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## In memory of Razafindrabe: a General Ethnography of the Astrologer's Skill in West Bezanozano, Central East Madagascar

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**Christel Mattheeuws**

### **Abstract**

Astrologers in Madagascar, in West Bezanozano in particular, play a very important role in building the fundamentals of the land of extended families (they give the destiny of the family). They are also invited by individuals or families to lay the foundations of village, house, tomb, or memory stones for the dead, and last but not least to lead the *famadihana*, a ritual for the dead making them ancestors. This chapter follows the practices of astrologers in making the fundamentals of villages, houses and tombs. Making fundamentals is making as it were a living horoscope, giving places a suitable destiny in relation to the surroundings and the people concerned. I also followed an astrologer/mason who was in charge of crafting a particular memory stone. The memory stone had to deviate from a direct line between village and tomb caused by a mistake in the tomb building having killed two astrologers in their work. Finally, I presented the central importance of the astrologer during the ritual of the *famadihana* where the destinies of the dead and the living have to be mediated to protect the living from the dead. General speaking, a good astrologer will never become rich, since he has to hold not only good destinies but also bad ones. The work of an astrologer can be extremely dangerous since he deals with real forces. During difficult assignments, people offer him a cock that accompanies him during work since people believe that the cock will die before any human, also an astrologer.

Astrologers in West Bezanozano, central east Madagascar, play a very important role in cultivating the land occupied by extended families. In a previous paper, I compared such land to the process of plaiting in which 'life is carried on in upward and downward movements twisted into all kind of patterns and shapes according to the directions into which the

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strands are interwoven'.<sup>1</sup> The art of doing astrology in West Bezanozano is the art of weaving the destinies into the land by way of holding, opening, closing, avoiding, removing or joining them together. Like a craftsman, the knowledge of the astrologer grows 'from the crucible of his practical and observational engagements with the beings and things around him'.<sup>2</sup> The essay is based on fieldwork conducted in Zanadroandrenaland and surroundings. I followed West Bezanozano cultural practices over a period of twenty-two months between December 1999 and September 2001 by walking along with the Zanadroandrena through their daily and ritual life in which I recognised astrology as a unifying factor for everything they did, described in my thesis.<sup>3</sup> While I intend to work with an astrologer on a future project to learn astrological practice from within, this paper reports on some practices of both the general population and astrologers, particularly in relation to the cultural context of creating the layouts of villages, houses and tombs, giving them a suitable destiny in relation to the surroundings and the people concerned. I will also show the central importance of astrologers during the ritual of the *famadihana* (turning the dead), where the destinies of the dead and the living have to be mediated to protect the living from the dead. Generally speaking, a good astrologer will never become rich, since he has to hold not only good destinies but also bad ones. The work of an astrologer can be extremely dangerous since he deals with real forces. During difficult assignments, people offer him a cock that accompanies him during work since people believe that the cock will die before any human, including an astrologer, thereby warning of danger.

### Plaiting

Marshland consists of cold living soil that grows and floats on water. The main marsh plants for the West Bezanozano people are *herana* (*Cyperus latifolius*, flag-like), and *hisatra* (*Cyperus aequalis*, papyrus-like) used to

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<sup>1</sup> Christel Mattheeuws, 'Reading the Future in the Landscape: Astrology in Zanadroandrena Land, Central East Madagascar', in Nicholas Campion and Liz Greene, eds., 'Sky and Symbol. The Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture', *Studies in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology*. Vol. 4 (Sophia Centre Press, 2013), p. 216.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Ingold, *Making Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London, New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Christel Mattheeuws, 'Towards an Anthropology in Life: The Astrological Architecture of Zanadroandrena Land in West Bezanozano, Madagascar' (PhD dissertation, University of Aberdeen, 2008).

plait mats and baskets. These reeds are gathered from the marshes preferably in the months between March and June (autumn and winter). Plaiting mats and baskets in the light inside the house near the entrance door is equivalent to moulding new bodies in the light of darkness in June and July — i.e., to pregnancy. These are astrologically the female months in the darkness par excellence and plaiting is exclusively women's work. Every year during spring (the destiny of birth of new bodies) people tend to renew the mats in their houses. This is part of the cosmo-ecological practices that evolve according to the alternating leadership of the Sun and Moon in their ascending and descending annual and daily paths through the sky. While houses nowadays are wooden structures filled up with soil for the walls and grass or sheets of corrugated iron for the roof, in earlier times the walls were constructed with plaited *zozoro*, i.e. *hisatra* (*Cyperus æqualis*, papyrus-like) reeds that have dried naturally in the marshes before being gathered. The appearance of houses *out* of marshes is still remembered during the blessing of new houses by planting 'hisatra with living mother' in the north-east corner. These hisatra with living mother are the products of *one* cutting, consisting of a mother and offshoot. The work of plaiting shows how the West Bezanozano understand the flow of life. When reeds are prepared for plaiting, their leaves or stalks are undoubled and become 'male and female strings that are married', giving all kinds of patterns and shapes according to the directions into which the strings are twisted. The open sides where the work develops are called *vava* (mouth), referring to the open-endedness of the work. However, there are limits to growth, expressed by making the borders by literally turning the strings in the other direction inwards or to the other side of the plaiting work. Plaiting shows that life does not unfold of its own accord but in the weaving of manifold fruitful relations that have to be built up during one's career with compatible people, places and other beings. Life is a task and entails perpetual commitment.<sup>4</sup>

