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► **To cite this version:**

Zoly Rakotoniera. The Founding Myths of Postcolonial Madagascar : A Literary Perspective. Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion, 2004, Founding Myths of the New South Africa / Les mythes fondateurs de la nouvelle Afrique du Sud, 24, pp.157-162. hal-02344105

HAL Id: hal-02344105

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02344105v1>

Submitted on 3 Nov 2019

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The Founding Myths of Postcolonial Madagascar: A Literary Perspective

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In 1960, Madagascar's obtention of independence revived people's hope of a new order. For many, the time to get rid of French influence, which was still too tangible in Malagasy experience, had finally come. Thus, the decade following independence was marked by people's manifestation of discontent. As Françoise Raison Jourde puts it, the search for change was strongly voiced by Malagasy men and their writings (675). Two literary works, *Sikajin'I Dadabe*¹, by Randriamiadanarivo and *Trimofoloalina*² by Justin Fidelis Rabetsimandranto are examples of postcolonial writing which deal with this idea of national re-foundation. In fact, this paper will focus on the analysis of these two books as they offer a different perspective on the founding myths of the Malagasy nation after independence.

In *Trimofoloalina*, the author depicts a seventeenth-century utopian society ruled by a wise king who is concerned only with the well-being of his subjects. As for the people, they are described as excellent citizens who obey and venerate the king, "whose love

¹ "Sikajy" is a Malagasy word referring to the one eighth of a piastre, and "dadabe" means grandfather. So *Sikajin'I Dadabe* can be translated as "Grandfather's one eighth of a piastre."

² "Trimofoloalina" is the name of the hero of this narrative poem, and is also the title of the book.

for him is deeply-rooted” (40). The dominant feeling of nostalgia conveyed by the book is intensified by the writer’s use of an elegiac tone, a device he might have deliberately chosen to express his dissatisfaction with the society of his time. In *Sikajin ’I Dadabe*, the indictment of the established order is more direct as the major part of the novel relates the absurdities of the French system that Malagasy people had to endure. But the two writers do not content themselves with expressing their discontent; they also offer an idea of how society can be renovated, thus shedding light on the founding myths of the postcolonial Malagasy nation: sanctity of the sovereign and sense of collectivity.

Historically, the founding of a new polity was an enterprise that was undertaken by every Malagasy monarch, especially those who attempted to expand their kingdoms. And significantly, they all used the myth of “the sanctity of the monarch” to achieve their goals. Even during the pre-Christian era, the myth was politically used by an unnamed king who recognized the power of his idols because, in his own words, “they have sanctified me and thus have enabled me to establish unity in my kingdom and in the whole country” (Molet 203). In fact, in Malagasy culture, “hasina” or sanctity refers to an intrinsic or transmitted force in certain beings which enables them to achieve extraordinary actions.

And it is the same founding myth that Rabetsimandranto takes up in *Trimofoloalina*. Whenever the people address the king, the first words they say, “Sacred is our sovereign” , are meant to show belief in his power and respect for his authority (41). But nowhere in the book is the function of the myth better illustrated than in the episode dealing with the construction of the palace which is the major event of the story. As the writer’s metaphorical definition reveals, the palace symbolizes a unified, powerful and developed nation: it is “the tusk of the earth, the pillow of the king, an indestructible force assuring perennial sovereignty, peace and prosperity” (35). The king evokes this idyllic image of the nation when he appeals to his subjects to join him in the accomplishment of the monumental task. The first condition required by such an enterprise is that someone has to give his life by dropping his blood on the place where the palace is going to be erected, an act that is supposed to sanctify the palace, and above all, the king who will

live in it. The writer puts emphasis on the importance of the act by asserting that if the king is not sanctified, “famine and wars will destroy the nation” (36).

One may wonder how it is possible that the sanctification of the palace also means the sanctification of the king. In fact, as has already been said, for Malagasy people, sanctity is transmittable. According to Molet, sanctity can be passed on to a person or a thing through some rituals. It can also be maintained and recharged because, in time, sanctity can run out (205). In *Sikajin’I Dadabe*, the hero, Goaibe, and his friends survive many colonial adversities because of their beliefs in the sanctity of Goaibe’s ancestors, something that he has automatically inherited and that will protect those who are with him, as he says at the beginning of the novel: “trust in me. Don’t be afraid, no evil spirits can hurt me. My ancestors were sacred and those who are with me are untouchable” (68). Thus, throughout the story, Goaibe’s attempts to help his people fight against social injustice and hardships related to colonization are all successful. And relevantly, it is near the end of French occupation that Goaibe’s role as a social leader is given importance, a fact that drives home the author’s idea of re-foundation. Thus the last image of society given by the writer is one in which people can live in security and harmony because, tacitly and unanimously, they acknowledge Goaibe’s qualities as leader of the new society, namely his sanctity and his deep sense of collectivity.

