



Fig. 10: *Rebiky*; dancers representing the "red" and "white" rulers. Northern Mahabo on Nosy Lava, Analalava region, 12 May 1973 (Alan Harnik)

when the *rebiky* came to represent these conflicts. But there is historical documentation concerning the *sabàka* that may shed some light on the kinds of competitive circumstances in which important features of the *rebiky* developed. The *sabàka*, which is currently central to the *rebiky* in the Analalava region, may have come into use during the late eighteenth century when Sakalava first began to fight off Hova efforts to colonize western Madagascar.

Richardson (1885: 562) describes hats like the *sabàka*, including the *satro-dava* ("long hat"), "a very tall highly decorated hat, with a tassel reaching to the ground, worn on some particular occasion," and the *satro-potraka* ("fallen hat"), "a cap like a nightcap whose crest hangs down, worn by fathers in the circumcision ceremonies." Since he does not qualify his definitions as "provincial," they probably apply to the Merina. Camboué (1909: 378–379), in his discussion of royal circumcision ceremonies in Imerina before

1869, includes photographs taken at one of the two circumcisions held in 1844 and in 1854, during the reign of Ranavalona I, that show just such hats. The hats were worn by the men armed with spears and shields who were charged with the work of *mifehy* (literally, "to tie/bind/knot"), getting the pure water from as far away as Taomasina [Tamatave], which must have involved "binding" local people to Merina rule. (At least, this is the meaning of *mifehy* among Sakalava now.) The final day, when the men brought the water into the capital, they danced to honor Ranavalona and her ancestors. The water was used to wash the bodies and especially the penises of the circumcised boys, transmitting ancestral blessings, protecting them from sorcery.

According to Raombana's account of the circumcision of Prince Rakotosiheno in 1844, the men who carried the sacred water

... étaient armés de sagaies et de boucliers. Ils étaient richement vêtus et parés des articles rares apportés par M. Delastelle etc. [Napoléon de Lastelle, a French merchant in Tamatave, who handled Ranavalona's commercial transactions] ... en particulier d'immenses chapeaux carrés, de couleur écarlate, dont les plumes touchaient presque le sol. Il est difficile de décrire ces costumes; il suffit de dire qu'ils étaient magnifiques et que le prix de l'un d'eux ne valait pas moins de plusieurs centaines de dollars [whereas those of certain royal officials and the three princes, probably cost \$ 2–3000 each] (Ralaimihoatra 1952: 25).¹⁹

The fanciest headdresses – such as the one photographed "à la Cour de Tananarive" – were made of precious metals and stones (Camboué 1909: 378–379). Lesser versions, judging from the photograph of "ministres de la Circoncision à Imerina" (*ibid.*), were made of red cloth appliqued (?) with stars, circles, and ornaments of other shapes.²⁰ According to Merina oral traditions collected in the mid-19th century, the founder king Andrianampoinimerina [late 1750s–1810] was able to unify Imerina in part because he rewarded soldiers for their bravery in battle by presenting them with "grands honneurs":

19 Camboué (1909: 377) also comments that the whole array of ornaments, including shoulder-belts, was very expensive to rent, and so heavy that at "la dernière Circoncision des princes" (1854?), two robust men who succumbed under the weight required assistants to wear some of the ornaments for them.

20 The exhibit on "Madagascar: Island of the Ancestors," which opened at the Museum of Mankind in London in November 1986, includes such a hat made of imported red woolen cloth decorated with fleurs-de-lis in gold braid.