### **Zanadroandrena land as a plaiting work**

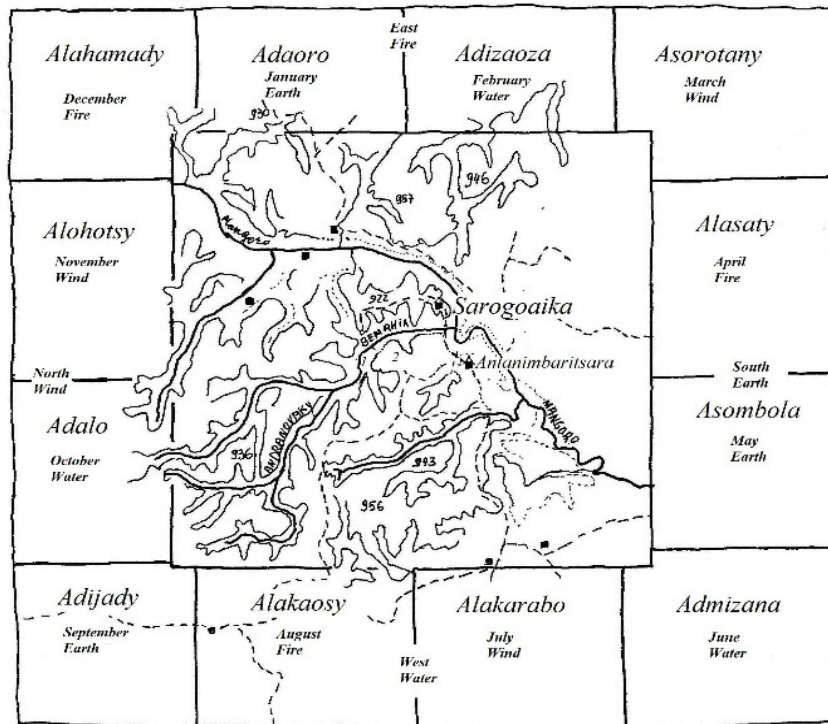
In Zanadroandrena land, the land is compared with a plaiting work in which 'life is carried on in upward and downward movements twisted into all kinds of patterns and shapes according to the directions into which human creations are interwoven'.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Mattheeuws, 'Towards an Anthropology in life', pp. 184-187.

<sup>5</sup> Mattheeuws, 'Reading the Future in the Land', p. 216.

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**Figure 1: Astrological perception of the land**

In this cosmological framework, the Zanadroandrena perceive their land in the shape of a quadrant formed by the four cardinal directions surrounded by twelve destinies (*andro*), equivalent to our zodiac. Their dwelling place where you find the villages, tombs, ritual centres, elevated stones and the source of their main rice field system has emerged in the south-east, the *andro Alasaty* (lion). This destiny was given by the astrologer Ralaisikidy, their Great Ancestor.<sup>6</sup> When Ralaisikidy went to look for a new place to settle, he had to take three factors into account: was that place fine for the people, for the rice, and for the cattle? Once the family had arrived, he made three *fotitra*: one for the village, one for

<sup>6</sup> Mattheeuws, 'Reading the Future in the Land', pp. 209-10.

the rice fields, and one for the prairie.<sup>7</sup> Making a fotitra gives an astrological destiny to a place that is considered both an origin and a source. Therefore the destiny is always double: one destiny has to make strong, and the other has to make mobile. In other words, a good fotitra always gives both strong entanglements and new offshoots. It makes life possible as a basis for growing wealth like children, rice and cattle. The fotitra for the people is the *jiro* ('that which gives light in the night'), and the territorial ritual centre in Voara. Voara is the now abandoned village established by Ralaisikidy, now abandoned by people but home to the ancestors. I estimate that it was constructed around 1870. The fotitra of the rice fields is *Ambakireny* (the Mother Giving Birth), a big rice field east of the place where the rivers Bemahia and Andranovaky flow together. It is considered to be the source of the fields, giving life to all the rice fields along the river Bemahia. Finally, until the seventies, the fotitra of the prairies was *Betsimihilana* (the leaves of a water lily), where the zebras were purified every year after their work on the rice fields and before being brought back to the prairies. This purification was done to protect the cattle against disease, death and theft. Betsimihilana was put up in the neighbourhood of an old abandoned village at the border of the prairie of that time and the dwelling area of the people, as a kind of centre linking prairies and the dwelling place of the people.

When the first prairie became a government forest, the ritual place was also abandoned. Nowadays people bring their cattle to a prairie across the river Mangoro and every lineage has its own fotitra for the cattle. The rituals protecting the people, rice and cattle take place (almost) yearly during the month of March when the rainy season is over and the land is 'closed' at the three fotitra. Since the death of the healer Rakotondrasoa in 2014 this ritual has been suspended, yet another healer, Rakotobe, who may be the successor, is keeping the place 'clean'. In that period of the year in the past, two groups of seven children went around the territory, starting from the *jiro*. One group moved in a leftward movement and the other in a rightward movement, while in each corner protective medicine was buried.<sup>8</sup> Ralaisikidy also built a tomb on the land of Voara, by which he made the area into ancestral land. A tomb is never a fotitra since the dead do not give birth. Yet it is considered an origin place, a place where

<sup>7</sup> Rakotomahay Ernest in 2004, quoted in Mattheeuws, 'Towards an Anthropology in Life', p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> Sophie Blanchy, 'Comment Devient-On "Mpimasy"? Ethnographie de la Communication avec des Esprits de Ancêtres en Pays Bezanozano', *Études Océan Indien*, 30, p. 157.

humans become part of the land. Building a tomb in a new settlement is often considered as colonising a place. Land that previously belonged to others (dead or alive) has become land belonging to one's own clan as a new place of origin, connected with other origins by moving an ancestor of the previous place of settlement into the new tomb. Yet I argue that in the case of the Zanadroandrena, the people are first grown by the land through their fruitful relationship with it, before they ever build a tomb. The tomb is the result of the land that gives, and not the point of departure for 'ownership'. On the other hand, building a tomb fixes the dead in the place of the living, so that their realisations, embodied in the land and in the bodies of the dead becoming ancestors, can continue to work in the creations of the living. Building a tomb is part of the process of belonging to the land, and of the continually growing and changing embodiment of the forces of that land.<sup>9</sup>

