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The literature in the anthropology of religion has queried not only how to define religion but also whether religion can be defined at all and whether, as an object, it is a product of the modern state. Insofar as there is some truth to the latter (Asad, 1993; 2003), religion is, in part, constituted by means of law, but simultaneously as something that is constituted to stand at arm’s length from the law. Hence, it is no straightforward matter to describe the relationship between religion and law—as though the law could readily interfere in religious disputes or religion in legal ones (cf. Kirsch and Turner, 2009). When I began to write, I had in mind to contrast this relationship between religion and law in the modern state (“secularism”) with the relationship pertaining in a society in which law and religion were not disembedded from a social whole, in this case a sacred monarchy. The problem in the monarchy was not the separation between religion and law, however convoluted, but the lack of distinction between them. If we begin not with the modern state and, hence, not with the way law circumscribes religion, but with the sacred monarchy and, hence, with the constitution of and contestation over the sacred, then the picture looks rather different. In both models, religion and law are inextricably entangled; one starts with features intrinsic to law, whereas the other starts with features that (it claims) are intrinsic to religion. In so doing, it is a point of similarity rather than a difference that is marked across the secular/nonsecular division.

The central theme of this chapter is the imposibility or near impossibility of reaching a satisfactory resolution in certain kinds of disputes. These are not resolvable in the kind of polity, call it, uneasily, a sacred monarchy, that I describe here, nor, I venture, in the kind of social fields, call them,
uneasily, religions, that are the subject of so much current excitement and discourse. I briefly review two conflicts—in effect, two distinct kinds of conflict—in the sacred monarchy: first, a long-standing factional split and second concerning appropriate governance of the main shrine. I use each to make a slightly different point and illustrate how they remain interminable—unless one considers either succession—definitively replacing one contender or one form of authority by another—or secession—a permanent splitting of the contending parties—to be forms of closure. Neither (suppression of) “voice” nor “exit” of this kind (transformations in time and space, respectively) are forms of “resolution” in the sense of fairness, compromise, or mediation. 4

The sacred monarchy is that of the Sakalava polity of Boina in northwest Madagascar. 5 I write “sacred monarchy” rather than “sacred kingship” because reigning monarchs are often women. From the origin of the polity around 1700, neither religion nor law were institutions disembedded from the political and social whole. Yet today of course, the monarchy is encapsulated within the secular state of Madagascar and, hence, is subject to similar kinds of legal circumscription as religion in Europe. Sakalava are state citizens and subject to state law and institutions. Many are Christian or Muslim, while others declare that they are neither and yet (as Asad would appreciate) do not explicitly identify their attachment to ancestral practice as a “religion.” In fact, many Christians and Muslims also participate in “ancestral practice.”

The most vivid manifestation of attachment is spirit possession, which occurs not through conversion but through practical experience, whether it is a matter of particular spirits choosing to manifest themselves in the body of a particular person, who thereby becomes a medium, or through solicitation, deference, or other forms of social interaction people have with spirits manifest in the bodies of their kin or neighbors. The spirits, tromba, are distinct social actors and are (for the most part) deceased members of the royal clan; the earlier their generation, the more sacred they are. Spirits collect funds to support their respective ancestors as well as the living monarch and the ongoing reconstruction of sacred enclosures, requesting contributions from their mediums and clients. In recent decades, mediumship has become increasingly widespread, both in sheer numbers and in the kinds of people who become possessed, including many non-Sakalava throughout Madagascar and in Mayotte, the Comoros, Réunion, and metropolitan France. The financial contributions of the latter are substantial.

With the conquest of Boina by the Merina in the early nineteenth century and then the French conquest of the entire island, the power and autonomy of Sakalava were drastically curtailed. The following vignette illustrates a contemporary manifestation of subjection to the state. At the end of the large annual ceremony, the Great Service (fanompoabe), held
in 2007, the officiating but still provisional monarch was consulting with several ancestral diviners who had manifested themselves in spirit mediums who had come from the countryside for the ceremony. The living show great respect and deference to spirits, but this time the consultation was suddenly interrupted when the king’s cell phone rang and he took the call. It was from a senior government official with whom it was even more important that he remain on good and deferential terms than with the spirits. Nevertheless, despite this power to interrupt, there remains some confusion on the part of successive governments as to how to handle the ancestral polity and in what respects to treat it as primarily a political, religious, or cultural institution. While there has been little consistency, many state officials would prefer not to bear responsibility for resolving the polity’s internal affairs, notably the disputes among factions of the royal clan concerning proprietorship of the ancestral relics and shrine that form the axis of contemporary practices, where interference could have profound public repercussions.

