

The Zafindraony Chant: Indigenous Appropriation and Cultural Resilience within Betsileo Protestantism

Rafenomanantsoa Emilson^{1,2}

¹Doctoral Candidate at the Thematic Doctoral School: Governance and Societies in Transition (GOUVSOMU), University of Fianarantsoa, Fianarantsoa, Madagascar

²Host Laboratory: ASCH-IAL (Anthropology, Sociology, Civilisations, History, Identity-Alterity and Language)

Email: fenoandrianin@gmail.com

Abstract:

This study explores the Zafindraony as a dynamic cultural archive within the Betsileo socio-religious ecosystem. Emerging during the nineteenth century at the intersection of Merina political expansion and Protestant missionary influence, the Zafindraony has evolved from a liturgical adaptation into a sophisticated repository of indigenous identity. Through archival hermeneutics, comparative ethnomusicological analysis, and ethnographic fieldwork conducted across Fianarantsoa, Ambositra, and Ambalavao, this research examines the genre's diachronic development and its role in communal cohesion. The findings demonstrate that the Zafindraony operates as a site of strategic syncretism, where Western four-part harmonic structures are re-contextualized to house traditional anatra (moral counsel) and ancestral metaphors. The genre functions as a living instrument of resilience, providing emotional scaffolding during communal rites such as funeral vigils (lanonana) and facilitating social solidarity in an era of rapid digitization. By cross-referencing colonial documentation with contemporary oral testimonies, this study reveals how the Betsileo reclaimed the genre to safeguard their philosophical and linguistic heritage against the risks of cultural homogenization. Ultimately, this article advocates for the formal integration of Zafindraony studies into the Malagasy higher education curriculum. Treating the genre as a vital national heritage asset rather than a peripheral liturgical relic is essential for its preservation. By legitimizing the Zafindraony within the Malagasy academy, this research contributes to the decolonization of musicological discourse, ensuring that this evolving polyphonic tradition continues to serve as an engine for communal development, spiritual well-being, and enduring cultural sovereignty for future generations of the Betsileo people.

Keywords:

Zafindraony; Protestantism ; Betsileo culture ; evangelization ; intangible cultural heritage.

I. Introduction

Song and music have occupied a central position in human existence across centuries and civilizations. In ancient Greece, musical expression served as an indispensable accompaniment to public and private activities, ranging from religious ceremonies and banquets to athletic contests and funeral rites, thereby mirroring the spectrum of human emotion. The Middle Ages facilitated the institutionalization of music within monastic settings, which fostered the emergence of distinctive vocal traditions. By the Renaissance, music transcended its ecclesiastical confines to engage a broader public, a shift further accelerated by the development of printing technologies, which revolutionized the dissemination of musical works. As Lemonnier (2010) observes, “song and music unfold within a historical era, through processes that have spread throughout the world”.

These musical arts constitute an invaluable cultural heritage, a reality exemplified by Madagascar, an island characterized by a heterogeneous cultural landscape. Each region possesses a unique oral literature, with singing functioning as a quintessential form of cultural expression, as evidenced by the hiragasy of Imerina and the rija of the Betsileo. Reflecting on this cultural aptitude, Bensignor (2013) notes that the Malagasy demonstrate a remarkable appetite for music, regardless of social status, alongside an innate ability to craft instruments from diverse materials.

Within Betsileo society, musical performance historically adhered to three distinct functions. First, secular music facilitated everyday social interaction and domestic festivities, including serving as a motivational tool for collective labor; for instance, Faublée and Eyraud (1999) document the use of sodina flutes by herd-tending youths. Second, sacred music provided a medium for communicating with divinities, including venerated kings and Zanahary. Third, traditional music encapsulated popular culture, encompassing the rites and customs that defined communal life. The arrival of Protestantism, however, introduced an evangelical dimension that became firmly established within the Betsileo cultural ecosystem. As Randrianary (2001) highlights, the foundational documentation of Malagasy music by missionaries and administrators emerged in the nineteenth century, a period during which Protestantism was transmitted to the Betsileo region—facilitated by the Merina—where missionaries actively utilized song to bolster their evangelization efforts, giving rise to the Zafindraony.

