Restoring Dignity in Rural and Urban Madagascar

On How Religion Creates New Life-stories

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INTRODUCTION – A LIFE-LONG RELATIONSHIP

The background for writing this book is in many ways that Madagascar, in different capacities, and with different perspectives, has always been a part of my life. What I do in this book is to present elements of my own personal and professional life journey. I grew up in Madagascar, and as a grown-up I have studied social anthropology or social science and its relation to development and cultural and social processes of change on the one hand, and I have been involved in the wide themes of Christian religion on the other. My relationship with Madagascar has been a challenging and sometimes troublesome one, but at the same time it has been an immensely rewarding journey to make. This book in a way sums up some of the themes and projects that I have been working on and relating to.

I lived most of my childhood and part of my adult life in Madagascar. My parents were Norwegian missionaries who worked in the Lutheran church on the island. As a child I lived in small towns on the southeast coast of the island, and grew up bilingual – and I am still bilingual, as Malagasy is almost as much a mother tongue to me as Norwegian. I spent more time with my Malagasy friends and in their houses and villages than I did in my parents' house. In spite of this I was brought up as a Norwegian – in a Malagasy setting, as I went to a Norwegian boarding-school in Antsirabe. However, my Malagasy

childhood and youth at least have given me lasting impressions and left, I think, strong imprints. Even during those times when I feel uncertain how strong they are, they at least left me with a tension relating to who I am, and a curiosity relating to my own background and the culture and society that helped me grow up.

When my family moved to Norway I was 16 years old. After finishing my university education, I moved back to Madagascar, with my husband, a child and a wish to learn more about Madagascar and to undertake studies in social anthropology.

Our small family lived and worked in the Bara village of Ivohibe, in the eastern part of the Ihorombe region. Here I started my first fieldwork preparing for a thesis in social anthropology. I was interested in learning more about gender relations in Bara society, and moved in with the Bara families in the small village of Androkombato, near Ivohibe, and stayed there for shorter periods from 1979–82. I was at the time also employed by the same church as my parents, as a teacher in the local secondary school. My anthropological training at the University of Oslo made me curious not only about Bara society and gender relations, but even more about what causes change, and how religious change affected Bara society.

In my fieldwork and study of gender relations in Bara society, the aim was as broad a study as possible of the cultural, social, religious and economic context for gender roles, and how power and influence were organized in the relation between women and men in this society. I became part of the Androkombato village close to Ivohibe. I became very aware of the multi-faceted dimensions of culture, society and religion in this village. The tension between new and old cultural traditions, for example as expressed in a conflict between the Christian religion and the Malagasy ancestral religion, was clearly demonstrated in my encounter with the village chief, *Lonaky*, in Androkombato. As village chief he was the religious leader of the family lineage, and therefore responsible for making sacrifices to gods and ancestors. A few years earlier he had come into contact with the Christian church in Ivohibe, and had decided that he wanted to be a Christian, and after a while he voluntarily took on responsibility for a local congregation in a neighbouring village. He was the only one who thought of himself as a Christian in the Androkombato village, and he encountered little understanding of his new religious ties. At the same time, he was held accountable in his role as a religious leader for the family lineage and could not withdraw from this. However, after a while it felt impossible for him to combine being a Christian and a congregational

leader with making sacrifices. At one point he tried to be excused from his position as a religious leader in the village, but his relatives refused to see this as a possible alternative. When I stayed in the village he had recently made the choice to leave the Christian congregational work, and had broken off contact with the church. The pressure to sustain his traditional role became too strong.

Living in Ivohibe for three years was very challenging, both for me and for my family. It really is the end of the world, and the Bara population were proud to have a separate identity, and did not need the world beyond. Due to both internal and external forces, this is rapidly changing, and the formerly proud and self-reliant group feels increasingly left out and sees the world go by. This I have described in greater detail in chapter 4.