### **The astrologer is like a craftsman**

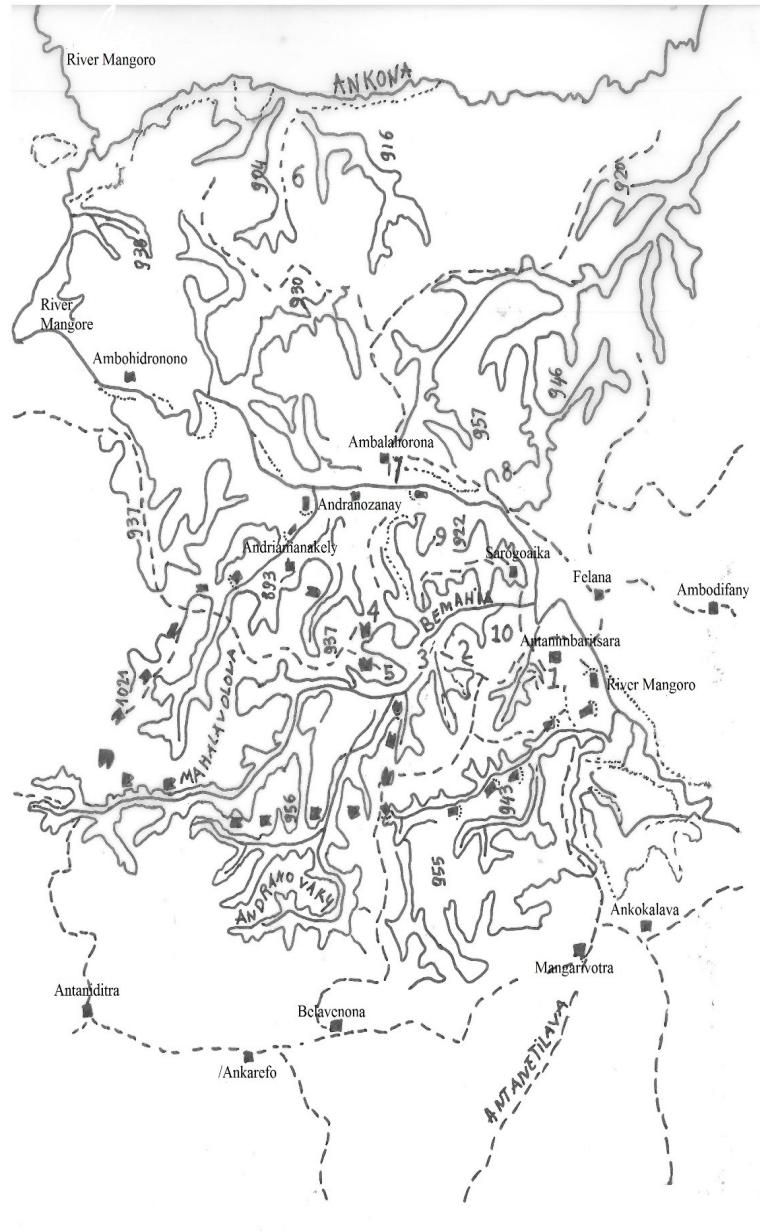
After this general outline of laying the foundations of a dwelling place making new land into a locality, I will now examine the astrologer in West Bezanozano as a craftsman whose knowledge grows from the crucible of his practical and observational engagements with the beings and things around him. Ingold's statements that a craftsman 'thinks through making' and his knowledge and skills are largely acquired 'on the job' describe well the local astrologers' work.<sup>10</sup> The features of the landscape, both earth and sky, are very important in any decision where and when to establish a village, build a house or a tomb, place an elevated stone or erect a ritual centre. For example, there are different ways of making a village strong so that it does not fall apart. One method is to put a stone east of the village, but one can also plant the herb *fanazava* (that which illuminates, *Elaeodendronolyganthum*), which has the capacity to make a village solid. In the vicinity of the present *ranjavola* (*hasina* with little leaves, a kind of *Dracaena*), which is said to have been the first centre of the village Voara, a fanazava was growing, showing the place where the jiro should have been erected. But Ralaisikidy had to choose another point to erect the jiro, since because the surface was not levelled that place did not give good results, so the andro kept 'slipping away'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Mattheeuws, 'Towards an Anthropology in Life', pp. 31-32.

<sup>10</sup> Ingold, *Making*, pp. 6, 52.

<sup>11</sup> Mattheeuws, 'Towards an Anthropology in Life', p. 292.



**Figure 2: Zanadroandrena land 1) Voara 3) Ambakireny 4) Betsimihilana**



Building houses in the vicinity of a hollow is also not recommended, since this provokes hunger in the family. One has to be very careful with *taratra*, deadly forces in the middle of a valley carried by water. The dazzling reflection of the sunlight on the water is a materialisation of this. Taratra can be deadly when the living place themselves orthogonally to the line of a valley. Therefore, villages are always built along a valley. Tombs, on the other hand, are built at right angles to a valley, just like the nests of ants. While houses as a cultural creation carry the andro *Asombola* (the destiny of the harvest), graves carry the andro *Adijady*. It is on the one hand the destiny of division, separating the dead from the living and, on the other, the destiny of the soil holding firm, avoiding the souls of the dead wandering around. The orientations of tombs are like houses with the feet (door) in the western wall and the head in an eastern direction. Since people want to avoid burying the dead in the same line of the houses of the living, the orientation of tombs is tilted in as much that the door is directed to the southwest instead of the west. As with houses, tombs are protected by a hill to avoid the souls of the dead falling into a space filled with water if they leave the tomb. Ancestors do not like water at all, and they also do not like the forces that come directly from the wet valleys. Yet they need these kinds of forces. Therefore, tombs always look out into a valley for the taratra. But while a promontory may align the wind so as to avoid it coming directly from the valley, it can still blow directly onto the tomb.

