CHAPTER THREE

NINETEENTH-CENTURY MADAGASCAR
AND THE NORWEGIAN MISSION

Introduction

This chapter describes major features of Malagasy society, culture, and history, with particular attention to nineteenth-century highland Madagascar and the Kingdom of Madagascar’s politico-religious history. Focus is also on Christianity’s history in highland Madagascar. What society did the Norwegian missionaries encounter? What characterised the social structures and religion of highland society? Towards the end of the chapter, I give an overview of the Norwegian mission in Madagascar, of the Norwegian missionary personnel, and the size of the Norwegian mission in Madagascar in the nineteenth century.

Language

The Malagasy language, spoken with dialectal variation all over the island, belongs to the Austronesian language group, and is more specifically related to the languages spoken in western Indonesia.1 Malagasy culture is generally described as a mixture of Indonesian and African elements, often with one element dominating the other in different regional contexts. Most accounts state that Madagascar is inhabited by eighteen peoples, albeit the number varies.2 The Merina and Betsileo, who live in the highland area, are the main focus of this study.

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The Kingdom of Madagascar

The kingdom, internationally known in the nineteenth century as the Kingdom of Madagascar (1817–1895), is among the largest indigenous states to have developed in pre-colonial sub-Saharan Africa. Some scholars refer to it as the Merina Kingdom or the Merina Empire, among other things, to underline that other major kingdoms existed elsewhere in Madagascar before and simultaneously with the Kingdom of Madagascar. I will use the term the Kingdom of Madagascar.

Based in the central highland district of Imerina, the Kingdom of Madagascar was first reigned by King Andrianampaninimerina (c. 1783–1810), who unified and expanded the kingdoms around the capital, Antananarivo. His son, Radama I (1810–1828) and Radama I’s wife, Queen Ranavalona I (1828–1861), continued the kingdom’s territorial expansion. When the French colonised Madagascar in 1895, the Kingdom of Madagascar broadly included two-thirds of the entire island; however merely one-third of the island was effectively under Merina control.

Nominally, the queen was sovereign, but in Merina politics she was a sign of commoners ruling in the name of the royal queen. In the nineteenth century, there were three different kings: Andrianampoinimerina c. 1783–1810, Radama I 1810–1828 and Radama II 1861–1863. After a military coup in 1864 and until the coming of the French in 1895, the real power was in the hands of leading military officers and traders, represented in the government by Prime Minister Rainilaiarivony (1828–1896), who was also head of the army. Raililaiarivony of the Andafy-Avaratra, son of one of Queen Ranavalona’s leading ministers and grandson of one of King Andrianampaninimerina’s commoner warlords, ruled by marrying women of royal descent. First he successively married Radama II’s two wives, Queen

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6 Most notably, the Sakalava kingdoms from the sixteenth century onwards, on most of the west coast and Betsimisaraka around 1720 (Solofo Randrianja and Stephen Ellis, Madagascar: A Short History (Hurst & Company, London 2009), p. 100ff.
7 Stephen Ellis, Red Shawls, p. 167.
9 Raison-Jourde, Bible.