

**THE SUSTAINING POWER OF THE BIBLE TO THE
MARTYRS DURING THE PERSECUTION IN
MADAGASCAR FROM 1828 TO 1861: HISTORICAL
AND HERMENEUTICAL ANALYSIS**

By

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DECLARATION

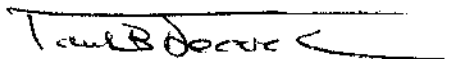
As required by the university regulations, I hereby state unambiguously that this study, unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text, is my own original work. It has not been presented to any other university for examination. It is submitted for the first time in the School of Religion and Theology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, for the degree of Masters of Theology.



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November 2005

As the candidate's supervisor I hereby approve this thesis for submission.



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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my sister Marie Angèle Raivomanana who has gone to be with Christ. May she rest in peace with the Malagasy martyrs in the house of God. Her soul remains at one with me eternally.

ABBREVIATIONS

CREDO	Centre de Recherche, d'Étude et de Documentation- Research Centre for Study and Documentation
ELM	Evangelical Lutheran Mission
FCM	French Catholic Missionaries
FMBM	Fikambanana Mampielv Baiboly Malagasy- Society for the Propagation of the Malagasy Bible
LMS	London Missionary Society

BIBLICAL REFERENCES

Biblical quotations are from the African Bible unless indicated otherwise.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1- Outline of the dissertation

This thesis comprises six chapters. Chapter one consists of the statement of the research problem. It covers the outline of the dissertation and the background of and motivation for the research. It also includes the research problem and the theoretical framework. The last section of the introduction will be the limitations and the assessment of the main resources used in this study.

The aim of chapter two is to give the background information of the people of Madagascar in general, and the Merina in particular. It gives a general understanding of their world. It includes a brief description of the island and its population, the location of the Merina and their origin, also their traditional beliefs and religion, the attempts of the early Catholic missionaries to evangelise the Island and Radama's contract with Great Britain.

Chapter three deals with the first encounters between the Bible and Merina Christians around the capital of Antananarivo. It highlights the arrival of the first LMS missionaries and their mission in and around the city of Antananarivo, the presence of the Bible in the highlands and the use of it as a text book in schools. From that moment the Merina population sensed that the Bible had power; as a result their interest to get copies of it grew throughout the capital and the surrounding villages.

Chapter four provides information about the uncertainty of Christianity in Madagascar. It was uncertain because of the death of Radama, friend of the missionaries, and the accession of Ranavalona I, an anti-Christian queen, to the throne as his successor. It continues with the dusk: a period of confirming the church, then the queen's edicts against the converts. It ends up with the edition of the Bible, translated into the Malagasy language.

The focus of chapter five is the sustaining power of the Bible during persecutions. First of all it considers the causes of the persecutions, then the role of the Bible in the Malagasy language in the hands of Christians. After that it speaks of the use of the Bible by the indigenous Christians and the power they gained from it during times of persecution. It also speaks about the edict of the queen to collect all the Bibles and burn them, and how the Christians managed to save some and hide them. Then it concentrates on the three waves of martyrdom, in 1837-1842, 1849 and 1857. Lastly it highlights the courage of these martyrs until death with the Bible in their hands and the contribution of the Bible to the growth of Christianity in Imerina during the persecution.

Chapter six will be the conclusion of the thesis. It underlines three aspects of the Bible and its encounters with the martyr church. It considers, in the first aspect, the effects of the translation of the Bible into the Malagasy language. The second aspect deals with the interaction of the Bible with the Malagasy culture and context; and the last is about the power of the Bible itself. The very last paragraph will try to prompt a further research on the Bible and its impact in Madagascar after Ranavalona's death.

2- Stimulation which led to the selection of this topic

While reading, *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, works edited by Gerald West and Musa Dube, I found the following statement: 'The project has not come to an end with the production of this book. When we began we hoped that the book would generate more than what it contains between its covers' (2000:1). This statement strongly encouraged me to write about the Bible in Madagascar. In this research I am keen to make a study of the early encounters of the Bible with the Merina people of the central region of Madagascar, especially its encounters with the persecuted Christians during the reign of Ranavalona I between 1828 and 1861. This research is trying to find out how the Bible's power sustained the martyrs' fidelity to God until the end.

The work of West and Dube is a broad collection of essays of many African scholars from different parts of Africa. They cluster the voluminous book of eight hundred and

twenty-eight pages into five parts. Part 1 is on 'Historical and Hermeneutical Perspective'; it provides models of the landscape of interpretation of the Bible by indigenous Africans. Part 2 deals with the 'Particular encounters with Particular Texts' where the African biblical scholars give insights on how intense and creative were the encounters with the Bible in Africa. Part 3 is entitled 'Comparison and Translation as transaction'; it draws together 'essays from two important paradigms in African biblical scholarship: the comparative paradigm and the translation paradigm' (2000:6). Part 4 is about the 'Redrawing the Boundaries of the Bible in Africa'; it underlines the place and presence of Africa in the Bible. The last part, Part 5, is a collection of bibliography on the Bible in Africa. This work as a whole inspired me to study the early encounters of the Bible with the Malagasy Christians.

In addition, Vincent Wimbush remarked that the reception of the Bible by African-Americans can and should be distinguished from the way they received Christian missionaries and Christianity¹. This study will also explore whether this statement is indeed true of the early encounters with the missionaries, Christianity and the Bible in Madagascar. In that article, Wimbush analyses the historical and hermeneutical dimension of the early encounters with the Bible among the African-Americans. He underlines the need of studying the Bible as a separate entity. In the analysis, he realises that the Bible can have an impact on people's lives on its own. When the indigenous people had it, they could make use of it even if the missionaries were absent. That was the case in Madagascar, despite the expulsion of the missionaries the indigenous Christians made use of the Bible which had impact on their lives. They embraced the Bible and made it their own as a source of spiritual power, inspiration, encouragement and strength during their tribulations.

3- The aim of this study

This study is an attempt to discover the contribution of the Bible to the fidelity of the Merina Christians until martyrdom. When the Catholic missionaries came earlier, they gave the people copies of the catechism, but the Protestants gave the Bible which made

¹ He spells this out in his article published by *Semeia* 62(1993): 'Reading Texts Through Worlds, Worlds Through Texts'.

their mission fruitful. The power and impact of the Bible and the catechetical book must be different. What did they make of the Bible? The Bible arrived in Madagascar with the missionaries' package deal. In this package the martyrs discovered that the Bible is special. It is a 'strange object of power'². This study will try to find out how the Bible empowers the indigenous Christians in their testimony. What did the Bible mean for them? Queen Ranaivalona I wondered why she could not stop them from following 'the religion of the European'³ despite the persecution she inflicted on Christians. Later on she realised that it was the 'Book' that empowered them. She then proclaimed an edict to collect all Bibles and burn them so that this religion should be eradicated from her Kingdom.

The film, *Ilay boky nodorana anefa tsy levona*-The book that was burnt but not consumed, underlined how the power of the Bible was experienced by the martyr church in Madagascar. This film was produced by the FMBM: *Fikambanana Mampiely Baiboly Malagasy*- 'Society for the Propagation of the Malagasy Bible'. It aims at spelling out the power of the Bible during the persecution of Christians in Madagascar. The Bible had a great influence and was a source of power for the early indigenous Christians. Despite the major operation launched by Ranaivalona I, the collection and burning of all Bibles throughout the island, she could not stop Christianity. She failed to burn all the Bibles because the Christians managed to hide some in various secret places, and they used these remnants during their secret prayers, and meetings for reading and sharing the Word of God. The Bible's power sustained their faith and increased their courage during the dark period they underwent.

Their reading of the Bible made them come in contact with the New Testament's martyrs. As a result the martyrdom and persecution of the Early Church must have been very alive in the memory of the early Christians in Madagascar. This study will strive to discover how the testimony of the early martyrs of the New Testament period influenced the Merina Christians. The book of Frend on the *Martyrdom and*

² See *Early Encounters with the Bible among the Batlhaping: Historical and Hermeneutical Signs*, of Gerald O West 2004 in website: Brill/Bibl.Int/conv+corrs/bi357/030304/000004.

³ The queen and those attached to the traditional religion around her called Christianity the Religion of the European; she forbade her subjects to follow it.

Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus, a very broad and elaborate study, will provide a comparative survey of the martyrs in Madagascar and the martyrs in the early church. They preferred death rather than denial of their faith in Jesus Christ said Frend (1965:80) and Townsend (1893:86). Those Christians faithfully stood firm until the end even under the severest strain. Neither cruelty nor torture could force them to betray their Lord. Their hope and comfort were on the reward they were to receive soon after their death.

The main concern of this study is the historical and hermeneutical dimensions of the early encounters between the Bible and the indigenous Christian communities in and around Antananarivo, the Merina Christians. The Bible translated into the Malagasy language was felt so powerfully by the martyr church in Madagascar. It had touched in a very profound way the culture and life of the indigenous population, since 'in most of these cultures,' says Sanneh 'language is the intimate, articulate expression of culture' (1989:3); and when indigenous people hear God speaking in their own language 'they are in touch with the roots of Christianity' (Bediako 2001:2). Translating the Bible is not just putting the Word of God in the indigenous language; it is also introducing the indigenous Christians into its world and therefore enabling 'the eternal Word of God to become flesh to dwell among a people, who are thereby enabled to perceive that the Living God who has never been far from them, is now heard to speak their language, calling them to turn to Christ all they are and all they have been' (Bediako 2003:17).

When the martyr church heard God speaking to them in their own language, they received strength and courage in their times of trial. Since the "Word of God" was understood to carry great power' (Sanneh 1989:229), this power sustained the Merina Christians during the period of persecution. The fundamental question of the research will be: What is the contribution of the Bible to the testimony of the martyrs in Madagascar during the persecution of Ranaivalona I? In attempting to answer this question, this study seeks to address the following questions as guidelines:

- (i) What is the historical process of the early engagements between the Bible and the Merina Christians in and around Antananarivo?

- (ii) What did the Bible mean for the Merina Christians, especially the Martyr church?
- (iii) Why was the Bible so powerful for them?
- (iv) Whom did they imitate in the Bible? (Stephen? Jesus? or Others?)

The hypothesis of this thesis is about the power of the Bible particularly as translated in the language of the people. This power sustained the faith of the Malagasy Christians during the time of persecution from 1828 to 1861. The LMS missionaries, aware of the empowering character of the Bible, redoubled their efforts to translate it into the indigenous language. Their work of translation made the Bible more meaningful and more powerful to the indigenous Malagasy communities. Though the queen expelled the missionaries from the country later on, the Christians already had the Bible in their hands and in their own language as their ‘companion for the journey’ (Maluleke 2000:98). It became ‘their pastor, leader, teacher, advisor and comforter’⁴. The Bible sustained their faith during the dark moments of the Malagasy church.

4- The approach and method adopted

The resource materials consist mainly of historical and archival data collections. As a result my theoretical approach would be first and foremost an historical analysis. Most of the written materials were largely done by foreign missionaries, especially the LMS who were the first to reach the Merina people of Antananarivo with the Bible. The analysis of historical facts will help me to ground and contextualise this research in and around Antananarivo. Although the persecutions were felt throughout the island, the focus of this study will be in and around the city of Antananarivo.

The contextual interpretation, initiated by many African scholars, will be followed. It consists of linking the biblical text to the African context; in this research it is about the Malagasy context during the nineteenth century. In the African context, the main focus of interpretation is on the communities that receive the text rather than on those that produced it or on the text itself (Ukpong 2000:11-12). There were always attempts to

⁴ I quote this from the interview of the director of the FMBM ‘Fikambanana Mampiely Baiboly Malagasy’ in Madagascar, on the 14th of February 2005 at Antaninarenina-Antananarivo.

link the biblical text to the indigenous context. For example the persecution of the New Testament Christians reported in the Bible was experienced in the context of the indigenous Christians in Madagascar. The main task of this study is to consider carefully how the Bible was received by the persecuted Malagasy Christians. In dealing with the encounters and dialogues between the Bible and the indigenous Merina Christians, some elements of Justin Ukpong's paradigm will be considered.

Ukpong, in his article 'Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions', shows the developments that have taken place in the method of Biblical interpretation in Africa (2000:11-28). He distinguishes three phases of development:

- Phase I- The Comparative Method: It was the earliest method developed in the 1930s-70s. It focused on legitimizing African religion and culture. This method, mostly reactive and apologetic, was developed in response to the domination of Western methods of biblical interpretation.

- Phase II- Inculturation-Evaluative method and liberation hermeneutics are reactive-proactive responses to the Western widespread method. It was developed in the 1970s-90s. It uses the African context as resources for biblical interpretation.

- Phase III- Liberation and inculturation methodologies: It is a proactive method developed from the 1990s onward. It is based on the recognition of the ordinary readers and the African context as subject of biblical interpretation.

This research will adopt elements of phase II and III of Ukpong's paradigm to analyse the reception and interpretation of the Bible by the early Merina Christians in Antananarivo. The focus on inculturation-evaluative method will be on the encounters between the Malagasy culture and that of the Bible. It will attempt to 'evaluate the theological underpinnings resulting from the encounters' (Ukpong 2000:16). On the one hand, it will show how the use of the indigenous culture and tools, such as belief system, religion or taboos, facilitate the communication of the Bible to the indigenous Malagasy Christians. When they approached the Bible and interpreted biblical texts with these tools, they extracted new understanding of their life as Christians and the implications thereof. On the other hand, this method enabled them to evaluate elements

of the Malagasy culture, religion, beliefs, concepts and practices in the light of the Biblical witness. It brought them to a Christian understanding of these elements and their Christian value.

Then the liberation hermeneutics method used the Bible as a resource for struggle against any form of oppression: political, economic, social or oppression of any kind. This research will show how the understanding of the Bible changed the Malagasy society for the better. When the Bible came into dialogue with the indigenous people it brought liberation to them. It came together with material and technological progress. Its arrival brought the abolition of slave exportation. It also has changed the whole nation's outlook on many issues. It specifically brought liberation to the persecuted Christians. The understanding of the indigenous Christians that God as the one who 'does not sanction oppression but rather always stands on the side of the oppressed to liberate them' (Ukpong 2000:19), freed them from fear: fear of the queen, fear of persecution and even fear of death.

The latest development in Biblical interpretation in Africa was the recognition of the ordinary readers. Their contribution to academic Bible reading and interpretation was vitally important. Their participation broadens and enriches the field of Biblical interpretation in Africa. Here it consists of the recognition of the Malagasy ordinary readers and their context as the subject of the interpretation of the Bible. In this research the ordinary readers are the early Merina Christians and their context during the persecution of Ranaivalona I is the Malagasy context. It will study how the Merina Christians, when reading and interpreting the Bible, linked their context with the biblical text. How did they use their context to make meaning of the text they read? Was not their goal the actualisation of the theological meaning of the text in their context so as to forge interrogation between faith and life, and engender commitment (Ukpong 2000:24). It seeks to empower them in the situation they lived in.

5- Limitations and main sources for this study

Though the persecution was felt throughout Madagascar, it is difficult, even impossible, to carry on a research that embraces the whole country, due to the vastness of the island

and the complexity of the history involved. As a result, this research will be limited to Antananarivo and its surroundings where the execution of the martyrs took place. The emphasis will be on the historical encounters between the Bible and the indigenous Christians, with the focus on the sustaining power of the Bible to the martyrs' faithfulness until the end.

In addition, since the majority of this research was conducted in Madagascar, the time for the research was limited to two and a half months, during the holiday from mid-December 2004 to the end of February 2005. I had to accommodate all of the research and fieldwork within that short time. Despite the brevity of the time allotted to the research, I believe that sufficient information was collected, to ensure that this research is sound.

Then, in my literature survey, I have learnt that the LMS archives in London contain a lot of material on the early missionary work in Madagascar. These archives must contain much relevant information about the early dialogues and transactions with the Bible among the martyrs. But due to time and financial restrictions, I was not able to have access to this material. I limit myself to that which was found in Madagascar.

Lastly, the paucity of materials written by indigenous people is another limitation. The research will rely mostly on the resources written by the early missionaries and historians. It implies that I have to be critical in dealing with the analysis of data collected. I need to adopt the method of reading between the lines.

This last section serves as an assessment and introduction to the list of the main sources used in this research. It includes a brief identification of the authors whose works were employed as source materials and description of their works. Almost two centuries separated us from that first generation of Christians in Madagascar. During this lapse of time, many historical works were written by different people from different backgrounds. Despite these differences their works seem reliable and complement each another.

Freeman and Johns were among the pioneer LMS missionaries in Madagascar. They worked there during Radama's reign and the first part of Ranavalona until their expulsion in 1835 and 1836. They kept contact with their flocks during the period of persecution in the island. Their work, *A Narrative of the Persecution of the Christians in Madagascar, with Details of the Escape of the Six Christian Refugees Now in England* (1840), and *A Narrative of Persecution of Christians in Madagascar* (1894), are interesting accounts of the lives and death of the Malagasy martyrs during the reign of Ranavalona I. Being pioneer missionaries of 1820s, they were seen as documents of the events during that seminal period (Bradt 1993:56).

William Ellis was one of the first missionaries in Madagascar in 1820s. He was the foreign secretary of the LMS. His works: *History of Madagascar* (1838), *Madagascar Revisited* (1867), and *Three Visits during the years 1853-1854-1856* (1859), were based on the LMS archives. His works were considered as the standard texts on the early work of British missionaries and history of Madagascar during the nineteenth century. He knew the martyrs and of their tribulations. He met some of them during his three brief visits in 1853, 1854 and 1856. He came back to the island after Ranavalona I's death to promote the LMS missionary work. He became one of Rakotondradama's advisors. Helped by the Great Britain and the local Christians, he built four big stone churches in memory of the Martyrs at Ambohipotsy, Faravohitra, Ampamarinana and Ambatonakanga.

Raombana was one of the early Malagasy historians. He was one of the twins, Raombana and Rahaniraka, sent by Radama to England for six years for study. When he returned to Madagascar, he became the secretary of the queen Ranavalona I. He wrote the diary in English. 'His long stay in England enabled him to assess critically the Merina world and the reality surrounding it' (Raison-Jourde 1991:10). He was an eye-witness to the persecution in Madagascar. His work entitled *Histoires* is a unique record of pre-colonial Madagascar written by a Malagasy. It was written in English and translated into French on the opposite pages.

William Edward Cousins was a missionary in Madagascar from 1862 to 1894. In his *Concise Introduction to the Study of the Malagasy Language as Spoken in Imerina* (1894), he suggested that the missionaries must have a thorough grasp of the Malagasy language. He used that book to tutor them. The second part of his mission was dedicated to revision of the Malagasy Bible. He wrote also *The Translation of the Malagasy Bible* (1873). Since he was present in Madagascar the year after Ranavalona I's death, and used the LMS archives, his testimony is reliable.

Rabary (1864-1947) was a Malagasy author, a lecturer and a pastor. He was the pastor of Avaratrandohalo-Antananarivo for forty-seven years. He was one of the reputed Malagasy historians and his works are read broadly throughout the country. He wrote an excellent work recording the memorable dates of the 19th century Madagascar: *Daty Malaza* (1927). It was one of his great achievements. He also wrote: *Ny Martiora Malagasy* (1925) and *Ny Martiorantsika* (1957). Both of these works reported the account of the Martyrs in Madagascar. Being a student of the LMS missionaries, he used the sources of the LMS archives and manuscripts of the martyr church.

Gustave Mondain was a French Protestant missionary in Madagascar from 1897 to 1953. He met a few of the persecuted Christians during the reign of Ranavalona I. He was an historian and had an interest in writing down the history of Madagascar. He was one of the founders of the Malagasy Academy. His works: *Un siècle de mission Protestante à Madagascar* (1920), *L'action Protestante à Madagascar* (1925), *Angoisses et délivrances* (1926), provide insights about the lives of the Malagasy church during persecution. He used as sources, interviews with the persecuted Christians he met, their manuscripts kept by the LMS, and the LMS magazines. He also wrote other works on Madagascar: *Des idées de Hovas avant l'introduction du Christianisme* (1900), *Ce que les missions Protestantes ont fait pour l'instruction publique à Madagascar* (1904), and *Rôles religieux de la femme Malgache* (1925).

Harold Ridgwell was among the early missionaries in Madagascar. He wrote pious books recording the history of the Malagasy martyrs such as: *The Great Island Madagascar: Heroes in Madagascar* (1920) and *Past and Present* (1937). According to

the information I got from Pastor Ramino Paul, Ridgwell was a great preacher, one of his touching homilies is *Madagasikara ho an'i Kristy ary i Kristy ho an'i Madagasikara*-Madagascar for Christ and Christ for Madagascar.

Mervyn Brown is a British historian. From the time of his appointment as the British Ambassador in Madagascar in 1967, he had a special interest in the history of the island. His work, *Madagascar Rediscovered* (1978), is an accurate and comprehensive historical book written about Madagascar. 'This history, from early times to independence, is a well-informed and highly readable account by an ex-British Ambassador' (Bradt 1993:29). His work is one of the most substantial sources on the history of Madagascar in the 20th century.

Bonar Gow was the director of Academic Studies at Northern Lights in Dawson Creek, British Columbia. He wrote about the *Madagascar and Protestant Impact: The Work of the British Missions 1818-1895* (1979). 'This work grew out of a Ph D thesis completed at Dalhousie University in 1972' (Gow: 1979:xvi). In it he examines the aims and activities of the protestant British Missions in Madagascar. Raison-Jourde says that he was the first person who gives a global view of the LMS archives; and because of his critical analysis of the history condemning the abuse of power of the early missionaries and their social arrogance, his work was not well received by those missionaries, because he accused them of reproducing an European Christianity in Madagascar and rejected all aspects of traditional religion (1991:11). He lived there while he was doing the research on this project.

Stephen Ellis wrote an illuminating account of a key event in the history of Madagascar during the French Colonisation (1895-1960). His work: *Rising of the Red Shawls: A Revolt in Madagascar 1895-1899* (1985), reports the breakout of the rebellion against the French occupation, and the downfall of the Merina monarchy. He has done unique research about the history of the island using archival materials. His work was clear and readable. He focuses on the causes, progress and consequences of the Rebellion in Imerina.

The main source is the work of Françoise Raison-Jourde (1991): *Bible et pouvoir à Madagascar au 19^e siècle: Invention d'une identité chrétienne et construction de l'État*. She is an historian who taught in Madagascar from 1965 to 1973. She had a particular interest in the history of Madagascar. She has done tremendous research for this voluminous work of 840 pages. She had access to the LMS, and FFMA (Friends' Foreign Missions Associations) archives in London and Wales and to the Anglican archives in Oxford. She also consulted written material about the history of the island collected in Paris. She had conducted archival research and interviews in Madagascar. She wrote an important book which takes a fresh look at Madagascar's 19th century history in the light of modern cultural understanding. She had also written others volume about the history of Madagascar before this one: *L'acculturation par l'Écriture Sainte à Madagascar* (1974); *L'échange inégal de la langue: la pénétration des techniques linguistiques dans une civilisation de l'oral Merina* (1977); *Radama II ou le conflit du réel et de l'imaginaire dans la royauté Merina* (1977); *Introduction à les souverains de Madagascar. L'histoire royale et ses résurgences contemporaines* (1983); *Mission LMS et mission jésuite face au communautés villageoises merina* (1983); and *Le travail et l'échange dans les discours d'Andrianampoinimerina* (1984).