The relationship between the Sun 'in the zenith and about to decline' as an embodiment of the sacred andro *Alahamady* and the month of December is easy to understand. The month of December as an embodiment of the sacred andro *Alahamady* gives the sensation of pure life in a very high sky, the air filled with the sweet smell of blossoms and honey, and the valleys becoming young-green after people have planted the summer rice. The sacred andro *Alahamady* in December is *the* sacred event in the existential field and the owner of *hasina*, the generative and life-giving forces. In the astrological understanding of the cosmogony of the earth-sky world, *Alahamady* is the first andro that stood up followed by the other destinies. In the generation of places, the *Zanadroandrena* will always request blessings towards the north-eastern sacred *Alahamady* corner and elevate this corner before other corners. But following the same line of thought, why are the months of December until March above all the months without rituals? And why do the *Zanadroandrena* avoid the andro *Alahamady* at 1:00 pm during the proceedings of rituals for the living; and why do they also avoid putting

things or themselves into a centre? Moreover, astronomically, there is no relation between the north-east corner and the December Sun. On 15 December, for example, the Sun comes up south of east in an azimuth position of  $114^\circ$ , ascends till an altitude of  $104^\circ$  at 9 am and culminates almost in the zenith with a zenith angle of  $4^\circ$  at noon. I contend that the Zanadroandrena do not want to entangle their bodies, places, and activities with the appearance of sacred life, and therefore avoid the December Sun and also the noon Sun in general at the ritual moments of the generation of their life and the life of their creations. They say that the living human beings cannot support the direct force of the Sun in the zenith. The image one should have in mind to understand what is happening during rituals of blessings is not the image of the December Sun in the zenith and about to decline, but of the ascending morning Sun in wintertime at about 9 am passing in the north-east. On 15 May the Sun is at an azimuth of  $50^\circ$  around that time, while on 15 June the azimuth is  $48^\circ$ . When people request blessings in the north-east from all invisible beings called hasina (life-giving or life-generating forces), they appear like the morning Sun. And when building a house, the astrologer measures the north-east corner accordingly. Concerning *the earth itself* (realm of the dead), the earth's life-generating moment in the north-east is in the evening, at about 5 pm (andro Alasaty) as when the sun's rays enter the door and light the north-east corner inside the house, moment of procreation. From these examples, we can easily generalise the relationship between the movement of the Sun and the generation of life. The birth andro (birth destiny) of the Sun is the sacred andro Alahamady in December, as the fire making the earth alive. It always carries this andro, in every place, in every circumstance, at all times. The Sun is considered as making alive, not by a divine illumination from above, but during its journey. As one walks along with it, each phase is an act of birth, the appearance of a new situation, an event in place. During the sun's daily life-path, the different astrological andro appear as events shaping the different phases of day and night. The astrological ground image, as an image of the appearance of the astrological andro in place(s) during the cycle of one year or one month (Figure 1), *cannot* be used to show how these astrological andro appear in both day and night. It is *not* an image of the daily movements of the sun. The astrologers in Bezanozano start the division of the twenty-four-hour day in Alahamady at 1 pm, at the moment when the Sun is about to decline at noontime. At 1 am a second cycle starts. So there is a cycle of descending and ascending movements, both having a part in the light (day) and a part in

the darkness (night) (Figure 3). The Zanadroandrena do not like extreme high or low forces (Alahamady). The best moments of the day are around 7 or 9 am and pm (Admizana/Alakarabo/Alakoasy). People organise the proceedings of their rituals according to this double cycle and the play of light and darkness. Any ritual concerning blessing the living and creations for the living will happen in the morning, directed to the east between 9 am and 11 am when the Sun is rising and lightening the east. Rituals of healing are also directed to the east but start about 6 to 7 pm — when the shadows are spreading in that direction. These shadows bring the ill-making and curing spirits. Laying the foundations of a tomb happens at about midnight, the temporal realm of death. Burials happen in the evening around 4 pm at sunset and facing the west, stressing the death of the sunlight. The climax of the famadihana unfolds in daytime in the west, stressing the dead becoming alive as ancestors. The timing and orientation of the start of an activity and the ritual proceedings determine the direction in which the activity should unfold (up/growth or down/decline) and also the sphere in which it has to be accomplished (the sphere of the dead or the sphere of the living). I call this *ritual time and orientation*.