These changes also cast light on an interesting religious phenomenon. In spite of extensive missionary activity since the 1880s and locally initiated church work, the Christian influence on the Bara people has been slight, to use the strongest expression possible. However, around the turn of the century, at the same time that I was involved in the church-related development project in the region, a religious innovator emerged. A local woman from the small village of Maropaika, southeast of Ivohibe, called Mama Christine, experienced what she describes as a combination of having a vision of Jesus and being resurrected from the dead. Her conclusion is a message to the Bara that the time has come for them to change their religious affiliation to Christianity.

She places herself in the long tradition of Christian innovators in Madagascar, or, in the local term revival leaders. Her influence locally has been wide-ranging, as you will also find in the stories I relate from individuals who have experienced changes in their lives. And as she places herself in a long tradition of persons with strong spiritual or religious experiences from which they are able to speak both with authority and cultural relevance, so the church leadership – with an equally strong tradition – have questioned her legitimacy, as do all her predecessors in the spiritual revival movements. To the local population this is, however, of little consequence, and Mama Christine's preaching has had wide-ranging effects on both religious affiliation and conviction, and on the life of thousands of villagers, as have all the revivalists in the Awakening movement or *Fifohazana* tradition of Madagascar. I have reflected more on this in chapter 3.

After moving from the Bara people, and after finishing my thesis on the Bara at the University of Oslo, *Autonomous women and dominating men*, we

moved back to Madagascar, this time to Betafo, a small town 20 km west of Antsirabe in the Vakinankaratra region in Merina society.

Here I conducted research on socio-economic processes of change that took place in Merina rural society, and how these have affected the organization of the family farms, the sexual division of labour and the inheritance system of land. I found that in this region there has been a gradual transition from subsistence economy to market integrated economy, and the introduction of new cultivation practices and new technology to provide modernization in agriculture has created changes in gender relations. The book presenting the research results was published as *Women and development* (Skjortnes 1990b).

This stay in Vakinankaratra was also my first encounter with how the Merina people understand and practice Christianity. I found that most Merina were Christians, but at the same time had a close relationship to ancestral Malagasy rituals, such as the turning over the dead,[1] *famadihana*, the large family gathering that occurs every third, fifth or seventh year to celebrate the fellowship between the dead and the living. I discovered that many people who regularly attended church also attended the family and local community's *famadihana* celebrations, including several Christian pastors, and this happened in opposition to the official stance of the Lutheran church. I also realized that the Catholic church took a different stance, and that as a church they chose to participate and be officially present in the celebrations, for example by arranging Mass in connection with the preparation of the *famadihana* ritual. This became an important moment of recognition for me, as I experienced that being Christian in a Malagasy context is shaped and defined in a different way than in the Protestant part of the West. An understanding of what Christianity is and is not is closely connected to the cultural context of each society, and reminds us of the importance of maintaining a culturally relativist perspective in our approach to religion, grounded in specific cultural forms.

After ten years in Madagascar, partly in the Bara region, and later in the Vakinankaratra region around Antsirabe, I settled in Norway, and started working for different academic institutions and consulting agencies that all tended to bring me back to Madagascar. Around the turn of the century I was invited by the Malagasy Lutheran Church to work with a group of local leaders to develop strategies for locally initiated change in Bara villages. This was a very exciting process. I was involved in discussions and planning of the preparation of what was later coined the Bara development project, or SoFaBa (*Soritr'asa Fampandrosoana ny Bara*). Altogether the project brought new cultural, social, economic and religious elements to the society, which

meant new opportunities and new challenges for the Bara people. It is this project that forms the basis and background of the life-stories in chapter 5 in this book.

The project is financed by Norwegian government money, and the planning group for the project, on behalf of the Malagasy Lutheran Church (Fiangonana Loterana Malagasy, FLM), discussed the importance of the religious dimension with the Norwegian funding agency at the time. Some openings in a very restricted policy, based on the assumption that religion and development are two separate entities, were negotiated.

During my stay in Vakinankaratra I did a number of more applied studies relating to both private and government-funded development projects in the region.

This continued after my family settled in Norway in 1988. And I have been back to Madagascar to do studies, fieldwork and teach at universities and other institutions nearly once a year ever since. The research and studies I did in the Vakinankaratra region gave me deeper insights into culture, society and religion in the Merina group in the highlands. Some of this is related in chapter 6.

