

# Several Types of Obsolete Madagascan Pottery

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**B**ECAUSE of its insularity, the island of Madagascar has preserved, as if in a sanctuary, survivals that have disappeared in the homeland of the protoculture. This observation can be made for certain facts in the language as well as for material culture remains.

Present Madagascan pottery and pottery of the nineteenth century retain morphological types that have been in use for centuries. For example, note the duality in cooking vessels: a globular cook pot is used for meat, fish, and vegetables, while a cook pot with a flat bottom is designed and used essentially for cooking rice.

The technological regression that seemed to affect Madagascan pottery since at least two centuries ago (Vérin and Boulfroy 1964) continues until today in the quality of the manufactured goods and the variety of forms. Three types of objects that are still in use from the nineteenth century have actually almost disappeared. They are the footed plate, the vessel with vertical side walls slightly enlarged at the bottom, and the oblique bowl called *tasitasy* by the Bezanozano. (To simplify the text, illustrated artifacts (Fig. 1–Fig. 5) are referred to by alphabetical identification, rather than the laboratory catalogue numbers that also appear on the drawings.)

## FOOTED PLATES

The most beautiful footed plates were discovered at Vohitrandriana on Lake Alaotra, an eighteenth-century site that was destroyed in the nineteenth century by the Merina invasion. L. Molet discovered a fragment of a plate in 1956 and thought it was the cover of a jar used as an urn (see Vérin 1962). Actually, the upper parts of nineteenth-century jar covers have high, pointed hollow handles. A jar cover fragment might be mistaken for a footed plate base that had been accidentally sectioned in the middle of the tabular support.

At the time of the 1963 excavations at Vohitrandriana, in which a certain number of pieces were discovered (Fig. 1), I was hesitant about what significance these objects should be given (Battistini and Vérin 1966). The pieces somewhat resemble but seem a bit larger

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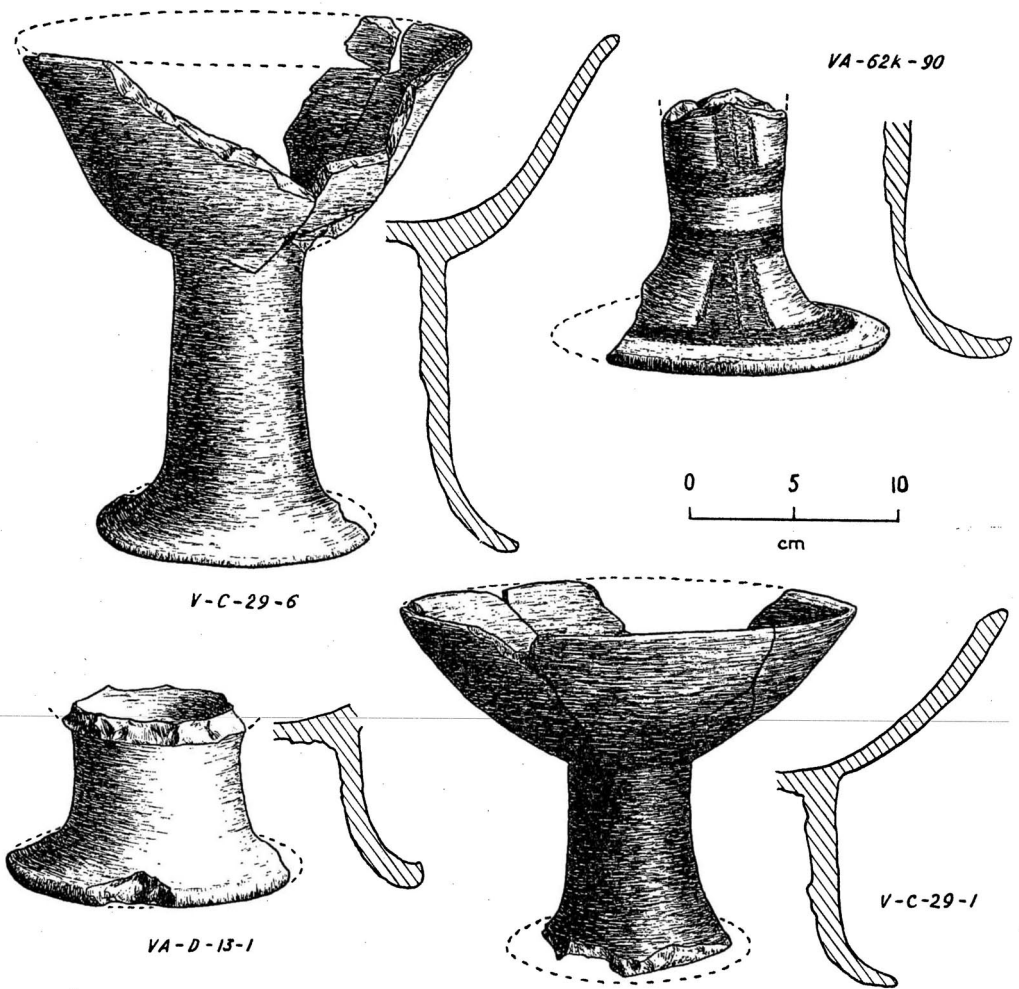


