

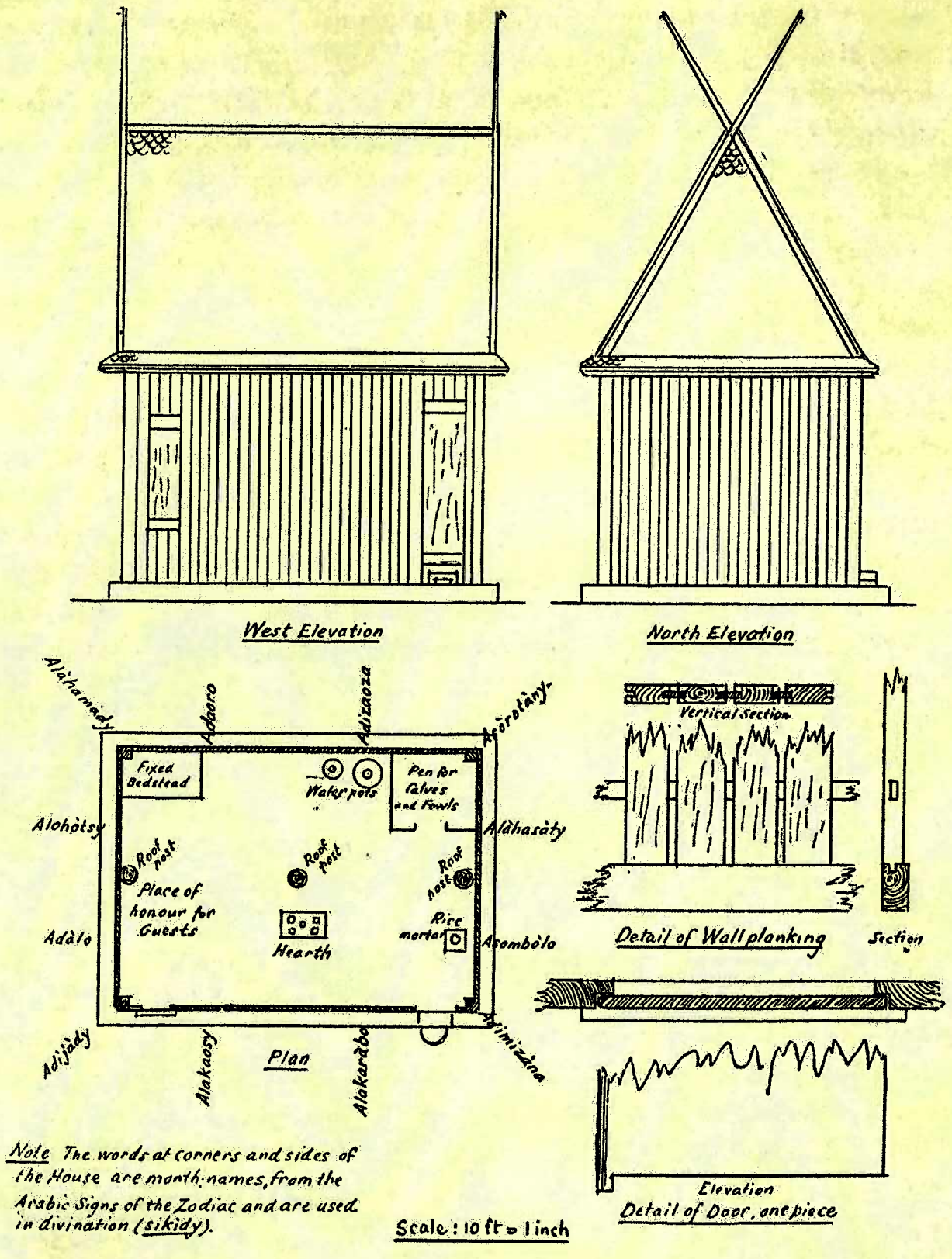
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Earth, sky. ancestors

Bird, Randall

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A MALAGASY HOUSE.
Showing elevation, plan, internal arrangement, and month names.