Among the projects initiated by the Lutheran church in which I have been involved is one small but interesting initiative aimed at providing young and unemployed individuals in the city of Antsirabe with the necessary capacity to find employment. I tell the story of the diaconal center of the church in Antsirabe at the end of chapter 6.

Throughout all these different phases there has been a certain interplay of religion and anthropology. While doing my first thesis on the Bara, I wanted to study and describe the Bara way of life, how they, from a gender perspective, lived and organized their society, and to understand why they behaved and reflected as they did. Since my focus was to understand and describe, I didn't try to actively effect change in their society, even though I know that my presence there probably introduced new inputs to the village and the people living there. I did not act as a development actor in my research position.

On the other hand, when I was involved in planning development projects I often had to defend my role as an agent of change first and foremost through my church affiliation, but also sometimes as a person engaged in development initiatives – and how this could be related to my role as a social anthropologist.

For me it has been important to reflect on and clarify a few principles tied to the different roles and positions I have taken on in my various tasks

in Madagascar. Firstly, it seems fair to say that the role of anthropologist and the role of church worker or development actor initially evoke a range of conflicts and, as a consequence, they may stand in opposition to each other. A researcher in social anthropology tries to attain an attitude of cultural relativism, which can be expressed in the principle that cultures must be understood on their own terms. A church worker or development actor, however, refers to a set of overarching moral concepts or values, which are actively presented and offered. In my opinion, the question of cultural relativism and influence (proselytizing) is a question of which strategy one chooses when faced with another culture. In my life the question has referred to my alternation between using principles of cultural relativism and humankind's moral unity, to use the words of social anthropologist Tord Larsen (Larsen 2009, 300). I am aware, however, that this kind of differentiation is difficult to completely sort out in practice, for example in Androkombato, where, for my Bara informants, I held the status of both anthropologist and church worker. This is a dilemma that I share, in principle, with other anthropologists in the field, insofar as one's identity, culture and traditions will be present in different ways, and will color the informants' perceptions of who one is, as well as the interaction that takes place, even though one tries to maintain an attitude of cultural relativism in the research process. I am aware of the reality that the simple act of being present and asking questions changes the reality on the ground. From a different standpoint it might be said that the principle of respect is lost if cultural relativism is taken too far, and that it is only when one is clear about one's own values that one is being honest with the other. In this sense, the church worker may be more honest than the cultural relativist. To say what one stands for is to be part of a conversation; to hide an attitude of knowing better is to fail to show adequate respect.

It has been an exciting journey to note how these relations have undergone great changes. Social anthropology, although never blind to the religious factor, has undergone changes, and there are new openings where the role of religion is looked upon with interest – and not only the non-Christian religions, but also Christianity, how it plays a role in the life of individuals and how the meanings of Christianity guide their actions.

There have also been tensions related to my involvement in the development field. It is a fundamental tenet of social anthropology that cultures and societies should be understood from the inside and from below, on the society's own terms. To do fieldwork in the Bara or Merina context means to explore rationality and reasoning, and to understand people and society

in their own context. The development arena has a desire to understand societies based on its terms, and it has systems and procedures, and strategies to reach defined objectives. The content and priorities of reporting routines, usually defined in the West, can often be experienced as foreign and not very relevant in a local, Malagasy context. In some cases the demand to decide the content of the obligatory reports comes across so strongly that the church's uniqueness, and the religious starting point for having the church participate in development work, disappear or become invisible. In the worst cases, the development field and its actors, including those who are church-based, may be seen as representatives of Western actors who force irrelevant language and agendas onto the local Malagasy context, contrary to a cosmological and ecclesial holistic perspective. The tension between locally defined understandings and global, Western understandings of what is central and worth writing home about can become striking, even when Western actors have a church base. In my experience, today's development politics in many ways faces the question: How can we avoid development work being perceived – despite our good intentions – as a neo-colonial practice? I have often experienced this tension as challenging.