Fig. 1 Footed plates from Vohitrandriana (Lake Alaotra).

than incense burners that are found in many regions of the island; besides, their interior decorations are not in accord with the burning of the essences incense burners are made to consume.

According to a personal communication from J. T. Hardyman, the Sihanaka footed plates that certain old people of the region of Imerimandroso still remember go back to a tradition of pottery that François Martin alluded to in the seventeenth century. A translation of his notes:

The inhabitants were very curious about pottery; in the same house of which I speak, there was pottery in vase form of three different sizes, the first ones, which were the largest, were placed on the lowest stage of the shelves, the others, above and by row; everything inside the dwelling was surrounded with pottery, and I believe that there were four or five hundred of these kinds of vases (Froidevaux 1896, p. 40).

I believe that the vases to which Martin referred were precisely footed plates, rather than jars or cooking pots. The ancient hut of King Andrianampoinimerina also has preserved faithfully in Tananarive (in spite of restoration) a series of pottery, of which a large number are plates, on sets of shelves.

Two examples of almost complete footed plates discovered in Vohitrandriana (Fig. 1, *a* and *d*) have a tubular support of 12 cm in height and 3.5 to 6 cm in diameter. The basin is 22 cm in diameter and has a depth of 7 to 9 cm. The foot flares at the base of the support and has a maximum diameter of 16 cm. It is the flared form of this foot that resembles the covers of jars or cooking pots.

One plate has a particularly thick-set aspect (Fig. 1*c*). The foot is 7.5 cm tall with a tubular diameter of 8 cm. Its upper part is missing.

The Sihanaka footed plates (excluding Fig. 1*a* and the tubular support recovered in the dug-out canoe of Didy—not shown on the drawings) whether entirely coated with graphite that gives them a leaden or blackish shade or reddressed in a reddish color, are uniformly covered on the exterior walls of the basin, or they are decorated on the support and the foot with concentric rings and vertical graphited lines that contrast with a bottom coated in red.

Footed plates from Imerina are represented in Fig. 2. The two complete specimens (*a*, *b*) come from the collections of the Palais de la Reine at Tananarive [I wish to thank Madame Randriamboatsimarofy for allowing W. Rajesitera, designer of the figures, to draw them.] The broken specimen (*c*) was uncovered in the site of Angavobe near Carion that was mapped and excavated by the Centre d'Archéologie in April 1966. The three pieces are of well-fired clay covered with graphite, as was the piece from Vohitrandriana (Fig. 1*a*). The dimensions are comparable, as well, since the largest Merina plate is 25 cm in total height and 24.9 cm in maximum diameter in the basin; the measurements correspond within 2 or 3 cm to the height and depth of all the others recovered, except for the plates shown in Fig. 1, *a* and *d*.