Bruno Hübsch is a French Catholic missionary in Madagascar. He specialized in the Story of the Church. He taught at the Catholic University of Ambatoroka-Antananarivo. He wrote a voluminous work on *Madagascar et le Christianisme* (1993). In it he underlines the persecution of the Christians during the nineteenth century in Madagascar. He also wrote an article on the early Christianity in Madagascar: 'Ny Nifandraisan'i Madagasikara voalohany tamin'ny fifavahana kristianina', *Tantara iraisan'ny Fiangonana: I Madagasikara sy ny Fivavahana Kristianina* (1992).

Chapter Two: Historical background

1- Madagascar and its population



Figure 1: This map shows the border of Mozambique and the Madagascar Island, surrounded by the Ocean Indian.

Madagascar is one of the largest islands of the world, the fourth largest after Greenland, New Guinea and Borneo, covering an area of 587 040 square kilometres, nearly one thousand six hundred kilometres long, north-south and six hundred kilometres across, west-east at its widest point. It resembles the print of a gigantic left foot. It lies in the Indian Ocean about four hundred kilometres south-east of the African mainland. There are six provinces: Antananarivo, Fianarantsoa, Toliara, Toamasina, Mahajanga and Antsiranana, named after the chief cities of each. Antananarivo is the capital of the country; it lies in the centre of the island. Madagascar was once called the 'Green Island', but due to the degradation of the environment, it is now known as the 'Red Island'.

Brown reports that

The climate is temperate but the original forest has been destroyed nearly everywhere and a general impression is of barren, eroded hills interspersed with terraced rice cultivation in the valley. Here the thick crust of red laterite which covers much of the country, giving rise to the name 'Great Red Island', is particularly evident. In most areas it has a covering of coarse grass (*bòzaka*) but here and there recent accelerated erosion has laid it bare in great fan shaped gashes (*lavaka*) on the hillsides, looking from the air like fleshy wounds inflicted by some savage giants (1978:2).

Madagascar is inhabited by about seventeen and a half million people called The Malagasy⁵. The people of the island are composed of eighteen ethnic groups⁶. The Merina, the ethnic group we are dealing with, reside in the highlands in the centre of the island, in and around Antananarivo. They represent one quarter of the Malagasy population.

Although urban population is growing rapidly in Madagascar, 71% of the people still live in villages (Lahmeyer 2004). The villagers are traditional farmers and herders living on auto-subsistence economy. They produce rice, since it is their chief crop food, but cassava, corn, beans and potatoes are also grown as supplements. The most valuable export is coffee, and Madagascar is one of the world's greatest vanilla producers. Sisal, sugar, cloves and vanilla are also produced for exportation. The country's most important kind of livestock is cattle. Despite its vast fertile soil and good climate favourable for farming and raising cattle, Madagascar is classified as one of the poorest countries in the world. It is due to the mismanagements by the leaders and reluctance of the people to introduce modern technological farming.

⁵From the 2004 Malagasy Population Source: 2004 CIA WORLD FACTBOOK on web site: http://www.immigration-usa.com/wfb2004/madagascar/madagascar_people.html

⁶ 1-the Merina, 2-the Betsileo, 3-the Betsimisaraka, 4-the Sakalava, 5-the Antaisaka, 6-The Antandroy, 7-the Mahafaly, 8-the Vezo, 9-the Bara, 10-the Ankarana, 11- the Antemoro, 12-the Antefasy, 13-the Masikoro, 14-the Antambahoaka, 15-the Tsimihety, 16-the Tanala, 17-the Bezanozano, and 18-the Sihanaka.

Madagascar, as a whole is thinly populated. The average population is little more than twenty-five per square kilometre (ELM 2003). The distribution is uneven being dense in the central regions and sparse in other parts. The inhabitants of Madagascar are unequally distributed between the six provinces 29,4% in Antananarivo, 20,8% in Fianarantsoa, 16,3% in Toamasina, 14,4% in Toliara, 11,5% in Mahajanga and 7,8% in Antsiranana (Coatalem 1999:94-98).

The official language is Malagasy. It is spoken throughout the island by the entire population with only relatively minor differences of dialect. It belongs to the Malay-Polynesian language family. It has close affinity with those languages in its grammar, structure and vocabulary. The language is a significant basis of cultural unity in Madagascar. The Malagasy consonants are pronounced as in English and the vowels as in French, a compromise promoted by Radama. French was the dominant language of the island during the French colonial period. The Malagasy was relegated to an inferior position, particularly in official and academic circles. The Malagasy revolution of 1972, under the motto 'malgachisation', brought back the primacy of the Malagasy language. After 1982 the drive towards malgachisation increasingly faltered due to the world policy of globalisation. French remains important because of its international status. Both Malagasy and French are now used in official government publications.

Brown called Madagascar 'a World apart' due to its divorce from Africa in regard to its fauna and flora (1978:44-45). The island has only few big wild animals, different from those which are found in the big continent⁷.

2- The Merina, the dwellers of the Centre of Madagascar

The Malagasy people come from two major groups- those of black African descent and those of Malaysian and Indonesian descents. Madagascar remained uninhabited since its separation from the African continent some seventy to eighty million years ago, towards the end of Cretaceous period (Brown 1985:1-3), until the beginning of the Christian era. The proto-Malagasy were navigators coming from eastern Africa,

⁷ There are no animals like elephants, lions, giraffes, buffalos, and rhinoceros but it has many species of lemurs which are only found there.

Malaysia and Indonesia. Successive waves of small groups of people arrived there and established themselves in different points of the island. The migration lasted centuries. These immigrants did not form immediately one people as it is now, but many separated small kingdoms.

A genius king, Andrianampoinimerina, of a small kingdom at Ambohimanga-Antananarivo in 1787-1810, had an ambitious plan to bring the whole island together: *Ny ranomasina no valamparihiko*-The sea is my border, he said. His son, Radama, his successor, followed his footsteps: conquering kingdom after kingdom. As a result, the Malagasy became one people and one nation of different origins, black Africans and Malayo-Indonesian. That is the Malagasy's origin as a whole; But what about the Merina, the dwellers of the centre?

Since the focus of this study is on the Merina and the Bible, it is important to know this people. Although the basic stock of the Malagasy people is a mixture of two ancestral groups, African and Malayo-Indonesian, there is high proportion of pure Malayan and Indonesian types among the Merina. There is a remarkable similarity of physiognomy between the Malaysian-Indonesian types and the inhabitants of Imerina. The following characteristics are very similar to them: the colour and character of the hair: dark, straight with few blondes; the average stature: small; the shape and complexion of the face: round and light-coloured skin; the shape and colour of the eyes: almond-shaped, most of the time slit-eyed. *The Mercury*⁸ on Thursday 5th May 2005 reports that:

A team of genetics experts at the University of Cambridge, Oxford and Leicester looked at both the Y chromosomes of Madagascar residents, inherited virtually unchanged from the father to son, and the mitochondrial DNA, passed directly from mothers to their children. The result showed clear similarities to sequences found on the island of Borneo, now shared by Indonesian, Malaysian and Brunei (Reuters 2005:11).

The Malagasy language belongs to the Malay-Polynesian language family. It resembles more closely the Malayan and Indonesian dialects rather than the African languages. It

⁸ It is a daily Newspaper of Durban South Africa.

shows that the colonisation of Madagascar had its origin in Indonesia and Malaysia. Those first settlers of the inland are called *Vazimba*.

Towards the second half of the first millennium, a substantial migration of Malayo-Indonesians to Madagascar took place. After their intermarriage with the first settlers, they became the ancestors of the today's Merina people. The newcomers, due to their advancements in trades, arts, manufacture and farming did not wait to implement their skills to improve their life. They introduced iron-working which was very important for the fabrication of tools for war such as spears, lances, swords and knives. They also began to evolve a sophisticated system of agriculture based on intensive rice cultivation which became the staple food of the Malagasy.

They brought with them their customs, traditions and culture. They paid great importance to the family tomb and spent a considerable amount of wealth and energy to build and maintain it, more for building a tomb for the dead than building a house for the living. Ancestor worship is one of the main features of the Merina population, common to the Malaysian and Indonesian. The family tomb is made of stones, which are more expensive than bricks, and more difficult to work. They build their family tomb next to their homes; the reason for this proximity will be explored in the next section: traditional beliefs and Religion.

Like those found in Malaysia and Indonesia, they always construct rectangular houses aligned north-south with the door on the western side and various sides and corners of the house are attached to a different symbolic significance, but what matters to this research is the north-eastern corner. It is traditionally allocated to the ancestors and is called 'corner of the ancestors', every time they prayed they turn to that corner, and whatever they eat or drink, they throw or pour part of it to that corner for the ancestors' share.

Skins were never used by the early Merina people for clothing as it was the common use in Africa. They used instead bark of various trees. They soaked it in water and beat it with wooden mallets until thin and pliable. It constituted their earliest form of

covering similar to those found in Indonesia and Malaysia (Shaw 1885:53). There are still more customs and practices which originated from Malaysia and Indonesia as Shaw reports:

The most solemn contract between two parties was concluded by the practice of brotherhood by blood. In the presence of the chiefs, judges and others, the common people always sit, and not stand. There are a long lists of things looked upon as *fady* or taboo by all the tribes in the island. These and some other customs which are found to exist equally among the dark-skinned races of Madagascar as among the hovas, point to a Malayan origin (1885:53).

It is now accepted that Malaysia and Indonesia were the cradle of the Merina, dwellers of the inland but what about their traditional beliefs and Religion.

3- The Merina traditional beliefs and Religion

The Merina was a highly religious people; it played an important role in the faithfulness of the martyrs during the persecution of Ranavalona I. Their daily lives were based on belief that the human being was made of *vatana*-flesh and *fanahy*-spirit and that a person continued to live on after death; that is why there was not much fear of death in those martyrs because death made sense to them. They believed firmly in the existence of close ties between the living and the dead. Their religion was basically focused on the veneration of the *razana*-ancestors, but this did not exclude their belief in a Supreme Being called *Zanahary*. They also believed in *sampy*-talismans as protective powers against evils, and they prayed and paid respect to them.

3.1- Zanahary

Long before the arrival of the first Christian missionaries in Antananarivo, the Merina already believed in only one God, the Supreme Power who created the world, everything in it and the people therein. This is confirmed by the *lovantsofina*-oral-tradition transmitted from generation to generation; the *ohabolana*-proverbs, one of their golden archives holding their beliefs, culture and wisdom; by the *angano*-myths, which are orally transmitted around the fire every evening by the elder of the family while waiting for the rice to be cooked; and the *joro*-sacrificial prayer, performed by the *mpanandro*-traditional priests, or diviner during libation or sacrifice. All of these

show that the Merina already knew God and believed in Him. It was part and parcel of their history since the beginning. They called him *Zanahary*.

Zanahary is the common name with which they used to call God. But they have also other names, like *Andriamanitra*-Sweet or Fragrant God, *Hasina*-Efficacious Virtue, or *Mpahary*-the Creator. The translators of the Bible, since the very beginning, used the name *Andriamanitra*. *Hasina* and *Mpahary* were not used so often, as a result they are not so familiar to the later generations. The name *Zanahary* is used so often in traditional prayers and the traditional priests are familiar with it rather than other names. Even the first Christians were used to it, they alternate the use of *Zanahary* and *Andriamanitra*; but what does it mean for them?

Some researchers connect its meaning from two foreign languages. The first part 'za', they said, comes from the Sanskrit⁹ language 'yang'-God, and the second part 'hary' from the Indonesian language 'hari'-sun. As a result, they conclude that *Zanahary* is *Andriamanitra Masoandro*-God Sun. Others analysed its meaning from the radicals of the name itself. It is formed, they said, of two radicals, *za* and *nahary*; *za* is the short form of (i)za(y)-the one, and *nahary* means create. They understood *Zanahary* as the one who creates the world and everything in it. This second analysis is closer to the understanding and belief of the Merina people who believe in *Zanahary* as the creator of everything: heaven and earth, visible and invisible, people and animals alike just as Gow says:

All Malagasy people believed in one Supreme Being, the creator of heaven and earth and all mankind, whose name was variously '*Andriananahary*' (Creating Prince), *Zanahary*, or *Andriamanitra* (scented God). Although all Malagasy believed in and accepted *Zanahary*'s power to create... All Malagasy also accepted the immortality of the soul and in a life after death (1979:37).

Although they believe that *Zanahary* cares for them in their daily lives, providing them health, food, wealth etc; they do not want him to mingle and associate with them. They

⁹ According to the Award Illustrated Dictionary, it is the ancient, classical and sacred language of the Hindus in India, the oldest known member of the Indo-European family of languages.

want him to provide his benevolent gifts from a distance where he lives, in heaven. They are afraid of Him because if *Zanahary* comes down from heaven and associates with them, it brings disaster in the community. Françoise Raison-Jourde reports a peculiar case about it in her treatise on the *Bible et pouvoir à Madagascar au 19^e siècle*. A couple with their little girl came to the temple to pray to God she says. The little girl fell sick during the service. They then consulted the diviner about the cause of her sickness. The diviner said that someone among them prayed, and the Supreme Being came down from heaven to respond to that person, that is why the little girl fell sick. To get rid of the Supreme Being's unwanted presence, they offered him a *hasina*-sacrifice and rice, then everyone begged him to return to his sphere of beatitude where he lived with the golden ladder, which in their imagination connects heaven and earth (1991:79). They believe in the power of a transcendent and somewhat distant God. They want him to act from a distance or through the *razana*.

3.2- Razana

The Merina believe in life after death. They believe that the *razana*-ancestors continue to live and live closer to *Zanahary*. As a result they are able to intercede for the living. Their ties with the living are not cut off. In the Merina world they are omnipresent and from time to time they appear to them in dreams or in visions. Their descendants respected them. The ancestors were the source of blessings. They have power to affect the fortunes of the living for good or evil. The Merina consider them as the most important and most authoritative members of the family, just as if they are intimately involved in the daily lives of the living members. They are believed to be the sources from whom the life force flows, and are the creators of their customs and way of life. They watch over the living everyday and provide them with their needs.

Gow says that:

It was believed that the ancestors watched over the living at all times and that these same ancestors could alter their day-to-day lives. Malagasy beliefs held that, although dead relatives had left this world, they were leading a new existence and remained in touch with their descendants. The ancestors controlled the obedience of the living to traditional customs, gave them advice, and showed their displeasure by appearing to them in dreams. The dead were

seen as source of good things such as life, happiness, tranquillity and fertility (1979:37).

The Merina have such a great respect for the *razana* that they do not spare their fortunes to build burial tombs for them. This burial tomb is the primary link between the living and the dead, and it is built with great care and expense, reflecting the privileged position given to the dead. The family tomb is built on the family land because it makes that area their *tanindrazana*-land of the ancestors. The *tanindrazana* holds the living and the dead together. For this reason the Merina, working or living far away from that place, come from time to time to pay a visit not only to the living but also to the dead. In case one member of the family died far away from the *tanindrazana*, the whole family makes sure that the body is brought home and buried in the family tomb. The hardest curse for any Merina is *tsy milevina ampasan-drazana*-not to be buried in the ancestral tomb. Only those who offend the ancestors gravely are guilty of sacrilege; they are ostracised from the family tomb. Great care is taken to ensure that the ancestors are not angered in any way.

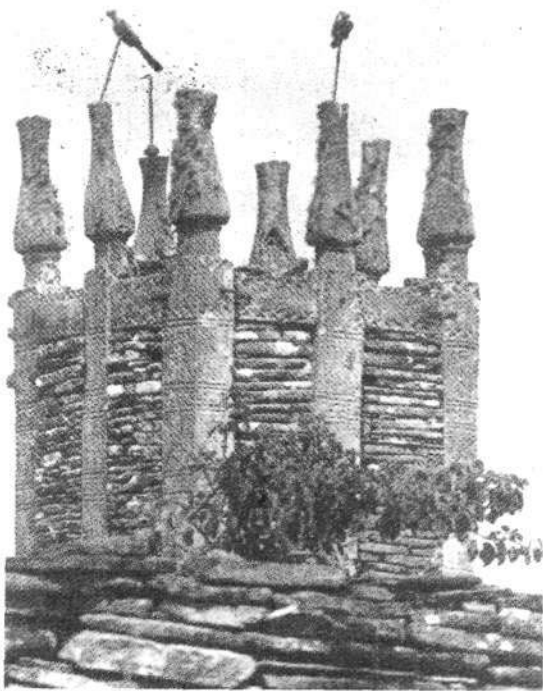


Figure 2: One of the tombs that the Malagasy built for their dead.

While burial is the final respect paid to a dead person in some parts of the country, it was not the case for the Merina. Periodically they perform the *famadihana*-turning of the dead. It reaffirms the links between the living and the dead. The intervals between one *famadihana* to the next vary from family to family: for some every five years, for others seven, nine or even eleven. It is a joyous moment for the whole family. Brown reports:

The well-known Merina custom “the turning of the dead”, *famadihana*, under which the bodies of the dead wrapped in burial shrouds are removed from the family tomb at intervals of years and displayed at a joyous family gathering before being wrapped in a new shroud and returned to the tomb, is not found outside the plateau area (1978:11).



Figure 3: Exhumation in Imerina, the central region of Madagascar. People lifted high the bodies of the *razana* and dancing following the rhythm of music and song.

The ceremonies of the *famadihana* are very costly, because of the expense of providing food for a large number of relatives and guests, and it is a big feast, everyone has to eat well. It represents a time of communion with the ancestors. It is also a means

of avoiding or reducing guilt or blame. It is considered a serious transgression not to hold a *famadihana*. They believe that it is not only a feast for the living but also for the dead. The spirits of the ancestors are invited to the feast given by the living members of the family; that is why a few elders of the family go to the family tomb the day before the ceremonies to call the ancestors to be present lest they go away on a long journey and be absent for the big day. The *famadihana* marks the family reunion in spirit among the living and the dead.

The Merina recognise a number of different souls. These include the *fanahy*, the *ambiroa*, the *lolo*, and the *angatra*. The *fanahy* is the soul of the living person. They say '*Ny fanahy no olona*-the fanahy makes a person'. It is a kind of essence which determines individual character and behaviour. By fate, a person can have a good or a bad *fanahy*. The *ambiroa* is the soul of the person after death. The *ambiroa* are the souls that the elders called to the tomb the day before the celebration of the *famadihana*. They believe that the *ambiroa* permeate the tomb building, the family household, and the hills and valleys of the *tanindrazana*. In a sense they are omnipresent. The *lolo* is the soul of a recently deceased person. It cannot do anything to the living, it is harmless. It only feels homesick, for that reason it comes back to its old surroundings. It often appears in the form of a moth or a butterfly. Then the *angatra* is the ghost of the unknown dead. It is often malevolent and frightens people at night (Pischke 2004:4). There is a specific prayer to chase it away.

Though they are not physically seen, the Merina believe in the omnipresence of the *razana* in their daily lives. The ancestors and the living maintain a close relationship. Their presence is felt through some daily practices. For example, when throwing water through the windows, they always warn *rano oh*-water. They do it in order to avoid splashing water on them in case they happen to take a walk around. Or else, they do not dare to drink any alcoholic drink without pouring first the ancestors' share at their corner. The *razana* are omnipresent in the Merina daily lives.

3.3- *Sampy*

The Merina believe in the supernatural power of the *sampy*-idols or talismans. They have invisible, supernatural powers over the land, the climate, wealth, and the people themselves. They have power to protect from any harm caused by natural disasters, evil spirits, witches, enemies or any diseases. They protect the land from intruders. They can change the climate for the benefit of the people, making rain fall for the crops and the herds. They can make people gain money and teach them tricks in order to become wealthy. They protect people from any kind of harm and cure all kinds of disease that affect people. They also protect them from the attack of the enemies. During the time of war, they help them to overcome the enemies, either by making them invincible or by making the enemies collapse by their magic powers. They can also neutralise the malevolent power of the witches.

The *sampy* are represented by visible and tangible objects such as pieces of wood, sculptures, animal's teeth, horns, bottles containing sacred land, sacred water and the king's remains. They are well kept in the house, inside wooden boxes or in small well-covered baskets. In the houses where these *sampy* are kept, there are many restrictions that the people have to follow in order to avoid offending them. Nobody is allowed to come close to the *sampy* except their keepers. No stranger is allowed to enter the house where they are kept. Everyone entering that house must be sprinkled with sacred water mixed with white soil and ginger. The houses for them are built on top of hills so that they can see and take control of the land and the people living in it.

The Merina know different kinds of *sampy*: the family, the ethnic, and the royal *sampy*. These worked at different levels: the family *sampy* worked at family level, for the benefit of the family members; the *ethnic* at ethnic level and the *royal* at national level. The family *sampy* requires worship and sacrifices from the family it protects, the ethnic from the ethnic group and the royal from the inhabitants of the entire kingdom. The royal *sampy* are believed to be the most powerful. Their task is to protect the whole country, the kingdom, and specifically the king. The well known among them are

kelimalaza, *ramahavaly*, *fataka*, *zanaharitsimandy* and *manjakatsiroa*. Radama I held only one, *manjakatsiroa*¹⁰ because he did not want to share his kingdom with anyone.

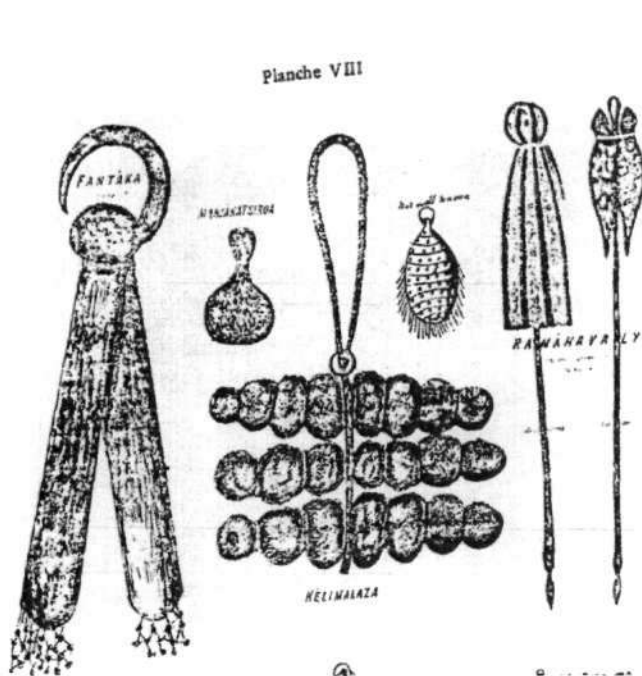


Figure 4: These are some of the royal *Sampy*, from the left: *fantaka*, *manjakatsiroa*, *kelimalaza* and *ramahavaly*.

4- The failure of the first Catholic missionaries

Despite the hardships the first Catholic missionaries endured and the tremendous effort and dedication they gave to their mission in Madagascar, they experienced failure and disappointment. They met obstacle upon obstacle up to the point where they gave up. They resumed sending missionaries to the island only two centuries later, after the failure of the first attempt.