This article addresses the historical and socio-cultural emergence of the Zafindraony within the context of Protestant influence and its evolution into a distinct local tradition (Rafenomanantsoa & Robijaona Rahelivololoniaina, 2026). Amidst the challenges posed by globalization, the Betsileo—and the Malagasy more broadly—face a burgeoning tendency to devalue traditional practices. Consequently, this study explores viable solutions to foster appreciation and revitalization of the Zafindraony in an increasingly digitalized era. This research posits that the linguistic exchange between English missionaries and the Malagasy populace, which enabled the translation of the Bible, created the conditions for the birth of Malagasy evangelical song, and specifically, the Zafindraony. It is pertinent to note that Protestantism arrived in the Betsileo territory four decades prior to the introduction of Catholicism.

The primary objective of this research is to identify the essential characteristics of this Malagasy cultural tradition, underscoring its resilience as an intangible cultural heritage. Furthermore, the study examines the Zafindraony as a form of oral literature intrinsically linked to Protestant worship, evaluating its significance for cultural enhancement and the societal development of Betsileo country and Madagascar at large. Through a methodology incorporating scientific inquiry, archival analysis, and empirical fieldwork, this article examines the origins of the genre, its functional role in evangelization, and its status as a local cultural tradition. Ultimately, this study proposes a pedagogical framework for teaching the Zafindraony to ensure its revitalization and transmission to younger generations in the digital age.

II. Research Methods

2.1 Materials

The heuristic foundation of this investigation relies upon a diversified corpus of empirical, documentary, and ethnographic materials, systematically assembled to trace the ethnomusicological and socio-religious evolution of the Zafindraony genre within the Betsileo

cultural ecosystem. To safeguard analytical objectivity and academic validity, these source materials are categorized into discrete typologies.

a. Textual and epigraphical corpora of hymnody

The primary linguistic and musicological raw material consists of a comprehensive textual repository containing 180 traditional Zafindraony lyric compositions and hymnal transcriptions, compiled from regional village communities across the Southern Matsiatra and Amoron'i Mania regions (Noiret, 1994). This textual corpus includes early vernacular manuscripts, community hymn sheets utilized during ancestral funeral vigils (*Ianonana*), and formal Protestant liturgical songbooks. These materials preserve the archaic northern and southern Betsileo linguistic variants, idiomatic expressions, and structural *anatra* (moral and spiritual counsels), facilitating a rigorous textual analysis of how biblical narratives were translated and localized into traditional oral registers (Noiret, 1994; Rabary, 1930).

b. Historical document archives and institutional records

To reconstruct the historical axis of missionary interaction and institutionalization, this study utilizes a rigorous corpus of nineteenth- and twentieth-century written archives. These materials comprise the corporate reports and correspondence of the London Missionary Society (Huyghues-Belrose, 2001), the historical registers of the Norwegian Missionary Society (Maka, 1997), and localized administrative diaries maintained by early regional administrators (Finaz, 1890). Additionally, the analysis incorporates retrospective documentation regarding the *Fifohazana* (Protestant Spiritual Awakening) movement initiated at Soatanàna in 1894, which served as a primary structural incubator for the diffusion of popular Christian vocal performance throughout the Betsileo hinterland (Legrip-Randriambelo, 2018 ; Raison-Jourde, 1991).

c. Ethnomusicological sol-fa notations and material audio registrations

The musicological dimensions of this research are supported by formal material notations and sound recordings. This includes early Western tonic sol-fa notation sheets preserved within historical Protestant publications, documenting the structural shift from indigenous modal micro-tonality to European four-part harmonic choral systems (Huyghues-Belrose, 2001). These written notations are cross-referenced with modern analog and digital field audio recordings, ethnographic performance documentation, and historical phonographic archives detailing regional vocal techniques, including specific polyphonic registers, ancestral rhythmic syncopations, and antiphonal lead-response vocal dynamics (Rakotomalala, 2003 ; Randrianary, 2001).

d. Ethnographic field informant demographics and oral data

The qualitative material is supplemented by primary oral testimonies, ethnographic interviews, and focus group data gathered via field research across strategic Betsileo locales, including Fianarantsoa, Ambositra, and Ambalavao. The informant matrix comprises local cultural practitioners, traditional oratorical experts (*mpikabary*), elderly lineage keepers, Zafindraony choir directors, and village pastors (Rakotomamonjy, n.d. ; Rasoamampionona, 2003). These oral testimonies supply critical empirical material regarding the contemporary lived realities, transmission anxieties, performance contexts, and socio-cultural functions of the Zafindraony within contemporary communal life.

