

# Sakalava Dancing Battles

## Representations of Conflict in Sakalava Royal Service

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**Abstract.** – Sakalava royal service honors the dynasty that governed western Madagascar prior to the French conquest in 1896. Services range from annual purifications of ancestral relics to generational reconstructions of royal tombs. Praise songs and dances are considered essential complements to royal work, having historic as well as aesthetic dimensions. The *rebiky* commemorates battles among rival branches of the dynasty that Sakalava regard as basic to its growing strength from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries and its more recent decline. The *rebiky* is the only Sakalava dance in which participants, regardless of age, gender, or ancestry, take on the roles of royalty as well as those of royal subjects. The pattern of participation in the *rebiky*, common to many aspects of Sakalava royal work, embodies ideas about the organization of competition and the resolution of conflict that apply broadly to the conduct of current everyday affairs. [Madagascar, Politics, Work, Dance, History]

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### 1. Introduction

The people of Madagascar are celebrated in the anthropological and historical literature for their intricate funeral customs, which include rituals of reburial. The Merina, for example, periodically rebury the bones of their ancestors in silk shrouds, commensurate in beauty and number with the social status of the deceased (Bloch 1971). Merina royalty of the precolonial period were not reburied, but the living ruler was purified at the beginning of every lunar new year in a ceremony known as the "bath" (*fandroana*), described in Merina oral traditions (Callet 1974 I [1935]: 301-329, II [1956]: 116-124; see also Abinal 1949-1950, Collins 1898, Molet 1956, Rabe 1907, Razafimino 1924, based on reports dating from 1817).

The complex funeral customs of the Sakalava of western Madagascar take a somewhat different

form. Sakalava focus on the ancestors of the Maroseraña dynasty that ruled this coastal area, not the ancestors of the people who were once their subjects. The bodies of deceased royalty are left in their tombs, but periodically relics made from them or regalia associated with them are taken out from their shrines, purified, and put away again. Sakalava in the former territory of Menabe south of Mahajanga bathe (*mitampoka*) royal relics known as "elders" (*dady*) in sea water. These ceremonies are held every seven to ten years at royal compounds still occupied by descendants of the dynasty. "Northern Sakalava" living in the former territory of Boina, from Mahajanga to Nosy Be, "serve" (*manompo*) the "(things that) bless, heal" (*mitahy, mitaha*) or "difficult things" (*raha sarotra*) by purifying them in a mixture of honey and water, fermented with bark (*tô mainty*). These royal services (*fanompoaña*) take place in the first month of the lunar new year (*fanjava mitsaka*, about July).

Among the "Southern" and "Northern" branches of the Bemihisatra Sakalava living in the areas of Analalava and Nosy Be-Ambanja, the service is carried out at both the royal compound of the currently living descendant of the Maroseraña dynasty (*doany*) and at the royal cemetery where the royal ancestors are buried (*mahabo*). The Southern Bemihisatra Sakalava in the Analalava region also repeat some aspects of the royal funeral in the process of reconstructing the fence immediately surrounding the royal tomb some years later. Known after the name of the fence, the *menaty* service takes the same form as the new year's ceremonies: the old fence is taken down, the tomb enclosing the bodies is cleansed with *tô mainty*, and a new fence is put up around it.

Sakalava variations on the "royal bath" have been described at some length (Chazan-Gillic 1983, Feeley-Harnik 1979, n. d. a, Nerine-Botokey 1983, Platon 1958, Poirier 1939a, 1939b, R-n-j-s 1878, Raharijaona and Valette 1959).