The traditions of *Tantaran'ny Andriana* [Traditional book of Merina history] mention footed plates in opposition to others that are less elaborate; the following is a translation:

The plates were of three kinds: those with long feet, those with round feet, and plates in clay. One smeared them in graphite to make them black; the plates in clay were red because this is the color of the earth (Chapus and Dandouau 1953, p. 61).

Pieces found in the caverns of Isandra are represented in Fig. 3. The caverns are 21 km to the west of Fianarantsoa; they were intensely occupied in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Fig. 3*b* is representative of plates with round bases analogous to the pieces mentioned for Imerina by the *Tantaran'ny Andriana*. Fig. 3*d* is the most elaborate plate, since its base rests on a castellated support more than 4 cm high. Fig. 3*a* (which is shown with the largest part turned upside down) might remind one morphologically of the footed plates from Antsihanaka and Imerina, if its tubular part were closer to the ground. In the upside-down position shown, it is perfectly stable and seems to have been effectively made to be set on this tubular extremity. The design has been used for the covers of jars, so that when the vessel with water is uncovered, the cover must be placed with its handle below, in order not to touch the ground and later dirty the water when the piece is replaced in position on the jar. The purpose of this design was suggested to me by J. Dez who recorded an analogy near Soamanandrany in the Vakinankaratra. There, for the cooking pots and the jars (a translation follows) "the handle of the cover is called *tongotra*, foot, because one is able to place the

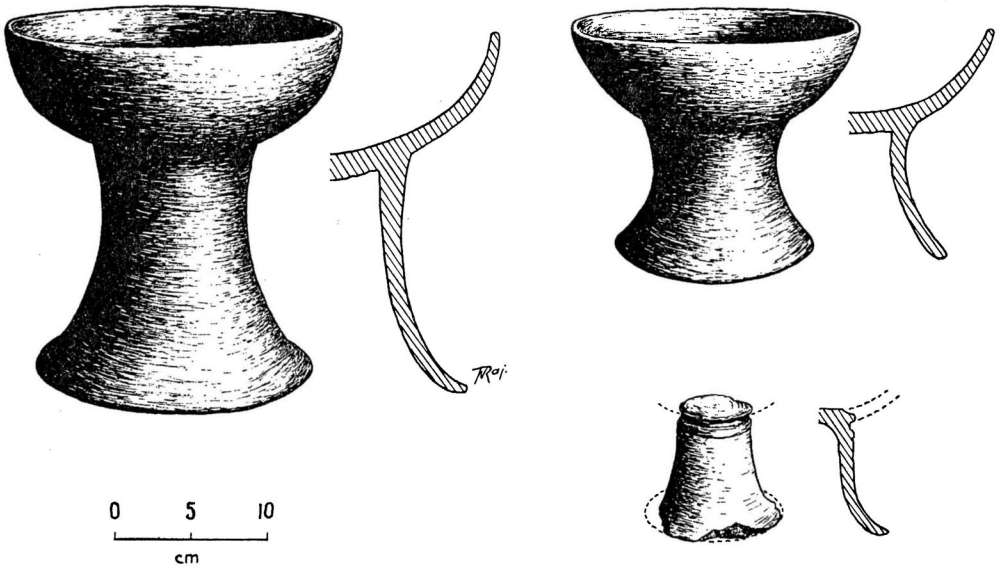


Fig. 2 Footed plates from Imerina: a, b, Palace of the Queen Collection; c, Angavobe