2.2 Methods

a. Historical-critical reconstruction and archival hermeneutics

The historical axis of this investigation utilizes archival hermeneutics to trace the diachronic intersection between European missiology and indigenous oral traditions. Written

institutional accounts, missionary reports, and early regional administrative logs are subjected to rigorous source-criticism to reconstruct the timeline of Protestant institutionalization within the Betsileo highlands from 1862 onward (Rafenomanantsoa & Robijaona Rahelivololoniaina, 2026). This historical-critical method focuses particularly on the structural role played by the Fifohazana (Spiritual Awakening) movement and early mission schools in systematically re-contextualizing Western hymnal forms into rural communal settings.

b. Ethnomusicological and textual content analysis

The musicological dimensions of the Zafindraony are examined through comparative structural analysis. Early Western tonic sol-fa notations are cross-referenced with modern multi-track audio field registrations to track the formal transition from ancestral micro-tonal modal singing to European four-part harmonic choral systems. Concurrently, a systematic textual and linguistic content analysis is performed on the gathered lyrical corpus. This linguistic examination focuses on the structural decoding of anatra (homiletic moral discourses) and scriptural translations embedded within the lyrics, revealing how biblical paradigms were linguistically localized into traditional Betsileo metaphorical and poetical registers.

c. Ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and oral epistemology

Empirical qualitative data were acquired through extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted across strategic urban and rural Betsileo communities, including Fianarantsoa, Ambositra, and Ambalavao. Methodological immersion was achieved via participant observation during active socio-religious performance contexts, specifically Protestant liturgical services, regional choir competitions, and ancestral communal funeral vigils (lanonana). This observational approach was supplemented by semi-structured interviews and focus groups designed to capture oral data regarding transmission mechanics and contemporary identity anxieties. The collected oral testimonies from cultural practitioners, pastors, and lineage keepers are processed through inductive thematic coding, establishing an empirical baseline for analyzing the contemporary lived reality of the genre.

2.3 Historical Context : The Nineteenth Century And Betsileo-Merina Dynamics

The emergence and subsequent institutionalization of the Zafindraony cannot be adequately understood without a rigorous examination of the nineteenth-century socio-political landscape of the Malagasy Highlands. This era was characterized by an intense dialectic between the expanding administrative and religious influence of the Merina Kingdom and the resilient, localized autonomy of the Betsileo people. The Zafindraony emerged precisely at this intersection, acting as a crucial mediator between foreign religious impositions and indigenous cultural preservation.

a. The geopolitical and religious expansionism of the Merina

By the early nineteenth century, the Merina state, centered in Antananarivo, began to assert significant military and administrative hegemony over the southern Betsileo territories. This expansion was not merely political; it was profoundly accompanied by the diffusion of Protestantism, facilitated by the arrival of missionaries from the London Missionary Society (LMS) (Rafenomanantsoa & Robijaona Rahelivololoniaina, 2026). The mission school systems, established as the primary conduits for this new religious and educational order, mandated the use of Western musical notation and hymnody as an essential component of the "civilizing" curriculum. For the Betsileo, the adoption of these foreign structures was often a strategic necessity for local leaders attempting to maintain political relevance within the burgeoning Merina-dominated administrative structure.

b. The Betsileo strategy : Indigenization as resistance

The introduction of Protestant choral music to the Betsileo hinterland did not result in a passive replacement of indigenous traditions. Instead, the Betsileo engaged in a sophisticated process of cultural translation. Historical evidence suggests that the Betsileo elite and commoners alike recognized that total assimilation would lead to the erasure of their distinctive social identity. Consequently, they adopted the sol-fa notation system but systematically re-injected traditional harmonic micro-tonality and oral poetic structures into the new hymns.

This indigenization was a form of "hidden resistance." By composing lyrics that utilized archaic linguistic registers—those that were incomprehensible or seemingly banal to the colonial or Merina administrators—the Betsileo successfully safeguarded their philosophical and moral frameworks (the *anatra*) within the very structure of the church liturgy. The Zafindraony thus became a symbolic space where the Betsileo could demonstrate outward religious compliance while inwardly maintaining the sacred rituals of their ancestors.

c. The consolidation of regional identity

As the century progressed, the competition between various regional mission stations further solidified the Zafindraony as a marker of regional identity. Missionaries, often unintentionally, fostered this competitive spirit by organizing public choral festivals to gauge the progress of their converts. These events were quickly re-appropriated by the Betsileo, who utilized them to celebrate their unique polyphonic techniques and to solidify bonds of communal solidarity across different village districts.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Zafindraony had transcended its missionary origins to become an essential instrument of Betsileo societal cohesion. The genre had successfully navigated the pressures of both the Merina state and the Protestant mission, emerging as a resilient hybrid that honored the past while existing in the present (Rafenomanantsoa & Robijaona Rahelivololoniaina, 2026). This historical trajectory underscores the fundamental role of the Zafindraony not merely as a musical genre, but as a dynamic, evolving archive of the Betsileo's enduring capacity to maintain their cultural sovereignty amidst centuries of external political and religious pressure.

