This book contains a historical study of the Norwegian Lutheran Mission in the Highlands of Vakinankarata and Betsileo in Madagascar in 1866-1903. The author focussed on this region and period to sketch the motivation and start of what developed into the flourishing of the Norwegian Lutheran mission. Simultaneously she wished to point out how these 37 years resulted in the emergence of an independent church tending towards self-governance and financial independence.

In the first part of her study Skeie informs the reader about the rapid developments that took place in Norway since the beginning of the 19th century. In 1801 85% of a population of 885,000 persons were working in agriculture, fishery and forestry. In the following years a process of marketing, industrialisation, road construction and shipping was initiated so that in 1878 Norway had the largest trading fleet of the world. These social and economic developments went hand in hand with renewing spiritual movements, mostly taking place outside the area of the church. Nonetheless the Norwegian Lutheran church accepted these extra-ecclesial movements and consequently it was filled with a new enthusiasm for mission, which made the church aware of her mission to evangelise. Thus the Norwegian mission was integrated in the Norwegian Lutheran church and it was this mission that resulted in the establishment of Lutheran churches in Madagascar.

The principal reason for opting for Madagascar was an offer made by the London Missionary Society (LMS), which had been working on this island since 1818. Some impressive developments had occurred since the start of the mission there, such as the rise of an enthusiastic Christian people’s movement followed by heavy persecutions, but subsequently followed by the emergence of a second Christian movement which was recognised and supported by Queen Ranavalona ii. She transformed Christianity to a state religion which also gave space to all sorts of popular rites and ancestor worship. The Norwegian missionaries started their work on the island and received much space for implementing their mission ideals and creating a separate form of indigenous Lutheran Christianity.

Above it was noted that the nature of the Norwegian mission was ecclesial. Consequently the missionaries received a training equivalent to the trainings for ministers. Before they were sent abroad they were ordained as Lutheran
ministers. Later the missionaries gave their theological students in Madagascar a training equivalent to those they had received in Norway. Therefore the indigenous graduates were also ordained and became Lutheran ministers. As the majority of the Norwegian missionaries come from peasant families, they probably had no difficulties in teaching their students in a concrete and simple way.

While the male missionaries had humble backgrounds, their female partners and the women working in the schools and in medical care were originating from higher social classes and were mostly well-educated. Nonetheless the quality of their missionary work was not expressed in a better income so that their families in their mother country had to give them material and financial support. Consequently the interiors of the mission stations and the private houses of the missionaries had much Norwegian furniture and a Norwegian atmosphere, which the missionaries preferred to keep for themselves. Out of fear for venereal diseases they moreover barred the local people, indigenous ecclesial workers and their servants from their private houses. Before their appointment their servants were tested on physical defects. Nonetheless malaria infected the Norwegian mission workers. The infant mortality was high and many missionaries suffered from fragile health, probably because they seldom took leaves and continued to stay until a sometimes very advanced age.

The missionaries in the remote areas did their work in contact with the mission stations located in more central regions. Because of the education and medical care in these more central stations they developed into rapidly growing ecclesial congregations. The training programmes gave many indigenous workers the proper qualifications for initiating and supporting all sorts of work within these congregations. Moreover the fragile health of the missionaries urged them to transfer their competencies in administration and theology to their indigenous assistants. This transfer made the growing indigenous community increasingly aware of their own identity and skills to work independently. Assisted by the Norwegian missionaries they developed a ‘self-sufficient, self-governing and self-propagating church’, which also paid attention to the financial aspect of the independency of the congregational activities.

However, the visit of the secretary of the Norwegian mission organization, Lars Dahle, to Madagascar led to great disenchantment. Beforehand Dahle had worked as a missionary on the island for many years. He knew the situation from his own experience. Yet, he delivered a message from the board of the Norwegian mission organization that the Lutheran church of Madagascar was not yet qualified to function independently from the Norwegian mission. Their financial resources were insufficient to meet the financial needs of the