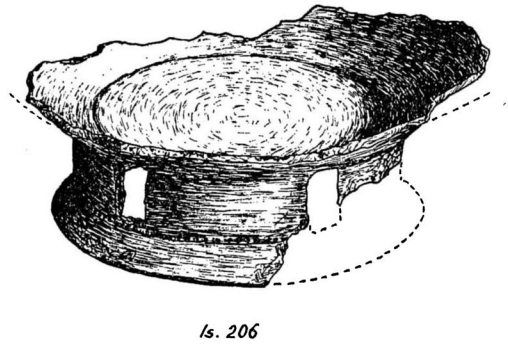
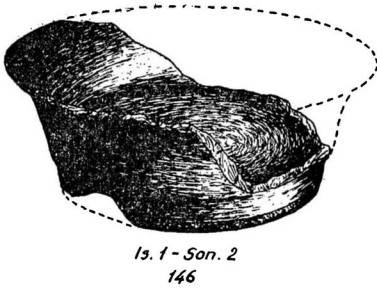
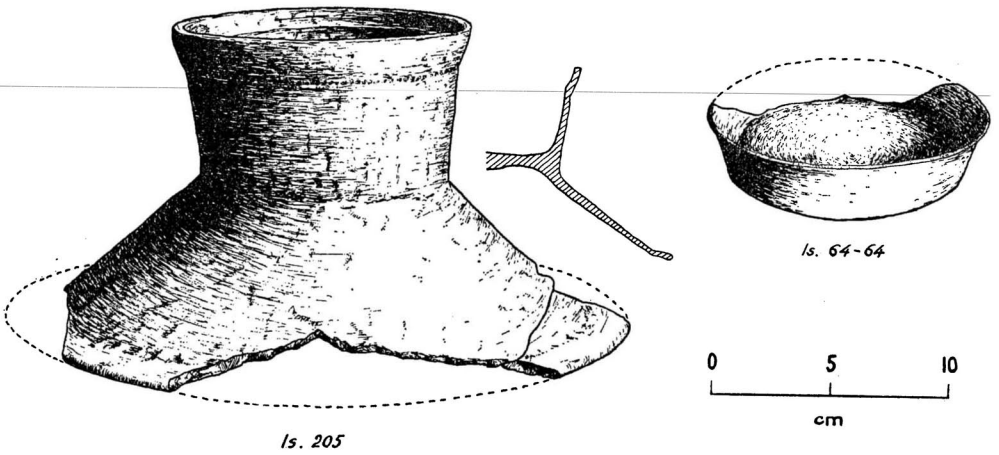


Fig. 3 Pieces found in the caverns of Isandra.

cover in an upside-down position resting on its handle; it is then used as a sort of basin set on a foot; this process also avoids having the rim of the cover become soiled by touching the ground (Dez 1965, p. 55). Dez pointed out, moreover, in a personal report, that the interior cup of the *tongoira* was formerly used as an oil lamp. This is not an isolated case, since Dubois pointed out the utilization in Betsileo of a broken cover whose handle was transformed into a primitive lamp (Dubois 1938).

#### VASES WITH VERTICAL WALLS AND ENLARGED BASES

Vases with vertical walls and enlarged bases are known among the Betsileos and among the Tanala of the north (Zafimaniry) and of the south (Ikongo). See Fig. 4.

The vase shown in Fig. 4a was uncovered at the same time as the bowl shown in Fig. 5b on the mountain of Mahafalykely in western Ambodiara-Sakorihy. It was placed near the sepulcher of a king who was rejected from the ancestral *kibory* (collective tomb). The piece was given to me by a descendent of the royal family. These two objects are all the more interesting as R. Linton pointed out the disappearance of the manufacturing of pottery at the moment of his inquiry and that this ancient industry was only remembered by adults and old people (Linton 1933).

Fig. 4a is a piece carefully made that was covered with graphite and whose decor is composed of rays arranged on its vertical wall between two circles of triangular impressions. The vase shown in Fig. 4c was bought among the Zafimaniry of the region of Ambohitrandriana. It was preserved in a house since a very ancient time. It is different from the vase in Fig. 4a in size—21.5 cm high compared to 16.4 cm—and by its absence of body. But there are some similarities in the two objects even though the base of the Zafimaniry piece is more swollen and the upper walls slant in. The vase shown in Fig. 4d is equally a Zafimaniry vase from the same region. The drawing is made from a photograph by R. Mallet taken in a rock shelter for burials in the region of Ambohitrandriana (Ambositra Prefecture). I am ignorant of its dimensions, but its form is very similar to the other Zafimaniry piece.