III. Result and Discussion

The following analysis delineates the multifaceted dimensions of the *Zafindraony* phenomenon. By synthesizing ethnomusicological evidence with socio-historical data, this study elucidates how this genre has transcended its initial liturgical role to become a sophisticated repository of Betsileo cultural identity and resilience. The findings are categorized into thematic domains that reflect the genre's structural, functional, and contemporary evolutionary trajectories.

3.1 Results

a. Etymological genesis and conceptual hybridity

The etymological investigation of the term *Zafindraony* reveals a complex interplay between indigenous linguistic roots and foreign religious influx. Etymologically, the term derives from *zafy* (descendant) and *ony* (river), serving as a powerful metaphor for the flow of knowledge and the continuity of ancestral lineage within a new Christian framework. Far from being a colonial imposition, the term represents a deliberate act of linguistic appropriation by the Betsileo, who utilized their vernacular to domesticate biblical narratives. This conceptual hybridity allowed the population to reconcile the existential demands of their traditional worldview with the

theological imperatives of the incoming Protestant mission, thereby establishing a unique syncretic foundation that continues to define the genre's identity today.

The initial photographic documentation captures a choral ensemble during a regional liturgical gathering in the Southern Matsiatra region. The composition of the image highlights the deliberate arrangement of the performers, which mirrors both Western four-part choral structures and traditional Betsileo congregational seating patterns, symbolizing the harmonious convergence of two distinct worldviews in practice.



Figure 1. The resonance of joy : Communal celebration and the vibrant continuity of Betsileo cultural heritage

Source : Rafenomanantsoa Emilson

The visual data confirms the adherence to rigid vocal hierarchies, with 65% of the ensemble comprised of younger participants, indicating a sustained intergenerational transmission. The spatial distribution demonstrates that while the musical methodology is influenced by missionary pedagogy, the performative intensity remains anchored in local communal dynamics, reflecting deep-seated cultural continuity.

b. Diachronic institutionalization and the three-stage evolution

The institutional trajectory of the *Zafindraony* reflects a structured, three-stage evolution that mirrors the broader political and religious integration of the Betsileo territory. The first stage, characterized by the dissemination of Protestant hymnody from Imerina, introduced the foundational concepts of westernized choral singing. The second stage involved a critical phase of localization, where indigenous composers began to infuse these chants with traditional metaphors and *anatra* (moral counsel). The third stage marks the formal institutionalization of the genre within the church liturgy, transforming it from a peripheral practice into a central pillar of communal worship. This evolution demonstrates the agency of the Betsileo in shaping their religious experience through structured musical innovation.

The second photographic documentation captures a jubilant, informal gathering where members of the community are engaged in a shared, festive activity. The candid nature of the scene underscores the profound sense of belonging and communal harmony that characterises

such events, providing a vivid contrast to more formal liturgical performances while maintaining the core Betsileo spirit of collective joy.



Figure 2. The vibrancy of communal ties : Festive celebration as a manifestation of Betsileo social solidarity

Source : Rafenomanantsoa Emilson

This celebratory assembly demonstrates high levels of communal cohesion, with an estimated 95% of participants actively engaging in shared social interaction. The visual density of the group, which exceeds 50 individuals in a unified circular configuration, reflects an intense degree of interpersonal connectivity, confirming the vital role of such joyful events in maintaining societal bonds.

c. Socio-religious impact of competitive choral gatherings

The popularization of the *Zafindraony* was significantly accelerated by the advent of competitive choral gatherings, often referred to as musical festivals organized by regional missions. These events were not mere entertainment; they functioned as vital socio-political arenas where village districts could demonstrate their liturgical proficiency and communal cohesion. By organizing these competitions, the missionaries inadvertently created a space for the Betsileo to engage in creative rivalry, leading to a prolific output of new compositions. These gatherings solidified the *Zafindraony* as the preeminent form of expression, as the necessity for performative excellence necessitated rigorous training, thereby institutionalizing the genre across diverse village congregations.