Moreover, in reflections and writings on development issues, there have been great changes. My personal combination of being at times a Christian church worker, a development agent and a social anthropologist has shifted from being something looked upon with great scepticism to becoming a more relevant and interesting combination, with greater societal acceptance.

Also the Madagascar that has always been there in my life has in many ways undergone big changes, even though these are almost invisible from an external perspective. The changes are bigger than they might at first glance appear. When I attended the Norwegian school in Antsirabe in the 1960s, we bought our weekly Saturday sweets at "the Chinese with two doors" or at "the messy Chinese". These were two small brimming shops with a varied assortment of goods, including everything from candy, ham, liquor and textiles to ball bearings and transistor radios. Today the shops have been replaced by the South African supermarket chain "Shoprite", with a mass produced and standardized assortment of products.

To continue to relate to and regularly work in Madagascar during this whole time period, up until today, has also been challenging because changes in other parts of the world have been greater than in Madagascar. The economic circumstances of normal Malagasy people have on the whole been at a standstill, despite a lot of work to ensure that education and health services

would be commonly available. There is a sharp contrast between my own experiences of the world I grew up in on the east coast of Madagascar and in Antsirabe and the life I enjoy today, in relation to education, health, technological development and economic circumstances. To live in both of these two worlds, which have developed so differently, is an experience that is challenging and filled with tensions.

Stories of Changed Life

This book will present life histories of individuals who live in Madagascar, in a society with many needs, both social and economic. The stories show how living in a world of poverty and need, humiliation and lack of safety, presents many challenges relating to the fulfilment of needs, and the creation of decent living conditions. The stories also speak of many who have met compassion, and individuals and institutions that give priority to the task of upholding human dignity.

The aim of this book is to present stories of experienced lives and human dignity. It describes how vulnerable men and women, through participating in the diaconal work of the Lutheran church,[2] challenge poverty and the dehumanization resulting from deprivation of their fundamental freedoms and basic rights.[3] The study is based on fieldwork in rural Bara society in the southern part of the island, and in the city of Antsirabe in the highlands of Madagascar.[4]

My aim is to shed light on the meaning of the diaconal work of the church and how new opportunities and challenges are creating stories of changed life and changes in people's experience of human dignity. I wish to describe how vulnerable human beings have succeeded in improving their quality of life. The objective is also to discuss what religious organizations contribute to the secular development project. When I refer to religious organizations, my focus in this book will be mainly on Christian religious organizations.

I will start by presenting two stories. These stories will present some of the main topics and arguments of this book. Rahery and Norine have received help through the Malagasy Lutheran Church to create a better life for themselves and their families, resulting in stories of changed lives. They also act here as representatives of two Malagasy groups, the Bara and the Merina, whom I have focused on in the work with this book.

The Bara population lives in the southern part of the country, and their livelihood is based on cattle keeping in addition to a high degree of subsistence

agriculture. The Bara people mainly live in rural areas in kinship-based villages, and have up until recent times emphasised the maintenance of a lifestyle and cultural values tied to their cattle keeping, without a desire for interference from the rest of society. However, increased contact with the world around them has created changes both in larger residential areas and in villages, in the form of the presence of schools, health clinics, churches and trade.

The Merina people live in the highland area of the island, and play a central role as the country's agricultural producers. The Merina region stands out as a modernized part of the island compared with other regions, with, for example, the city of Antsirabe, which is the most industrialized city in the country. Large parts of the city's population are dependent on jobs in the city's agricultural and industrial sectors. In the past decades increasing numbers of villagers have moved to the city to seek work, and people and lifestyle have become characterised by greater individualism than previously.