4.1- The first Europeans in Madagascar

Diego Dias made landfall on a large island on the 10th August 1500. He named it Saint Laurent, 'after the Saint on whose feast day the island had been sighted' (Brown 1978:31). From 1502 onward, it appeared on Portuguese maps with the name of Madagascar. The first Europeans were not interested in bringing Christianity to Madagascar. They were only concerned with their trade and commerce. Discovery of

¹⁰ Manjakatsiroa means never two kings reign at the same time; that is the reason he kept it because he wanted to be the only king of Madagascar.

new land meant for them an increase of profit. It was almost a century later, in 1585, that a Dominican priest, Father Jao de San Toma came to lay the foundation stone for the missionary works on that big island. He landed at Analalava, northwest of Madagascar. He did not last. He struggled with the Muslims who arrived there before him. After working briefly, he died of a sudden death. He was believed to have been bewitched.

4.2- The Jesuits' disappointment

In 1613, Louis Mariano, a Jesuit priest with his two companions arrived in Madagascar. They landed at the western coast, at Mazagalem, a famous bay of Boina. They started their mission right at that place, but they met difficulties. That place was already under the control of the Arab traders who were Muslims. They decided to move southward by following the west coast. At last they arrived at Taolanaro, at the southeast of the island, where the king Tsiambany welcomed them warmly. They built their missionary works at that place but due to the language barrier, they decided to withdraw for a while. They went to the Indies where they had already a strong mission station at Goa. They came back two years later, but the king did not welcome them. They decided to move to another place more favourable for their missionary works.

They went to Boina, on the west coast of the island. Their hope of making Christians did not last. War broke out at that place, the king of that region was already old and his sons fought for his succession. It hindered their mission. They did not make any converts. The people were busy with war, and the few they reached refused to give up their old way of life. Concerning life after death, they preferred to be with their ancestors at the Helo¹¹, rather than going to heaven which is an alien place to them. These pioneers left the country in 1617 disappointed and downhearted. Mariano attempted to return in 1619 but he met with difficulties. He was confronted with the Muslim opposition at Mazagalem. He went to Mozambique and worked there, dreaming of coming back to Madagascar (Hübsch 1992:170-171), but his dream was not realised. The Jesuits were disappointed but they could not do otherwise due to the uncompromising situations.

¹¹ It is a place near the bay; They believe that the souls of the ancestors go there and continue to live.

4.3- The Lazarists' struggles

While the Jesuits left disappointed, the Lazarists came to try their luck. Two Lazarist priests arrived on the 4th December 1648, Fathers Charles Nacquart, and Gondrée, young priests of thirty and twenty-nine. They landed at Taolanaro. They started their mission at that place. They were greatly encouraged by favour of the king of that region. The people also cooperated and welcomed them in their midst. And in no time they spoke the Malagasy language, communicated with the people and preached the Good News to them.

Due to the absence of didactic materials, they had to improvise some materials to facilitate their work. Nacquart started to write a catechism in Malagasy language. They had a different approach from that of the LMS missionaries who came to the island in early nineteenth century. The LMS missionaries translated the Bible into the Malagasy language. These methods produced different effects from the reception of Christianity by the indigenous people. The LMS made more and lasting converts while the Lazarists struggled without success.

Nacquart used some Koranic words and expressions in his catechism (Hübsch 1992:174). He realised during his encounters with the people that they were already influenced by the Muslim religion brought by the Arab traders who arrived there before them. So he tried to build from what the people already knew. He also wrote a few prayers and thirty short homilies. He compiled them with his catechetical book. The theme of his teaching converged around three Christian mysteries: the Trinity (the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit), the Incarnation and the Sacraments (1992:174). His work was of great use later on for the missionaries coming to Madagascar. It was published in 1657, seven years after his death.

Gondrée died six months after their arrival. He did not adjust to the harsh climate of Madagascar. Nacquart was left alone to carry on the Lazarists' mission. His task was not easy, both among the French community and the local people. He died on the 29th May 1650. In all he baptised seventy-seven people and blessed ten marriages (Hübsch 1992:175).

Then Fathers Bourdaise and Mounier arrived in August 1654 to take over the mission from him. A few months later, Mounier died. The Lazarists sent four more missionaries to replace him and strengthen their mission in Madagascar the following year. Only two of them arrived on May 1656, the other two having died during the journey. The two new comers did not last. They died of malaria. Bourdaise was left alone again. After experiencing hardships, fatigue, and sickness, Bourdaise himself died on the 24th June 1657.

In 1663, four more Lazarists missionaries arrived; but they were disappointed by the situation. Villages were torn apart by the war between the local people and French settlers. They sent more missionaries whose mission became more and more difficult. At last they decided to leave the country on September 1674. All of the French settlers left the island with them. In a period of twenty-five years, the Lazarists sent thirty-one priests and ten religious brothers to Madagascar. Only two of them survived and managed to return to France, their country of origin (Hübsch 1992:179). After long struggles, they had no choice but to abandon their mission in Madagascar. No more foreign missionaries came to the island until the arrival of the LMS, London Missionary Society, in 1818.

5- Radama's contract with Great Britain

Andrianampoinimerina died in 1810. His dream was to bring the whole island under one kingdom; but it was only a dream. His son Radama I succeeded him on the throne. He was a young man of seventeen, having been born in 1793, when he came to the throne for the first time. Despite his tender age, he showed aptitude and intelligence in carrying on his father's dream. He consolidated his kingdom at Imerina and continued the conquest of other kingdoms. He did it in order 'to fulfil both his father's wishes and of his own ambitions to become a great conqueror in emulation of Napoleon' (Brown 1978:132).



Figure 5: Andrianampoinimerina in his traditional garments, painted during colonisation. He said '*Ny ranomasina no valamparihiko*'. He refused to cooperate with any European.

Radama had no difficulty in raising an army larger than that of any possible adversary in a densely populated kingdom of Imerina. He was self-sufficient in everything except firearms and ammunition for the conquest. His only income for these was the exportation of slaves. He was the patron of slave trade in Madagascar. He captured potential slaves during military expeditions and brought them to the coast at Toamasina to be exchanged for firearms and ammunition. During his reign, an average of two thousand slaves was exported each year from Imerina (1978:129).

During this time Robert Townsend Farquhar was the British ambassador in the island of Mauritius which was already a British protectorate. He was commissioned to extend the British hegemony around the Indian Ocean region. He was informed about Radama's plan to bring the whole Madagascar under one kingdom. He thought that alliance with him could bring the British policy to its achievement. He then sent first Jacques Chardenoux on June 1816 as an unofficial delegate to establish contact and gain information. The delegation was well received with affection and respect by the

king. Farquhar was well pleased with this initial contact. He proceeded with the official delegate. This second was to secure a general treaty of friendship and alliance. He sent Le Sage on November 1816. This latter managed to conclude a general treaty of friendship and peace but failed to address the question of the abolition of the slave trade.

The British had three specific goals that pushed them to conclude this alliance: firstly, to acquire sovereignty over Madagascar so that it would become open to British influence and trade, secondly, to use Radama's power to oust the French from the island, and thirdly, the abolition of the slave trade by persuading Radama to prohibit the export of slaves (Belrose 1992:188). The two first goals could be achieved by the conclusion of a treaty but the last one needed another step.

The failure to address the subject of the slave trade was a disappointment to Farquhar. But the ground was already prepared for further negotiation. He delegated James Hastie on July 1817 to address this matter to Radama. His mission was to convince Radama that

it is more advantageous to him to keep his people in his dominions, and by their labour to provide those articles which his country produces in sufficient quantity to exchange for the merchandise of Europe and India which he requires, than to depopulate his country by the sale of his subjects, and of his unfortunate neighbours, whose country he lays waste in order to gratify his desire (Brown 1978:140).

Radama was not convinced at first, but when Farquhar offered him provision of the equivalent in arms and money in lieu of the proceeds of the slave trade, he accepted. In his great *kabary*-speech on the 9th October 1817, he prohibited the export of slaves. Anyone who disobeyed it would receive the most severe punishment or be reduced to slavery. Farquhar seeing his policy crowned with success, returned to England on leave. General John Hall replaced him.

Hall ruined Farquhar's policy by ignoring the treaty. He refused to pay the 'equivalent', and now he recalled Hastie from Antananarivo (Brown 1987:143). Radama was infuriated by this breach of faith. He immediately ordered the resumption of the slave trade. It continued until July 1820 when Farquhar's home leave was finished. Back in Mauritius, he immediately set about to repair the damage caused by General Hall. He re-appointed Hastie to go back to Madagascar and renewed the treaty. This time he went with a LMS missionary, Rev David Jones. After a long explanation, Hastie managed to re-convince Radama to ratify the renewed treaty. Meanwhile Radama asked for help in instructing his people. With the support of the king Rev David Jones set to work without losing time. Many more missionaries and artisans were to come to help him.

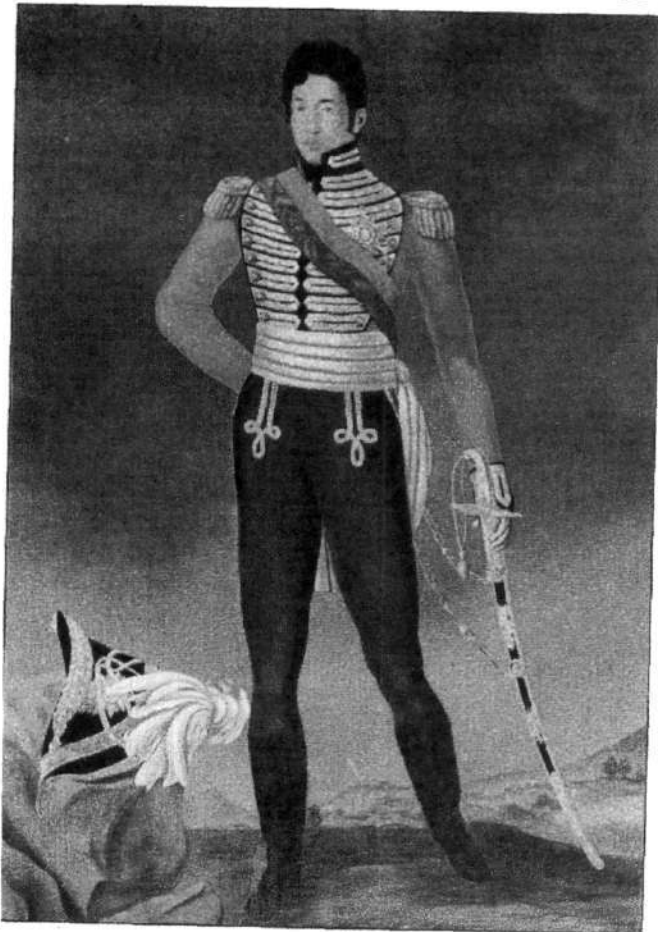


Figure 6: Radama dressed as a European Soldier. He was the first king who welcomed the missionaries and civilisation in Antananarivo (Painted by Copalle in 1826).

Chapter three: The first encounters of the Merina with the Bible

1- The first LMS missionaries and presence of the Bible in Antananarivo

In February 1818, full of zeal and courage David Jones and Thomas Bevans embarked for Madagascar with their brides. At that time, the treaty concluded between Radama and Farquhar had already been abolished by General Hall. During their transit at Mauritius, Hall and Hastie discouraged them from proceeding to Madagascar. 'It would be a waste of time trying to establish a mission in Madagascar in the existing circumstances' they said (Brown 1978:153). Nevertheless, they decided to go and landed in Toamasina on the 18th August 1818. They were the first LMS missionaries to step on the soil of Madagascar.

Due to their fear of Radama's anger at the breach of the treaty, they started their missionary work far from Antananarivo, at Toamasina. They opened a small school and started to teach the Malagasy children. The progress of these children was encouraging but the enemies of the mission were greater than they thought. The slave-trading community was hostile on one hand because the missionaries denounced slave-trade as an evil which should be stopped without delay. The missionaries based their condemnation of slavery on Paul's teachings especially in his letter to the Galatians 3:28 where he spells out the equality of all people. The slave-traders were not willing to give up their business because it was very lucrative. On the other hand the harshness of the climate was intolerable and Malagasy fever was merciless. In less than one year, David Jones remained alone. His wife and new born child died in December the same year; and all the Bevans' family perished the following year, in January and February 1819¹². Jones himself was very sick and was forced to retire to Mauritius to recover his health and wait for a better opportunity to resume the mission.

¹² They died tragic deaths in a span of a few months. For further information see Brown 1978:153-154.

The return of Farquhar to Mauritius prompted this opportunity and, with his full support, Jones sailed to Madagascar with Hastie, the British government official. They landed at Toamasina on Monday 4th September 1820. The following week they set out on the journey to Antananarivo. They arrived there on Tuesday 3rd October 1820 after seventeen days of walking (Rabary 1925:27). Happy at his old friend's return (Hastie), Radama even forgot his anger. He received them with great joy. According to Jones report 'the king appeared as if he was lost in ecstasy and joy and mirth-overwhelmed with rejoicing laughter that he could hardly keep his seat-hugging and pulling about Mr Hastie in such a manner that I have never witnessed such a sight and such excess of joy on any occasion in all my life as this day on the reception of Mr Hastie'¹³.

Mr Hastie's task was to renew the treaty abolished by General Hall. Just after the conclusion of the treaty, Jones set to work without delay. He opened his first school on 8th December 1820 with three pupils. Even without necessary equipment he started teaching immediately. The pupils sat on the ground, there were no desks, no blackboard, and no paper. They wrote on smooth boards with charcoal. Radama urged parents to send their children to school, and in no time their numbers increased to sixteen. Radama offered them a bigger room. Despite the lack of teaching aids and unfavourable conditions of the classroom, the progress of the pupils was promising. They were remarkably intelligent and quick in learning and very good at singing. Jones was impressed as he said 'I consider that people in this country are [sic] in further civilisation than numbers in Wales...' (Gow 1979:6).

The fact that the missionaries introduced the Bible together with the skill of reading and writing meant they wanted to impress upon the people the superior power of the Bible. There was an introduction of a written culture which took over little by little the oral culture. As a result, the oral culture was later no longer influential to the local people, who were absorbed by the new culture. The introduction of this new culture of writing contributed to the high esteem of the Bible in Madagascar. The indigenous population

¹³ This was Jones's report found in *Manuscript Journal to Madagascar in 1820*, entry for October 3, 1820, LMS Journals Madagascar/ Mauritius.

found it a valuable object of power and authority. Those who had and used it obtained power.

David Griffiths arrived in Antananarivo on the 30th May 1821. He came to replace Bevens and to reinforce the LMS mission. He opened the second school at Andohalo and started to teach sixteen pupils. Then the LMS sent another missionary on June the following year, John Jeffreys. He opened the third school at Ambohimitsimbina with twelve students. David Jones, David Griffiths and John Jeffreys were the LMS pioneers in Antananarivo. They brought the Bible with them along with 'tobacco, beads, knives, guns, mirrors, watches, and telescopes' (West 2004:3). These were products of western technology, and introducing the Bible with them automatically associated the Bible with the superior technology of the West.

The missionaries taught that the secret of their wisdom and knowledge was in the Bible. They told the indigenous people and Radama that it was because of the Bible that Great Britain was advanced in technology. Those missionaries linked the western technology with the Bible to convince the local people of its great and superior power. As a result the king and the indigenous people would embrace it without any suspicion. In one aspect these pioneers were right, because the Bible can be a stepping stone. However, it is not a source of technical know-how. They told them so in order to attract disciples because they saw that the Malagasy were interested in the guns, telescopes and watches they brought. Thus, through the help of the missionaries they came into contact with the Bible and its world. The Bible opened the minds and hearts of the Malagasy to the products of western technology, the Bible included. From that time onward the presence of the Bible was felt and through their encounters and dialogues with it, they appreciated it.

2- Use of the Bible as text books in schools

The LMS missionaries did not rush into baptising the local people. They believed in education as a powerful means of converting people to Christianity. From the beginning they had no text books, the only text books used in schools were the Bible. Little by little the gospel message permeated the hearts and minds of their pupils and

they would become the future converts to Christianity. So, the Bible was at the same time a mean to impart the skills of reading, writing and to learn a foreign language: English, and also to evangelise the learners. The Bible came in a form that tied it up very much with western culture and technology. There is belief in the minds of the people that the Bible has power because it contains knowledge; they knew that knowledge is power. After being impregnated with the gospel message with which they came into contact every day, they would become strong Christians in faith. Their encounters with the Bible would affect their whole lives, world view and behaviour. Belrose-Huygues argues that the missionaries' students had common thoughts, views and ways of speaking based on the Bible (1992:201). They were formed little by little to become fervent Christians.

Schools were the best place of announcing the Good News. The missionaries tried to convert Radama to Christianity but they failed. They were right in thinking that his conversion could mean the success of the mission: conversion of his entire subjects to Christianity. Radama's interest was not in their religion, he was suspicious of it from the beginning, because it lowered his position as the representation of god on earth and of the twelve kings. He was interested in the civilisation and technology they brought to his kingdom and he was taught that the key is the Bible. He wanted Madagascar to be civilised like Great Britain. They even had very little success with adults who were used to debauchery and a licentious life style. It was very difficult to convince them to abandon their old ways of living and adopt the new Christian life because they were not exposed to the Bible as the pupils were. The Bible condemned debauchery and a licentious life style. Their thirst for the new civilisation was encouraging but their reluctance to leave behind their habit discouraged the missionaries. It was only in schools that they made considerable progress just as Brown says 'in schools, they made considerable headway in implanting Christian doctrines in minds of their pupils, by the use of religious texts for reading and writing and hymns for singing' (1978:163).

From the beginning, the teaching was in English because there was no written Malagasy language at that time and the missionaries' knowledge of the language was

rudimentary. Despite the newness of the English language, the pupils showed much progress in their learning. Jones in a letter dated on the 3rd May 1821 wrote:

I use the great part of my time to teach sixteen children that the king entrusted to me. Three of them live with me, the children of Radama's sister, one of them is the heir of the throne. The others are children of dignitaries' officials. All of them were remarkably intelligent. One of them, just six years old, and two others started to read some chapters of the Bible in English fluently, although they ignored the alphabet on the month of November (Mondain 1920:41-42).

Jones was impressed by the progress of his students, in less than six months they already could read fluently biblical texts.

The Bible was the main text book used in schools which are the cradle of civilisation and progress. In the year 1822, teaching in English was abandoned in favour of teaching in Malagasy. The missionaries translated and used the translated passages for reading and writing exercises. For example Belrose-Huygues reports that in the year 1823, some Bibles from Britain arrived in Antananarivo; there were fifty Old and New Testament together and two-hundred New Testaments. The missionaries translated them and used them as texts books in schools (1992:204-205). Other books arrived later on as supplements such as arithmetic, geography, grammar, catechesis, and history books. When they felt confident enough in their own ability of mastering the Malagasy language, they started the translation of the Bible.

3- Translation of the Bible into the Malagasy language

From the beginning the missionaries realised that the translation of the Bible into the Malagasy language was of first importance and necessity. They felt the real need of the Malagasy to hear the word of God in their own vernacular language. If they wanted Christianity to take root in Madagascar they had to make the Bible heard speaking the language of the inhabitants of that island. The LMS missionaries had the tradition of making the Word of God available in the vernacular languages; they found out that it was the best way of evangelising the local people. They thought on the same lines as Lamin Sanneh: 'God, who has no linguistic favourites, has determined that we should all hear the Good News in our own native tongue' (1989:174).

They attracted many indigenous people to Sunday services. These people were curious about the religion of the European and to listen to the ability of the missionaries in the *kabary tsy valiana*¹⁴-speeches without response. They still needed conversion because once the missionaries tried to relate the doctrines to the conduct of their private life, the people shied away. The promise of heaven and the threat of hell made less impact than the usual impact on a people deeply imbued with the idea of survival after death in the family tombs, with the spirits of the ancestors presiding over daily life (Brown 1978:164). To conform their lives to the Scripture's recommendation was still far from their mind. Listening to colourful sermons and singing hymns every Sunday was one thing, and obeying the commandments was quite another.

Confronted by this situation, the missionaries were compelled to translate the Bible into Malagasy. They were convinced that to convert people to Christianity, they had to hear God speaking to them in their own language. This was a priority. This would enable them to grasp the inner meanings of the Biblical message and understand its doctrines. The massive development of Christianity in Africa was due to the translation of the Bible into the vernacular language, not in maintaining the Western languages as means of evangelisation just as Bediako argues:

African Christianity is inconceivable without the Bible in the vernacular language of the Africans; the mother tongue is powerful. When the Bible is written in their own language; that is the moment that Africans recapture Christianity. God speaks their language. Africans are now in touch with the root of Christianity¹⁵.

The missionaries felt the need of translating the Bible into Malagasy more than ever but they were hesitant about what alphabet to use, the *sarabe*¹⁶ which arrived there long before them with the Arab traders, or the Roman alphabet with which the Bible was written and they were familiar with. Through their influence Radama gave them

¹⁴ They called the Sunday sermons *kabary tsy valiana*. They were used to the exchanged speech during their leisure time. Sunday services were only an alternative to the *kabary* they used to have.

¹⁵ It was note taken from Bediako's lecture on the 3rd March 2004, at the University of KaZulu-Natal.

¹⁶ The *sorabe* was based on the Arabic alphabet.

permission to reduce the Malagasy language into written language based on the Roman alphabet. This was an important decision, first of all it shows the superiority of the Language of the Bible, and secondly it would distance the island from Islam. The king's edict was issued on the 23rd March 1823. It accelerated the work of translation in Madagascar.

Jones and Griffiths started to undertake this most arduous work on Wednesday 10th September 1823 (Munthe 1969:73). They divided the work systematically; each one had to take one book from Old Testament and another one from the New. Once finished they moved to the next books. Their journal confirmed that Jones translated the book of Genesis and the Gospel of Matthew while Griffiths was occupied with the book of Exodus and the Gospel of Luke. They wrote in a letter sent to London dated on the 20th November 1823 'we hope to have Genesis, Exodus and Matthew and Luke completed in the course of next year' (1969:73).

The work of translation required a great part of their time and energy. Though it was hard and demanding, they did not work alone. They were helped by twelve of their most clever students. They called them 'the twelve youths'. They had class in the morning and the whole afternoon was dedicated to the work of translation. The work advanced rapidly. By the end of the following year, 1824, and the beginning of 1825 they completed the translation of the New Testament and great parts of the Old. Brown reports that 'only five years after their arrival, the missionaries had not only created a considerable network of schools in and around the capital, but had completed the translation of the New Testament and a substantial chunks of the Old' (1978:160). This was a great achievement of Jones and Griffiths with the help of the twelve youths.

They translated the New Testament from the Greek Bible, the *Textus Receptus* and the Old Testament from the Hebrew Bible of Van der Hooght (Cousin 1891:79). Jones and Griffiths had substantial knowledge of these languages, since they were trained in Wales at the school of Dr Phillip. This school considered Hebrew, Greek and Latin the basis of most learning. They also taught in their turn Greek and Hebrew to the twelve youths. They thought it would be beneficiary for the work of translation. They were

also compelled to do it, under the request of Radama who wanted that these youths should be given classic education (Munthe 1969:77). They imported manuals for their education. At the end their knowledge, for translating the Bible from Greek or Hebrew to Malagasy, was very limited. Instead of offering help, their contribution caused even more confusion to Jones and Griffiths. They were more useful in the revision of the already translated texts into Malagasy. Their contribution was more appreciated in their critique and correction of some Malagasy words used by the missionaries in their translation.