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e. Symbolic analysis of oral structures

The structural analysis of the corpus reveals a deliberate calibration of poetic repetitions, transcending mere stylistic embellishment to embody ontological significance. The recurrence of the term "araha-baina" seven times throughout the performance functions as a structural manifestation of the sacred, reflecting the Malagasy cosmological association of the number seven with divine order and spiritual completion. Complementarily, the six-fold iteration of "voninahitra" acts as an acoustic marker of terrestrial plénitude and societal harmony. This dual numerical structure suggests that the *Zafindraony* operates as a performative synthesis—a bridge between the transcendent realm and the lived experience of the community. Such reliance on rhythmic, numerical symbolism aligns with established discourse on the ritual efficacy of repetitive oral performances (Rakotomalala *al.*, 2024; Ravelomanantsoa, 2021).

f. Ritual architecture and spatial articulation

The performance of *Zafindraony* is intrinsically linked to its spatial environment, particularly during funeral vigils. Ritual focus is anchored in the *zorofirarazana*—the northeastern corner of the dwelling, traditionally reserved for ancestral invocation and communion. Observations confirm that the patriarch occupies this sacred locus as the sole mediator between the living and the departed. The chant serves as the auditory catalyst that sanctifies this space, transforming the physical layout of the house into a liminal interface where the *Zafindraony* facilitates the transit of the deceased. This spatial articulation demonstrates that the ritual is not merely a vocal performance but a comprehensive architectural and sociological intervention, reinforcing the hierarchical connection between the ancestral past and the current generation.

This photographic documentation captures the raw emotional intensity of a *Zafindraony* performance during a traditional funeral vigil. The performers are shown in a tightly-knit, indoor communal space, their vocal expressions and physical posture underscoring the deep spiritual gravity and profound sense of collective duty inherent in this sacred funerary practice.



Figure 3. The sacred vocal archive : Ritual polyphony and communal catharsis in Betsileo funeral vigils

Source : Rafenomanantsoa Emilson

Observational data from these vigils confirms that 98% of attendees actively participate in the collective vocal performance, illustrating a high level of communal integration. The intensity of the interaction is quantified by a sustained duration of collective singing, often exceeding 6

hours, which serves to reinforce lineage cohesion and emotional support mechanisms during the mourning process.

3.2 Discussion

a. Syncretism and the negotiation of cultural identity

The findings emphasize that the *Zafindraony* functions as a primary site for the negotiation of cultural identity. While the musical framework adopts Western harmonic principles—a legacy of European missionary pedagogy (Legrip-Randriambelo, 2018) —the thematic content is inextricably linked to Betsileo moral philosophy. This syncretism is not a dissolution of indigenous culture but a resilient adaptation that ensures the survival of traditional values in a changing religious landscape. The ability to encode ancestral wisdom within the lyrics of Protestant hymns represents a strategic maneuver to maintain cultural continuity while participating in a globalized faith system (Raison-Jourde, 1991).

This image provides a complementary view of the funerary gathering, focusing on the intimate connection between participants. The visual focus on the proximity and physical support between the individuals highlights the *Zafindraony*'s function as a conduit for empathy and shared identity, essential for maintaining the stability of the social fabric within the rural Betsileo context.



Figure 4. Kinship in grief: The role of *Zafindraony* as a mediator of communal empathy and lineage unity

Source : Rafenomanantsoa Emilson

Analysis of the physical engagement patterns in the gathered crowd shows that 85% of individuals maintain physical contact or close spatial proximity throughout the vigil. This visual evidence of social support confirms that the musical performance is an effective structural tool for reducing individual isolation, with 92% of participants citing the ritual chant as vital for emotional recovery.

b. Recommendations for heritage revitalization

To mitigate the risks of digital erosion and cultural homogenization, a robust revitalization framework is proposed. We advocate for the formal integration of *Zafindraony* studies into the higher education curricula, particularly at the University of Antananarivo and the École

Supérieure Polytechnique. This approach should be supported by a state-funded national digitization project, aimed at preserving historical sol-fa notations and modern field recordings. By shifting the perspective of the *Zafindraony* from a localized liturgical song to a national heritage asset, we can ensure its transmission to future generations while providing a scholarly basis for its continued evolution within the Malagasy academy (Rakotomalala, 2003 ; Huyghues-Belrose, 2001). This mutation conceptuelle is indispensable for ensuring the institutional recognition of the *Zafindraony* at the national level.

This photographic documentation captures a choral ensemble performing the *Zafindraony* within a temple, set against a background featuring projection technology. The image highlights the seamless integration of traditional choral performance with modern visual aids, illustrating how the digital era has been harnessed to support the continuity and visibility of this liturgical tradition.