EARTH, SKY, ANCESTORS

BUILDING THE MERINA WORLD IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY MADAGASCAR

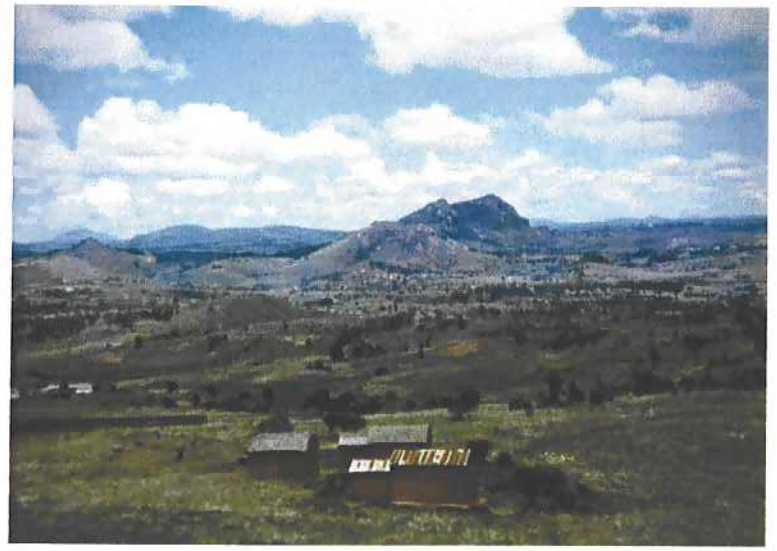
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Randall Bird

THE MERINA PEOPLE who inhabit the central highlands of Madagascar make up the island's largest ethnic group, constituting 25 percent of the island's population. In the nineteenth century, until 1897 when France annexed it as a colony, most of Madagascar was ruled by the Merina kingdom. The siting, orientation, and design of the architecture constructed by the Merina during that century can be more fully understood by studying how architecture, landscape, and the sky were seen in relation to one another (FIG. 9.2).

Physical features of the terrain and the orientation of the land in accordance with a local astrological system, known as *vintana* (commonly translated as "destiny") influenced planning across architectural scales, from the layout and construction of impressive Merina royal palaces to the placement of openings in their houses. Important features of Merina cosmology are made concrete by a series of visual

9.1 (OPPOSITE)
Plan/elevation by James Sibree of a *tronokotona* house type. Sibree's plan is labeled according to the twelve major periods of *vintana*.
From James Sibree, *A Naturalist in Madagascar*, 1915



9.2
Central-highlands village. Note the lack of fenestration on the east façades, which is in keeping with a Malagasy building tradition of only having openings on the west façade.

metaphors mapped out on the surfaces of residences and organized into carefully delineated parts. The twenty-eight-day lunar cycle is referenced in a sequential form at specific points along the sides of the rectangular floor plan of houses and tombs. As in the past, these traditional practices are incorporated during the construction of many contemporary Malagasy houses and are central to tomb construction throughout the island.

Before looking more closely at *vintana* and its relation to architecture, some explanation of spatial and cultural aspects of the Malagasy landscape is in order. The landscape of the central highlands is at the very heart of Merina identity and history. The attachment to "place" and the history associated with that place is central to the construction and maintenance of individual and group identity. Through his brilliant orations, King Andrianampoinimerina (r. ca. 1785–1809), who unified the Merina kingdom in the late eighteenth century, created a sense of belonging among the Merina to the home of their ancestors—the central highlands. In short, the king bestowed the dimension of history on the area constituting his kingdom. These deep historical ties to the land have been passed down by generations of Merina, who continue to draw on the landscape as their main source of memory and connection to their ancestors. The anthropologist David Graeber succinctly summarizes this complex point: "History, in Imerina, is largely a matter of placing the living in an historical landscape created by the dead."[1]