On the 4th August 1825, Jones and Griffiths confirmed that the work was proceeding speedily. They said 'having finished the translation of the New Testament, we proceed with that of the Old this year as diligently as other affairs of the mission will allow us to attend to it' (Munthe 1969:74). From December 1825, they put aside all other activities and concentrated only on the work of translation. Their aim was to finish the translation of the Bible into Malagasy language as quickly as possible because it was of great importance in the preaching of the Good News to the local people. Griffiths wrote on the 12th April 1826 that 'a version of the Scripture is rendered into the Malagasy language, and we now go on as fast as possible with revising our translation' (1969:75). It means that by April 1826 the translation of the Bible into Malagasy language was completed. The remaining work concerned the revision.

Further help arrived from Wales on the 11th September 1826. David Johns came to Antananarivo with two artisans, Cummins, a cotton spinner and Cameron, a carpenter. Then Joseph Freeman also came the following year. Both Johns and Freeman made a valuable contribution to the revision of the Malagasy version Bible. In this process they tried to compare the Malagasy translation with the originals and other versions. Jones wrote on the 9th November 1827, 'we are now revising our translation of the Scriptures as critically as we can, by comparing it with the originals and other versions' (Munthe 1969:75). They were interested particularly in a linguistically accurate translation of the Scriptures into the Malagasy language. By the end of 1827, they gave a final touch of revision of the whole Bible, both Old and New Testament. And on November 1828, the whole Bible, except the book of Leviticus, was 'translated, revised, and re-revised'

(1969:75). They found the translation of Leviticus very difficult; the words were not familiar and the terms complicated. They had to work on it closely with the twelve youths. What remained was the edition of the Bible, translated into Malagasy language.

4- The Merina sense that ‘the Bible has power’

The Malagasy who owned the Bible had power because they acquired knowledge from it. For them the famous saying is indeed true: ‘knowledge is power’. The Bible introduced them to the concept of power in the western point of view. Gerald West is right, then, in saying that ‘the Bible has strange power’. The Malagasy recognised it because ‘they would have seen the Bible used both as a closed object of power and as an opened object with particular things to say’ (West 2004:15). But the non-Christians who saw and judged them from outside saw it as power in itself because they associated it with the charms they had at home; and they were convinced that the Bible had superior power. For the converted Christians, the Bible is an alternative to charms. This understanding of the Bible as power and knowledge was experienced by the Merina during their early encounters with it. By seeing and observing both the missionaries and their students’ acts and deeds, the Merina sensed that there was something powerful protecting them; and they attributed it to the Bible.

The *vazimba*¹⁷ graves were everywhere on the high grounds in Imerina. These resemble small barrows, or gentle elevations of earth with an upright stone placed in the centre, and a number of smaller stones scattered around. They were like ancient ruined graves. The Merina were afraid of approaching or touching these graves because they might have offended the *vazimba* spirits. And the most common offence against them was disturbing their dwelling places. If they were offended they became extremely dangerous both on the offenders and on their descendants. That is why the Merina were so frightened of them. But the missionaries did not believe in the *vazimba*’s harmful power.

Griffiths reported that he and Jones Canham once took a walk to the east of the town and passed by the tomb and altar of the *vazimba*. When they arrived on the spot, they

¹⁷ They were believed to be the original inhabitants of Madagascar.

cut a small branch of the holy tree called *fanory*. The Merina believed that if anyone cut a branch of that tree, he would die in the course of few days. The children seeing what they did cried and were very frightened (Larson 1997:976). Within a few days, when nothing happened to Griffiths and Jones, the people said that they were unharmed and alive because they had the Bible. They attributed the safety of the missionaries from the attack of the *vazimba*'s spirit to the power of the Bible. The *vazimba* could not do anything to them because they were protected by the Bible. The acts and deeds of these early missionaries showed that the Bible had superior power to the holy things of the traditional religion.

The students of the missionaries were also protected by the Bible's power. These students would step on the *vazimba* graves or played with the stones on them and they stayed unharmed. A normal villager could not dare to do the same because of the fear of being harmed or even killed. For example, in Griffiths' journal in 1823, the missionaries challenged an elderly man at Miakotso, a village at the west of Antananarivo, only to touch a stone and piece of wood vandalised from the *vazimba* grave. He refused to do so because he believed it would make him sick and as a consequence he would die. The missionaries explained to him that that superstition was false; he would not die because of vandalising *vazimba*'s tomb. He further explained to him that the students did it and they were unharmed. The man replied that he was not like the children who learn the book (Larson 1997:991). It implied that learning or possessing the book endorsed power just as West says 'Both the open Bible (as text) and the unopened Bible (as sacred object and icon) are powerful in much of Africa' (2000:48).

In the *Early Encounters with the Bible among the Batlhaping*, the same issue was raised by West. He says that the '*ngaka* (an indigenous doctor/diviner/healer) assumes that the missionaries' book(s) are their equivalent of his *bola* (a prognosticating dice)' (2004:22). In Madagascar there was a high risk of considering the Bible as the Christians' *sampy* (idols or talismans) or *ody* (charms). The Malagasy Christians who were stripped of their *sampy* used the Bible as an alternative. As a result the Malagasy embraced alternative understandings of Christianity as an extension and refinement of

the existing practices of idolatry. So the understanding of Christianity by the Malagasy was different from that of the foreign missionaries. They assigned local meanings for Christianity; because once they had the Bible the missionaries could no longer control them just as Larson says:

This serves to illustrate the genius of the Malagasy to evince their susceptibility of Christian instruction, and quick talent in applying that instruction to the capacities and modes of thinking of their countrymen, rather than representing a change from idolatry altogether as the missionaries put it, Malagasy conversion to Christianity entailed assimilation of mission religion to cultural logic of Malagasy sacred practices, a process also known as syncretism (1997:978).

The Merina, then, understood Christian practices as a change from one culture to another, and becoming a Christian meant abandoning the charms and embracing the Bible. As a result the Bible was considered as an alternative to the charms that they used to have. The risk of syncretism was high during the early encounters with the Bible among the Malagasy; especially to the adults who did not attend schools. By syncretism I mean the fusion of local beliefs and rituals with Christianity. If it was well integrated it promoted inculturation, if not Christianity became a varnish which affected the indigenous people superficially.

There is a typical example illustrating this use of the Bible as a charm in Larson's article. It was about a Christian officer in Radama's army who used the Bible as a protective object while the others were carrying their charms and idols, carried in their bosoms for this purpose. He reports:

These places abound with crocodiles and the people carry about them numerous charms & idols to protect them against their powerful adversaries; he (the officer) carried none but it was frequently observed by his comrades that before entering into the water, to approach his object, he used to take from his mantle a little book, and after reading attentively for a few seconds, plunge boldly in. He was often jeered on his subject by his comrades, & his reply was, 'you have your charms to which you trust for safety, and I have my safeguard, the book is mine' (Larson 1997:991).

For this practice, he did not select what to read. He just opened his Bible and started reading any passage in front of him.

5- The interest of the Merina in the Bible

The Merina wrestled to get the Bible from the hands of the missionaries. At the beginning the missionaries printed only chapters of the Bible. They had not yet finished the translation. But from time to time they printed some parts of it. When they published and distributed variety of tracts, small pamphlets or copies of individual books of the Bible, they were astonished at the great numbers of the people interested in getting copies. These people came from various parts of the county, far and near, to get the book. 'Written texts became very popular' with the Merina and 'copies of small books of different kinds from the LMS press increased to 20 000 per annum by the early 1830s' (Larson 1997:990). They were fascinated about the new written culture of the Bible.

When the New Testament was published in the year 1830, the missionaries put many copies into circulation. They had had satisfaction of noticing greater attention on the part of those who attended public worship. The effect of the content of the 'Book', the opened Bible, was more powerful than the closed one, as a charm. As a result the missionaries wanted to print as many copies of the New Testament as possible. Despite their efforts, the supply could not respond to the demand from the local people. Munthe says that 'the distribution of the New Testament was very difficult because of the huge demand. There were people coming to Ambatonakanga more than seven times to get a copy' (1969:132). They showed great interest in the book and strove to get one from the hands of the missionaries.

The indigenous people greatly prized the Bible. There was an incident illustrating it:

A poor man in a very feeble state of health, who had not been able to quit his home for five months, on hearing that the leaders were preparing to leave, determined to make the attempt to walk to the capital in order to secure for himself a complete copy of the sacred volume. Though he had sixty miles to travel in his delicate state of health he did not rest until he had reached the

house of the missionary, and obtained his pearl of great price. It is impossible to express the joy in the countenance of this devoted Christian on receiving the sacred book. He pressed it to his bosom and exclaimed: 'this contains the words of eternal life; it is my life, and I will take as much care of it as my own life (Patten 1935:38-39).

Chapter Four: The uncertainty of Christianity in Madagascar

1- The death of Radama, friend of the missionaries

Despite Radama's indifference to Christianity and in the spreading of the Gospel message he was a friend of the missionaries. He gave them every support they needed for the work they undertook in schools, in the development of arts and crafts and in the dissemination of the Malagasy written language. He was the one who recruited their students and built schools for them. He encouraged the students by frequent exhortation, visits to the schools and gave personal rewards for the better pupils at the annual examinations. He gave the missionaries full support: morally, financially and materially; and they acknowledged that without Radama they would have achieved nothing.

But Radama's health declined steadily in the first half of the year 1828. He was still very young, thirty-six old, but his strength was weakened by various military expeditions from where he often caught fever. He was also very fond of alcohol and nocturnal debauches¹⁸. All this weakened his constitution and resistance to any disease and shortened his life. He became very weak that year and it was almost impossible for him to conduct the kingdom's affairs. He even stopped receiving visitors except his close friends and relatives. Jones, during a visit on the 25 July, did not recognise him. He was very thin and barely managed to articulate words (Rabary 1925:38-39). He died on 27 July 1828 at eight o'clock in the morning.

His reign constitutes an epoch in the history of Madagascar, too important to be forgotten. He concluded an alliance with Great Britain; it was the key to his success in every way. He suppressed the slave-trade. He adopted a general system of school education and introduced Christianity in the very heart of the country. He subjugated almost the whole island under his rule due to his brilliant talent in forming a large army on the European model. He reduced the Malagasy language to form and order. He

¹⁸ This observation is confirmed by three authors: Rabary 1925:37-39, Brown 1987:164 and Gow 1979:13.

established a printing press in his capital. He diffused numerous branches of art from the West. These are memorable events which gave a marked character to that period, and to the history of his sovereign. The Malagasy lost a king, a leader, and a father who initiated them to the new civilisation and the missionaries lost a friend and supporter. Even today, he is a highly appreciated king because of the introduction of western civilisation in Madagascar. What can be criticised was his over-ambition to imitate Napoleon; he lost thousands of his soldiers in the military campaigns he undertook. He had a large plan, to unite the whole island, but used poor strategies in achieving it.

Most of all, it was Radama who also introduced the Bible in Imerina by accepting the LMS missionaries. Although he disfavoured Christian religion he welcomed the missionaries in his kingdom. He was interested in the civilisation they brought but suspicious about their religion. It would endanger his position as the only monarch the island; the Christians called Jesus their King. He was also keeper of the traditions of the ancestors as well as the guardian of the national *sampy*. If Christianity prevailed he would have lost the support of his subjects and would have had problems with the traditional conservative party that would certainly overthrow him. It is obvious that the missionaries came with the Bible. He supported them in the process of translating it into the Malagasy language. His attitude towards the Bible was complex, he saw it as part of the European power and knowledge, but he also saw its danger. Without Radama it was difficult to imagine that the Bible could have reached the indigenous people around Antananarivo. At his death, the missionaries were anxious about the future of Christianity. But they still had hope; the students in various schools made very good progress and the Bible was translated. The future of the young church in Madagascar lay on these scholars and the Bible. The support of Radama helped the missionaries to lay down the foundation of Christianity, the Bible, in Madagascar. It was one of the biggest achievements during his reign.

Radama's success lay in his collaboration with the missionaries and the Europeans in general and vice versa. Hastie, Jones and Griffiths could have achieved nothing without his enthusiasm and willingness to ride rough-shod over traditionalist opposition. One can only speculate on what he might have achieved if he had been spared for another

thirty years. He might in due course have reacted against the threat the traditional values posed by the rapid spread of Christianity; but it is perhaps more probable that his authority would have ensured a more gradual modernisation of Malagasy society without the violent upheavals of the two subsequent reigns. What is reasonably certain is that the subsequent history of Madagascar would have been very different without him.

2- The accession of Ranavalona to the throne

Radama reigned eighteen years, from 1810 to 1828, before he died. He was too weak during his sickness to publicly designate his successor¹⁹. So Ramoma, Radama's first wife, seized this occasion to make herself queen, under the name Ranavalona I. On the 3rd August 1828 she summoned a great assembly at Andohalo during which she announced publicly the death of the king and made known to them that he and the twelve kings²⁰ had designated her to be their successor. They were told to rejoice because the will of the sovereigns was carried into complete execution. Most of all 'the kingdom was not transferred into the hands of any other persons, to whom the sovereigns have not bequeathed the sovereignty' (Raombana 1994:243). The military supported her claims. As a result she was firmly established on the throne. No one dared to make any resistance or objection to what she had said for fear of being killed. But they pretended to be happy that she has obtained the kingdom, not a person to whom the sovereign had not bequeathed the throne. Then they vowed to serve her 'as heartily and as willingly as they served her predecessors and will submit to whatever she is pleased to do with them; and that death will be the lot of any person who will think of making any conspiracy for her overthrow, and the overthrow of any person whom she will appoint as her successor' (1994:245).

Opposed to her husband she was surrounded by a group of conservatives who were dissatisfied with the rapid changes during his reign. Soon after her accession to the throne she began to reverse most of the changes instituted by Radama. The first thing

¹⁹ It was a custom during that time that the ruling king or Queen towards the end of his life designated his or her successor so that people would obey the appointed one without wrangling because he or she was the successor of the twelve-kings and represent the God of the ancestors.

²⁰ The Merina believed that the will of the present queen is also the will of all her predecessors.

she did was the elimination of all potential rival claimants of the throne. She executed Rakotobe, Radama's nephew, the successor designate. Radama wished him to inherit the throne. He intended to give his daughter, Raketaka, in marriage to Rakotobe; in this way he would become the legal king, but he was the first to be executed, drowned at the lake Imarohoho at the east of Ambohipotsy. She also assassinated Rakotobe's parents, Ratefinanahary and Rabodosahondra, the governor of Toamasina; then Radama's mother, Rambolamasoandro; his brother Ratafika, governor of Mananjary; his cousin Ramananolo, the governor of Fort-Dauphin; his brother-in-law Rafaralahy Andriatiana, governor of Foulpointe, and his best friend, Ralala. Only one person marked for execution managed to escape to Comores Island, his cousin Ramanetaka, the governor of Mahajanga.

She announced a national mourning for Radama, which lasted one year. The prescription of the mourning included the closure of all schools and public worship. Everything seemed to stand still but the missionaries profited by this time to revise their translation of the Bible and processed it for printing. They also wrote and printed other religious books. They believed that these would be of valuable use in the future if anything worse might happen.

Though she sent a message to the missionaries assuring them of her protection and promising to act towards them as Radama had done, her actions disproved it. She showed signs of enmity and hatred towards the Europeans, including the missionaries. She refused an audience to Mr Bennet, the LMS inspector and Dr Robert Lyall, the new British Agent. She abrogated the treaties with Britain and no longer wished to receive the annual equivalent which Radama cherished. General Brady was forced to resign as the commander of the army. She gave only a one-year stay to Atkinson, an LMS missionary who arrived in 1831, because she said that he knew nothing more than teaching in class; she wanted artisans not teachers. Every action she took seemed in disfavour of any Europeans staying in Madagascar.

When the period of mourning ended, she gave permission to open the schools 'but in the absence of positive support...the number of scholars declined' (Brown 1978:170).

She made the life of the missionaries tough, especially the Malagasy teachers helping them in schools. In 1829 she forbade any payments to the Malagasy teachers. Many left their teaching career and looked for other work which could help them to sustain their families. A few remained committed, and helped the missionaries to carry the work. In 1830 she disallowed Greek and Latin courses for the senior students which had been encouraged by Radama. She said that it was no use to learn unspoken languages; it would bring no benefit to the kingdom.

Instead of encouraging Christianity she revived the *sampy* and the *tangena* ordeal which were put aside during Radama's reign. The day of her coronation, she held in her hands *kelimalaza* and *manjakatsiroa*²¹ and told the people that it was these *sampy* that gave her the kingdom. She held them high in the air and urged the assembly to cheer them. Although she knew the missionaries and Christianity she preferred the traditional religion. In addition, she was surrounded by conservative traditionalists who put her on the throne. They were extremely powerful and influential during her reign. She gave them strategic positions in the military, the civil services, and the commercial relations. She revived the traditional religion and customs.

3- The dusk: a period of confirming the church

The foundation of the church was laid little by little since the arrival of the first missionaries in Antananarivo in 1820 by prayers, preaching, Bible studies, teaching in schools, meeting with people and Sunday services. But during this early period of Ranavalona's reign, from 1828 to 1835, the church enjoyed relative freedom. The missionaries used this crucial moment to confirm its foundation. Despite the lack of support no harsh measures were directed against the Christians at this time because first of all the queen required the skills of the missionary artisans. They manufactured a number of useful items for her such as soap, sulphur, gunpowder and acids. The queen valued their work, and because of this the Christians were spared.

²¹ These were the two most famous *sampy*, *kelimalaza*- the small famous one and *manjakatsiroa*- only one monarch not two.

Then there were two feuding parties at the court, the traditionalists and the pro-British. They were always present to challenge each other. The traditional party headed by Rainiharo wanted to revive the customs and tradition of the ancestors; but the pro-British, under the leadership of Andriamihaja, wished to 'extend education and enlarge the measures commenced by Radama. They did not favour the plan hatched by some of Ranavalona's supporters which was designed to eject all Europeans after she had secured the throne. They argued that education and the skills of the missionaries were of great use to the kingdom' (Gow 1979:16). Andriamihaja, having been in Britain during Radama's reign, knew the advantage of civilisation and Christianity; but Rainiharo saw it as a threat to the personal benefit he had won from the present queen.

Though the missionaries had to work under pressure and conditioned by the sovereign they were not overcome by discouragement. They used that dusk period, which preceded the dark moment of persecution, to redouble their efforts in their missions in order to confirm the young barely built church. They worked harder in preaching the Good News, teaching in schools, writing religious books, revising the translation of the Bible and instructing the artisans. David Jones and Griffiths worked on the translation of the Bible, Cameron with the assistance of Malagasy artisans worked at the printing press at Ambatonakanga and 'David Johns had established six churches in Vonizongo and schools at Isoavina, Fihaonana, Fierenana, Ambombazana, Miramanjaka, and Ankazobe' (Gow 1979:23).

The Word of God found its way into the hearts of some Merina. During Radama's reign they came only to church out of curiosity: to follow the missionaries *kabary tsy valiana*-homilies and listen to their hymns but during this time they came to search for God. When a human being is in difficulties that is the time they search for help from above. Mondain, an historian and a former student at the 'Ecole Normale Supérieure Missionnaire à Madagascar' says that the hearts of the church goers were stirred up and tears came down from their eyes; they were seized by great emotion from time to time. They experienced the struggles of the early Christians. They were touched by the Word of God and as a result many of them came to the missionaries homes every evening to talk about salvation. The church was fully packed every Sunday and after the services

many came for the Bible studies which lasted for hours. The people conducted prayer meetings among themselves in different houses daily (1920:61-62). The missionaries were pleased at seeing the conversion of the Merina. Their work was not in vain, they saw its fruits growing like yeasted flour.

What puzzled the missionaries was that Radama did not give them permission to administer any sacraments to the Merina, he was afraid of rapid change that could occur afterwards as Ranavalona had given. Gow says that 'while on 21 May 1831, she gave her subjects permission to accept baptism, to take communion with the missionaries and to be married after the western Christian rite' (1979:16). Her gesture was a way of thanking the missionaries for their good work in arts and crafts which had benefited the country. The Merina began to respond enthusiastically and in great numbers to Jesus' call. The following Sunday, 29th May 1831, twenty received the sacrament of baptism at Andohalo (Rabary 1925:45). Towards the end of the same year, their numbers increased to sixty-seven and some of them participated in the communion of the Eucharist.

The missionaries were quick to take advantage of this more favourable atmosphere in Antananarivo. They conducted Sunday services without interruption every week; they intensified the Bible studies, instructing the faithful in knowledge of the content of the Bible and to read it. They also organised prayer meetings frequently where they read the Bible together and singing hymns and choruses based on the Scripture. They received many people in their homes, giving them advice and encouraging them in their journey of faith. They printed the New Testament and distributed them to the church attendants and school children. Rabary who relied upon the report of the Committee minutes, *Africa and Madagascar 1826-68*, reports that the missionaries distributed 5000 copies of the New Testament in the year 1830 alone (1925:44-45). All of these efforts were in view of confirming the young church just founded, to spread the Word of God and allow its message to touch the hearts of the Merina population. The church grew in quality and quantity.

Without that transitional period which happened during the early reign of Ranavalona, the missionaries wondered what would have happened to their work in Madagascar. Would the indigenous Christians have supported the persecution? Their effort to evangelise the Merina during Radama's reign, eight years, would have been in vain, like the work of the early catholic missionaries at Fort-Dauphin. When those Catholic missionaries left the country the indigenous Christians went back to their former traditional daily practices. The same fate would have happened in Imerina if Ranavalona had persecuted the Merina Christians and expelled the missionaries from the beginning of her reign.

4- Ranavalona's edict against the converts

From the beginning, it was clear that Ranavalona was antipathetic to Christianity but during the first six years of her reign she could not tighten the restrictions on them. She needed the skills of the missionaries. Her attitude and lack of support discouraged the missionaries. Later on, the pressure from the conservative traditionalist party around her was too much and she could not do otherwise than to suppress Christianity in her kingdom. She issued an edict to counteract the first one of 21st May 1831²². In this second edict, she prohibited baptisms and religious meetings to her subjects. She pointed out that the missionaries could continue to practice their own religion but she warned them strongly not to discuss Christianity to her people. It was a great blow to them. She said to them:

I tell you plainly that I will oppose any attempt by my people to change the customs of my ancestors established under the twelve kings up to Andrianampoinimerina and Radama...and with respect to religious worship, whether on Sunday or any other day, baptisms and societies (i.e. membership of a church), I forbid my people to take part (Brown 1978:173).

The missionaries were further discouraged because the main purpose of their mission was forbidden: to preach the Good News to the Malagasy. They were only allowed to teach arts and crafts for the material benefit of the queen. They were afraid that their

²² In this first edict she gave her subjects permission to participate in Christian sacraments. See above in the same chapter, under the subtitle 3 (The dusk: a period of confirming the church).

tireless effort during more than a decade would come to nothing. Christianity was threatening to vanish in Imerina. They saw the traditional practices of divination, idolatry, ancestral worship and *tangena* ordeal flourishing especially within the court's palace. One could imagine the pain and anguish the missionaries experienced at that time.