Rahery

During the years that I have conducted fieldwork among the Bara, I have been struck by how they were previously a self-reliant, independent and proud group without much desire for contact with the surrounding world, while today they find themselves in a situation in which they wish to change their worsening living conditions, and they realize that they are dependent on relating to the world around them in a different way than before. Old solutions no longer work – new challenges demand new solutions. This is what Rahery expresses when he talks about how all his cattle were stolen. It happened at night, when everyone was sleeping. Strangers with stronger weapons than Rahery's family snuck into the village and emptied the cattle corral and disappeared. Rahery got several of the men in the village to come with him to find the stolen cattle, without success. For agro-pastoralists such as the Bara, cattle have traditionally been their most important capital and livelihood. Since the 1980s and '90s there has been a sharp increase in organized cattle theft, not least from groups who live in bordering areas and who have modern weapons. Several families in the village Ankasy, south of Ivohibe in the Ihorombe region, have had all their cattle stolen. Others have had to sell their animals one by one when family members have become ill or when the family in other ways has been hit by hard times. The result across the Bara region is that the cattle, to a larger extent than before, are owned by a minority. A general deterioration of living conditions in the region has contributed to cattle and other

reserve resources being in decline. The lack of available cattle has created a cultural identity crisis, and many are asking how one can manage life without a herd of cattle.

Rahery, who is 50 years old, grew up in Ankasy, where his father's family is from. He is married to Soa, one of his relatives from the same village, and when they became married his family had to perform the *tandra* ritual by sacrificing cattle to the ancestors in order to remove the blame associated with marrying a relative, which actually is seen as an incestuous relationship. The marriage was arranged by their parents, who saw several advantages to a marriage between their children from the same family. Rahery himself thinks it is a good arrangement to have the family make such agreements on behalf of the children. "My wife is a relative from Ankasy. We are from the same lineage, but the marriage was arranged by the family".[5] Rahery and Soa have had nine children together, five girls and four boys, but two of the children died when they were little. Neither he nor his wife can read or write, since the nearest school was still far away when they were growing up. But after the village built a school house in 2000, in collaboration with the Malagasy Lutheran Church (*Fiangonana Loterana Malagasy* – FLM), their children of school age have attended school. The village population constructed the school house itself, while FLM contributed the tin roof. Rahery thinks it is necessary to go to school today. It is not easy to get by in life without being able to read or write. Even when the cattle need to be registered with the local government, those who cannot write have to pay people to draw up lists of the animals, and this writing skill is expensive – 100 Ariary per animal.[6] Even though he himself no longer has animals, he hopes that his children in due course will be able to acquire cattle, so that they can experience the security and satisfaction that comes with owning a cattle herd. Since their own herd was stolen, Rahery and Soa have to borrow animals from their relatives when they need to work the fields and prepare them for rice planting. Rahery does not think it is quite right not to have his own animals, but now that they are gone he spends more time on the agricultural work. He inherited a fair amount of land from his father, and after receiving advice from the agricultural extension worker from FLM's development arm, he has modernised the cultivation methods and types of seed that he uses. Today the yields of rice have become much greater than before, and in addition the family cultivates corn, manioc, sweet potatoes, beans and peanuts. Altogether they have enough food to feed their household of ten people, including one grandchild, their eldest daughter's child who was born recently.

In 2005 a church was built in the village, and in the same way as with the school house, the village population worked to construct the church building. Rahery and Soa decided a few years ago that they and their children would become Christians. "The whole family is Christian. All my children have been baptized", says Rahery.[7] It started when Rahery became seriously ill. He went to the traditional healer to receive advice on how to get well. First he visited the healer who lived in the neighbouring village, and later he traveled all the way to the town of Ihosy, a day's journey northwest, to get help. Rahery spent a lot of resources on this, without seeing any improvement in his health. Rahery then decided to visit the hospital in Ivohibe, the nearest hospital, but did not get well from the medicines he was given there either. It was only when he was prayed for in church that he became well. This made up his mind – he and his family decided to join the Lutheran church in Ankasy. "The *ombiasa* [traditional healer] does not provide healing, but the church provides healing, because the *ombiasa* deals in lies".[8]

For Rahery it is safe to be a part of the church. When the children get ill, he and Soa bring them to church to be prayed for and so that the shepherds can drive out the evil spirits from the sick person, or they can take them to the village's new health clinic so that the midwife can give them medicines. "The good thing about being a Christian is that you get healed. It gives good health – there is nothing shady about that".[9] Rahery is pleased with his new life as a member of the church.