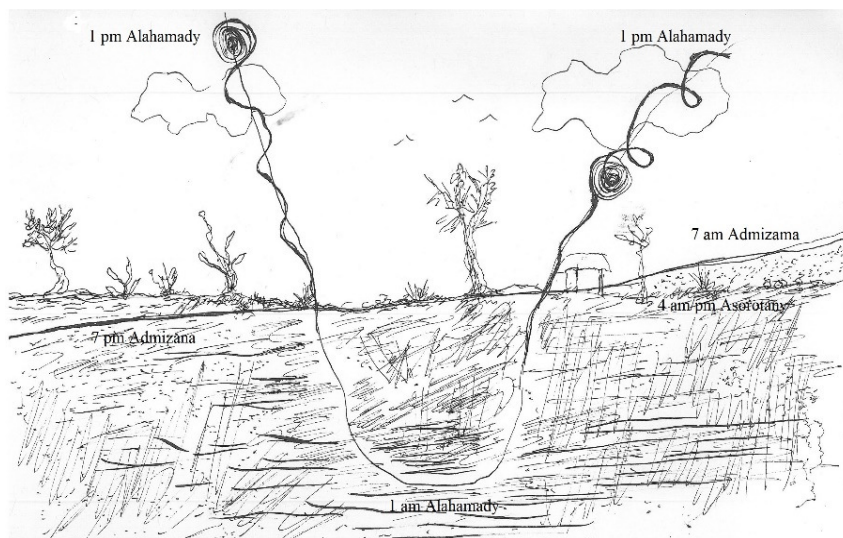


Figure 3: Daily path of the Sun

Ritual time and orientation are different from the calendar time and place of a ritual, giving the activity as a whole its destiny of birth and growth (birth andro). The diverse examples show that timing and orientation cannot be separated from each other and that each astrological andro has its diurnal and nocturnal manifestation. The way in which the Zanadroandrena get a grip on the world (or the world on them), in which everything falls into place, is very earthly, bodily and immanent, based on the horizon astronomy of the four directional places. Whereas a zenith/nadir (culmination point) explains the perpetual cosmogony of the world in the field of *Andriamanitra* (the Creator), horizon astronomy generates the andro appearing in a culmination point *in embodiments along the horizon* as the creative act of the *Zanahary* (the Children of the Creator), extending into all the corners of the world — the cardinal directions. The start of activities or the establishment of places follows the path of the Sun in wintertime and is set in motion by means of blessings that can be considered as the beginning of a new life cycle. This is not something that comes from above and descends into matter. It is rather a happening from inside, in which everything falls into place, stands up and grows, each body, place or activity having its own form and process, and having its particular birth andro. A house, for example, is likely to be erected on the astrological calendar day Asombola, carrying the destiny of a good harvest and procreation. But the first house of a village often carries the astrological andro *Alakaosy*, as it is a strong foundation. The destiny of a grave that people like is Adjady in its double capacity of both closing the soil and so separating the dead from the living, and of the soil giving birth to new bodies (ancestors in this case). The choice of birth andro depends on different factors that may reveal cultural patterns, but it can also be very contextual, based on the owners of the place or activity, its relation to the environment and the astrologers as well, who have their own vision about life and the relationships of andro. I follow the argument of Kus and Raharijaona that we must learn to appreciate astrology as a *poiēsis* of practices of the astrologers and the whole population that transcends the general lines offered in literature.<sup>12</sup> I would go further, however, and argue that

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<sup>12</sup> Susan Kus and Victor Raharijaona, 'Where to Begin a House Foundation: Betsileo "*mpanandro*" and the (Re)Creation of Tradition', in C. Allibert and Narivelo Rajaonarimanana, eds., *L'extraordinaire et le Quotidien: Variations Anthropologiques*, homage au Professeur Pierre Vérin (Paris: Karthala, 2000), p. 136.

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astrology is *a poiēsis of life*, helping to carry on life in the forms and processes of places and activities. Every place lives by virtue of its birth, having a life cycle through blessings in a given place and time where the birth andro appears, and by the activities that involve people and things in that place during its lifetime. Once the rituals of blessings have put a place or activity in motion, the mutually constitutive interaction between a place or activity and its environment continues constantly. For example, my local colleague complained about his house being along the village path *Adalo*, where bad forces should pass (*mandalo*) without hanging around in the village, claiming that not only did the bad forces pass along his life path without staying but also the good ones.<sup>13</sup>

### **The art of doing astrology during a famadihana**

There are certain occasions on which an astrological specialist (*mpañandro*) will be invited, such as when building a house, a tomb, erecting an elevated stone or performing a famadihana. His work consists of generating places and specific forms. He helps the inviting family to choose a place, taking account of the topography of the environment, the directions of the sun, the andro of the family or an individual, the andro of other places relative to the new place, and also the presence of earthly forces or spirits. He then helps with the orientation and erection of the place and also the ritual proceedings of the activity. He is able to create astrological fields of relations into which forms grow and also create networks of relations between different places. The people, together with other agents and entities, can then live together in a mutual and fruitful relationship in order to build a prosperous community in which all people and all agents can grow and be grown. The astrologer helps to lay the foundations of a society, but it is for the people to develop the foundations into a prosperous community (or alternatively to destroy it). The art of doing astrology in West Bezanozano is the art of weaving the astrological destinies into the land by way of holding, opening, closing, avoiding, removing or adjoining destinies. Destinies are invisible forces that can be fetched, avoided or removed. I will give one example, the famadihana.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Mattheeuws, 'Towards an Anthropology in Life', pp. 80-85.

<sup>14</sup> For a complete account of this ritual, see Mattheeuws, 'Towards an Anthropology in Life', pp. 234-271.

Although many scholars have described famadihana rituals, they have not done so from an astrological point of view.<sup>15</sup> The ritual, held at the interface of winter and summer, is organised for the dead to become ancestors or as renewal of ancestor-hood. Only in this capacity can the dead relatives be called during rituals of blessing. Leading this ritual is the most difficult assignment an astrologer can get since it is a ritual for the dead in which the living participate. The astrologer must ensure that deadly forces do not enter the realm of the living while he has to build nevertheless the possibility of contact between the living and the dead during the climax of rewrapping the bodily remains into new shrouds outside the tomb. The famadihana is the only ritual I observed being performed both on the level of andro for the living and andro for the dead in order to align them in such a way that the dead, being regenerated, will not become a threat to life and the living. The astrologer does this by letting the ritual unfold in a particular andro in time and place that must mediate between the andro of the living and the dead. This andro is called the *andro famadihana* and is based on the andro of the village where the first part of the ritual takes place (the village of the person who has built the tomb and of the main corpse to be rewrapped) and the andro of the grave where the corpses will get new shrouds. In most cases, the andro famadihana and the andro of the village are 'living andro' in contrast to the tomb. In another paper<sup>16</sup> I suggest that we can understand the andro famadihana as forming the interface of life and death shaping mutual bipolar unities such as winter and summer, day and night, the living and the dead, the village and the tomb, the owners of the ritual and the guests, and also the drums and flutes or trumpets used as the instruments during the ritual. If the andro famadihana is a destiny brought by the new or waxing moon, the ritual *must* start in the evening, contrasting ceremonies for the living in the morning. Since rituals for the living cannot be held during a waning or dark Moon, if this Moon brings the andro famadihana, then this destiny can be entered in the morning or evening. I saw the latter only once, in 2015, and the examples in this essay are all under a new Moon.