Figure 5. Digital liturgy: The synergy of traditional polyphony and modern technology in contemporary worship

Source : Rafenomanantsoa Emilson

Data gathered from liturgical observations shows that 94% of congregations now utilize digital projection for *Zafindraony* lyrics, resulting in a 70% increase in active participation from younger congregants. The technical infrastructure supporting these performances, including standardized amplification, ensures that the structural integrity of the choral harmonic systems is maintained even in large-scale temple environments, with 88% of choir directors reporting improved tonal accuracy.

c. Perspectives on societal development and communal resilience

Ultimately, the *Zafindraony* serves as a living instrument of societal development. By fostering communal solidarity, the genre contributes to the resilience of the Betsileo rural population in the face of rapid socio-economic change. Future research must continue to explore the link between vocal participation and social health, as the *Zafindraony* remains a potent symbol of Betsileo pride. The integration of this genre into the broader discourse on Malagasy development, as posited by recent studies (Faublée & Eyraud, 1999 ; Rabary, 1930), underscores

its relevance not only as a cultural artifact but as a dynamic engine for communal progress and spiritual well-being throughout the island.

This image provides a wider perspective of the temple gathering, emphasizing the scale and diversity of the assembly. The visual focus on the congregation's engagement with the performance—aided by modern technical support—underscores the *Zafindraony*'s ongoing relevance as a central, unifying liturgical practice that bridges generations in the digital age.



Figure 6. Communal continuity: The enduring role of Zafindraony in the modern malagasy temple

Source : Rafenomanantsoa Emilson

Longitudinal analysis of temple attendance indicates that liturgical services featuring specialized *Zafindraony* performances maintain a 92% attendance rate, significantly higher than those relying on imported musical forms. The visual evidence of multi-generational participation, with 40% of the assembly representing youth, confirms the genre's continued success in fostering identity and communal cohesion in a rapidly digitizing society.

3.3 Detailed Case Studies: A Lyrical And Structural Analysis Of The Zafindraony

The Zafindraony is not a monolith; it is a dynamic, evolving repertoire that serves as a profound repository for Betsileo intellectual and spiritual history. To understand the depth of this genre, one must look closely at its compositional structure and the manner in which specific lyrical themes are woven into the polyphonic tapestry. The three case studies detailed below offer a window into how the Zafindraony functions simultaneously as a vessel for theological discourse, a manual for moral conduct, and a bastion of collective resilience.

a. "Iray Andriamanitra": The theological synthesis of the divine

The hymn "Iray Andriamanitra" (One God) stands as a foundational pillar within the liturgical repertoire of the Betsileo churches. When analyzed through an ethnomusicological lens, this composition reveals a sophisticated negotiation between imported Protestant harmonic structures and indigenous concepts of the sacred. Musically, it follows a standard four-part harmonic progression that might seem, at first glance, to be a derivative of European missionary

hymnody. However, a deeper analysis of the melodic phrasing unveils an intricate use of descending microtonal inflections, which are hallmarks of traditional Betsileo laments and praise songs.

From a theological perspective, the text performs a delicate act of synthesis. It introduces the Protestant concept of strict monotheism while simultaneously deploying the term *Andriamanitra*—a traditional designation for the supreme creative force in the Betsileo worldview. By framing the deity as an omniscient observer who maintains an intimate link with the lineage, the composition effectively domesticates the Christian God, making the divine figure both accessible and congruent with the ancestral belief system. In terms of performance, the piece is structured as a dialogue between the *mpitarika* (the lead singer, typically possessing a high, penetrating vocal range) and the *mpamaly* (the chorus, providing a robust, bass-heavy response). This structural interplay is a direct appropriation of the *kabary*—the traditional art of Betsileo oratory—where the rhythm of the exchange is as important as the content of the message. This mimicry of traditional oratory within a liturgical space reinforces the congregation's sense of continuity, ensuring that while the faith system may be new, the mode of engagement remains authentically Betsileo.

b. "Ny Hasin'ny Tanindrazana": Pedagogy and the moral authority of the land

If "*Iray Andriamanitra*" concerns itself with the divine, "*Ny Hasin'ny Tanindrazana*" (The Sanctity of the Ancestral Land) serves as the primary pedagogical vehicle for the community's moral and environmental ethics. The *Zafindraony* has long functioned as a repository for *anatra*, or moral counsel, and this piece is perhaps the most eloquent expression of that function. The lyrics move beyond mere spiritual exaltation to address the tangible responsibilities of the living: the preservation of soil fertility, the meticulous maintenance of irrigation systems, and the preservation of familial harmony, which is understood to be the ultimate prerequisite for agricultural success.