**WHO HAS RIGHTS TO THE SACRED?**

The relics of the founding ancestors of Boina are housed at the Doany Ndramisara (the shrine of Ndramisara) on the outskirts of the city of Mahajanga. They are visited by devotees throughout the year and especially at the annual ceremony during which the reliquaries are bathed (Lambek, 2002). The Great Service attracts thousands of people, and a good deal of money and other gifts pour in to the ancestors and the shrine that houses them. The relics provide for the well-being of their descendants, subjects of the monarchy, and other devotees. The relics are equally a responsibility; their continuing sanctity and power are understood to be dependent upon the respect and proper treatment they receive. They are the most sacred objects in northwest Madagascar, and their sanctity is preserved through the means by which they are housed, cared for, and protected from a variety of pollution. They are sacred precisely in the Durkheimian sense of being “set apart.”

As sacred objects, the relics are the sort of things that anthropologists refer to as inalienable possessions. However, this begs the question, inalienable from whom? While all devotees, especially spirit mediums and active custodians of the shrine, assume certain rights of access to the relics, members of the royal clan—that is, descendants of the persons manifest in the relics—claim a special relationship. Indeed, because members of this clan do not fully die but continue in a half-life of ancestorhood, in which they are capable of manifesting themselves in the bodies of spirit mediums, all the descendants of the senior ancestors, both living and semideceased (hence ancestors themselves), could be said to share in the rights and obligations toward them. In particular, it is a living descendant,
the reigning monarch of the region, who oversees the shrine and who is the immediate recipient of the gifts brought to the Great Service. Because descent among Sakalava moves through both women and men, producing numerous collateral lines, royal succession is not straightforward; there are multiple claimants to the throne and to responsibility for the relics. Hence, the inalienability of the relics from the royal clan and from the people (vahoaka) goes hand in hand with a great deal of conflict, especially between two factions of the clan who never resolved ancient claims of succession, both of whom claim rights to and responsibility over the relics and accuse the other of alienating the relics from them. Indeed, since the French colonial period and explicitly continuously since at least 1956, the two factions have been involved in a struggle with one another. For a time, they established a division of ritual labor, each side having complementary rights and responsibilities at the shrine, enacted and displayed during the annual ceremony. However, this was followed by accusations of arson, theft, counter-theft, mishandling, and misappropriation and included the construction and eventual destruction of a second, competing shrine.

Not being able to resolve the conflict themselves and seeking any means to win, the two factions each turned to the state for assistance. During the colonial period, they hired French lawyers, and they have been engaged in legal actions, appeals, and counter-appeals ever since. However, the modern state has been no more successful than the ancestral polity at resolving the conflict. Marie-Pierre Ballarin (2000) has shown in fascinating detail all the reasons why recourse to the courts has failed. These include cultural misunderstandings (e.g., whether the relics are to be treated in the law as objects or persons); confusion or even outright contradiction between judicial and executive or administrative pronouncements and actions; use of multiple levels of the court system (regional, national, appellate, etc.); political interference in the judicial process; questions about whether the appropriate jurisdiction is one of customary law and, if so, what are the correct customary precepts; and most of all, the fact that whenever a judgment has gone against one or the other of the two factions, they have been able simply to ignore it.  

Resolutions by the courts have been ineffective and also not fully authoritative because their independence and disinterestedness are always questioned. The conflict has, thus, been interminable; there have been de facto winners and losers, but the dispute intensifies again when the means become available to the aggrieved party.

In sum, the fact that relics are inalienable, in principle, makes their disposition all the more contentious insofar as there are competing parties who consider the relics inalienable from them in particular. In the face of this, my argument is neither how religion helps solve nonreligious
disputes, nor how the law helps solve religious disputes, but how both “religion” (here the ancestral polity) and the law (here the judicial system of the Malagasy state) appear to be inadequate to the task of resolving the dispute at issue. I suspect this is true of disputes over the sacred in general. This is because sacred objects (or words, texts, etc.) are both inalienable and foundational; it is precisely the sacred objects themselves that confer legitimacy to do things like adjudicate and resolve conflicts. Because both Sakalava factions claim rights over the vehicles of sanctification that are themselves essential to effective and authoritative resolution, this case illustrates something more general. If, as argued by so many Durkheimian anthropologists, the performance of certain kinds of rituals can resolve conflict or affirm group unity, what happens when the conflict occurs over the right to perform, officiate, or participate in the rituals in the first place?