During a famadihana the astrologer carries a heavy responsibility, and he is often the first person in danger because he is holding all the andro,

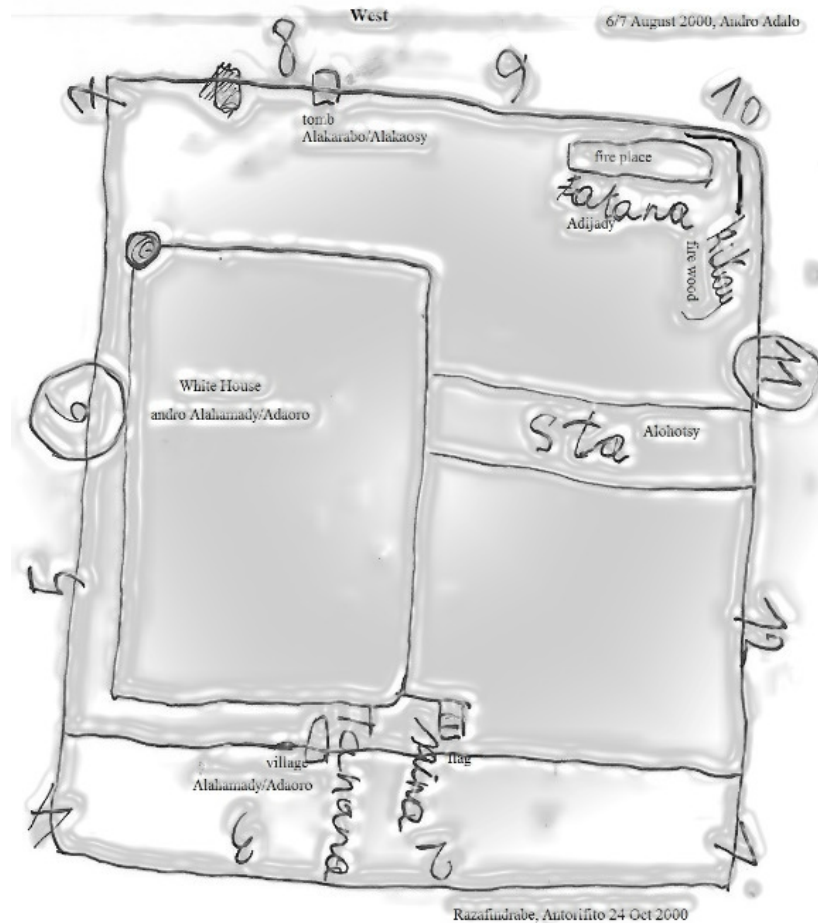
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<sup>15</sup> Christel Mattheeuws, 'In Light and Shadow. Surfaces of Polarity in Rituals of Second Burial in Central East Madagascar', in Mike Anusas and Cris Simonetti, eds., *Surfaces. Contributions from Anthropology, Archaeology, Architecture and Design* (London, New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

<sup>16</sup> Mattheeuws, 'In Light and Shadow', forthcoming.

including the andro of the dead. He can die as the victim of sorcery, because of mistakes he made concerning the alignment of the andro, or because of problems with the andro of the tomb. During a famadihana it becomes evident that practising astrology is more than intellectually knowing and applying its principles. Especially during this ritual, it is clear that an astrologer not only controls astrology intellectually but also has special capacities to 'detect' the andro and work with them. He can activate andro, stabilise them, hold them or release them, bring them or remove them. An astrologer must be able to recognise and detect bad forces and distinguish them from good ones. The people say that his *hasina* (spiritual guide) helps him during a performance by giving him antennae, enabling him to see things people normally do not. His clairvoyance is not a kind of trance. He is always very consciously present as a person. His first concern is to keep the organising family and the public as a whole in a state of tranquillity and peace of mind. Besides, he has to protect the attending crowd against the invisible deadly forces which become active during the ceremony. He has to be very alert and for this reason, you hardly see an astrologer communicating with the people during the preparations and the ceremony which last about three days.

On the first day the ritual place of the village is erected and the tomb is cleaned. This day carries the andro lighting or pushing the andro famadihana. The ritual place consists of the 'white house' (*tranofotsy*), the fireplace and the place where the meal of the guests is served. The 'white house' is generally built in the andro of the village, with the fireplace in the andro in front of the andro famadihana to stimulate and light the first part of the ritual. The construction is preceded by a blessing and killing of a zebu at the periphery of the ground image of the white house drawn by the wooden poles put on the ground in the rectangular shape of its foundation. During the speeches and blessings, the astrologer stands in the andro of the owners of the event while watching the triple start of elevating the beams, digging the fireplace and killing the zebu in the andro famadihana, preventing this andro from entering too soon while catching the forces of the stimulating andro of that day. He also goes with the male delegation to oversee the cleansing of the tomb.