Seen from the vantage point of the living, landscape is the ultimate source of belonging because people connect to one another by engaging with their ancestors. Anyone who has traveled to the central highlands is aware of the attention paid by the Merina to their ancestors (*razana*), family tombs (*fasana*), and the land (*tany*) on which their tombs are built (FIG. 9.3). The Merina and many other Malagasy use the term *tanindrazana* (ancestral land; land of the ancestors), which is a distillation and summation of the extreme importance of the relationship among ancestors, tombs, and land. Ancestral land is tantamount to one's own status in society and by definition one's historical and current affiliation to other Merina. Despite the length of time spent away from one's ancestral land—and today the majority of Merina live in places other than their ancestral land—*tanindrazana* determines a sense among individuals of

where they "belong," and their social status, which derives from ancestral ties to one's social rank.[2] For the Merina, the past is linked to the present because an individual's current position in society is defined by the "home" of his or her ancestors.

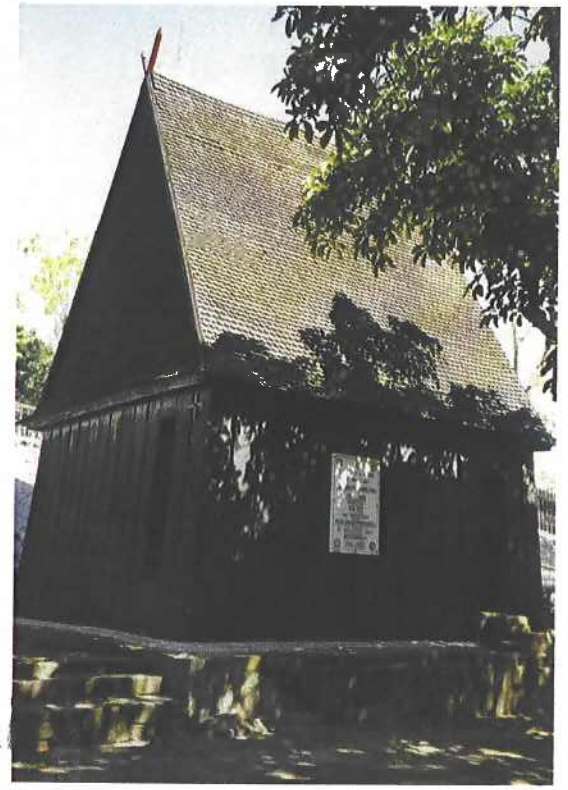
Architecture also played a key role in establishing a sense of identity among the Merina. Stemming from the military and political achievements of King Andrianampoinimerina, wooden architecture built by the royal and *andriana* (noble) Merina people came to incorporate ideas concerning tradition and the formation of a unified kingdom. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a type of Merina wooden house known as *tranokotona,* and wooden structures known as *trano manara* or *trano masina,* which are built on top of tombs, became powerful artifacts that were practically synonymous with royal Merina culture. In Malagasy, *trano* (house) signifies any house and the suffix *kotona* denotes a more specialized house, namely, a Merina house whose walls are constructed from vertical wooden planks.[3]

One of the most widely circulated drawings of a *tranokotona* was published in *A Naturalist in Madagascar* (1915) by James Sibree, a missionary-architect from the London Missionary Society.[4] Publishing the drawings was viewed as a way of "preserving" an almost extinct house type. At the outset, Sibree remarks that *tranokotona* were in the process of disappearing, since they were no longer built and very few remained. His drawings, including a plan, elevations, and sections of a traditional wooden house (SEE FIG. 9.1), provide a wealth of information about the materials, construction, and spatial aspects of *tranokotona.* The walls of the house rest on a short foundation constructed of packed mud lined with stone. This construction is similar to that used for tombs of the same period. The plan is rectangular (15 feet by 11 feet) and oriented along the north-south axis. There are openings only on the western façade of the house; the door is south of the window. To enter a traditional *tranokotona,* it is necessary to step up onto a round stone, step over a wooden threshold (approximately 2 feet high), and step down onto another round stone and then again onto the smooth earthen floor. Sibree's plan is labeled according to the twelve major periods of *vintana* (see explanation below).