Theoretically, a concept of the sacred as described here precedes any kind of institutional distinction between religion, politics, and the law; it is, rather, the very ground on which such distinctions might be legitimated (Derrida, 1989–1990). Hence, neither religion nor the law is adequate to resolve conflicts with respect to sanctity (although religion may be able to restore sanctity when it has been displaced or eroded by conflict). In this view, both “religion” and “law” draw from the property of sanctity. As elucidated by Roy Rappaport (1999) and summarized here, ritual produces a kind of performative truth and certainty, and this truth, encoded in what he calls “ultimate sacred postulates” (but that for Sakalava are the relics themselves), is used to legitimate or sanctify more mundane forms of utterance, including statements and adjudications. Sanctity provides the contract underlying the contract, so to speak; that is, it provides the grounds from which more substantive or particular truth claims and laws are able to draw their authority. In the United States, this is exemplified by the act of swearing in witnesses with a hand placed on the Bible and in the phrase “In God we trust” on US currency. God is the ultimate and inalienable guarantor of the validity of American finance and law. Thus, despite the ostensible separation of church and state, at a more basic level, there is a connection (cf. Bellah, 1991 [1967]).

In Rappaport’s model (1999, pp. 441–445), a distinctive feature of the most sacred postulates is that, while deeply meaningful, they are relatively informationless, that is, they are socially unspecific. Sanctity best serves the law by remaining neutral or disinterested with respect to the outcome of specific cases or political platforms. When religion fails to maintain this neutrality by overspecifying and substantiating the sacred, it suffers from idolatry.

If religion, in the sense of sanctification, helps ensure the authority of the law by rendering possible the enactment of valid forms of adjudication
and dispute resolution, Rappaport’s argument leaves open the question of what happens when the sacred postulates themselves are in question. Indeed, in Rappaport’s formulation, the absence of information (substantive content) in the reiterated postulates renders them unquestionable and, hence, unlikely to be contested. What can arise are conflicts over the felicity conditions of their invocation (Austin, 1965): who has the right to utter the postulates, in which circumstances, with what manner and means, and so forth. Indeed, the conflicts I describe are precisely over the felicity conditions surrounding the maintenance of the relics, not over their sanctity. The more closely or directly the conflict is centered on what is ultimately sacred, the more we might call it a specifically religious conflict, but equally, the more difficult the means of resolution will be and the more likely the conflict will result either in silencing or replacing one authority with another (“succession”) or in schismatic splitting (“secession”). Secession—the peeling away of new sects or denominations, whether by expulsion or design—has been a characteristic feature of Christianity from its inception.

In sum, the central issue raised here is, If the sacred underpins the legitimacy of the law and hence the authority to resolve conflicts, what happens when conflicts arise over the sacred itself? What means are there to resolve conflicts over sanctity?

**Mechanical Division, Secession, and Conflict over the Relics**

Durkheim (1965) famously described law as the nervous system of society and an index of social solidarity. Hence, he felt it would manifest differently according to whether a society were organized primarily by means of a mechanical or an organic division of labor. Anthropologists understood African chiefdoms and precolonial states largely as segmentary systems, maintained primarily by means of mechanical solidarity (likeness or equivalence of the parts). I argue, however, that the Sakalava polity can only be understood if one recognizes the complex intersection of the division of labor along at least three dimensions. I use the mechanical division to analyze the first conflict over the relics, but then complicate the picture with respect to what I call organic and particularist divisions. “Labor” itself is an appropriate concept as it is very close to the Sakalava terms for ritual (*fanompoa*, *asa*), formed the main subject of colonial struggle (Feeley-Harnik, 1991), and serves as the way Sakalava understand their polity as a distribution of tasks among distinct “kinds” of people (Lambek, 2002).

Sakalava locate sanctity in living and especially deceased members of the royal clan, particularly those who have reigned. The most sacred are the founding ancestors of the polity, that is, those with genealogical
precedence. They are manifest both permanently as relics and periodically in the bodies and performances of spirit mediums. The power of the relics as persons is manifest for Sakalava in their immobility, silence, and perdurance. However, as objects, it is a property of the relics that they can be removed or destroyed. Their current location is intensely contested.

I was first directed to Mahajanga in 1992 by a Malagasy intellectual who hoped my research might help resolve or at least bring clarity to the disposition of the relics (Lambek, 1997). The conflict opposes two factions of royal descendants, each claiming rights over the relics and the right to officiate at the annual ceremony during which the relics are bathed and prestations flow in to the living member of the royal clan who holds authority at the shrine. The Bemihisatra faction has held the relics since it seized them from the Bemazava in 1973, and its members have been worried ever since that they will be removed in the same way. The Bemazava maintain their own shrine a few kilometers away, bereft of relics.