The vase shown in Fig. 4b was removed from a cavity in the grottos of Isandra not far from the spot where the vase shown in Fig. 3a was found (see Vérin et al. 1965, p. 253, Site 8). In the cavity there were several crumbled fragments of long bones, certain signs of a burial. The piece, of a fairly constant diameter, is rather rough and its decor is composed of two parallel circumferences of impressions.

Another fragment of a vase with a vertical wall was discovered at the surface in the grottos of Isandra. It belonged to a piece 11 cm high only 0.5 cm thick; its external wall is decorated with painted vertical lines grouped in threes. The Isandra vases are close to the pieces identified as D 46-2 that J. Faublee illustrates in *Ethnography of Madagascar* (Faublee 1946, p. 49). The object comes from the Museum of Man (Section B. Delorm); it was found in a Betsileo sepulcher. One is able to make the following observations concerning the Betsileo and Tanala vases:

1. In the regions concerned, they appeared regularly on sepulchers.
2. Their name and their usage are up until now totally unknown.

The vases' association with the sepulchers would lead one to think that they had some ceremonial function: for example, to contain alcohol offered to the deceased on their tombs. However, it is more reasonable to think that the vases were of some use to the living; perhaps they held drink or honey, and so would have been placed next to the deceased with other

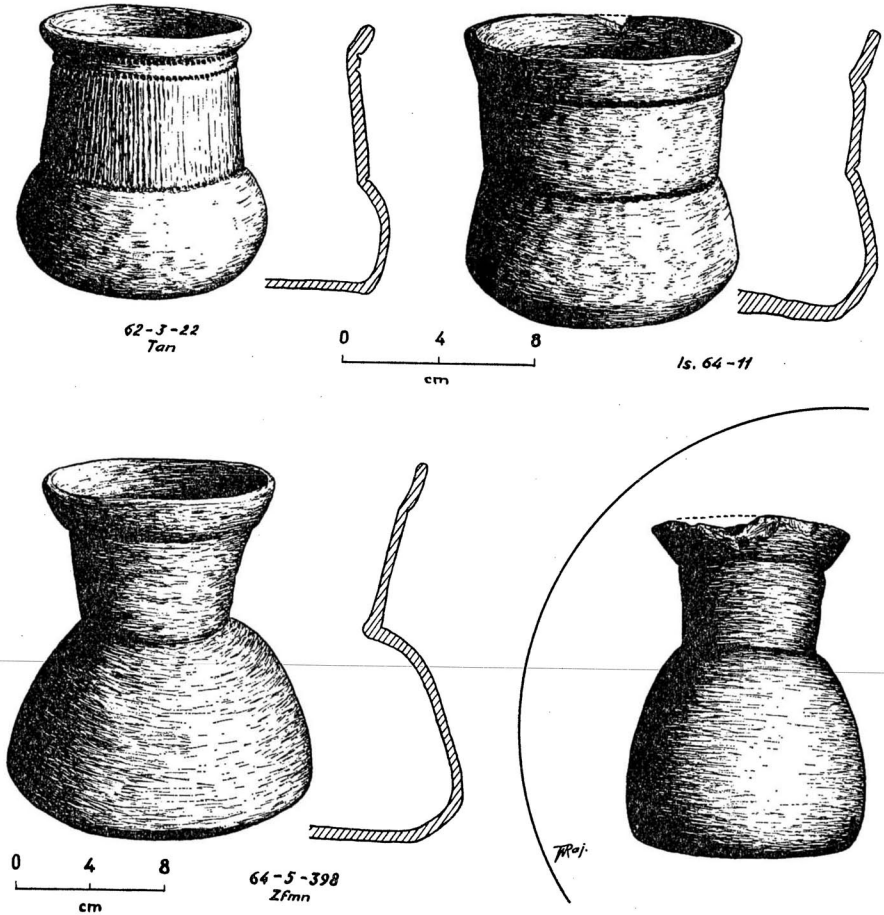


Fig. 4 Vases with vertical walls and enlarged bases; *d* is drawn from a photo in a burial cave of Ambohitrandriana.

objects that were dear to him at the time of his death. This interpretation is moreover corroborated for the Tanala sepulcher by the presence of a machete that must have belonged to the person interred there.