An outstanding example of a *tranokotona* is the reconstruction of the king's palace at Ambohimanga, a short distance from the current capital Antananarivo (FIG. 9.4). It

9.3
The entrance (west elevation) of an 18th-century tomb at Arivonimamo, central-highlands Madagascar. This type of family tomb was designed for several corpses.





9.4
West façade with entry portal (right) of King Andrianampoinimerina's palace at Ambohimanga. Several of the exterior features result from the palace's many reconstructions during the 20th century.

survives today as one of the chief symbols for Merina kingship and the birthplace of the unified Merina kingdom. The aspects of the *tranokotona* found in Sibree's drawings are borne out in this palace. The sense of arrival is heightened by the verticality of the interior space, which is further enhanced by the tall pillars (*andry*). After one's eyes adjust to the darkness of the interior, there is an immediate awareness of the elegant arrangement of hundreds of pieces of wood into a complete form. The structural solutions—namely, the tall posts and mortise-and-tenon system destined to deal with the forces of the *tranokotona*—provide solidity to the mass of assembled wood (see detail of wall planking, FIG. 9.1).

The symbolic and material features of the traditional wooden house are featured prominently in the *Tantara ny Andriana eto Madagascar* (History of Kings; hereafter *Tantara*), a monumental collection of Merina oral traditions (mostly royal) recorded by the Jesuit missionary François Callet during the mid-nineteenth century.[5] The version of the *Tantara* edited by G. S. Chapus and E. Ratsimba (published from 1953 to 1978) contains architectural diagrams of the plan and elevation of the *tranokotona* that nicely summarize these features. The diagram is a rectangular plan that is open to above and shows openings only on the west façade and three posts supporting the roof (SEE FIG. 9.1). The central pillar (*andry*) is the most prominent of the three posts, and the hearth is off-center toward the southwest. The *Tantara* tells us that the *andry* has a sacred character, supports the roof of the entire house, and brings good fortune to children of the sovereigns.[6]

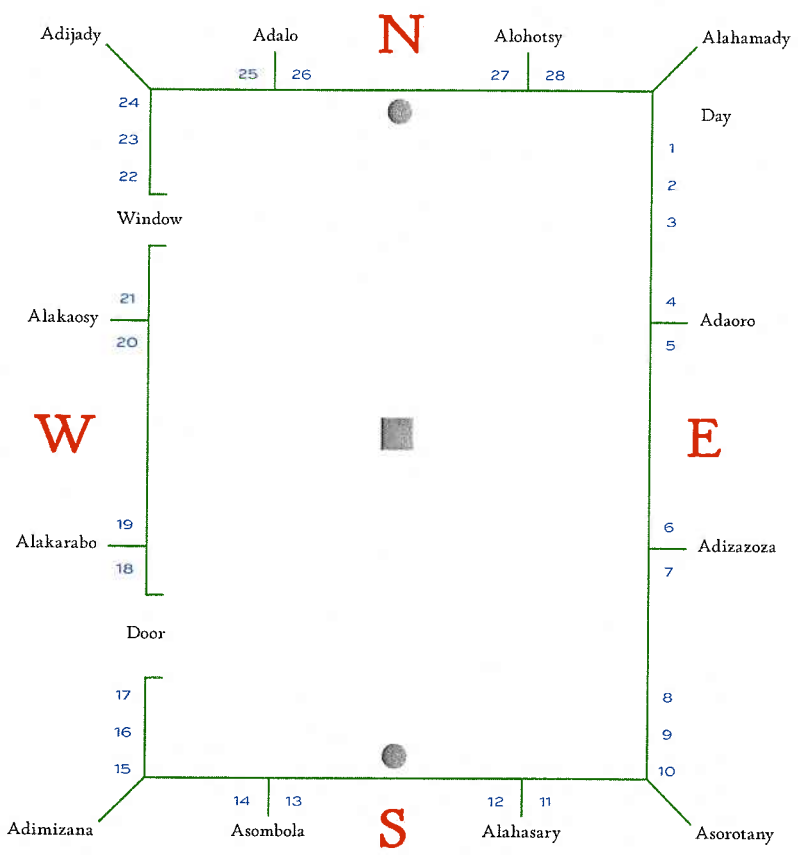
The word *andry* has several referents: *mandry* (to lie down; to be at peace), *mandry* (keeping guard [as in soldiers]), and *andriana* (sovereign; noble). *Andriamanitra* refers to anything divine, extraordinary, or wonderful, or to the living or deceased sovereign.[7] The word *andry* also appears metaphorically in proverbs. The proverb *Foloha andry nian kinana* (The trusted support is broken) is used to express the death of a trusted parent or relative.[8] Symbolically, the *andry* represents the place—the still point of the house—where all the *vintana*, or "destiny," converges, as well as the central position from which the sovereign rules over his subjects. Since the *andry* is dug into the smoothed earthen floor, the pillar also forms a symbolic and physical connection to the portions of the *vintana* that remain unseen—those marking the periods of darkness. While the daytime periods are marked out in an "imaginary" way on a house's visible architectural