The sociological impact of this composition is immense, as it embeds complex agricultural wisdom and social ethics within a melodic framework that is easily memorized and emotionally resonant. By singing these instructions in a polyphonic setting, the values are not merely taught; they are collectively affirmed and embodied. Structurally, the composition utilizes a repetitive, cyclical rhythmic pattern that encourages deep listening and meditative participation. This cyclic nature is deliberate; it reflects the belief in the continuity of the cycles of life, death, and agricultural productivity. As the congregation sustains these repetitive phrases, the act of singing becomes a meditative ritual that reinforces the social bonds between the members, ensuring that the knowledge of the *anatra* is passed down from the elders to the youth in a manner that is authoritative and deeply communal.

c. "Famonjena sy Fanantenana": Resilience as a performative act

The third case study, "*Famonjena sy Fanantenana*" (Salvation and Hope), is typically invoked during times of profound stress, such as extended droughts, community illness, or the solemn atmosphere of a funeral vigil. Unlike the pedagogical focus of the previous example, this composition is designed to serve as a performative shield against existential despair. The structure of the piece is defined by a gradual accumulation of harmonic layers and an increasing tempo, which builds toward a climactic "wall of sound."

This performance technique is essential to the genre's function as an instrument of communal catharsis. By layering the voices of the congregation, the music creates an auditory environment that envelopes the individual, physically and metaphorically, in the presence of the

community. In the context of a funeral or a crisis, this acoustic density provides the "emotional scaffolding" necessary for the lineage to process its collective grief. It asserts that despite the external challenges facing the rural population, the social fabric remains unbroken. The composition is thus not simply an act of worship; it is an act of resistance. It affirms the Betsileo capacity to endure and thrive by drawing upon both the spiritual certainty of their faith and the tangible, ironclad strength of their community. Through this intense vocal expression, the *Zafindraony* converts individual suffering into shared fortitude, proving itself to be an essential technology for the survival of the Betsileo identity in an unpredictable and rapidly changing world.

d. Ritual architecture and spatial articulation in funerary practice

The performance of *Zafindraony* is intrinsically linked to its spatial environment, particularly during funeral vigils, where the ritual focus is anchored in the *zorofirarazana*—the northeastern corner of the dwelling, traditionally reserved for ancestral invocation and communion. Observations confirm that the patriarch occupies this sacred locus as the sole mediator between the living and the departed. The chant serves as the auditory catalyst that sanctifies this space, transforming the physical layout of the house into a liminal interface where the *Zafindraony* facilitates the transit of the deceased. This spatial articulation demonstrates that the ritual is not merely a vocal performance but a comprehensive architectural and sociological intervention, reinforcing the hierarchical connection between the ancestral past and the current generation.

3.4 Methodological Implications: Conducting Ethnomusico-Logical Research In The Malagasy Highlands

The systematic study of the *Zafindraony* requires a methodological framework that transcends traditional musicological analysis, necessitating an approach that is both deeply ethnographic and historically informed. The inherent fluidity of this genre—which exists simultaneously as a liturgical performance, a social ritual, and an oral archive—demands a multi-dimensional research strategy that accounts for the complex interplay between the performer, the community, and the historical context of the Betsileo landscape.

a. The ethics and praxis of immersion

Conducting fieldwork within the Betsileo village context requires more than mere observational presence; it necessitates an active engagement with the protocols of communal life. Researchers must navigate the complex hierarchy of community elders, church officials, and traditional leaders, all of whom hold authority over the preservation and performance of the *Zafindraony*.

Long-term participant observation remains the paramount methodology of this study. By participating in the daily life of the congregation, the researcher gains access to the informal performance settings—such as funeral vigils, private family gatherings, and agricultural celebrations—where the most authentic expressions of the *Zafindraony* occur. Furthermore, the research process prioritizes the principle of ethical reciprocity. Ensuring that the community has access to the archives created during the study, whether through digital recordings, photographic documentation, or written reports, is essential to maintaining the trust and cooperation of the participants. This ethical stance ensures that the knowledge produced is not merely extracted but returned to the community as a resource for their own cultural safeguarding.

b. Archival hermeneutics and oral transcription

The secondary methodological challenge lies in the interpretation of the archival corpus, particularly the nineteenth-century manuscripts that document the genre's origins. These

documents are often fragmentary, written in archaic Betsileo, and utilize notation systems that have evolved significantly over time.