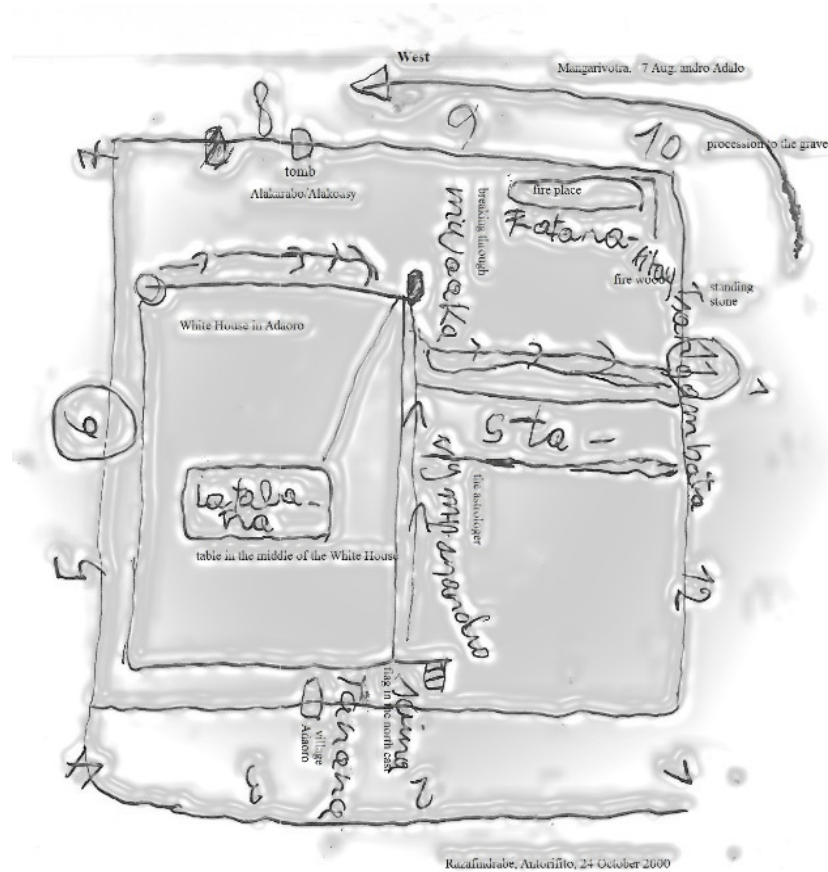


**Figure 4: Astrological sketch of the famadihana of Mangarivotra**

On the afternoon of the second day the first guests arrive and get their meal. This is still part of stimulating and warming the famadihana. Astrologically, this is achieved on one hand by the andro of the fireplace that pushes and lights the andro famadihana, the place where the meal is given to the guests, and on the other by the firewood that is put in the andro of the grave or one of its friends. However, in the example here (Figure 4) the astrologer could not bring the firewood to the andro of the tomb and gave the andro Adijady to both the fireplace and the



firewood. The andro Adijady is able to light the andro left (dead) and right (life). The andro famadihana is entered only at dusk on the second day. It is entered with a group of musicians who arrive from the west and enter the white house in the andro famadihana between 5:00 and 6:00 pm. They also sit and play in that andro. While the warming up phase took place in the living andro of the day, the entrance of the andro famadihana takes everyone into the living andro of the night and stresses the life-giving processes in the earth during the dead phase of the cycle of life. The energy unlocked during the dance party must attract the wandering souls of the dead becoming ancestors to be caught in the new shrouds during the blessing of the shrouds the next day. Meanwhile, the astrologer stays in a house carrying the andro famadihana. This is a house in the village standing astrologically in the place of the andro mediating between the andro *velona* (living andro) and the andro *maty* (dead andro). He will leave only a few times to check on evil forces and sprinkle protective medicine. The andro famadihana divides the proceedings of the ritual into two parts — one in the living andro and a second in the dead andro, roughly speaking, in the village and at the grave. During the first part, people are not allowed to approach the tomb, while during the second, all signs of the famadihana at the village should have been removed to avoid sorcery. The second part is announced when the astrologer appears near the white house at about 11 am on the third day for the crucial moment of the blessing of the shrouds for the dead. This blessing is different from blessings for the living that unfold at 9 am, and which are directed towards the north-east corner. The blessing of the shrouds proceeds between 11 am and 12 noon and is directed towards the centre of the white house where the shrouds are placed on a table. The blessing of the shrouds occurs at the pivotal point of entering the dead andro of the tomb. This happens at the moment when a single breeze moves the canvas during the blessing, explained by the astrologer as the arrival of the souls of the ancestors. The second part of the famadihana concentrates on the dead, yet the living and dead andro will be kept separate by the andro famadihana firmly held by the astrologer until the corpses are danced around the grave. After the blessing of the shrouds, the baskets filled with the shrouds are danced around in a leftward direction. Meanwhile, the astrologer leaves the white house and waits in the andro of the village and the crowd, holding the national flag that was planted all along in the north-east corner. At a specified moment, he picks up the flag and guides the children of the ancestors, breaking out of the white house.



**Figure 5: Breaking out of the ‘white house’**

Breaking out of the white house is achieved in a purely astrological matter, depending on the andro of the village and the grave, and whether the dead have to be removed from an old grave to a new one or just have to be rewrapped and returned to the same grave. In the example here, the astrologer Razafindrabe is standing on the periphery in the andro famadihana, which is the same andro as the elevated stone of the deceased person in whose name the famadihana was organised. The astrologer asks the children of the ancestors to leave the white house in the andro of the tomb and to come to the andro famadihana. The

procession led by the astrologer leaves the village in this andro, dances in front of the elevated stone just outside the village and proceeds along its path to the tomb at noon.

The path to the tomb in the dead andro is the path of the dead to the grave, yet it is protected by the andro famadihana. The astrologer is continually on his guard against evil forces that might cross his way. Every passing breeze might bring malevolent spirits of the dead and every suspicious mark might point to sorcery. Crossroads, tombs and elevated stones are approached with particular care. The astrologer stops the procession whenever he detects negative forces and intervenes by sprinkling protective medicine on the place. The procession is also called to pause if the group is scattering or if the procession is ahead of schedule. Everything happening around and in the tomb is very dangerous. A lot of protective medicine and rum is sprinkled and drunk during this stage, both by the astrologer and the organisers of the event. Before the crowd can go near the tomb the astrologer goes to inspect the place. He sprinkles protective medicine on all sides in a right turning movement around the tomb from the andro famadihana onwards. Then he returns to the crowd to give the signal that they can continue on their way under his leadership, giving the procession a wide berth before entering the graveyard in the andro famadihana, walking around the grave to the right until the procession reaches the entrance. The astrologer places the flag in the andro famadihana and observes the people settling. Then he climbs onto the roof of the tomb and stands above the entrance. He sprinkles protective medicine on the soil and also drinks a bit himself. Then the soil and stones covering the steps to the entrance door can be removed. After this, the astrologer will be the first person again to descend, take the necessary precautions and ensure that no one is standing in line of the entrance before opening the door. After the door is opened he either sits on top of the roof in the andro famadihana or stands next to the grave holding the flag planted in that andro. He observes the movements of people going inside the tomb to take out the remains of the dead to be rewrapped (the remains are always taken out in a piece of cloth) or the watching crowd to ensure sure no one falls ill. When the corpses are ready they are rolled into mats and taken on the shoulders. The astrologer takes the flag away from the andro famadihana, opening the way to dance the corpses seven times around the tomb in a clockwise direction, starting from the andro famadihana. Then the corpses are returned to the tomb one by one and are put on higher beds. After inspection by family members, the tomb is closed again. This should be