features, the following nighttime cycle is "imagined" to be delineated beneath the ground on which the house is built. While there is wide variation in the aesthetics and use of the central pillar among the Malagasy peoples, it is an emblematic example of a shared cultural theme as the "core" or "heart" of a house.

At the root of planning a *tranokotona* is the system of *vintana*. Based on the twelve signs of the zodiac and twenty-eight stations of the moon, *vintana* is a prime example of the enduring influence of Islamic culture in highland Madagascar, since *vintana* has its origins in Arab astrology and numerical systems. The *vintana* system is used throughout Madagascar, but the particular ways in which it is fashioned and interpreted vary considerably from one region to another. The concept of *vintana* is difficult to grasp because events or actions both determine it and are determined by it. *Vintana* is the means by which future actions and events are planned and ordered, for example, planting rice, timing the preparation of a building site, or the spatial ordering of a plan. The timing and spatial ordering of other types of structures, for example, corrals, tombs, and the layout of an entire village, have to comply with a system of *vintana*. At the same time, the precise occurrence of life events, such as birth, circumcision, and marriage, determines an individual's destiny (*vintana*). The concept is given additional vitality by virtue of *vintana*'s "deep" historical associations since, according to the *Tantara*, it was practiced by the ancestors. *Vintana* is a power that influences every aspect of life. The anthropologist Jorgen Ruud writes, "To oppose the *vintana* power is something impossible and unthinkable."[9]

The concept of *fady* (prohibition; that which is prohibited) is intimately tied to *vintana*. As Graeber points out, authority in general consists of "imposing taboos or otherwise preventing others from acting, rather than telling people what to do."[10] *Fady* is as fundamental to Merina (and Malagasy) life as zebu cattle, rice, and *lambas* (a rectangular piece of cloth worn as a shawl and used to wrap a corpse), and it encompasses activities of all kinds, such as diet, the place where one is allowed to sit inside a house, crop planting, and construction. Like *vintana*, "actions" or "things" that are considered *fady* (prohibited) are culturally specific and vary significantly throughout Madagascar; they are interpreted according to precise positions or moments in the cycles of *vintana*. Following on Ruud's statement regarding the impossibility of going against the power of destiny, something is usually considered *fady* when it is thought to be in opposition to *vintana*. For example, according to Merina *fady*, the foundation of a house must not be laid on the day with the same *vintana* as the proprietor's birthday because the combination of the *vintana* will be too powerful for the occupants.[11] For a *tranokotona*, it was considered *fady* to have the entry on any side of the house except the western façade. This traditional practice remains common among some Malagasy

9.5
Diagram of a *tronokotona* showing a system of *vintana* mapped onto the floor plan. The 28-day lunar cycle begins with the first and most important month, Alahamady, which is located in the auspicious northeast corner of the house. The ensuing months and days progress in a clockwise direction. Preciosa Da Cunha Gomes Nunes, 2011



in the highlands. In the highlands, it is considered *fady* to build a tomb when rice is still immature in its growth cycle. Being in the prime of their youth, rice shoots are contrary to the function of tombs, which house the dead. If this *fady* is violated, many highlanders believe that violent storms will destroy the rice.[12]

