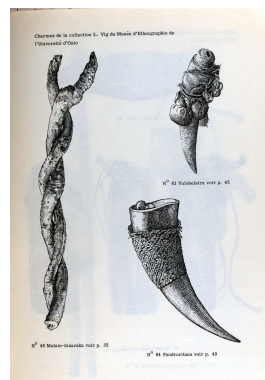


**Lars Vig-the ethnographer.** By Aase Vig Berget,  
(translated by Alvar Berget, 2007)



**Nr 48 Malain-kisaraka, see page 32 in CHARMES  
Spécimens de magie malgache . Photo: ©KHM/UiO**



Lars Vig was the first European to carry out a profound study of Malagasy religious ideas. According to Jean-Pierre Domenichini: "It was not until the newly arrived missionary, Lars Vig, had the originality of directing his studies towards the field of religion."<sup>1</sup>

And Pierre Vérin: "But in particular, he was one of the first to understand the nature of that supernatural dialogue which Malagasy Man maintains with the forces that dominate him."<sup>2</sup>

To understand the ethnographer/ missionary and the interplay of relationships that helped him succeed, one might do well to look at the time in which he lived: The process of national emancipation from Denmark and Sweden made a strong impact on Norway. People became aware of the unique characteristics of their own culture, and of a legacy from before the union with Denmark which was preserved in local traditions. Artists and folklorists, like Asbjørnsen and Moe, were inspired to seek this out among the rural population. Travelling far and wide in the southern part of the country, they tried to make people tell them their myths, legends, folk-tales and proverbs. From their research, they made a wonderful collection of stories.

So, here we find the idea of going from village to village in the Masinandrana and Antsirabe district making people tell stories from the past or describe customs that still were a part of their life. Here, we also find the method of field-study in use, long before Malinowski. At this time, the rural areas in Vakinankaratra and Betsileo were for the most part still untouched by outside influence. Even after the Queen and Prime Minister were baptised in 1869 and ordered the people to build churches, the impact of the central government were minimal at Masinandrana. Stories and customs handed down from the ancestors were intact, and sorcerers still practiced their divination and magic.

As "graven images" were now forbidden, Ranavalona II had ordered the destruction of fetishes and images of deities, something that drove traditional worship more or less underground. A missionary arriving to collect forbidden objects and asking questions naturally appeared suspicious. When it came to sorcerers, they had to hold back secrets connected to their magical art. They would often tell only what they thought the Europeans would expect them to say. Lars Vig, fully aware of their reservations, had to cross-check all information which he had managed to get from them, in order to confirm its authenticity. With this in mind, he developed a large network of informants. As he already lived in daily contact with the population, it became easy for him to win their trust. With his friendly, easy-going manner he found it easy to break the ice with people - from old ladies, his joking porters, village chiefs, magicians, and old sages. When he spoke of his own religious views, he inspired people to explain what they believed in, often in terms of a debate. In him, they had

<sup>1</sup> Domenichini, J.P : LES DIEUX AU SERVICE DES ROIS ; CNRS, PARIS 1985, page 13

<sup>2</sup> Foreword by Pierre Vérin in Vig, Lars : SUR LA FEMME MALGACHE, Solum/Harmattan 2003

met a man who would listen to them with an unusual attention! And, he was even present at ceremonies of worship, and actual magical practice.

The teachers college gave him an excellent opportunity to find informants amongst the students, who even knew how to write. These men, coming from all levels of society and from different parts of the island, were a representative cross-section of the population at the time. Lars Vig made use of the fortunate situation, extending his method of questions, distributing notebooks to his students. An extensive collection of valuable material still, to a great extent, lies unused and well preserved in the mission archives (NMS Arkiv) in Stavanger. It appears that quite a few manuscripts may have been lost, as Lars Vig has not by far made use of all the material which he collected and wrote down.

As mentioned, Lars Vig based his scientific writing on notes written in Malagasy by his informants, or written down by himself based on oral traditions. From 1892 unto his death in 1913, Lars Vig published his research in a series of articles. Some of it was published in mission journals or Scandinavian church journals. All was written in Norwegian, and at that time, very little was translated to other languages for a greater readership. Later, B. Hübsch , E. Fagereng, O. Chr. Dahl and Aase Vig Berget translated his works into French.

In addition to textual information, Lars Vig also collected objects of ethnographic interest, such as the large collection of 128 fetishes, which others at his time would have burnt up. Lars Vig had this collection placed at the Museum of Mission in Stavanger in 1896, before he, in 1907, had them transferred to the Ethnographic Museum in Oslo, - where one even today can watch them. This Museum (Kulturhistorisk museum UiO) has now photographed the entire collection, so it can be displayed at the Lars Vig web sites. The 128 objects were numbered and described by him in a catalogue. The first version from 1896 was made more complete in 1907. In 1969, the Ethnographic Museum in Oslo had the catalogue translated into French, giving it the title "Charmes. Spécimens de magie malgache".



### **The handwritten catalogue of 1896 and the book « Charmes » of 1969**

Photo: NMS Arkiv

One might, well enough, ask why on earth would a missionary become so fascinated by paganism that he would make a fairly probing study of it? And no doubt, his research took his attention more and more; even to the point where it inspired him to do objective scientific research. Simply, perhaps, because he was a man with a passion for knowledge, just like a

real scientific researcher? Anyway, his study of Malagasy culture was directly linked to his work as a missionary. He shared of his knowledge primarily to his colleagues at the yearly missionaries conferences. He was asked to do this, in the service of preaching the Gospel. Lars Vig was convinced of the fact that it was necessary to know the world view and values of the Malagasy people in order to better introduce the Gospel to them. This attitude is significant to an ethnographer-missionary. The Catholics had already made attempts at adjusting to the Natives' ideas of the world. For the Protestants, the knowledge of language became a way to learn to know the natives conceptions. As soon as the British arrived in 1820 they started translating the Bible into Malagasy, and with good help from the Norwegians completed it in 1887.

Lars Vig's work as an ethnographer-missionary may also be considered in terms of teaching. Coming from a tradition of popular education, these pioneer missionaries actually came to Madagascar to teach the "good news" to the pagans. Like other missionary teachers, Lars Vig does not appear to be aware of the paradox of such an undertaking; to preserve, by his writing, those religious traditions which the missionaries wanted to fight and replace with their own.



**BOKY.** Six of the 10 books by Lars Vig which Domenichini used for his thesis : **LES DIEUX AU SERVICE DES ROIS.** Photo: NMS Arkiv