Another blow fell on the Merina Christians and the missionaries on the 1st March 1835. The queen then decided to act against the Christians. She assembled her subjects from every corner of the kingdom, from far and near, for a great meeting at Mahamasina-Antananarivo. Hundreds of thousands were present to listen to the great *kabary* in which she forbade Christian practices and gave strict orders to every citizen to adhere to the ancestral customs of divination, *sampy*, ancestor worship and *tangena* ordeal. She gave one month to the Christians: those who were baptised, those who attended public worship or evening prayer meetings were to come forward, accuse themselves and receive her forgiveness. If they didn't come they would be executed. The hearts of the Christians grew cold as they heard her dreaded words. When some of the assembly protested; they said that Christian teaching was encouraged by Radama. She became furious and reduced the time limit for confessing to one week. Many indigenous Christians came forward and recanted but some remained faithful despite the risk of being killed.

The Christians interpreted the event of 1835 as a return to darkness. They called the period of Ranavalona's reign *tany maizina*-dark land or Dark Age. They said that the country was in darkness before the missionaries came. When they came they brought the Gospel to the island. The light of the Gospel illuminated it and its inhabitants. Again the whole country had returned to the Dark Age. Jesus, the light of the world, was forbidden to be proclaimed in the island. The queen prevented the light from illuminating her kingdom. Darkness covered the country and its population. A Malagasy Christian, during their prayer meeting at Ambatonakanga, prayed 'Lord save us from this dark moment, we perish'²³.

²³ Baker to LMS, March 17, 1835. LMS Mad. IL, B5, F2, JA.

The greatest shock of the Malagasy Christians was the expulsion of the missionaries from the country. Ranavalona applied Radama's order limiting the stay of any European to ten years. She would not permit, even a day of extension. David Jones, the very first missionary to reach Antananarivo, was expelled with his family on the 23rd June 1830. His last homily before he left was on the message of 1Thess 5:21: 'test everything and hold on what is good' (Rabary 1927:86). He invited the indigenous Christians to stick to what is good in their teaching, and to forget whatever was not in line of the divine commandments. He was already afraid of what was going on around Antananarivo. He encouraged the Merina Christians to hold fast to what is good in his teaching. He knew that it would comfort and strengthen them in time of trials and persecution.

David Griffiths' time was up in 1834, but due to the influence of his former pupils at the court, he was given a year of extension. It was also, for the queen, a way of thanking him. She was so grateful for work he had done in her kingdom, especially the building of the palace at Soanierana (Freeman & Johns 1840:98). On the 27th August 1835, Ranavalona sent a delegation to expel him and his family from the country. He encouraged and strengthened the Christians in and around Antananarivo until that last moment. He wanted to remain with his flock in the time of trials but the queen's decision was stern. He left the island sad. He wondered what would happen to the Merina Christians.

Joseph John Freeman, Cameron and Chick decided to leave the country with their families on the 18th June 1835. When it had become increasingly difficult to carry on religious work, spies were following their every move day and night, they saw no point in staying. They preferred to leave the island and search somewhere else to announce the Good News. They were not ordered to leave because the government were happy of their work, especially that of Cameron and the artisans he employed. They 'carried on manufacturing a number of useful items for the queen such as soap, sulphur, gunpowder, and acids, and it was largely because of their skills that she permitted the mission to remain in Imerina' (Gow 1979:17). Cameron and Chick went to South Africa, to Cape Town and Port-Elizabeth. They worked there until the death of

Ranavalona. When she died, Cameron came back to Madagascar. Freeman went to London and was appointed pastor of Walthamstow. He wanted to come to Madagascar in 1850, but the queen refused. He died on the 8th September 1851 (Rabary 1927:102), ten years before Ranavalona's death. He did not have the chance to revisit the Merina Christians.

Only Johns and Baker remained. They had work to accomplish before they left the country: the printing of the Bible²⁴. They left on the 22nd July 1836. The night before, many Christians came to say their last farewell to them. They could not meet during the day because of the spies. Both the missionaries and the Merina Christians were very sad, they prayed and wept bitterly that night. The Christians left the missionaries' house at dawn when it was still dark. They were afraid to be caught and accused of visiting the missionaries clandestinely. Johns visited them at two occasions in 1837 and 1838. During this last visit he arranged the escape of Rafaravavy and her companions to Mauritius and then to England.

The departure of the missionaries marked the final break with Radama's policy. Their activity in Madagascar was brought to a close. Their sheep were left without a shepherd. Rabary summarised that during the sixteen years of mission in Madagascar, from 1820 to 1836, the missionaries had achieved tremendous work of evangelisation and civilisation. They had erected two church buildings at Ambodin'Andohalo and Ambatonakanga with many church-goers including two hundred communicants. They had built more than one hundred schools in Imerina and Vonizongo with four thousand students and more than 15 000 people²⁵ had passed through their schools. They also had compiled a Malagasy-English and English-Malagasy dictionary. I agree with Rabary that the greatest achievement they had accomplished was the translation of the Bible into the Malagasy language and its edition (Rabary 1927:106). It is a valuable treasure that they left to the Malagasy Christians who would use it soon as guide and support. It helped to expand Christianity throughout the island.

²⁴ More detail in the section below: the edition of the Bible, translated into Malagasy language.

²⁵ This figure was given by Brown in *Madagascar Rediscovered*, see Brown 1978:172.

5- The edition of the Bible, translated into the Malagasy language

The printing of the Bible, translated into the Malagasy language was a long-lasting work in process. It spanned the period from December 1827, before Radama's death, to June 1835, before the departure of the last missionaries, Johns and Baker. The missionaries did not wait to finish the translation of the whole Bible before they printed it. They translated it little by little and printed the translated passages they needed in their teaching and preaching. They met real problems with the printing press at the beginning, because Hovenden, the one who was supposed to work on it, died within a few weeks of his arrival. He did not even have the time to set up the machine ready for work. It was a long-awaited instrument but when it arrived, the specialist in it had died.

Fortunately Cameron was present. Even though he was not a specialist in the printing press machinery he had knowledge about machinery in general.

Before going out to Madagascar he spent a year in Manchester learning about machinery, in particular the spinning machine which was being sent out with Cummins. He had thus equipped himself to practice and teach numerous trades and he was one of those fortunate men who have almost an intuitive knowledge of machinery and how it works (Brown 1978:161).

With the aid of a handbook found among the machinery, and after a good deal of trial and error, he managed to set it up and make it work. Then on the 4th December 1827, all the missionaries assembled at Ambatonakanga to print their very first work. It was a passage from the book of Genesis 1:1-23. This was the very first passage of the Bible ever printed in Madagascar. I have not found any particular reason why they chose this particular passage but I think that they had intended to print the Bible from the beginning to the end.

From the 1st January 1828, the printing press undertook its first large task which is the printing of the Gospel of Luke. They described that moment as a big event. They sanctified the New Year with the printing of Luke's gospel. They said 'it is effectively a beginning of a new era' (Munthe 1969:125). The work was hard and frustrating sometimes. It was mentioned above that none of them were specifically trained for the

printing press and the Malagasy who helped them had not yet received any instruction for the work. As a result the printing progress was very slow at this beginning. Jones reported that on the 12th May they had only achieved the printing of the first half of the Gospel of Luke (1969:125-126).

It was not only the lack of skilled and experienced workers that slowed down the printing of the Bible. They had to print at the same time, a small catechetical book and a hymn book. They also had to print other texts for teaching in schools. These missionaries were people of courage and determination; hardships could not stop them from carrying their work of evangelisation. They did everything to make their mission successful. After a year of struggle, Baker, a specialist in the printing press, arrived on September 1828. He was sent by the LMS to replace the deceased Hovenden. He set to work the following month and took charge of the direction of the printing press. With encouraging collaboration they completed the printing of Luke's Gospel towards the end of November. The following month they distributed hundreds of copies of it. The Malagasy Christians were happy to receive the copies.

As soon as they finished the printing of Luke's Gospel, they proceeded on to Matthew, Mark and John. At that time the work of printing progressed rapidly. First of all Baker knew how to operate the machine, secondly he worked full time at the printing press. He completed the printing of the other Gospels on 29th March 1828 (Munthe 1969:126). The following month he continued with the Acts, Paul's and the other letters and the book of Revelation. The printing of the New Testament was completed on the 26th February 1830. They printed 3000 copies of it. On the 1st March, they decided to bind four hundred copies for immediate distribution.

These were distributed towards the end of March 1830 among 'the members of the mission in England and Mauritius, compositors and pressmen, first scholars, teachers and proficient scholars, civilians and a few slaves, soldiers and officers, persons on the eastern coast, sailors of the 8th rank, women chiefly scholars and wives whose husband have taught them, youth who were learning the Arabic language, Mr Canham's apprentices, Mr Chick's apprentices, Mr Cameron including those recently appointed

by the government to learn soap making' (Munthe 1969:132-133). It is remarkably interesting that each group of people received their part during this first distribution: soldiers, civilians, artisans, teachers, students, housewives, and even slaves. The missionaries wanted to make sure that the Word of God reached everyone in the island.

Most of the missionaries were expelled before 1835; the remnant joined their efforts together and hastened the printing of the Old Testament. They vowed not to leave the country before finishing the printing of the whole Bible: Old and New Testaments. But at that moment the queen had already declared war against Christianity. So leaving without having finished the printing of the Bible could mean the end of Christianity in Madagascar. Because when they had left, the Bible would become 'the pastor, leader, teacher, advisor and comforter'²⁶ of the Merina Christians, which would become a shepherdless flock. After very hard work, they at last completed the printing of the whole Bible on the 21st June 1835. Before their departure in July 1836, Johns and Baker distributed clandestinely the Malagasy Bible to the Merina Christians. This is the greatest gift they left to the Merina Christians as Ridgwell argues:

The story is no less than the romance of a book, God's Book; the last and the greatest gift the missionaries gave or could give, to that shepherdless flock, before they were exiled from the country. Eleven strenuous years of passionately devoted translation, culminating in a feverish haste to finish it before the blow fell, went to the completion of the task, and then, when the human voice was silenced and men ceased speaking, God spoke, and the Word became life-the very breath in the nostrils of those hungry scattered sheep (Ridgwell 1937:33).

Having the Malagasy Bible they could experience what the early Christians experienced on the day of Pentecost: 'We hear them speaking in our own language' (Acts 2:8). From that time, it is not only the Bible that spoke to them; they too spoke to the Bible. They transacted, dialogued and conversed with it. Both they and the Bible spoke to one another just as Maluleke says 'the Bible is regarded as a "conversation

²⁶ I quote this from Rakoto Mark, the director of the FMBM, during the interview on February the 14th 2005 at Antaninarenina-Antananarivo.

partner” to be teased, sung about, laughed about, prayed around, relied upon and inquired from’ (2000:92). They always moved around with their Bible under their arms or in the bags that they carried with them. The Bible became their ‘fellow traveller’ (2000:97), through the dark moment of persecution. Their reading of it gave them courage and strength.

6- The rise of indigenous leaders

With the departure of the last missionaries the government relaxed their vigilance against the Christians. They hoped that Christianity would die away when their shepherds left. But to their surprise, the numbers of the Christians increased day after day. The government’s spies even noticed that prayer meetings became frequent and many homes were used as venues when the church had been closed. This growth was due to the ability of the young indigenous leaders.

The missionaries formed young skilled leaders. While teaching in schools, they had realised that many Malagasy children were recruited by Radama for studies in various schools and they were few. Many villagers around Antananarivo asked for teachers. Many schools needed to be opened. In front of such situation, they used the ‘Lancastrian method by which the more advanced pupils acted as monitors to teach classes and younger children’ (Brown 1978:157). These advanced pupils studied and taught at the same time. They were sent to various schools around the suburbs of Antananarivo. From this experience they received good formation of leadership, and when time came for the missionaries to leave the country they would lead the young church.

The island was in a troubled and tragic period. The Christians needed wise and strong-willed leaders to give them courage and audacity to continue the race. It was during that time of persecution that they showed to the world their faithfulness to the Lord. With the help of their indigenous leaders who were charismatic and inspiring, they proved that their desire to follow Christ was for sacrifice not for pure fantasy. These leaders gave them the strength and courage. Raombana wrote ‘I was impressed with how quickly the Merina began to assert themselves in church affairs. House meetings,

conducted by the Malagasy, gave some members an opportunity to preach and teach; and many possessed great ability in this sphere. Their preaching was “persuasive eloquence” and quite “irresistible” (1835:348). As a result they became stronger as they faced the difficulties and worries. They did not recoil from great sacrifices, although they willingly recognised their fragility.

These leaders encouraged community spirit which made the Christians strong in their trials and struggles. They stood together to face the trials and possible martyrdom. For them the climb to Calvary had already begun. All of them wholeheartedly devoted their lives to the Lord. They intensified their prayer meetings and Bible reading in various secret places. Throughout these times of problems and difficulties, strong and courageous leaders were more than ever needed, and the former students of the missionaries were up to it. They held the spirit of the Christian community high, ready to face anything, even death through martyrdom.

Chapter five: The Sustaining power of the Bible during Persecution

1- The causes of persecution

The main cause of the persecution of the Christians in Madagascar was the queen's patriotism and strong attachment to ancestral traditions. On the one hand, the Merina people were attached to the customs and religious rites followed by their ancestors, valuing above all their traditional religion and belief system. On the other hand, the Christian religion preached by the missionaries could not go hand-in-hand with the Malagasy ancestral customs and religion. Some of those religious and customary practices, such as *sampy* worship, charms, *tangena* ordeal, divination, ancestral worship and the licentious debauchery custom called *lapa-be*²⁷, could not go hand-in-hand with Christianity. Christianity could not tolerate these practices but denounced them as evil. So, the Malagasy converts had to abandon their traditional customs and religious practices in order to adhere to Christianity. The queen, as the first guarantor of the ancestral traditions, could not tolerate the spread of the Christian religious practices that would undermine and denigrate the Malagasy traditions.

In addition, the queen and her counsellors suspected the missionaries of having a hidden plan to overthrow the government. They wondered why the missionaries spent tremendous amounts of money and effort in their work for the people they did not know and having no blood relationships with them. They suspected that the missionaries had a secret plan. They ignored the leitmotiv which animate the Christians: 'without cost you have received; without cost you are to give' (Mat 10:8). They were convinced that the missionaries had come to take the land and the Christians were their allies. So, Ranavalona's cruelty against the Christians was considered as an act of patriotism since they were a threat to the traditional customs and the stability of the nation. She could not give up her kingdom to foreigners and a handful of traitors²⁸.

²⁷ It was a custom practiced on joyful royal occasions since ancient times where all the people gathered for the feast celebrated with extravagant dancing, singing, drinking and licentious fornication.

²⁸ Christians were called traitors because they allied with the missionaries to overthrow the government.

Furthermore, spies who were sent out to gather information about the Christians and their activities reported back to the queen that her subjects prayed to the kings of England. They made up a story that Jehovah had been the first king of England and Jesus Christ the second. The missionaries taught the Christians to fear Jehovah and obey Christ not her, their sovereign. It means that they intended to divert the hearts of the Malagasy from her. It infuriated the queen because the loyalty of her subjects was diverted from her, the rightful sovereign, to the kings of England.

The adversaries of the Christians also falsely accused the missionaries by distorting the meaning of some words they used frequently like: 'school, society, missionary and committee'. They argued that 'school' means *soko-olo*, *soko-catch*, *olo-people*. The missionaries tried to catch the hearts of the people, especially the youth in schools, because they knew that the future of the country depended on them. Then the word 'society', which is part of the LMS title, derives from *asosay-aty*, *asosay-glide aty-here*. The missionaries wanted the queen to glide the country and its government to London. As for the word, 'missionary', they alleged that it meant *miisa-ary*, *miisa-counted ary-there*, meaning that the Christians were already counted among the population (there) of London not (here) of Madagascar. Lastly the 'committee' derives from *komy-ity*, *komy-rebellion ity-here*. The missionaries were organising armed resistance to establish their own government here (Rabary 1925:50-51). Although groundless, this distortion of words' meaning could have had a dangerous effect on the people, affecting the stability of the country and the authority of the sovereign.

What caused the persecution was also the imprudence of the Christians themselves. They were too zealous for the new religion they embraced. They met very frequently, morning and evening, for prayers, Bible study, and followed the teaching and instructions of the missionaries. Their adhesion to Christianity made them reject the ancestral customs and practices. They even openly attacked their fellow citizens following these customs and practices in their preaching and conversations. Mondain reported that the students of the missionaries even dared to discuss this matter jokingly and boldly with the elders. This over-zealousness of the Christians inflamed not only the jealousy of the queen, as the guardian of the traditional religion and customs of the

land, but also the anti-Christians tendency among the non-Christians who practised and valued the Malagasy traditions.

The anger of the queen exploded on the Christians when she heard the preaching of Raintsiandavaka. He had been the keeper of the *sampy zanaharitsimandry*, living in the village of Mangatany, to the north of Antananarivo. He had experienced great hardships due to the loss of his wife and many children who died due to the outbreak of a strong fever, and slaves who ran away from him. He was profoundly discouraged when he met Rainitsiheva who introduced him to Christianity. He grasped the new religion eagerly, and after only a few brief discussions with the missionaries at Ambatonakanga and listening to a few sermons he returned to his village and began to preach his own fundamentalist version of Christianity. Although illiterate, he told people that God taught him personally how to read the Bible.

He caused a great stir in his teaching around his village. He taught them that

Christ was to return to the world, when all men should be blessed and perhaps never die, that there would be no more slavery, for all men would be equally free; that cannons and guns and spears might be buried in the ground, for there would be no more war: even the spade, he said, might be buried in the ground, for the earth would bring forth its fruit without labour, and that the idols were not divinities but guardians (Cameron 1874:19).

He combined Christianity with the *sampy* because he argued that they were to be regarded as guardian charms not as divinities. He made them compatible with the Christian religion. His doctrines, however, did not match up to the Christian doctrines.

Raintsiandavaka was a real threat to the queen's sovereignty. His doctrine of the equality of all people, from Ranavalona the queen, God's representation on earth²⁹ and successor of the twelve kings, to the slaves, the people without rights, was anathema to her. The idea that the *sampy* were nothing more than guardians and not possessed of special powers was also threatening. It implied the dissolution of all the taboos

²⁹ The people believed that the sovereign is God's representation on earth, belief transmitted from generation to generation.

surrounding the *sampy* which were no longer supernatural objects. In this regard she lost her prestige and the respect of her subjects. As a result 'a man who knowingly or unknowingly struck at the position of the sovereign, the cast system, and slavery and who endangered certain aspects of traditional religion had to be eliminated as quickly as possible' (Gow 1979:18).

So, Rainitsiandavaka was eventually executed in 1834. He and his followers, about two-hundred people, formed a procession to Antananarivo. They brought with them the *sampy zanaharitsimandry* that their leader kept. They came to the city to tell the queen the glorious news. When the queen learned about his doctrine she brought swift and terrible punishment on him and his followers. 'Rainitsiandavaka with the *sampy* and two of his followers were thrust head down in a rice-pit, and boiling water was poured over them, and the pit filled in with earth. Eight of his party suffered death by the *tangena* ordeal and the remaining others were sold into slavery' (Cameron 1874:18-19). Although unbaptised, the queen saw him as a Christian leader. So shortly after his execution she decided to act against the Christian community.

2- The Bible in the Malagasy language in the hands of Christians

In the previous chapter we saw that all the missionaries were compelled to leave the country but before they left they had edited the Malagasy Bible. They endured forced exile from Madagascar but left a valuable great gift in the hands of scattered and shepherdless Christians, 'the Bible'. From then on, the Merina Christians took full ownership of it. It became the most significant resource for them, and their companion for the journey through the dark moment of persecution, just as Maluleke says 'Here the Bible is personified as a "fellow traveller", inspirer, treasure and gift from God' (2000:97).

By then, the complete Bible in Malagasy language was in the hands of the Merina Christians. It became their own Bible just as Maluleke confirms: 'my Bible and I...Oh what a wonderful treasure; the gift of God without measure' (2000:97). Maluleke is here quoting a song which illustrates how people looked upon their Bible. As it was

written in their mother tongue they believed that it was addressed to them personally. They appropriated it. They understood that God speaks their language just as he speaks English or French, Greek or Hebrew. Christianity is no longer an alien religion or the religion of the Europeans. It became their religion and the Bible was 'their Book'. They spoke to it and it spoke to them. In other words they conversed to each other: 'the Bible is regarded as a "conversation partner" to be teased, sung about, laughed about, prayed around, relied upon and inquired from' (Maluleke 2000:92). This 'conversation' played a crucial role in the interpretation and appropriation of the Bible. Looking at some popular Bible choruses that they sung and sermons and letters that they wrote, it is clear that they maintained vibrant conversation with the Bible.

They discovered the possibility of rendering the Word of God in Malagasy. At this stage they realised that the Bible is not just a historical book of the Jews written thousands of years ago. It is their own story, their own life, their own experience.

You are in scripture. Their story is your story. Where there is backsliding, take it to heart. Where there is triumph, take it to heart. Where there is obedience, be obedient. Where there is sin, watch out. Let him who stands beware lest he fall because Scripture is not something we believe in only. It is something we participate in, we share in, we have fellowship in. This is how it comes about that the people in the Bible without us would not be made perfect (Heb 11: 40). But neither shall we, without them, be made perfect (Bediako 2001:6).

They found life in the Scripture, their own life, their own history, their own tradition and their own experience. Once it had been written in the vernacular language 'it becomes our story. It becomes our tradition, the paradigm, the model which shapes us and in whose light we see light on our path in life' (Bediako 2001:2). It is this light of the Scripture which enlightened the path of the Merina Christians during the dark period of persecution. It encouraged them to embrace their fate and destiny boldly without blinking.

Their access to the Bible in the vernacular language enabled the Merina Christians to hear the wonderful things of God; experience comparable to the Apostles in the Acts

2:11: ‘...we hear them speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God’. Their engagement with the Malagasy Bible made them aware that God was on their side as he was on the side of the persecuted Stephen (Acts 6-7), and the early Christian community (Acts 8:1-3). They came to a new understanding of the Bible, of the New Religion they embraced. The ‘Scripture became the authoritative “road map” to their religious itinerary; it indicated to them where they had come from, how they got there and where they should go from there’ (Bediako 2001:2-3). They listened and paid attention to it more than they did to the queen. They were taught by the missionaries during the reign of Radama that the Bible and Western culture is good and it made them civilised. They thought that the return to tradition would make them uncivilised. So they preferred to listen to the Bible’s voice more attentively.

In their hardships, those Christians found inspiration and encouragement in the Bible as Fletcher confirms:

The love, courage and fidelity of those who, in the days of Caesars, sealed with their blood their testimony to the saving power of Jesus, will ever prove an inspiration to the church of Christ in days of trials and persecution, will shine as a beacon-light to the followers of the Nazarene, in the periods of darkness and gloom through which the full-day splendour of his kingdom must come on earth (1901:11).