During the planning phase of a house, a system of *vintana* is mapped onto the floor plan of the *tranokotona*. The rectangular plan is divided into "imaginary" parts, which can be "read" or "thought of" as the twelve months of the year, the twenty-eight parts of a lunar month, and the twenty-four hours of a day (FIG. 9.5). Three days are attached to each corner; the remaining sixteen days are distributed among the four walls (four per wall). Accordingly, months, days, and hours share specific points on the rectangular plan. The organization of a house plan based on *vintana* necessitates having corners because they mark precise points in a cycle of *vintana* and transitional areas from one *vintana* to another. As a point of juncture between two *vintana,* a corner can acquire more than one quality. The months marked at each corner are called the *renyvintana* (*vintana* mothers). The remaining eight months (two per wall) are called the *zana-bintana* (*vintana* children). According to Ruud, a "mother" at each corner is said to carry one "child" on her back and hold another in her lap or arms.[13]

From an architectural perspective it is noteworthy that the corners of a *tranokotona* are attached with greater significance than the walls. Architecturally, the corner offers some of the greatest design challenges because its articulation is full of design possibilities. The corner is also the point where vertical and horizontal architectural members come together to form an enclosure. For the Merina, the first and most important month, Alahamady, is located in the highly esteemed northeast corner, from which the ensuing months circulate (*rohontany*) in clockwise fashion. The northeast corner (the month of Alahamady) is the most powerful destiny and is associated

with kings and nobility. Alahamady is also connected with the color red—the most powerful of all colors, belonging exclusively to the sovereign and being the color of the parasol (*elo mena*) shading the sovereign as he or she moves from place to place. As the most important month, Alahamady overlaps with the most auspicious three days. It is during these days that the New Year is celebrated and the royal bathing festival (*fandroana*) took place until Madagascar became a French colony in 1897.

Anthropologists Susan Kus and Victor Raharijaona write that each of the twelve major *vintana* is associated with a good (*tsara*) or evil (*ratsy*) fate and, in turn, corresponds to the symbolic meaning associated with a particular cardinal direction.[14] In general, the north is associated with royalty and ancestors; the south with activities connected to farming and raising livestock; the east with the sacred; and the west with the profane.[15] The *vintana* are also combined to achieve new qualities. The northeast corner (*anjoro firarazana*), being a combination of "status" and "sacred," for example, is associated with the ancestors. It is also the most important *vintana,* being the symbolic location of the first month of the New Year, a time that bestows honor on the sovereign. The northeast corner is also the storage place for the *sampy* (personal protective charms) that protect the house and its occupants from sorcery and avert evil in general. Present-day Merina consider the northern part of the house, particularly the northeast corner, as a place of veneration where elders or important guests are honored and religious ceremonies are carried out. Special plants, carved figures, or shiny quartz (*vatovelona*) are often kept near the northeast corner. This kind of quartz, which is rubbed with water to make it "brighter," is also placed on the outside of tombs. *Vatovelona* is said to add "light" to the darkness of a space and is a way of receiving "blessings" from the ancestors.

An astrologer (*mpanandro,* "maker of days"), who would be a keen observer of the heavens and knowledgeable about lunar cycles, was responsible for making decisions that were, in turn, materialized into the precise siting and orientation of a *tranokotona.*[16] Before a house was built, the *mpanandro* determined the precise timing of the construction cycle and initial occupancy. *Mpanandro* coordinated general information about the *vintana* of individuals and building sites with more immediate knowledge of the site derived through the practice of divination (*sikidy*). Both an art form and a tool, the practice of *sikidy* involved the arrangement of beans, grains of sand, and seeds (usually from the *fano* tree) on the ground and the interpretation of their resultant patterns to decide upon the good or bad fortune of an action or decision. Astrologers also intervened at certain points during the construction process, for example, to ask the permission of the ground (*hasin-tany*) to be dug, or "wounded," in order to set the central pillar (*andry*). In the highlands, *mpanandro* continue to play an important role in

the construction cycle of houses and tombs. During the lifetime of a house, *mpanandro* are called upon to perform rites for the well-being of its occupants. These rites often involve animal sacrifice and the placement of herbs in various corners of the house.