Indeed, these writers’ portrayal of society reveals that the building of a nation does not depend only on the belief in the ruler’s power, it also requires everybody’s sense of collectivity: the second founding myth that is treated in the two books. Political scientists argue that a common WE identity is the symbolic representation of unity which does not exist in reality, but which is an unwritten charter of the social and political order.³

Randriamiadanarivo gives us to understand that the major characteristic of the pre-colonial society that he yearns for and idealizes, is happiness engendered by the harmony existing among

³ Founding Myths of Europe and the role of the Holocaust, online posting, <<http://www.deutschlandstudien.unibremen.de/deutschlandstudien/publika/myths.pdf>>

the people. During those days, he adds, people valued the collectivity as is shown by their nightly gatherings during which grown-ups have discussions and children play traditional sports. In *Trimofoloalina*, the value of sense of collectivity as founding myth is also represented by the palace that the king wants to build. As the author says, “in good or bad times, the palace will always be open for our folks, it is a place where they will always be well-taken care of” (42-43). In other words, the palace is another means of tightening the bond that is supposed to exist between the people, and thus to strengthen people’s sense of collectivity. It is also noteworthy that each description of the functions of the palace ends with the idea that it will bring peace and unity in the country.

As we have seen, the two myths presented by these two writers are useful elements in the building of a powerful government and in the unification of the nation. They are old myths that date back to the seventeenth century, but it goes without saying that the writers revised them to suit their purposes. The main discrepancy between the old and the new myths of sanctity lies in the way monarchs obtain or renew it. During the pre-Christian era, the sanctification of kings consists in a very simple act: people accompany him to a place where the sacred rock is, then he stands on the rock and declares that he is sanctified (Molet 217). During the reign of Ranavalona II, when Christianity was established in Madagascar, the sanctity of the queen was just taken for granted, for at her enthronement, the first words she uttered were: “God has entrusted the country to me” (Molet 220), thus affirming her sanctity and her legitimacy. One can say that the simplicity of this act accounts for the hegemony of the Merina tribe, to which these monarchs belonged, and for the dynastic continuity that characterizes the history of Malagasy monarchy.

In *Trimofoloalina*, however, the sanctification of the king requires the important act of taking somebody’s life. Remarkably, the king does not force anybody to give his or her life, but trusts in people’s patriotism and allegiance to the king. It is then the hero, Trimofoloalina, a peasant, who accepts to die in order to sanctify the king and the palace. To reward him, the king decrees that henceforward, Trimofoloalina’s descendants will enjoy the privileges that so far exclusively belonged to the higher castes. Unlike

the old myth, the new one implies that sanctity is not easily acquired; it is something that the king asks for and deserves. Also, the empowering of the government requires effort and participation from everybody. The second conclusion we can draw from the story is that people from all castes should benefit from the advantages of having a strong and stable government.

The last point that is worthy of attention is the role of religion in the functioning of the founding myths. In her book on the construction of Christianity and state in Madagascar, Françoise Raison Jourde says that the royal exercise of power is correlated to God's power (578). This interrelation between political and religious power can be seen through the myth of sanctity in *Trimofoloalina*. Before announcing to the people the project of building the palace, the king asks his soothsayer to consult their god. This latter answers that the quintessential element in the achievement of the task is the sanctification of the king. And when the king informs the people about the need for a sacrifice, he insists upon the fact that it is god's will, and that people's disobedience will provoke god's anger. As this situation shows, religion empowers the myth of sanctity which, consequently functions like a dogma.

In conclusion, a powerful government, and a unified people are the foundations of the Malagasy nation. And when it was exploited and disfigured by colonization, its reconstruction demanded myth production. What is interesting in the works of Randriamiadanarivo and Rabetsimandranto, is that they reproduce the old myths in order to give new meanings to the new political and social order. But the writers also reinforce the idea of complementarity of political and religious power in Madagascar. Through their exposure of the founding myths of the new Malagasy nation, they manage to create a link between Madagascar's past and future which has been broken by colonization, and conveys the sense of temporal continuity that surpasses the contingency of human existence.

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