done before 4 pm, when the cold wind cooling the day and bringing the night comes. The astrologer folds up the flag and throws the stick to which it has been attached to the south, the direction of the dissolving soil. He puts his staff in the destiny of the village outside the realm of the tomb to close it against intrusion from the dead when people return to the village. The famadihana is finished. The rewrapped dead, now dwelling in the realm of the ancestors, will be able to give life to new bodies, places and activities whenever they are called during blessings, appearing in step with the winter Sun ascending in the north-east at 9:00 am. Human beings are born *on* Earth and become in a continuous movement part of the earth after death, to appear in the light again as ancestors with the help of the living. I compare this movement before with a Möbius strip, which is non-orientable as it has no back and front surface; the single surface of a Möbius strip is both, back and front, revealed in the *turning* process. Night becoming day, winter becoming spring, the interplay of guests and owners of the event and the interactions of drums and flutes unfold in a similar way and form subtle layers of the ongoing inhaling and exhaling of life. The crescendo of the event, when the dead are danced around the tomb *without* the protection of the andro famadihana, allow the living to become part of creation, the creation of ancestors who are elevated and put on the shoulders of their children. It is in the dance with the children that the ancestors are born.<sup>17</sup>

### Standing stones

The last famadihana I witnessed in West Bezanozano during my fieldwork was in my own village, Sarogoika. At first glance this one looked like all the other famadihana. There were no differences with respect to the customs and the proceedings of the ritual, but astrologically I met with a great dissimilarity that confused me: the andro famadihana was the andro of the grave and this is not in accordance with what astrologers told me, namely, that the andro famadihana is always a living andro mediating between the realm of the living and the realm of the dead. The astrologer-mansion Rasolofo who is responsible for the famadihana in Sarogoika explained to me that we had to see this famadihana as part of the whole process of erecting the two standing stones for Ranampy and his younger brother that also commemorate their spouses. The process of growth and erection of the standing stone of Ranampy and the famadihana unfolded over a period

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<sup>17</sup> Mattheeuws, 'In Light and Shadow', forthcoming.

of five months, starting on 5 May 2000 (andro Alasaty/Asombola) with the blessings of the stone in the valley, and ending on 28 and 29 September 2000 (andro Adijady) with the famadihana. The erection of the standing stone was meant to create a permanent mediating place between village and tomb, because since there had been an astrological mistake in building the tomb, the village and the tomb were standing in a direct line opposing each other, respectively *Asorotany* versus Adijady, making the tomb a very dangerous place — always wanting to attack the realm of the living. According to Rasolofo, who led the process, this was why two astrologers had already lost their lives shortly after rituals concerning that tomb. In order to deflect the powerful and deadly forces of the tomb, he had erected the standing stone so as to embody mediating andro, respectively the andro Alahamady relative to the grave and the andro *Alohotsy* relative to the village. During the famadihana, these andro of the standing stone played the same mediating role as the andro famadihana in the other examples described above. The andro *Alohotsy* or *Alahamady*, for example, were the andro of the eating place, the andro from which the children of the ancestors broke out of the white house and left the village, the andro of entering the realm of the tomb and where the flag was planted at the tomb. And the astrologer stayed in the house with those *andro* during the first part of the famadihana.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper has presented a general outline of astrological practice in West Bezanozano, Central East Madagascar. The astrologer of this region is an architect and a craftsman, who shapes the land in general and gives building directions to houses, tombs, elevated stones and ritual centres as astrological objects. He does that in an artful or skilful way in relation to the environment and the people concerned. I have been able to see the invisible threads he is weaving because of a specific approach during research and writing my thesis that I clarified elsewhere as ‘doing Goethean science’.

Goethe explains that “every new object, clearly seen, opens up a new organ of perception in us”. ... I could see astrology because my eyes had been developed in an astrological attitude to life, making me intimately entwined with

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<sup>18</sup> Mattheeuws, ‘Towards an Anthropology in Life’, pp. 272-274.

Zanadroandrena land. ...I would identify the astrological attitude to life, as a continuous generation of life with specific directions (gestures, characters) shaping the land and all its inhabitants. In the finest reading of the happenings in Zanadroandrena land, I would learn that only the destiny that was given to the land as a whole and to the Zanadroandrena community was the 'primal gesture'. It was in the light of this destiny that the appearances of everything else in the land should be understood, as the whole that is reflected in all its parts, giving Zanadroandrena land its particular character in comparison to other people's land. The Zanadroandrena call this destiny the spirit or knot of their land from which their customs and habits are derived.<sup>19</sup>

I gave the ritual of the famadihana as an example because this ritual shows *in extremis* that the task of an astrologer is not always easy and can even be dangerous. However, he is protected by his spiritual guide. My kinship with the land and its inhabitants conversely resides, insofar as my present knowledge reaches, only on 'the outside of the inside'. I understand the astrology in West Bezanozano only from the perspective of already built objects and rituals I have attended. Learning from the inside needs working *with* an astrologer to develop his skills as deep as possible. Observation is not enough. Doing astrology is the only way.

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<sup>19</sup> Mattheeuws, 'Reading the Future in the Land', pp. 205-9.