Norine

Norine arrived in the town of Antsirabe when she was about to give birth to her little daughter. At first Norine lived in a rural area some distance south of the town, but when her mother died and did not leave much for her to make a living, she decided to travel to her mother's brother who was married and had family in Antsirabe. She hoped she could receive help from his family in the difficult life situation in which she found herself.

Norine, who is currently 23 years old, had worked as a maid for a family in the capital, Antananarivo, for five or six years. All these years she worked both weekends and without vacation, and when her father died at home in her village she was not given leave to travel home to the funeral. In Antananarivo she got to know Rakoto, a man who sold household supplies. After a while, Norine and Rakoto decided to get married, but first they needed to get their families' blessing to enter into marriage. Norine had become pregnant, and

they decided to travel home to Norine's family to introduce Rakoto before the baby was born. Norine had given notice in her job as a maid, since she thought the job would be difficult to keep now that she was about to have a baby. They agreed that Norine would travel ahead, home to her family, and then Rakoto would follow after a couple of days. But Rakoto didn't come and Norine never saw him again.

Norine found her uncle and his family in Antsirabe, and gave birth to her child there. A week later the uncle suddenly died, and his wife and four children were left without work or other resources to live off. It was impossible for them to feed Norine and her child in addition to themselves, and her aunt took Norine to the Lutheran church's diaconal center, which she had heard about, and presented her and their life situation to the staff at the center. Norine was in despair and didn't know what to do. She had a younger brother who lived with relatives in the rural area where she was from, but she did not think it would be possible for her to travel back there, and did not think there was anyone there whom she could count on for help. Norine was promised that she could come back to the center when she had recovered a little, and she would be allowed to stay there. Even though the center did not have bedrooms or facilities for overnight guests, the staff put out a mattress on the floor for her so that she had a temporary place to be with her newborn baby.

Later Norine became a participant at the center, which had been set up to help unemployed youth find work in the town. She took courses at the center that supported her and built her competence so that she would later be able to find work and care for herself and her child. She decided to specialize as a cook and took courses that taught her to prepare various dishes. After six months' training at the center she got a job as cook and household manager for a family. One of her duties was to accompany the family's children to and from school, and she took care of the household chores and cooked food for them.

In addition to food and board, she was paid a small sum of money for her work, enough to cover small expenses for food and clothes for her child. She also agreed with the family that she would accompany some of the neighbour's children to and from school, and she was paid a little for this too. She sent this money to her brother in her home village – she felt some responsibility for him and gave him a little financial support to cover school expenses when she had the chance.

Norine comes from a Christian family and it was natural for her to attend the Lutheran church each Sunday. She also regularly attends the Thursday revival meetings in the congregation. She has a stronger relationship with

the church since she moved to Antsirabe. Every morning the family whom she lives with start the day with prayer. She thinks she would have been completely exhausted if she had not had the support of Jesus as her savior and the one who has taken care of her in the difficult situation she has been in. She is grateful that she gained new knowledge about the Bible and the content of the Christian faith at the diaconal center. She also learned about how to organize her life and take care of her child. And not least, she now has a regular income, even though it is not a large sum. Her job allows her to spend a lot of time together with her child, and she has even managed to save enough to buy small golden earrings for her girl. She thinks that perhaps in some years' time she might manage to save enough that she and her daughter can move into their own household. She would also like to have a husband who could help raise her daughter, and who could take turns to sit with her at night when she falls ill. Norine herself suffers from headaches, and thinks she doesn't have much time to relax, but she lives with a friendly family and is grateful to be able to work in this household.

The two stories I have told are examples of the extremely vulnerable life conditions that many people in Madagascar face. The stories also tell us something about how these individuals live in a religious universe, in which religion plays a decisive role in life, not just at a surface level, but as part of the daily, existential reality that people live in and relate to.

I will in later chapters give a broad context of the cultural, social, religious and economic aspects of the society of Bara and Merina people. But first, I will present a few perspectives that have been taken up in the debate about the role of religion in societal development, especially focusing on which role religion and Christian churches play when it comes to creating development processes in a society. One important perspective concerns the degree to which religion is seen as a potentially important precondition for achieving development objectives.