The *Tantara* makes explicit reference to the connections between *vintana* and the location of daily activities of the Merina. In this fashion, the dimensions of time (through the diurnal motion of the sun) and space (specific places in the house) are unified into a single system as the various surfaces of the house are struck with light or left in shadow. The entry façade of houses and tombs faces west to allow light from the late afternoon sun to reach the interior spaces. Some Malagasy say that the sunlight warms both the living and the dead ancestors. The male (and sometimes female) elders of the household sit and sleep near the northeast corner, while animals are kept in the southern portion of the house. Each of the *vintana* has an identifier corresponding to a part of the house where daily routines take place. For example, at noon the "sun is over the ridge of the roof" (*mitatao vovonana*), and the period between two and three in the afternoon is called "at the house post" (*mby amin' ny andry ny andro*).[17] The southwest corner, being the last place where the sun shines on the façade of the house, is called the place "where the chickens pass the night."[18]

The same planning principles that are central to the design of *tranokotona* operate at the scale of a village layout. Looking up from the valley floors to hilltops reveals another aspect of the highlands' landscape—former royal fortified villages (*rova*). Dating from the seventeenth through the eighteenth centuries, these hilltop settlements were tiny principalities that eventually became unified as the Merina kingdom under King Andrianampoinimerina at the end of the eighteenth century. The plan of a *rova* corresponds closely to the *vintana* system used by court astrologers (*mpanandro*). First, the rectangular shape of a royal palace (with its length running north to south) for the hilltop site corresponds to the plan of a traditional wooden Merina house. Second, the meanings assigned to the cardinal directions of *tranokotona* correspond to variations of the physical terrain in those directions. For example, the north and east areas of *tranokotona* are associated with ancestors and privilege and correspond to the more protected part of the *rova* where there are hills nearby. The south and west areas of *tranokotona*, where animals and rice are kept and openings are located, align with the more open views of the rice plains. As the *rova* expanded and new palaces and tombs were constructed, a general pattern was followed of building to the north and east of the preexisting structures. The tombs of the wives and sons of the king are to the east of the prince's tomb; his tomb, in turn, is east of his mother's.

In conclusion, *vintana* (or destiny) lends an important dimension to the meanings of highland Madagascar's rich historical architecture and village planning. The

tranokotona's carefully delineated parts, that is, the multiple pieces of wood combined with its cosmological mapping (the layout of a village) are about the cyclical order of natural change—of growth, decay, and regeneration. Accordingly, Merina architecture is integral to a phenomenal rather than merely a mundane way of existing in the world. Merina architecture and planning embody the idea of time as continuity or eternity in the sense that it is difficult to tell where one building material or cosmological division of the house begins and the other ends. Time conceptualized as "continuity" is equally at the core of the Merina landscape, especially through its intimate association with ancestors. When Merina architecture, landscape, and the cosmos are seen in relation to one another, time is no longer strictly linear or strictly sequential. Instead, in any instant, at any particular place in a *tranokotona* or Merina village, we experience duration.

NOTES

1. Graeber 1999, 319.
2. Bloch 1994, 106.
3. Richardson 1885.
4. Sibree 1915.
5. Callet [1873–1902] 1953–58, 1978.
6. Callet 1981.
7. Richardson 1885, 43.
8. *Antananarivo Annual* 1887, 355.
9. Ruud 1960, 27.
10. Graeber 1996.
11. Ruud 1960, 111.
12. Ibid., 128.
13. Ibid., 29.
14. Kus and Raharijaona 1990, 24.
15. Ibid., 23.
16. Ratsimiebo 1998.
17. Sibree 1915.
18. Callet 1981, 1: 63–64.

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