The Shādhiliyya in Northern Madagascar
c. 1890–1940

The Planting of a Garden and the Growing of Malagasy Roots

I have planted a small garden in the Antankarana mountains.
If it is not tended, it will wither away.¹

The diffusion of the ṭarīqa Shādhiliyya in northern Madagascar is closely connected to the general Islamization of the Antankarana people (“the people of the [coral] stones”, meaning the Ankaran mountains with its remarkable tsingy rock formations)² and with Comorian migration to the region. The spread of the Shādhiliyya to Madagascar is also closely connected to religious change taking place in Zanzibar and the Comoros, propagated by existing and long-standing networks of scholars.

Previous research by M. Lambek and A. Walsh has addressed the Islamization of the Antankarana and this process will not be reiterated in detail here.³ Rather, this chapter shows how the spread of the Shādhiliyya ties in with the emerging daʿwa orientation of the Sufi orders, whose activities in northern Mozambique was outlined in the previous chapter. Members of the same network also figure largely in the history of the Shādhiliyya in northern Madagascar.

¹ Quote: ʿUthmān b. ʿAbd al-Laṭīf (see below).
² For an early ethnography of the Antankarana, see G. Ferrand, Les Musulmans a Madagascar. In line with colonial notions of Islam, Ferrand saw neither the Antankarana nor their Sakalva neighbours as “real Muslims”. In his view, they were “unconvertible” to any of the world religions. The only “real” Muslims in north/west Madagascar, according to Ferrand, were the resident Arabs, Swahilis and Indians.
Islam in Northern Madagascar

The Islamization of northern Madagascar has been described in earlier research as a result of consecutive “waves” of immigrants, including Arab immigration that led to the development of the sorabe (“big writing”) script. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the kings of the Antankarana were in constant conflict with the Merina of the plateau. By this time, the Antankarana, through contact with trading Arabs, Comorians and Zanzibaris, were well aware of Islam, and in some cases also converted. The majority of the population, however, remained with their native Malagasy customs and traditions, including the practice of reburial. The Antankarana king Tsialana I accepted Merina overlordship, but his son and successor Tsimiaro revolted against Merina rule. In the ensuing conflict, Tsimiaro and his people took refuge in one of the many caves in the Ankarana mountain range. According to popular tradition, the cave was beleaguered by the Merina, and at this point the king made a promise that if they made it out of there, he would embrace Islam and make his people Muslim too.

This pledge, according to tradition, was made on the 27 August 1840, when a complete solar eclipse passed over Madagascar. As the king and his family looked out from the cave, the Merina soldiers, believing that it was night, were asleep, and the king and his retinue escaped unharmed. After their miraculous escape, the royal family retreated to Nosy Mtsio (an island south-west of Diego Suarez, north-east of Nosy Be), where the king remained until his death in 1882.

Prior to these events, the Sakalava had appealed to Sayyid Sa‘īd b. Sulṭān in Zanzibar for assistance against the Merina. In 1838, Sayyid Sa‘īd sent a small