### BOWLS

Four pieces are shown in Fig. 5 that were collected among the Bezanozano of the region of Mandialaza by R. Rason, technical assistant at the Département des Sciences Humaines. It carries the name of *tasitasy* and is still used occasionally at the time of traditional sacrifices. It has no polish or decor. (The word *tasitasy* cannot have come from French, but must have originally come from an Arab word that came to Madagascar at the same time as the Islamic pottery.)

The form of the Bezanozano *tasitasy* seems to be a misunderstanding of the bowl from

Vohémar shown in Fig. 5*a*, which in turn was copied by the local artisans from Islamic bowls or Chinese bowls that were imported in this area up until the eighteenth century. The Vohémarian bowl, that without a doubt was considered to be a poor substitute for the pieces sought for importation, does not have any coating or decor. The Tanala bowl, Fig. 5*b*, comes from the same site as the vase with painted walls, has its interior edge graphited and strewn with punctate or linear impressions. The fourth object of the plate was drawn from a photograph taken in a rock shelter in the region of Vohitrandriana in the country of Zafimaniry. It has a ribbed aspect and its firing seems to have been particularly well done.

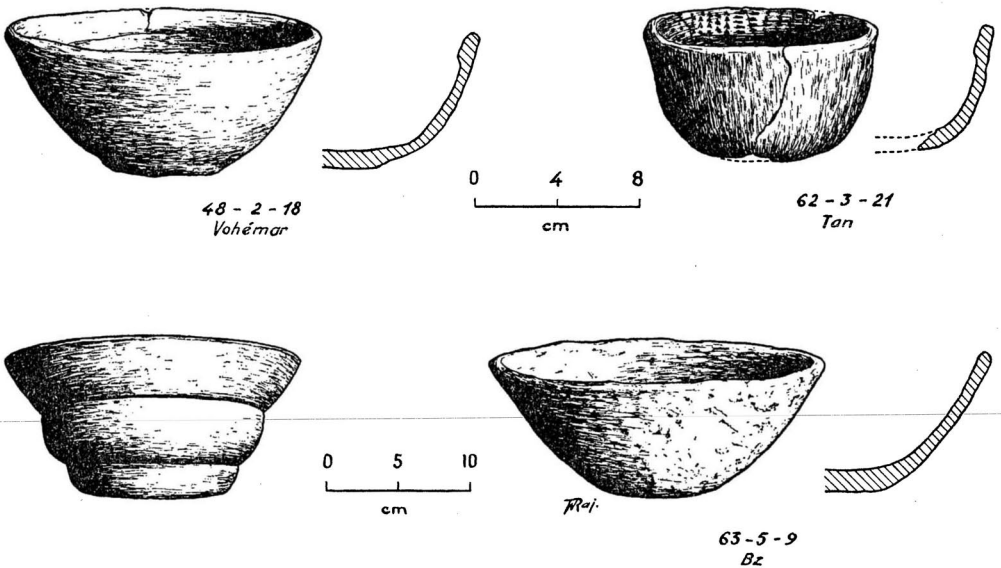


Fig. 5 Bowls from: *a*, Vohémar; *b*, Tanala; *c*, the Vohitrandriana region of Zafimaniry; *d*, the Mandialaza region, collected among the Bezanozano.

### SUMMARY

In summary, among the traditional pottery still existing in Madagascar, footed plates and vases with vertical sides belong to the most ancient forms. On the contrary, bowls without a doubt were copied from Islamic, Chinese, and even European models. These three types are now becoming completely obsolete in the remaining areas where they survive (bowls) or have completely disappeared (footed plates and vases with vertical sides).

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