They knew that the worst could happen to them, and instead of being afraid ‘their courage was increased, their faith made firm, and their strength to endure abundantly enlarged’ (Fletcher 1901:174). They found the source of new strength in the Bible. The role that the Malagasy Bible played in the foundation of the early church in Madagascar was great and invaluable. Ridgwell says ‘these books, which passed stealthily from hand to hand, and were read in secret and at the peril of the owners’ lives, became the fuel which kept the sacred fire burning during a quarter of a century of ruthless persecution’ (1920:37).

The Malagasy Bible was greatly prized among the early Christians in Madagascar and it played a tremendous role in the progressive fashioning of their community life.

Through their encounters with it, they learnt to build a strong community, imitating the early Christians in the Acts (Acts 4:32-35). They got new strength through mutual support in the community and the Bible assisted them in their spiritual and moral struggles to remain faithful to God. Despite the death threat pending, they stood firm in their faith.

They loved and valued the Bible very much. Their reading of it influenced their daily lives. They handled it with care. More and more they 'are falling in love with the Bible and immersing themselves deep in the religious traditions of the Bible. The Bible is to them a living book of practical realities' (Nkwoka 2000:334). It illuminated their path along their journey through the dark days of persecution. When they came together to listen to the Word of God, it calmed their terror and held their hope and courage high. It is clear that it was the availability of the Bible in Malagasy language which enabled the Merina Christians to stand firm in the trials and hardships.

According to Rabary's report, the Merina not only loved to possess the Bible. But they were also steeped in its message. They read it and pondered it thoroughly. They turned to it for guidance, comfort and inspiration. They found in it what they needed in life. It never failed to meet their expectations and needs (Rabary 1925:127-128). No matter what happened to them they did not abandon God and deny their faith in Him.

The devotion to the Bible was specific to the Malagasy Christians during the persecution period. Their love of it burns and gleams in their hearts. Even those who were caught and had been put in chains in their own houses under the guard of soldiers, kept their Bible in their bosoms. What Jean Narivony expressed in the poetry he composed at the centenary celebration of the martyrdom of Rasalama was lived and experienced by the martyr church:

*Ny Baiboly izay voadika no Jehovah an-taratasy
Ka raha lasa ny mpitory dia mahay mitory tena
Andrimanitra miteny amin'ny teny Malagasy
Ka mambabo fo mihitsy-fo mitady famonjena*

The Translated Bible became Jehovah in the letter-
When the preacher left, it knew how to preach itself-
God speaking in the Malagasy language- To seduce
the hearts of those who seek salvation

Nothing could separate them from their Bible, 'affliction, or distress, or persecution, or hunger, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword' (Romans 8:35). They wrestled to get it from the hands of the missionaries and when they got it they held on to it tenaciously.

3- How the Merina early Christians used the Bible

When public Christian worship was prohibited on the 1st March 1835, according to the queen's edict and its violation meant death, the Christians met secretly in various private places to pray and read the Bible. Rainitsiheva, supported by his wife with Rafaravavy Marie, worked courageously to support their fearful and scattered fellow Christians. They managed to gather a few members in the house of Raintsiheva. Mondain reports that Rafaravavy was fortified by the Holy Spirit. She could not tolerate the situation of them not gathering together. Some Christians were afraid and they stopped gathering for prayer and reading the Bible. She asked the few assembled Christians: 'Dear brothers and sisters in Christ are we going to cease praying to the Lord'. Then she showed them her Bible; seeing it, an extraordinary emotion seized them and they fell to their knees. Mondain continues that it was like a real Pentecost for them. She then opened her Bible and read it. While listening to her the fire of the Holy Scripture stirred up their hearts and they prayed for a long time (Mondain 1920:94-95).



Figure 7: This is one of the Bibles that the Merina Christians used during the Persecution in Madagascar. They buried it under the soil to protect it from the queen's raid. It is kept in the Library of the British and Foreign Society, London. It is bulky and the quality of the paper was not good that is why it was difficult to hide and torn apart easily.

The reading of the Bible rekindled the fire of the Holy Scriptures in their hearts and they became stronger than ever. From that moment onward they met as often as possible to listen to the Word of God when the situation permitted. During the first phase of persecution the Christians met every evening, moving from house to house to pray and read the Bible together (Mondain 1920:95). When the people of Antananarivo fell asleep, they called one another, sneaking in the dark silence of the night, for the rendezvous with God. Rabary confirms that those who attended those meetings testified an intense experience of peace and felicity during those moments (1925:72). They carried on their prayers and Bible reading till dawn.

The queen's death threat could not stop them from carrying on their secret prayer meeting and the reading of their Bible. They always found occasions to meet in lonely huts, or away deep in the forest, or in the caves or on top of the mountains. Even inside the city of Antananarivo they managed to gather:

In the very capital there were huts where Christians met in secret. Bolting the door, they would listen almost breathlessly for the sound of the soldiers on the watch, and hearing no one, would squat close to one another on the rush mat on the floor, and in a low, quiet tone someone would read, and read the treasured Word (Ridgwell 1920:34).

They believed that the Scripture contains the truth, the truth that could set them free. And to have access to that truth they learnt to read the Bible among themselves. The school system was the best and most efficacious method to learn to read it; but since schools were shut down and learning prohibited they found another way to solve the problem. They formed small groups of five or six among themselves and learnt to read the Bible. Those who had attended schools with the missionaries taught their brothers and sisters. Françoise Raison-Jourde reports that once the missionaries left the island, the indigenous leaders insisted that rapid literacy training was absolutely necessary for the catechumens, because it gave each member access to the truth (Raison-Jourde 1991:180). Their endeavour to learn to read the Bible was unremitting and ever

growing. It clearly showed the keenness of those Christians to read the Bible and search for resources in it.

On some occasions they shared the Word of God among themselves. One member read the passage that the pastor or the assembly themselves chose. Then after a brief moment of silence, each participant in turn interpreted the passage read. After everybody had given their insights or comments about that passage, a pastor or an elder, hearing everyone's participation, concluded the sharing with an *anatra*³⁰. This usage says Raison-Jourde exercised their spirits to find out in the Scripture, response to every situation and event they lived in (1991:180). Those Christians came together to search in the Bible a response to the situation they experienced at that moment. And when they found analogous situations as theirs in the Scripture, they came out of their meeting stronger than ever to face their fate.

They also learnt the Scriptures by heart. Those who possessed the Bible read them constantly. They kept it carefully and used their time to memorise it and cautiously learn it by heart, in case they were forced to run away without it. By such a practice 'its pages, torn and tattered by constant reading, and often conned by heart till every stop and comma stood out vividly in the mind, worked a great work' (Ridgwell 1937:33). As they knew it by heart it became like the seed buried in the darkness of the soil, but darkness could not prevent it from germinating. The queen could not stop 'the people of the Book'³¹ (1937:33) from following their religious practices.

4- Christians empowered by the Bible during persecution

The martyrs' church was built upon the impregnable rock of the Bible, and the 'rain fell, the flood came, and the wind blew and buffeted the house, but it did not collapse; it had been set solidly on rock' (Mt 7:25). They returned to the Bible constantly and continually; and this exercise gave them the strength and encouragement during the period of persecution. They relied upon the Word of God just as Patten confirms:

³⁰ It is a practical moral conduct based on the passage chosen for the sharing in the assembly.

³¹ The Christians were called the people of the Book.

Relying upon the word of God, seeking its guidance and inspiration at all times, and finding therein all the comfort and strength that they sorely needed, the Malagasy Christians endured their afflictions with invincible courage and came through the ordeal of suffering triumphant (1935:vi).

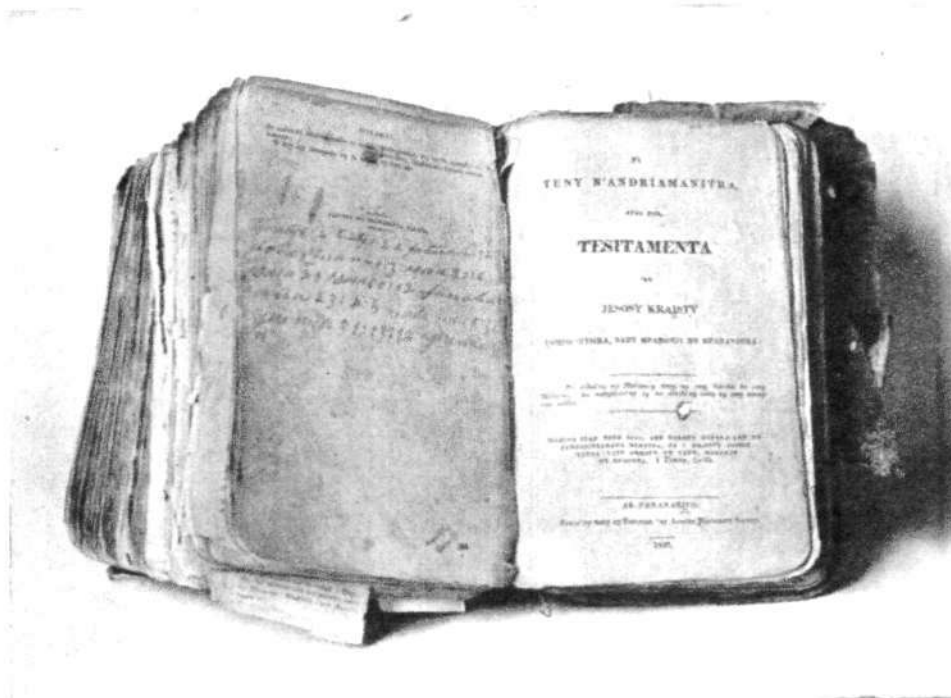


Figure 8: The same Bible opened at the section of the New Testament (The opened Bible).

The queen wondered about the spiritual prosperity of the Christians during the period of persecution. She could not understand why they remained faithful to their Religion despite the execution of some of their members. The only explanation to this was that the church possessed the Bible in the native tongue of the Christians. The Bible was the well from where they drew their strength. Before leaving the island, the LMS missionaries built the martyr church on a very strong foundation: 'the Bible'. While coming into dialogue with the Word of God the Merina Christians made a real commitment to the new faith they had embraced. They were wholeheartedly devoted to Christianity and its spread throughout the island. Their conversion was not skin-deep but deeply-rooted in their hearts because their encounters with the Word of God helped them to come to terms with Christian Religion.

The fierce and unrelenting persecution of Ranavalona could not stop them from their religious practices. The Word of God had struck so deeply into their hearts and minds that even violent persecutions could not suppress it. 'Death and punishment only strengthened the beliefs of the converts' (Gow 1979:26). The following extract from a letter of a native Christian to Freeman and Johns in 1839 confirms that the Merina Christians were really saturated with the spirit of the Scriptures:

We have seen what happened to the prophets and the ancients in former times, to Christ and his apostles, and the godly who have gone before us, and whose afflictions were far more than ours; even Christ was afflicted! And we are that are but grass and stubble, that we should plead exemption? 'For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?' 'For even hereunto were ye called', says the Apostle Peter. 'For Christ also hath suffered for us, leaving us an example that we should follow in his steps'. The Son of the Most High himself sustained all these sufferings, much more may we expect of them...Oh! That the admonition of Paul may be fixed in our hearts: 'wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all to stand (Patten 1935:40-41)³².

This letter extract shows that the Merina Christians, represented by the writer, had a real mastery of the Bible. They had a profound acquaintance with it. Their deep and intimate knowledge of it helped them to stand firm during the persecution. Many of them preferred to suffer death rather than to deny their faith in Jesus Christ. Their world was so saturated with the Scriptures. They were impregnated with the Word of God which became their source of strength and courage during the trials they underwent. Their hymns and short choruses, based on the biblical themes, reflected daring professions of faith such as the following:

<i>Izaho tsy matahotra ny ho faty</i>	I have no dread of death
<i>Satria Jesosy Kristy ilay mahery</i>	For Jesus Christ is might

³² It was an extract of a long letter of a Malagasy Christian collected by Patten in *The Martyr Church and its Book*, to show how the Bible empowered the native Christians.

Escande Elysée is right in saying that the martyr church was really 'l'Église de la Bible- the Church of the Bible' (1926:3). They showed undivided love and respect for it and it gave them in return unshakable confidence. The Bible was an inexhaustible fountain of God's revelation to them as Escande says³³:

For evangelical Christians the Bible always remains the authentic document of revelation, the source of spiritual life, the inexhaustible spring of water always accessible directly to every soul, the faithful witness of Jesus Christ, Son of God and Saviour of the world, who alone can say 'my words are Spirit and life, heaven and earth will pass but my word will never pass' (1926:3).

One of the reasons which caused the failure of the Catholic missionaries to evangelize Madagascar in the seventeenth century was that they did not give the Christians the Bible translated into their native language. The indigenous Christians were not in touch with the Word of God. It was only from 1818 onward, when the LMS missionaries gave part or a complete translation of the Bible into Malagasy language to the Malagasy Christians that Christianity started to lay its foundation in Madagascar. From that time the new religion took roots slowly in their hearts. When they heard God speaking to them in their own language, they understood him. They were then in touch with the roots of Christianity. It enabled them to grasp the inner meaning of the Biblical message.

They drew from the Bible their rule of life, church organization, and decisions to be taken. In one word, who sustained, instructed, encouraged and strengthened the martyr church during the dark period under the cross of persecution? Who? Escande's answer is *La Bible* (1926:23). The Bible was the fuel which kept the sacred light of Christianity burning in the heart of the Merina Christians. The Bible became their norm of life. They lived, suffered and died for the Lord, Jesus Christ because they had learnt of him and from him through the Bible. It sustained them.

³³ Here is the original French text of Escande, the passage in the text is my free translation: *La Bible reste toujours, pour les Chrétiens évangéliques, le document authentique de la révélation, la source de la vie spirituelle, source toujours jaillissante et directement accessible à toutes les âmes, le témoin fidèle de Jésus-Christ, Fils de Dieu et Sauveur du monde, qui seul a pu dire 'Mes Paroles sont Esprit et Vie, le ciel et la terre passeront, mes Paroles ne passeront point'.*

5- The queen collected the Bibles and burnt them

Despite Ranavalona's increasing hostility to Christianity from the year 1835, the Merina Christians continued to conduct their worship secretly. The reading of the Bible still went on in various hidden and remote places. Faithful witnesses, such as Johns and Freeman (1840), Rabary (1925), Cousins (1873) and Mondain (1920), report that there were more Christians by 1835 than there had been before Radama's death. She asked herself why the new religion gained many more adherents after that year than before when Christian worship was not yet forbidden. After a thorough investigation she realised that the growth of Christianity was attributed to the power of the Bible. Once she discovered the source where the indigenous Christians got their courage and strength she did not delay to take action to destroy their Bible.

Within a few days after the promulgation of the edict of the 1st March 1835, there was a great tumult in and around the city of Antananarivo. The queen sent thousands of her soldiers to raid the houses of everyone suspected of being worshipers of the Christian religion. They were searching for Bibles. These soldiers were instructed to search every possible place where the Christians could hide their Bibles. 'Beds were overturned, rice-pits were dug into, even the thatch of the roofs probed' (Ridgwell 1920:32). The Christians were surprised by the raid and many lost their Bibles; a great pile had been captured.

The soldiers brought their loot to the capital city Antananarivo. They heaped the Bibles with dry grass and wood and in presence of many people, they set the stack alight. The hearts of some Christians who attended the scene grew sad. They saw their 'treasure' on fire; 'that night the sky was reddened for miles by the lurid flame of the bonfire' (Ridgwell 1920:33). The queen was happy as she watched at the flame and the curling smoke from the pile of Bibles rising up to the sky. She thought to herself that it would put an end to the Christian worship. She was wrong because 'as in our physical organization, the loss of one faculty is often attended with the augmented efficiency of those that remain' (Ellis 1859:156).

The Bibles were not consumed; they were burnt and reduced into ashes but not consumed in the hearts of the Merina Christians. The FMBM, Society for the Propagation of the Bible in Madagascar, says '*Ilay Boky nodorana nefa tsy levona*-the book was burnt but not consumed'. Those faithful read it, re-read it and memorized it. It was already in their hearts and in their minds. No one could remove or burn it from there. For that reason the FMBM says 'it is not consumed'. It was written with indelible ink in their hearts and minds.

So, the Christians worship went on, because once they came to Christ, through their reading of the Bible, nothing could separate them from him, neither life nor death (Rom 8:34-39). The FMBM's film confirms that those Christians were ready for anything because they already set their desires towards heaven (Phil 2:2-5) and counted earthly things as a loss for Christ (Phil 1:21). The passage in the Apocalypse chapter 14 verse 13 came to them with its full vigor: 'Blessed are the dead, who die in the Lord'; that is why Rafaralahy Andriamazoto, witnessing the death of Rasalama, said 'If I die such a peaceful death, I too prefer to die for the Lord' (Rabary 1925:84), and his wish was fulfilled because one year later he was also crowned with a martyr's death. At the edge of the hurling cliff of Ampamarinana Ranivo even begged her persecutor to be executed. Her executioner had pity on her because of her tender age and her beauty. He spared her life. But she preferred to die for the Lord and share the fate of her friends. Being an eye witness of the persecutions, the FMBM made her the narrator in the '*Ilay Boky nodorana nefa tsy levona*'.

6- Christians hide their Bible

Although possession of the Bible was an offence punishable by death, the Merina Christians hid Bibles which had survived the soldiers' raid. The Bible was their 'treasure' (Mat 13:44) and they kept it as the apple of their eyes. They buried some in the earth for greater security and stored others in various hiding-places far from the reach of the queen's spies and soldiers; 'One of these copies, stained by the damp soil, is one of the most treasured possessions in the Bible House Library in Queen Victoria Street, London' (Patten 1935:38). This copy was used by the Christians of Vonizongo

during the persecution. They took great care of it for several years. They repaired and sewed it with thread of vegetable fibre, and it had been protected with a cover of skin (1935:39). When the dark period was over, the missionaries took it and kept it in that library as a valuable archival item in the memory of persecution in Madagascar.

Some Christians found the entire Bible too bulky to hide easily, so they cut up some Bibles into sections and divided them among the members so that they could hide it easily or carry it in their bosoms without being noticed. The copies also were few because of the raid, and everyone wanted to have a copy, so they had to share the few remaining. When they came to their secret prayer meetings, each one took out the portions of Scripture that they guarded so zealously, and read it to the assembly; 'sometimes it was a copy of the Psalms, sometimes an Epistle, sometimes some cherished pages of the word of the Master Himself' (Ridgwell 1920:33-34). Those Christians made sure that their Bible remained hidden from the queen and her spies who were spread everywhere.

Due to the scarcity of the Bible, their leaders wrote to the missionaries who were in London at that time to send them some Bibles. They wished to get the complete copies but they requested a small format for security purposes: 'Do send us some' they wrote 'and let them be of a small print, so that we may easily preserve them' (Patten 1935:39). Despite the death sentence awaiting those who were caught having the Bible, there was a great desire for the book in Imerina.

Hiding the Bible from the queen's spies was a problem, and hiding it from their own was another one; because not a few of them were betrayed by their fellow Christians or friends, even by their kin. A typical example was the betrayal of Ratsitapahina and his friend Rabearahaba by his own wife Rasoanjanahary. They were on their way to a mission at Ambongo, a village at the border of Antananarivo and Mahajanga. At the crossing of the river Ikopa, she denounced them to the soldiers who were working at the boat, helping people crossing the river. She told the soldiers that they were on their way to Ambongo to resuscitate rebellion among the Sakalava against the queen and they had a Bible because they were Christians. The soldiers searched the men and

found their Bible. They were arrested on the spot, and brought to Antananarivo. They were tortured and asked to denounce their fellow Christians but they refused to mention any name. So they were executed.

Many more Christians were caught in possession of the Bible, some were executed and others were put to jail or reduced to slavery with their entire household. This last kind of punishment was very degrading; some preferred to be executed than to be reduced to slavery. Alone in the year 1849, sixty-nine Christians were caught in possession of the Bible, of whom 'forty-two who had possessed books were made slaves, and their property seized; twenty-seven who had possessed books and who had preached, or explained, were made slaves with their wives and children' (Ellis 1859:165). Possession of the Bible was a capital offence during Ranavalona's reign punishable by death or reduction to slavery or a life jail term.

7- The first waves of martyrs 1837-1842

Ranavalona declared war against Christianity at the beginning of the year 1835. On the 26th February of that year, she publicly thanked the missionaries for their efforts in teaching in schools and their work of artisans. She complimented them for the good work they had done and also for their good conduct. But at the same time, she prohibited them from baptising the indigenous populations and conducting religious meetings. She wrote to them:

...and I also inform all you Europeans, that whilst you reside here in my country, you may, among yourselves, observe all the customs (religious observances) of your ancestors and your own customs; and do not entertain any fears, for I do not change the customs of your ancestors, or your customs, for the dispositions that you have manifested to my country is good: however, though I state that, if the law of my country be violated, the party is guilty, whoever he may be...And hence, then, with regard to religious worship, whether on Sunday or not, and the practice of baptism, and the existence of a

society, (or societies) those things cannot be done by my subjects, in my country...³⁴ (Freeman & Johns 1840:112-113).

The strike against the Europeans was the first step of her ultimatum against the Christians. While receiving her message they were overwhelmed with grief and terror. The second step was the strike against the Malagasy Christians themselves. It was on the 1st March 1835 that she announced publicly in a great *kabary* at Mahamasina saying:

I announce to you, o ye Ambaniandro, I am not a sovereign that deceives nor are servants deceived...To whom has the kingdom been left by inheritance, by Andrianampoinimerina and Radama, but to me? If, then, any would change the customs of our ancestors, and of the twelve sovereigns, I abhor that. Now on the subject of reviling the idols, treating the divination as a trifle, and throwing down the tombs of the *Vazimba*, I abhor that. Do it not in my country. The idols (say you) are nothing. By them it is that the twelve sovereigns have been established; and now are they changed, and become nothing? ...This is my affair and I hold guilty whoever in my country destroys them. As to baptism, societies, places of worship distinct from the schools, and the observance of the Sabbath- how many rules are there in this land? Is it not I alone that rule? These things are not to be done; they are unlawful in my country; for they are not the customs of our ancestors. Now then, to those who have observed baptism, entered into society, and formed separate houses for prayer (or worship) I grant you one month to confess (to make self accusation) and if you come not within that period, but wait to be first found out, and accused by others, I denounce death against such; for I am not a sovereign that deceives, and servants are not to be deceived... (Freeman & Johns 1840: 119-121).

Under such a death threat some had abandoned Christianity. They came to the queen for self accusation and received her pardon; they withdrew and renounced their faith. But others remained steadfast to their faith despite the risk of being denounced or

³⁴ This is part of a letter written by Ranavalona to the missionaries and all the Europeans in Madagascar on the 26th February 1835. It was signed by Ranaivalomanjaka; the original was in Malagasy but this is

caught by the soldiers such as Rafaravavy Mary, Paul Rainitsiheva and his wife. They lived in fear of being caught. They had to hide not only themselves but also their Bible. This Bible had taught them to fear God and to honour the queen. It enabled them to meet the claims of the present life and yet to cherish the hope of the life to come. It gave them the strength to carry their cross courageously.



Figure 9: The Malagasy Christians in their hiding place for prayer and reading the Bible.

