdom different from that of all other countries; says Ramasindraibe Paul, (1965): “*Fifankatiavana sy fifanampiana no toetra mampiavaka antsika Malagasy, ary mahatonga antsika hanana fahendrena tsy mitovy amin’ny an’ny firenen-kafa rehetra.*” (p.7) The ability to tolerate and respect each other has spread peace. Malagasy people are attracted to people who know how to cultivate peace and who know how to cultivate love. This peace and this love belong to the content of the Christian religion.

b. The Good Conduct

Behavior of Christians will convince others to accept Jesus Christ. Missionary work will be enhanced and based on mission in which God sends Christians, for the benefit of the whole world: “*Ny Asa Misiona, dia “izay rehetra anirahan’Andriamanitra ny Kristianina, ho tombontsoan’izao tontolo izao.”* (FJKM, 1990) God saves men. Missionaries must live according to the word of God. The action of Christians should bring development to society. Today, the Church builds schools to teach and medical centers to care for the sick. It is aimed at those who need help.

Pastor Ramambason Laurent William (2020) former Dean of the Faculty of Theology Ambatonakanga, said: “God calls us today Christians and the Church, and sends us to accomplish these 5 missions: Communicate with those who need help Milavonjy; Caring for the elderly, the poor, the disabled, orphans, foreigners, the losers of life, ... Teaching reading and writing, building schools (vocational training, etc.) Animate the society: create jobs, broadcast useful entertainment, promote sports, reconcile, bear each other's burdens, help victims of injustice and the marginalized, Maintain cleanliness, take care of the house and the ground; take care of the environment.”

Christians accomplish a mission that begins and ends in Jesus Christ. (John 20:21; Mat. 28:19) All Christian activities and customs are in accordance with the orders and commandments of Christ. They proclaim the gospel of god's grace (Acts 20 : 17-24)

c. The Importance of Faith

Every human being has their own belief, but what he believes differs from one another. Faith is trust and acceptance of the existence of things that cannot be seen, but have power. Special powers that can change someone or something. A higher power beyond human understanding. It is an inexplicable power, but his work justifies it. Belief has its own identity: “*Ny finoana dia manana ny maha izy azy manokana: mifototra amin’ny fahatsapan’ny olombelona fa tsy mahavita tena izy, ka mila ny fanampian’ny herin’ny zavatra na olo-manan-kasina.”* (Razafintsalama, 1998) Malagasy believe that God knows all things; so if he encounters a difficult situation, he remains firm and says that "Some people do not wait for God, but I wait for him." (Holder, 1960) Then they had endurance and patience.

For Christians, “to have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see. » (Heb. 11:1). God saves people by faith in Jesus Christ. “Yes, God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that everyone who believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16) “He who believes and is baptized, will be saved” (Mark 16:16). This is the purpose of the Church, to announce to the world that the living Jesus Christ is the only Lord and Savior, and that he is to be accepted and believed (1 Tim. 1:15). All words and actions of the Christian Church express their faith in Almighty Jesus Christ. (Mat. 28:18; Col. 2:10)

d. Missiology Develops

Missiology is a multidisciplinary field. It includes all knowledge of Scripture, theology, history, sociology and anthropology. The missionary can witness and serve others. “Mission is a multifaceted ministry: witness, service, justice, healing, reconciliation, peace, evangelization, communion, church planting, contextualization and many other things.” (Bosch, 1995, 2009) The Lord expects fruits from who he elected.

If people encounter and interact with Jesus Christ, there will have a great conversion in their lives. For example, Saul, when he met Jesus Christ near Damascus, became Paul: persecutor and hater of Christians, he became a passionate preacher of the Gospel. (Asa.9:

1-31) Likewise the kind captain: Cornelius, believed in God, and was baptized with the Holy Spirit. (Acts 10:1-48) There are many others in the Holy Scriptures confirming that those who had relationship with Jesus have hope, peace and new life. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17) Those who associate with the living Jesus know how to love all men, just as He does (Ramarolahy & Robijaona Rahelivololoniaina, 2024; Randrialiva & Robijaona Rahlivololoniaina, 2023). This love will eliminate the conflict between Christians and conservators. (Raharinosy & Robijaona Rahelivololoniaina, 2024)

IV. Conclusion

In Madagascar, the custom is more the same, but the worship practices are different. Most Malagasy people do “Joro” or ancestor worship, but the activities of the highlands are different to the coastal ones. Custom and tradition show the belief of the people. Faith enhances friendship and unity. Although the faith is different, Malagasy believe that there is an extreme power, which protects people and which can do miraculous things. This is the basis of ancestral worship. Knowing the reason why this custom is applied, it is possible to draw conclusions to convince people to move forward, to develop society and the country.

When the culture of a country is highlighted; and the value of the new things brought is well shown, the attitudes and customs of society will be renewed. Malagasy will serve one God. Many people will realize that the Christian religion is a game changer. Peace will come, for Jesus Christ is the peace of the world (Ephes.2:14) Discrimination weakens. (Gal.3:28) Everyone can enter and participate in the Church. Society will change. People take responsibility; and their lives will be improved. If Christians demonstrate the wisdom and holiness of Christ in their work and field, syncretists become faithful. Everyone is free in their beliefs and customs. But what is in accordance with the Word of God is the truth. (John 17: 17; Rev 20: 11, 12) The important is not to change the social system, but to announce the Good News, which will change the world. Faith separates what the Gospel unites. However, it is not easy to reconcile the views of conservators and Christians. It is indispensable to find ways to reconcile them, because it is one of the paths to peace and development.

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