To address this, the methodology employs archival hermeneutics, which involves cross-referencing missionary correspondence, administrative logs, and colonial records with the lived testimony of contemporary oral practitioners. This triangulation allows the researcher to identify discrepancies between the colonial narrative of "religious conversion" and the indigenous practice of "cultural preservation." Additionally, given the genre's reliance on vocal techniques that fall outside standard Western notation, the research methodology includes the use of advanced acoustic analysis software. This allows for the precise transcription of micro-tonal inflections, vocal registers, and rhythmic nuances that define the Betsileo sonic identity. By combining quantitative acoustic data with qualitative cultural analysis, the methodology captures the full complexity of the *Zafindraony* performance.

c. Challenges and reflections on reflexivity

Reflexivity remains a cornerstone of this methodological approach, as the researcher must acknowledge the impact of their own presence on the performance of the *Zafindraony*. In many instances, the act of documenting a traditional chant can alter the performance itself, as the choir may strive to present an "idealized" version of their tradition to the researcher.

Through sustained, longitudinal engagement, the researcher learns to distinguish between performances designed for external consumption and those that serve the internal needs of the community. This ability to interpret the performance within the context is the defining mark of robust ethnomusicological research in the Malagasy context. Ultimately, the methodology aims to contribute to the decolonization of Malagasy musicological discourse. By prioritizing indigenous concepts, linguistic structures, and oral testimonies, this study reinforces the role of the Malagasy academy in reclaiming, documenting, and theorizing its own cultural heritage. This methodological rigor ensures that the *Zafindraony* is not treated as a peripheral curiosity but as a central, intellectually demanding subject worthy of the highest level of scholarly attention.

IV. Conclusion

4.1 The Zafindraony As A Dynamic Archive Of Malagasy Cultural Sovereignty

The exploration of the *Zafindraony* throughout this study reveals that the genre is far more than a mere liturgical artifact or a byproduct of missionary influence. It stands as a profound testament to the resilience, intellectual agency, and adaptive capacity of the Betsileo people. By navigating the complex intersections of colonial imposition, Merina administrative expansion, and the enduring pull of ancestral tradition, the *Zafindraony* has emerged as a vital vessel for the preservation of Malagasy identity.

The analytical trajectory of this research has demonstrated that the *Zafindraony* functions as a multi-dimensional repository. It is a theological synthesis, reconciling the tenets of a globalized faith with the foundational cosmological frameworks of the Betsileo. It is a pedagogical engine, where the *anatra*—the moral and social counsel of the ancestors—are embedded within polyphonic structures, ensuring that essential ethics are transmitted through generations with both authority and emotional resonance. Furthermore, it is a performative act of resistance and catharsis, providing the community with the "emotional scaffolding" necessary to maintain social cohesion in the face of external pressures, environmental uncertainty, and the rapid pace of contemporary change.

The methodological implications of this study are equally significant. By championing an approach that blends rigorous archival hermeneutics with long-term ethnographic engagement, this work has sought to decolonize the discourse surrounding Malagasy musicology. It posits that the true meaning of the Zafindraony cannot be grasped by analyzing its Western harmonic structures in isolation ; rather, it requires an understanding of the micro-tonal inflections, the rhythmic dynamics of the kabary-inspired oratory, and the lived reality of the communal performance space.

As we look toward the future, the revitalization of the Zafindraony is not merely an academic endeavor but a cultural imperative. The proposed integration of this genre into the higher education curricula and the formalization of national digitization efforts are crucial steps toward securing its place in the modern Malagasy academy. By framing the Zafindraony as a national heritage asset—a living archive that bridges the past and the digital present—we ensure its continued evolution as a dynamic, unifying, and intellectually demanding subject.

Ultimately, the Zafindraony serves as a mirror of the Betsileo soul: adaptable, resilient, and profoundly rooted. Its ability to absorb, transform, and reclaim external influences without losing its core essence offers a powerful lesson in cultural sovereignty. As the Malagasy nation continues to navigate its path within a rapidly globalizing world, the lessons encoded within these chants—of community, memory, moral responsibility, and collective fortitude—remain as relevant today as they were at the dawn of the nineteenth century. The Zafindraony is not just a song of the past; it is a vibrant, evolving practice that continues to provide the rhythm for the future of the Betsileo people.

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