7.1- Rafaravavy Mary's trial

The following year was a year of respite, '*une année de répit*' says Mondain (1920:93), the Christians were waiting the consequences of the queen's edict and its effect and the queen herself was thinking of what to do to them if they remained stubborn. The thunder burst in the year 1837 and the first Christian to experience it was Rafaravavy Mary, a young woman of noble cast. She was denounced by three of her servants, whom she treated as her own sisters, for retaining the Bible and continuing to follow Christian practices. Her father whom she loved so much put her between the anvil and hammer. He asked her to deny her master or she would die. She remained steadfast to

the Lord. For the first time Ranavalona granted her life because of the service her father rendered to her kingdom. When liberated she interceded to her father on behalf of her servants whom he threw into jail. 'Do not hold this sin against them' (Acts 7:60), for 'they don't know what they were doing' (Luke 23:34). Two of these servants became fervent Christians later on (Rabary 1925:79).

She was denounced for the second time, with sixteen other fellow Christians, on the 20th July 1837:

1- Rafaravavy Mary	7- Rasoamaka	13- Simona Andrianomana
2- Rasalama	8- Ranome	14- Andrianimanana
3- Rafara	9- Ratiasoa	15- Ramanana
4- Rafaralahy	10- Ramanisa	16- Andianatoandro
5- Andrianizy	11- Ratsarahomba	17- Raivo
6- Razafitsara	12- Paoly Rainitsiheva	

She was considered as the leader of the group. The soldiers caught her and she was thrown into jail to await her fate there. On the way to jail, she thought that this was her end. To calm her agitated spirit, she re-memorised the passage from Isaiah 41:10 'Fear, not I am with you; be not dismayed; I am your God', and the prayer of Jesus already repeated by Stephen 'Lord, receive my spirit' (Acts 7:59; Luke 23:46). The queen issued an order to execute her on the 5th August, but due to the fire which broke out the previous evening, ravaging hundreds of houses around the palace, and the palace's court yard itself, her life was spared. The government affairs stood still following that fire. She was ready to die and she prepared herself for that but God still had mission for her to be accomplished. She went into exile in London then to Mauritius where she died on the 23rd April 1848.

7.2- Rasalama the first to be crowned martyr

Meanwhile the sixteen others were reduced to slavery for life and all their possessions delivered to the public. They were divided among the queen's officers who were ordered to treat them very harshly. Rasalama with nine others were put under the watchful eyes of her kinsman Ramiandravola. Despite their blood relationship, he treated her harshly, making her work seven days a week. On the 13th August, Rasalama refused to work. She said that it was Sunday, the day for the Lord; it is against His

commandment to work. Ramiandravola was infuriated; he insulted her and spat abusive words at her. But she only replied, warning him 'Pay due regard to what you are saying; because you and I have to stand before the Judge one day' (Rabary 1925:83). This expectation of the time of judgment dominated the thought of Christians during the period of persecution in Madagascar.

Overwhelmed by anger, Ramiandravola reported her disobedience to her master and her faithfulness to the Lord's command to respect the Sundays. The queen immediately gave an order to execute her the following morning. She was taken from Ramiandravola's house and thrown into jail at the former chapel of Ambatonakanga. She was chained with *omby fohy*³⁵. She suffered grievously during that night. Very early in the morning the 14th August 1837, they removed her chains and conducted her to the place execution: Ambohipotsy. She did not show any fear in front of the suffering and imminent death waiting for her. She was already permeated by the word of God who gave her unshakable courage. Passing next to the chapel at Ambodinandohalo, her face was lit up with smile and she said to her executioner and the people around her '*Tao no nandrenesako ny tenin'ny Mpamonjy*- There I heard the Word of the Saviour' (Rabary 1925:84).

Along the way to the place of execution, she never ceased to pray and sing the sacred hymns she used to sing with her fellow Christians. The following is one of the songs she sang. They are still echoed in different churches in Madagascar today:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>1- <i>Hitako ny lalatsara ka hizarako Azoko</i>
 <i>ny famonjena ka ho tanako mafy,</i>
 <i>Ampio aho ry Fanahy Masina.</i></p> | <p>I saw the way and I trod on it, I
 received my salvation and I hold it
 fast, Holy Spirit, help me.</p> |
| <p>2- <i>Ny mpanota hilazako, ny Mpamonjy</i>
 <i>tanako, hambarako fa ny rany, no</i>
 <i>nanavotany ahy, Jereonareo ny lalan'i</i>
 <i>Jehovah</i></p> | <p>I will tell sinners I hold my
 Saviour. I will tell them that his
 blood saved me. Look at
 Jehovah's way.</p> |

³⁵ It was a very cruel way of chaining a prisoner; the feet, hands and neck of the prisoner were tied together very closely with a very heavy metal. The neck between the legs; the prisoner could barely breath because of the weight and the tightness of the metal.

Arriving at Ambohipotsy, faint and weary but calm and ready to meet her Master, she asked permission from her executioner to allow her to pray. She knelt down to pray and committed herself to God. After that, she said 'I am ready'. Then they speared her to death. She was the first Malagasy Christian who received the crown of martyr. The crowd of people standing by were amazed at her heroism and the peaceful light on her face as she died. 'This praying must be true, they said, if people can dare to die in such a manner' (Ridgwell 1920:37). She died a martyr's death at the age of thirty-nine.



Figure 10: The martyrdom of Rasalama: the first Malagasy martyr.

She drew her courage and strength from the Bible that she 'knew already by heart' just as Jean Narivony says in a Malagasy beautiful poem:

<i>I-Raha nangirifiry mafy noho ny gadra</i>	When the pain was unbearable because
<i>izay nanery</i>	of the fetters too tight
<i>Ka voatsatoky ny lefon ny nofon-</i>	And Rasalama's flesh was pierced by
<i>dRasalama</i>	the spear
<i>Noho ny tenin'i Baiboly efa hainy tsianjery</i>	The words of the Bible that she knew by
<i>Dia Nalefaka ny ratra fa io no tena</i>	heart
<i>balsama</i>	Calmed the pain, it was the real balsam

2-Tao Jesosy ilay malalany, no henony There she heard Jesus her beloved
miteny,
Ka ny feony dia malefaka fa feo Whispering sweet words in her ears
mamelovelolo
'Mionona Rasalama, izaho no solo-dray sy 'Courage Rasalama, I am here near you
reny
Izay tsy mahafoty anao ka aza manana Like father and mother, do not be sad or
alahelo' afraid'

7.3- Rafaralahy Andriamazoto martyred

The following year on the 16th February 1838, Rafaralahy Andriamazoto was denounced by his best friend Rafiakarana who was the one who converted Rafaralahy to Christianity. Rafaralahy was a successful business man, and Rafiakarana was a poor man; because of their intimate friendship, Rafaralahy received him as a business partner and confided a big sum of money to him. Because of mismanagement or greed, the latter consumed all the money and when Rafaralahy demanded his share, he turned against him and accused him to the queen of conducting a prayer meeting in his house and keeping a Bible in his possession. It was a way of getting rid of the debt he owed to Rafaralahy. Rafaralahy remembered the Psalms 41:10-11: 'Even the friend who had my trust, who shared my table, had turned against me; but you, Lord, have mercy and raise me up'.

Rafaralahy was arrested with eleven other Christians; the list reads:

- | | |
|------------------|---------------------------|
| 1- Rafaralahy | 7- Andriamadio |
| 2- Itsomanova | 8- Ralaingomanga |
| 3- Ratsimindrana | 9- Rasata |
| 4- Itsindramina | 10- Ratsaramiarana |
| 5- Itsimosarena | 11- Ramahazo Rabodomanana |
| 6- Ravahiny | 12- Andriatsalama |

The executioners tortured him in order to accuse his fellow Christians; but he refused to do so. He said: 'Do whatever you want to me but I will never denounce my friends' (Rabary 1925:92). Then on the 19th February, he was brought to Ambohipotsy. Arriving there, he followed the example of Rasalama, asking his executioner to allow him to pray before his execution. He prayed for the country and the persecuted Christians and for himself. Then they pierced him to death; the last words coming from

the depth of his heart were the Words of Jesus himself, already repeated by Stephen 'Father, receive my spirit' (Luke 23:46; Acts 7:59). After that he died a peaceful death. His prayer was granted; for when he had witnessed the martyrdom of Rasalama, he had wished 'If I can die such a peaceful death. I wish too to die for the Lord'. He was the second Malagasy Christian crowned with a martyr's death.

Rabary reported that Rafaralahy did not suffer alone, his entire household suffered with him. His old mother suffered terribly from the loss of a beloved son; and died in grief within a few days. His pregnant wife was caught and put in jail. She was cruelly tortured. If she was not pregnant she would have been executed too. And the three lepers under his care also suffered a lot, because no one took care of them and Rafaralahy's death quickened their death. Though they were not martyred, they carried with him the cross of martyrdom (Rabary 1925: 92093).

7.4- Ramanisa killed by tangena ordeal

The hunting of Christians continued to ravage increasingly. The Christians lived in constant fear of being caught or being denounced. But with the company of the Bible they obtained strength; they read encouraging passages such as Proverbs 3: 25-26: 'Be not afraid of sudden terror, of the ruin of the wicked when it comes; for the lord will be your confidence, and will keep your foot from the snare'. This exercises calmed their fear.

The following year, Ramanisa had to undergo the *tangena* ordeal. She was the cousin of Rafaralahy, denounced with him by Rafiakarana. When Rafaralahy died, she was repudiated by her husband. Her father hated her because she refused to renounce Jesus Christ; and all her kin had run away from her. What consoled her was the Words of Jesus that she knew by heart: 'If the world hates you, realise that it hated me first. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you' (John 15:18, 20); 'But do not be afraid, I am always with you' (Mt 28:20). She drank the *tangena* and died. She was a beautiful young woman in her early thirties; at her death the people present exclaimed that her face was 'like the face of an angel' (Acts6:15).

7.5- The decapitation at Ambohipotsy

On the 23rd May 1840, sixteen Christians were caught at Andranomafana. They were on their way to escape to Mauritius via Toamasina, but the person who was entrusted to lead them up to the coast betrayed them. Then they were brought to Antananarivo for their trial the following morning, but one managed to escape during the night.

When they arrived at the capital, the queen pronounced the sentence against them. Five were sentenced to perpetual slavery. 'They were still young and they did not know what they were doing' she said. They were:

- 1- Andriamanantena
- 2- Rafaralahikely
- 3- Rafaravavikely
- 4- Razafitsaroana
- 5- Rasoamisa

The remaining ten were condemned to death:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|
| 1- Ramanisa Josoa | 6- Razafinierana |
| 2- Rainitsiheva Paoly | 7- Ramanampy |
| 3- Razafy the wife of Raintsiheva | 8- Ramanga |
| 4- Ratsiroriray | 9- Raminahy |
| 5- Ratsaramiarana | 10- Andrianimanana |

They were put in jail, under the watchful eyes of four layers of guards, awaiting their fate the following morning. But that night, Andrianimanana was delivered miraculously. Rabary says that the door of the prison was opened and his chains loosened. He woke up and alerted his friends about what happened to him. He did not want to escape but his friends forced him saying 'God still has a mission for you to accomplish, go'. After saying good-bye to them, he left the prison. During that time, the guards were in deep sleep (Rabary 1925:106). It reminded them of the miraculous delivery of Simon Peter in Acts 12:6-19.

The nine of them were brought to Ambohipotsy on the 9th July 1840. Along their way, they still had the courage to preach the Good News to the soldiers and the people who accompanied them. Arriving at Ambohipotsy, they knelt together and prayed and sang the hymn:

*Hody Zahay Zanahary
Fa tahio tsara zahay
Ampifalio ny kibonay
Amin'ny fitsaranao*

We are going home Zanahary
Help us
Make us happy
During your judgment

*Raha ho faty izahay
Ka handao ity tany ity
Dia ampifalio izahay
Ento andanitra dia faly mandrakizay*

When we die
And leave this earth
Make us happy
Bring us to heaven for eternal joy

Then the executioners decapitated them one by one. They were the fourth set of martyrs. They died calmly and peacefully said those who witnessed their execution.

7.6- The martyrdom of Ratsitapahina and Rabearahaba

Two years later, two Christians from Vonizongo were martyred: Ratsitapahina and Rabearahaba. They were denounced by Rasoanjanahary, the wife of Ratsitapahina, of plotting a rebellion against the queen and of being Christians and having the Bible³⁶. When they acknowledged that they were Christians and caught with their Bible they were sentenced to death. On the 19th June 1842, Ratsitapahina was decapitated at the market of Antotohazo on a market day. His executioner suspended his head on a mat and exposed it in the middle of the market so that every one could see.

Rabearahaba was decapitated the following morning 20th June. It was at the market and on the market day of Ankazobe, and his head was also displayed on a mat. These executions in the district of Vonizongo were purposely done in presence of many people in order to terrorise the population, and especially to discourage the Christians from continuing to follow their religious practices. Christianity was blooming in that district because it was far from the watchful eye of the queen; and the Christians enjoyed relative freedom.

³⁶ See details of their capture and arrest above under the subtitle The Christians hide their Bible.

8- The second waves of martyrs 1849

8.1- The great sufferings

The hunting of Christians continued. Many of the Merina Christians were denounced and thrown into jail; others were caught in various hiding places. They were cruelly tortured in order to denounce their fellow Christians. The cause of the great hardships they endured was none other than being Christians; 'their religion was their only crime' (Ellis 1859:155). Many of them bore in their bodies the marks of their sufferings. The scars of the torture they endured and the trace of hot iron stamped on their flesh remained the indelible marks of their persecution. They suffered much in the present life, but they were not downhearted because of their hope in the life to come.

Almost fifteen years had passed since the Christian worship and possession of the Bible was publicly prohibited in Madagascar. During that period every available means had been employed to enforce the prohibition, often very cruelly to the point of death. The steadfast decision, of those who were caught, not to renounce their religion and their refusal to denounce their friends became the means to augment the agony of their sufferings. Freely and frankly they did not deny that they had been praying and had the Bible but they said 'tell our friends that we will not denounce them. We do not want them to be killed. Greet them for us, and if we don't meet alive again see you in heaven' (Rabary 1925:113).

Many Christians were reduced to slavery during that time. Their sufferings were not minor compared to those who were thrown into jail and tortured only different. They were sold in public markets like animals. They were subjected to painful miseries resulting from separation from loved ones. Members of families were bought by different people, the father and the mother by one person and the children by another person. Many families were broken apart during that period. In addition, many of them were sold under two conditions; first they were unredeemable by family members, second they were to be treated very harshly by their owner just as John and Freeman put it:

frequently with two extra conditions intended to enhance the severity of their punishment, that they should only be sold to those who would engage to make them labour continuously, and that their relatives or friends should not be allowed to redeem them, but they should be, as it was expressed, “like weeds of waste, bowing down their heads till they die” (1840:293-294).

Many of them were not sold into perpetual slavery but were sentenced to forced labour. They were subjected to the hardest kinds of labour like quarrying or carrying stones for the erection of government buildings, or fetching timber from hundreds of miles for the same constructions or other equally hard labour. They were to work under severe surveillance and a brief moment of repose meant lashing of whips. Rabary said that many of them carried the marks of their punishment to their graves (1925:120-121).

Those who were still at large did not enjoy a peaceful existence. They lived in constant fear of being caught or denounced. They wandered from place to place as outcasts from society. Soldiers and spies were spread everywhere and it became almost impossible to hide from them. The queen encouraged spies and informers and she employed many of them. Often they went in disguise around the city and villages, to listen to what people were talking of in their houses or in public places during market days or any other public gatherings. Christians were between anvil and hammer. If they stayed in their respective villages, imminent capture awaited them. Wandering and hiding in desert places and mountains they were exposed to the dangers of roaming bandits who raided slaves and goods. The queen made the life of Christians unbearable.

8.2- The martyrs of 1849

The year 1849 was experienced by the Christians as the darkest period of Ranavalona's reign. They suffered and were persecuted for almost a quarter of a century but that year was seen as the severest persecution to which they were subjected. In only that one year, hundreds of them suffered severe punishment and eighteen were put to death. According to Ellis' report:

37 who had explained or preached the Word were reduced to slavery with their wives and children; 42 who had possessed books were made slaves, and their

property seized; 27 who had possessed books and who had preached, or explained, were made slaves with their wives and children; 6 with whom it was the second offence were imprisoned; 18 had been put to death (1859:165).

On the 28th March 1849, the prisoners were taken to the Market of Analakely, guarded by soldiers heavily armed with guns and spears. Their hands and feet were chained. Then in front of the multitude assembled from the four corners of the kingdom, she pronounced the death sentence on eighteen of them. Fourteen were to be hurled off the steep rock of Ampamarinana:

- | | |
|----------------------|----------------------------|
| 1- Rainimiadana | 8- Rakotonome |
| 2- Rainiasivola | 9- Rabodomanga |
| 3- Adrianasandratra | 10- Rafaralahy Antanifotsy |
| 4- Ranahatrarana | 11- Raivo Ravao his wife |
| 5- Ramaria | 12- Raivo Rasikina |
| 6- Ramainty | 13- Rafaravavy |
| 7- Razafilahizandiny | 14- Ramatoa Razafy |

Four were to be burnt alive at Faravohitra; they were:

- 1- Andriatsiamba
- 2- Ramitraho
- 3- Andriampaniry
- 4- Ramanandalana his wife

Once their sentence was pronounced they came closer to one another to comfort and encourage the younger ones. On this occasion they used the passages of Scriptures that they already knew by heart to lift up their hearts, such as Mat 10:39 'Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it'; Apocalypse 14:13 'Blessed are those who die in the Lord'; Rom 8:18 'The suffering of this present time are nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us'; and many other passages³⁷. After whispering to one another words of comfort, they started to sing:

<i>Raha ho faty aho, ka handao ny havako</i>	If I die and leave my family
<i>Ary dia hisaonany, Fa andeha hifaly aho</i>	They will mourn but I will be happy
<i>Raha afaka ny aiko, dia ho finaritra aho</i>	If I die, I will be happy forever

³⁷ These passages were taken from the film, *Ilay boky nodorana anefa tsy levona*, by FMBM. According to the interview with Rakoto Mark, the director of FMBM, the film was a based on a true story.

*Haveloko ity tany, fa efa azo tokoa
Ny fifaliana, Ny lanitra no lovako
Ka izaho tsy matahotra ny fahafatesan*

I will leave this earth, because I gain
The heaven my heritage
I am not afraid to die

When the queen heard them singing, she ordered them to be silent but they continued. When she failed to silence them, she ordered the executioners to treat them with the greatest indignity. They were beaten and stripped of their clothes; and to insult them they were wrapped in old torn dirty mats. Their mouths were stuffed with dirty rags preventing them from singing or speaking to one another. They did not walk to the places of execution but were carried like animals. Each one was tied along a pole and two men carried them on their shoulders to Ampamarinana and Faravohitra.



Figure 11: This is an illustration of how the martyrs were executed at Ampamarinana.

The fourteen to be executed at Ampamarinana arrived at the spot; they were untied from the poles. The executioner tied their hands and feet. They were still wrapped with the old mats. Then each one was suspended by a cord on the edge of the precipice. They were again asked to renounce Christ and take the required oaths to save their life but none of them did. The cord was cut down and within seconds their bodies were battered at the foot of the precipice, eighty metres below. Ranivo was reserved until the last; she saw all the others hurled over the fatal rock. She was a young beautiful woman

of noble caste; because of her tender age and position, the executioners thought that she would recant after seeing her friends perish; but she did not. The chief executioner struck her on the face and tried to force her to take the oaths and renounce Christ; but she refused. Despite her refusal, he spared her life. That decision grieved her heart; she wanted to share the fate of her fellow Christians. She begged him to do so but her plea was not granted.

The four, to be burnt at Faravohitra, also arrived there. They begged to be put to death before being burnt, but their prayer was not granted. The executioner wanted them to die a painful death. Each one was tied to a pole, on a pile of dried grass and wood. Then the fire was set alight, they were burnt alive. Like the three young man, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, thrown into the furnace during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, they too raised their voices singing, glorifying and blessing God (Dan 3:51-90). Ramanandalana gave birth and the baby came out of the fire but the executioner thrust him back into the flames. The infant received the crown of martyr with the parents.



Figure 12: illustration of the burning of the four martyrs at Faravohitra.

They prayed in the middle of the flames as long as they had life. Their last words were: 'O Lord, receive our spirits; for thy love to us has caused this to us. And lay not this sin to their charge' (Rabary 1925:135). Then they died softly and gently. The people present at the scene were astonished, they did not hear any cry of pain or lament from

them. 'Indeed, gently was their going forth of life. And astonished were all the people around that beheld the burning of them there' (Ellis 1859:429).

The fourteen at Ampamarinana and the four at Faravohitra, all died a heroic death. They met their fate with courage because they had put their trust in Christ and the Bible sustained them until the end. The bodies of the fourteen thrown off at Ampamarinana were dragged to Faravohitra to be burnt and reduced into ashes the same as their four friends. It was a shocking punishment for the Merina who venerate the bodies of the ancestors through *famadihana*-exhumation; but the queen did it purposely to undermine Christianity and discourage her subjects from following the Christian Religion.

9- The last waves of martyrs 1857

For eight years again, from 1849 to 1857, Christianity progressed in a period of darkness. The Christian leaders became more careful in their secret prayers meetings and reading of the Bible, avoiding unnecessary exposition of its members to death. For their part, the government were satisfied with their killings during the first and second waves of persecutions. They thought that the Christians would not dare to continue their religious practices. The queen's anger was tempered. But in 1857, the last and fierce outbreak of persecution took place.

9.1- The plot to overthrow the queen

The queen was already too old to lead the country; she was in her late seventies. She became easily irritated and acted out of control. It led to the killing of many innocent people. For example, a young servant who dropped the glass while serving her water was ordered to be decapitated. Another one who helped to remove her younger sister's milk tooth was also decapitated. She said that it was a disgrace for a slave servant to put her hand in the mouth of the princess. Many people were sentenced to death because of minor faults (Rabary 1925:135-142). Rakotondradama, a good prince and friend of Christians, grieved at what his mother did to her subjects. Surrounded by two European supporters, Jean Laborde and Lambert, and few officers included the two ministers Rainivoninahitriniony and Rainilaiarivohy, he planned to take the power from his mother. They planned not to kill her but to leave her as 'queen mother', having no

power but venerated as the mother of the king. They decided to put her in the palace of Alasora.

Everything was well planned but what remained was the execution of the project. But when the appointed time arrived, the 20th June 1857, Rainivoninahitriniony and Rainilaiarivony betrayed the plan. They informed the queen about the plot; she acted swiftly and prevented it from happening. She ordered the *tangena* ordeal to the officers involved in the plot and expelled all the Europeans from the island. She accused her ministers and officers of plotting with the Europeans to overthrow her. They had not only betrayed her trust but also the country. She punished many of them by degrading them from their ranks. After punishing them she turned on to the Christians.

9.2- The Christians became the scapegoats

The queen was enraged against the Christians because they were the friends of the Europeans. She was convinced that being their friends, they were also behind the plot. The Christians became the scapegoats. She sent thousands of her soldiers to search for them and arrest them. Rabary says that the city of Antananarivo and the surrounding villages were in terror during those days. Hundreds of Christians were arrested. On the 18th July, fourteen were sentenced to death:

- | | |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| 1- Rasoalandy | 8- Rabako |
| 2- Ramandimby | 9- Rainivoalavo |
| 3- Ratsitohaina | 10- Ramahazo |
| 4- Rahaingo | 11- Ramanandafy |
| 5- Rainitsotsoraka | 12- Razaka |
| 6- Rainivomanga | 13- Rabetsarasaotra |
| 7- Ramanakoraisina | 14- Rahandraty |

They suffered a novel form of execution; they were stoned almost to death before having their heads cut off. Along their way to Fiadanana, another place of execution, the soldiers tortured them with spears and whips. Their bodies were wounded and bleeding because of it but they did not pay much attention to the torture of their human flesh. They carried on their prayer and mutual encouragements. They did not cease their songs of praise and thanksgiving along the way. Arriving at the market of Fiadanana, they knelt down together and prayed. When they finished their prayer, the

soldiers tied each of them to a pole, facing the crowd already armed with stones and ready to strike. Rabary says that at the command of the executioner, stones flew like giant hail towards the martyrs (1925:142). Their last prayer was that of Stephen, already repeated by those executed at Ambohipotsy, Ampamarinana and Faravohitra: 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit' (Acts 7:59). Afterwards their heads were cut off and exposed on poles at Ambohipotsy.

Fifty were sentenced to undergo the *tangena* ordeal. Forty-two of them survived but eight died:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1- Rasoa | 5- Andrianisa |
| 2- Rafaravavy (Andrianamboninolo) | 6- Ratompoina |
| 3- Rajohary | 7- Rafaravavy (Manjakaray) |
| 4- Razakatsianindrana | 8- Ramiarana |

Their bodies were not given to their families for proper burial but fed to the dogs. It was a great insult; and the queen ordered it purposely to make the families of the victims and the Christians suffer morally. It was very painful; but even such an insult and disgrace could not shake the faith of those Christians. It was built on the rock of the Bible.

Nine of those who were caught and thrown into jail managed to escape; but their fate was not easy. They were living their martyrdom while they were still alive. They had to wander from place to place in hiding. They lived in constant fear. They suffered from fatigue, hunger and thirst. In their hiding places, they continually read the Bible which was their only source of strength during their desperate situation. This practice sustained and gave them courage during the period of persecution (Raison-Jourde 1991:181); without it they could not stand those years of trial.

Fifty-seven were condemned to be placed in irons for life. They were chained by the neck with heavy iron fetters; 'groups of up to six were fettered together with iron collars linked by short iron bars to the collars of the fellow-prisoners' (Brown 1978:185). Then they were banished to the unhealthy districts of Ambohiboahazo, Ambatondrazaka and Ankazonamoizana. Many of them died of fatigue, sickness and

hunger. When one died, his head was cut off to free the body from the chains and those remaining alive were burdened with the heavy iron that person carried. This punishment was the most painful of every torture that the Merina Christians ever had to endure. Of the fifty-seven, only twenty-two returned alive in Antananarivo at the death of the queen in 1861. Patten says that 'they reappeared as if risen from the dead. Some bore the deep scars of chains and fetters; some were worn almost to skeletons by prolonged sufferings from hunger and fever, could scarcely drag themselves along the roads that led to the capital' (1935:44). What was important, they had persevered until the end.

10- The courage of the Martyrs until death with the Bible in their hands

It is clear that those Merina Christians who avoided martyrdom denied their faith and recanted, but martyrs remained faithful to Christ until death. None of those who were martyred at Ambohipotsy, Ampamarinana, Vonizongo, Faravohitra and Fiadanana renounced their faith. All of them embraced their fate with courage. It was possible because they had the Malagasy Bible either in their hands or in their hearts and minds. Their Bible was the source of their vigour and maturity. They read, learnt and meditated it. These practices enabled them to speak to and listen to the Bible: to dialogue with it. And it made them stronger than ever in their faith. Due to its sustaining power the 'divine truth had produced those astonishing transformations of character which rendered them witnesses for God, living evidences, the unequivocal, unmistakable subjects of a wonderful moral change' (Ellis 1859:157).

Their faith in its integrity and solidity was based on the Bible. It became their companion through the Journey (Maluleke 2000), during the dark period of persecution. It became the foundation stone on which the martyrs' church was built. It taught them community life based on the example of the early Christians in the New Testament and moral conduct in the face of the temptation of leaving Christianity because of fear. It gave them insurance that the Christian life they had embraced had a genuine foundation. Their familiarity with it made them imitate and follow the example of their predecessors like Jesus the model par excellence who died upon a

cross; also some of the early Christians who died a martyr's death, especially that of Stephen. 'They had followed, as their safe and unerring guide, the Word of Inspired Truth' (Ellis 1859:159), which is the Word of God in the Bible. It helped them to embrace their martyrdom with joy and serenity.

The peril, to which they were exposed, could not stop them from listening to the words of instruction and encouragement from the Bible. Due to this daily exercise they were imbued with the Word of God. As a result, they had a new way of looking at life and death. They understood martyrdom as a way of witnessing to God's excellence in the face of the queen's hostility. It was already mentioned by Peter to the early Christians in 1Pet 2:9-17 where he encouraged them to stand the trials in the hostile world. Martyrdom in the New Testament period was seen as part of Christianity just as Frend argues 'suffering and tribulation (θλίψις) belonged to the very nature of primitive church' (1965:79). Paul comforted the Thessalonians in their hour of persecution with a tremendous vision of future judgment and vengeance in 2Thess 1:6-10. Jesus himself said to his disciples 'if they persecuted me, so will they persecute you' (John 15:20).

Being familiar with this world of the New Testament through the Bible, the early Christians in Madagascar stood firm in their tribulations. Their way of life and death was the way of imitating Christ and his followers. So, they preferred death to the denial of their faith because they believed that they would be rewarded on the day of judgement. What matter for them was to be with the Lord and to live or to die would have the same effect. With Paul they would say 'neither death nor life could not separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord' (Rom 8:38-39); and 'For me life is Christ, and death is gain' (Phil 1:21). Their expectation was already geared towards the judgment day; Frend says 'the final blow has been struck against the present age, that the "time is already at hand" (Rev 1:4); witness leads straight to death' (1965:91). In sum, the Merina martyrs, like those of the early Christians, 'with the Bible in their hands', embraced their death with courage and joy. The power of the Bible sustained them until death, a martyrs' death.

11- The Bible's contribution to the growth of Christianity during the persecutions

Ranavalona was fighting a losing battle against Christianity. Her effort was to bring down and eradicate Christianity in her kingdom, but the contrary happened. It was during that period of terrible persecution that the number of the Christians increased radically. Her governments, the same as Nero's, Diocletian's, or Alva's of earlier ages, sought to extinguish the Christian faith but it met with 'corresponding results in the invincible constancy of those who fell and the subsequent fruits of the imperishable seed which was scattered in the martyrs' blood' (Ellis 1859:425).

The courage and death of the martyrs attracted the interest and admiration of the Malagasy population and drew new adherents to the Christian community. Marguerite Rajonah and Gabrielson Jonah report that before the persecution, the numbers of Christians in the capital were about one thousand in 1836; but just after Ranavalona's death in 1861, there were more than seven thousand (1987:25-26). The punishments and martyrdoms served to expand and strengthen the Malagasy church. Their dialogues with the Bible made Christianity strike its roots deeply in the hearts and minds of the Merina Christians, and even violent persecutions could not suffocate it, but strengthen and promote it. The Malagasy Christians did not keep quiet but proclaimed the Word of God in secret to their neighbours and fellow villagers. They attracted many converts during the period of persecution. Empowered by the Bible, they did not stop preaching the Good News by words and deeds with courage and determination. So, due to the power of the Bible, the fierce persecutions resulted in a wondrous growth of Christianity.

Before the persecutions in 1835, even during the reign of Radama, Christianity had encountered difficulty in attracting new converts. But from the time Ranavalona prohibited Christian worship and persecuted the Christians, its numbers began to increase appreciably. The persecution, instead of discouraging them, challenged them and the Bible sustained them in responding to the challenge. The persecution tested their faithfulness to the Lord. The Malagasy population, who had high esteem of bravery, not only praised the martyrs' courage but also joined the ranks of the

Christians. At that time they were attracted not by any material benefits but by the Word of God and the teaching of Jesus Christ. The effect would have been different without persecution. The Bible was so powerful and with its guidance, the Malagasy Christians assumed full control of the church.

In addition, the charismatic indigenous leaders projected a more appealing image of Christianity than any of the missionaries could have done. Their preaching was down to earth and effective: touching the daily life of the indigenous Christians. They knew their flock more than the missionaries did; as a result they could speak the Word of God more meaningfully to them. With the assistance of the Bible, they helped the Malagasy Christians to appropriate Christianity as their own religion not 'the religion of the Europeans' as the queen said. They held on to their faith and they were proud of being Christians. Lastly 'the Malagasy have always placed a high regard on bravery, such conduct could well have helped to win the Christians new converts' (Gow 1979:21).

Chapter six: Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to map the early encounters with the Bible among the Malagasy people especially the Merina of the central region of Madagascar. It has tried to spell out the sustaining power of the Bible to the Malagasy martyrs during the persecution under the reign of Ranaivalona I. To summarise this study let us spell out three main aspects of the Bible: firstly the effects of translation of the Bible into the Malagasy language, secondly the interaction of the Bible with culture and context and lastly the power of the Bible itself.

1- The significance of the translation of the Bible

When the missionaries presented the Bible together with western product such as beads, knives, mirrors, watches, guns and telescopes, it was received by the Malagasy indigenous people as a foreign colonial import associated with the superiority of the West. It was part of the missionaries' package deal. But once translated into the Malagasy language, it was separated from these trappings. It interacted with local culture and religion more freely; it received from the local culture and affected the local culture. Translation enabled the Word of God to become flesh in the local culture as Bediako says:

In every instance of Scripture translation into any language, therefore, the eternal Word of God becomes flesh to dwell among a people, who are thereby enabled to perceive that the living God who has never been far from them, is now heard to speak their language, calling them to turn to Christ all that they are and have been (Acts 14:15-17; 17:24-31) (2003:17).

The translation of the Bible into the Malagasy language enabled the Malagasy indigenous Christians to hear in their own language the wonderful things of God (Acts 2:11). This translation, not only, made the Word of God heard and understood by the indigenous people, but also allowed it to interact and dialogue with the new areas of thought and custom (Walls 1997:29). This dialogue and interaction helped the indigenous people to receive and appropriate Christianity. The translation of the Bible into the Malagasy language produced more far reaching effects than the missionaries could imagine, it sustained the Merina Christians' faithfulness during the persecution

and contributed to the appropriation and growth of Christianity in Madagascar. Patten says that 'the complete Malagasy Bible was published by the society in 1835. The story of its influence on the growth of the Malagasy church through a long period of bitter persecution is one which should never be allowed to pass into obscurity' (1935:44).

Translation was very important for the rooting of Christianity in Madagascar because it enabled the indigenous Christians to recapture Christianity. Availability of the Word of God in the language the people speak and understand made Christianity touch the Malagasy culture in a very profound way, since language is the very heart of culture and is the mark of our humanity. Once the Bible was translated into the indigenous language of the people, it started to give importance to the indigenous language and automatically to its culture, since 'in most of these cultures' says Sanneh 'language is the intimate, articulate expression of culture, and so close are the two that language can be said to be synonymous with culture, which it suffices and embodies' (1989:3).

Translation of the Bible in the people's mother tongue is powerful because it makes the indigenous Christians to come to terms with the Bible as James Barr says: 'The Bible brings us into engagement with God, and to stay with him'. By being translated into Malagasy, the Bible invited the Merina Christians into itself and the martyrs did not resist this invitation but entered themselves in its world and culture, and allowed themselves to be imbued by it. Their dialogues and interactions with the Malagasy Bible made them impregnated by the Word of God which was their source of courage and strength during the dark period they experienced.

The failure of the first Catholic missionaries, in the seventeenth century, could be attributed to the unavailability of the Bible in the hands of the indigenous Christians. Instead they gave the Malagasy faithful copies of catechetical books. It makes the difference between the approach of the Catholic and LMS missionaries. The impact of the Bible was superior to that of the catechetical books. Learning from that mistake, Cardinal Victor Razafimahatratra quotes, *Dei Verbum* n°22, at the foreword of the third edition of the Malagasy Bible in 1982: 'Access to Sacred Scripture ought to be open wide to the Christian faithful...the church, with motherly concern, sees to it that

suitable and correct translations are made into various languages'. At present, Catholics and Protestants are working together for an interconfessional Bible translation in view of updating the Malagasy Bible as Ramboasolomanana confirms:

The New Translation will be quite different from the old one. Both Roman Catholic and Protestant Malagasy Bibles are very literal and very old. The New Testament of the Roman Catholic edition was published one hundred years ago and the Old Testament sixty years ago whereas the Protestant Bible was first published in 1835 and revised in 1887. The translation we are working now is a common language Interconfessional Bible especially for the young people (2000:2).

2- The interaction of the Bible with culture and context

The Malagasy Christians did not come to the Bible 'empty handed' (West 2000:37). From their early engagements with the Bible, one can identify different interpretative resources that they used. The following are more common and widely used as resources to interpret Biblical messages among the indigenous Christians: traditional beliefs and religion, oral narratives such as *angano*-myths and *tantara*-stories, proverbs and songs. These are part of their daily life experiences and they became resources in their interpretation of the Bible. They facilitated their reading of the Bible and made it more meaningful for them.

Traditional beliefs and religion are significant resources for interpreting the Bible. The Malagasy believe in God that they called *Zanahary*, they too believe in spiritual powers, in spirits, in life after death and in communion with the ancestors (see chapter two above). These were tools with which the Malagasy Christians interpreted the Bible. Since God had preceded the missionaries in Madagascar, the indigenous people's beliefs and religious experiences helped them to understand the biblical message and Christianity. They saw their own stories in the narratives of the Bible just as Bediako confirms: 'you are in the Scripture; their story is your story' (2001:6).

The Malagasy also have their *angano* and *tantara* which helped them to engage with the Biblical text. These are oral narratives which functioned as interpretative resources. When used by indigenous preacher, catechists or pastors, they made the Bible speak

louder and more meaningfully to the indigenous Christians. For example, on Sunday 20th February 2005, I attended a Sunday service in my parish. The catechist used the *angano* of Trimobe and Ikombia to explain the redeeming work of Jesus Christ for humankind.

Trimobe is an ogre; he came from villages to villages many times to eat the villagers. He had done that for many years. The villagers were living in constant fear of Trimobe. A courageous young man, Ikombia, one day killed a cow and roasted its intestines. Then he brought it to Trimobe. It was appetising. He was afraid of being eaten by Trimobe but he decided to put an end to the villagers' sufferings. Arriving in the middle of the forest, he called Trimobe who came running to him. He wanted to eat Ikombia but the latter told him to wait; 'I prepared a delicious plate for you' he said, 'come and eat'. He gave the roasted meat to Trimobe who enjoyed the broth very much. After eating, he asked Ikombia 'what kind of meat is this that you bring to me'. Ikombia responded 'it is my intestines, I took it out and roasted it'; he continued 'if you liked it let me prepare more for you, I take out your intestine and roasted it for you'. Then Trimobe accepted. Ikombia cut his stomach, took out his intestines and Trimobe died on the spot.

The catechist compared Jesus with Ikombia who came to deliver people from the evil one. He said that Trimobe is Satan who threatens people's lives everyday. Satan makes them live in constant fear, but Jesus came to deliver them from the power of Satan. This was one of the biblical interpretations which strikes me and sticks in my mind. After the service, people talked to one another about the homily. It was powerful. Oral narratives were in common use for teachers, catechists or pastors to interpret the Bible. These make the faithful understand and appropriate the biblical message in their own lives and contexts.

Proverbs also are important interpretive resources in the Malagasy reading of the Bible. Proverbs reflect the Malagasy worldview and beliefs. They express their wisdom and understanding of life, death and life after death. They describe the community values and experiences. They were made for giving advice, direction, warning and lesson.

Proverbs are widely used in the daily lives of the Malagasy people. The Christians are familiar with them. They used proverbs in their interpretation of the Bible. Preachers coloured their preaching with proverbs. The more they did it the more they attracted the Christians' attention.

Since the early encounters with the Bible, songs are one of the powerful resources that facilitate the Malagasy interpretation of it. The Malagasy people were musical people, they like music. Singing is part and parcel of them. They compose songs on various occasions. Songs are expressions of their daily lives: giving birth, rearing children, working in the field, marriage, funeral, exhumation, mourning etc. The Christians take texts of themes from the Bible and make it in the form of stanzas to be sung. Songs make Sunday services and prayer meetings more interesting for the Malagasy who love music. Many were converted by means of song. They came to church to listen to the Christians singing and later became Christians. From the time of the martyrs until today, songs are powerful resources for interpreting the Bible among the Malagasy Christians.

Since Andrianampoinimerina, the first king who wanted to unite the whole island, the Malagasy had a strong sense of community spirit. This ancient king introduced this community spirit in Madagascar, he urged the people to stand together and to help one another; he said '*Izay mitambatra vato, izay misaraka fasika*'-Those who assembled together are like rock but those divided like sand. This spirit of communion was fostered among the indigenous Christians by their reading of the Bible; The Christians of the New Testament period inspired them in this line. This community spirit supported the scattered Christians in their faith. This community spirit was one of the powers that sustained them during the persecution.

Traditional beliefs and religion, oral narratives, proverbs, songs and community spirit are interpretative tools based on the context and culture of the Malagasy Christians. They helped them to understand what the Bible speaks to them in their own context more deeply. When they came to any Biblical text with these resources, they interpreted it easily and applied it to their daily lives meaningfully. These tools made

the Bible take root in their context and culture. However the interaction of the Bible and the Malagasy culture and context did not exclude conflicts. Since the aim of this interaction was understanding and acceptance of the Biblical values, so culture and context, in order to integrate with these values, needed conversion. In this way, the interaction led to appropriation of Christianity by the indigenous people.

3- The power of the Bible

From their early engagements with the Bible, the Merina Christians sensed that the Bible, as an object, had a strange and superior power, and as texts, is a source of knowledge and skills. From the very beginning, when the LMS missionaries associated the Bible with the skills of reading and writing, also with the superior technology of the West, they wanted to impress upon the indigenous people its power. Its introduction with this culture of writing, reading and technology contributed to the high esteem of the Bible. As a result, The Merina Christians wrestled to get it from the missionaries. They believed that it not only had power but also empowered.

The backgrounds of the Merina Christians made them more receptive to the new religion brought by the missionaries to the country. They not only welcomed Christianity as their religion but also the Bible as their 'Book'. This 'Book' was different from the other tools that were brought by those early missionaries. It was and had 'a strange and superior power'. It endowed the Christians protection. When the missionaries and their students were unharmed in vandalising the *vazimba* tombs, the Bible was believed to be of superior power to the *sampy* and other items of traditional religion. What the indigenous Christians sought from it was protection from the evil ones and enemies which were felt so real in the Malagasy world of that time. They were attracted to its protective power and it made them reject their *sampy* and embraced Christianity. It was received as an alternative to the *sampy*.

In all historical and hermeneutical processes down through the years, the Bible was and is always seen as a distinct object that contains mysterious or magic power. This conception of the Bible as a mysterious or magic power was nourished by their traditional religion and culture; and the sense of the superiority of this power was

nourished by the western culture to which it was originally associated. During the period of persecution, due to its translation into the local language, it has been changed from being a foreign power to a local power.

This study has pointed out that this power had sustained the Merina martyrs during the persecution in Madagascar. If Christianity survived during the reign of queen Ranavalona I, it was due to the Bible's availability to the indigenous Christians, and translated moreover into their mother tongue. It became the source from which their courage and strength derived. They came to the Bible for instruction, consolation, establishment and inspiration and it never let them down in their trials and tribulations. The Bible was no longer understood as merely magical power that protect but as a spiritual power which empowered the Christians during their hardships. On the one hand the unopened Bible had some sort of magical or sacramental power and on the other hand the opened one gave teaching and enlightenment. Both of these powers were felt by the martyr church, but the second aspect was experienced more powerfully.

The Malagasy indigenous Christians' understanding of the power of the Bible gradually changed from one stage to another. First of all when it was presented with the missionaries' package deal, they saw it as a western product and when associated with the reading and writing it was seen as the western superior power. But when they were stripped of their *sampy*, they used it as a protective power, alternative to the *sampy* they used to have. Lastly when it was available in the Malagasy language and they had access to dialogue and interacted with it; it became more and more an opened Bible. It became a spiritual power which sustained them during their trials and tribulations.

Due to the power of the Bible, the cause of God prevailed in Madagascar during that dark period. Persecution, cruelty and martyrdom could not destroy the little leaven in that island. Pure and spiritual Christians, sustained by the power of the Bible, prospered during the reign of Ranavalona I. The Malagasy Christians walked hand-in-hand with the Bible through the dark period of persecution and came out victorious. The martyrs lived, suffered and died for Christ because they learnt of Him and from Him through the Holy Word of God that they read and pondered.

The purpose and limitation of this research project bound it to explore only a general view of the early encounters with the Bible among the Malagasy, specifically its sustaining power to the indigenous Christians during the persecution in Madagascar from 1828 to 1861. More focused research on the presence of and place of the Bible, after the death of Ranavalona I, would be an appropriate step stemming from this research project. It would look at the role and impact of the Bible on education, civilisation, colonisation, politics and nation building. When the Malagasy Christians enjoyed freedom of religion, did the impacts and role of the Bible remain the same? This question should be answered broadly and critically with the help of overseas research such as in Paris, New York and Wales, specifically at the LMS archives in London. These places conserve considerable materials about the Madagascar history.

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2, 3 & 9	In ' <i>I Madagasikara sy ny Fivavahana Kristianina</i> ' by the CREDO (Centre de Recherche, d'Etude et de Documentation).
5 & 6	In ' <i>Bible et pouvoir à Madagascar au 19^{ième} Siècle</i> ' by Raison-Jourde.
4, 7 & 8	In ' <i>Heurs et malheurs de l'Église Malgache au 19^{ième} Siècle, des origines jusqu'en 1895</i> ' by Rajaonah, M and Jonah G.
10	Photo on the cover of the book: ' <i>A Narrative of the Persecution of the Christians in Madagascar</i> ' by J J Freeman and D Johns 1840.
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Source of illustrations

FIGURES	SOURCES
1	From the website : www.allafricatravel.com/images/atlas/madagasc.htm
2, 3 & 9	In ' <i>I Madagasikara sy ny Fivavahana Kristianina</i> ' by the CREDO (<i>Centre de Recherche, d'Etude et de Documentation</i>).
5 & 6	In ' <i>Bible et pouvoir à Madagascar au 19ième Siècle</i> ' by Raison-Jourde.
4, 7 & 8	In ' <i>Heurs et malheurs de l'Église Malgache au 19^{ième} Siècle, des origines jusqu'en 1895</i> ' by Rajaonah, M and Jonah G.
10	Photo on the cover of the book: ' <i>A Narrative of the Persecution of the Christians in Madagascar</i> ' by J J Freeman and D Johns 1840.
11 & 12	In ' <i>Rafaravavy Marie</i> ' by Gustave Mondain.