The case had been taken repeatedly to state authorities, first those of the colonial state and later those of the independent republic. Officials of both the judicial and executive branches at both regional and national levels, some of whom were related to members of one or the other or both factions, sometimes took sides but were never able to resolve things consistently, completely, permanently, or authoritatively. Although the courts had, on more than one occasion, sided with the Bemazava, the relics remained firmly in the hands of the Bemihisatra, who used increasingly stronger measures to prevent seizure by their rivals. The Bemihisatra power came from several sources, including better connections to government officials and a much larger number of mediums to channel money.

The conflict originally seemed, to my friend, an unusual and painful situation, badly in need of resolution, and to me a particular and contingent event. However, in the face of its continuity and the emergence of a subsequent conflict within the Bemihisatra faction itself, I have come to realize that the state of affairs might not be exceptional and to appreciate that rivalry is an intrinsic feature of the system. I might have known this from the outset had I attended more carefully to the political anthropology of Africa, especially the work of Max Gluckman. Reading Gluckman today is a humbling experience, even if one rejects his more extreme statements about the functions of conflict and rebellion (Gluckman, 1963a). As Gluckman might have predicted, the main conflict over the relics was not resolvable, and neither fairness nor justice, as both Sakalava and I understand them, has been a possible comprehensive outcome of the dispute.

Drawing on the work of fellow Africanists, Gluckman argued that political conflict was intrinsic to the logic of segmentation and observed two ways that it might be addressed: the first being secession or fission and the second recurrent struggles over succession, symbolically expressed in
“rituals of rebellion.” Sakalava correspond to his model insofar as in the past conflicts over succession could be resolved by secession: unsuccessful siblings could hive off and possibly develop ancestors and relics of their own. If they could not take the older relics with them, they remained in principle subordinate or deferential to the branch that possessed them, but they could attempt to steal the relics or defeat the segment that held them (in effect, the same thing).

Secession became more difficult, if not impossible, for reasons having to do with the power of the encapsulating state and internal population movement and growth. Processes of both mechanical cohesion and division (fusion and fission) have been constrained by the colonial and postcolonial states’ attempts to fix group identities and boundaries of territorial jurisdiction, thereby limiting both the expansion of the ancestral polity and the hiving off of junior segments. The inability to move to new frontiers or conquer other polities perpetuates internal conflict and competition, rendering such conflict endemic. In effect, the curtailment of secession as a means of resolution has put more pressure on succession. It has also left these conflicts subject to the legal system of the encompassing state, but insofar as that state has lacked the means, will, or ability to resolve these conflicts, they remain simmering. Thus, the situation in Boina is that of a kind of incomplete fissioning. It is incomplete because there is only one set of sacred relics, and the very inability to hive off and form autonomous polities increases the value and attention placed on them.

Mechanical solidarity and conflict among Sakalava refer primarily to the segmentary structure of the royal clan, which is remembered in no small part through spirit possession and which reproduces each link in the complex genealogy (Lambek, 2002). Norms of kinship play a significant role because they simultaneously provide the basis for conflict and the ideology for solidarity within the clan. In Sakalava mythopraxis, particularly as exemplified in the relations displayed among ancestral spirits when they possess people, conflict is expressed as a matter of rivalry and jealousy among siblings, as well as between fathers and sons and husbands and wives (similar to Greek mythology and Old Testament narratives). Sakalava addressed sibling rivalry by attempting to reduce the number of births of reigning monarchs (Feeley-Harnik, 1991) and arguing that the key positive kinship relation and, in effect, mode of succession, should be that between mothers and sons (Lambek, 2007). While the mythopraxis helps articulate and interpret factional conflict, it cannot resolve it.

Gluckman argued that mechanical solidarity was reproduced in annual ceremonies, which, as he famously noted and as is also true for the Sakalava Great Service, offer frank expressions of both political order and conflict. In the Sakalava ceremony, the order is found in the way that different constituencies, including neighboring polities, send offerings and representatives. Conflict is represented in the performance of a
highly stylized dance, *rebiky*, representing competing royal siblings from a segmentation dating back to well before the Bemihisatra and Bemazava split (Feeley-Harnik, 1988; Tehindrazanarivelo, 1997). While the annual performance still retains deep political and religious effects and meaning and takes place by means of a careful calibration of forces and interests, conflict is more evident in the actual production than in the symbolic representation. In addition, the state has attempted to resignify it as a manifestation, and ostensibly static display, of “culture.”

If for Gluckman the expression of ceremonial conflict was largely symbolic, real conflict was manifest at succession. The kingship provided a common point of orientation and a source of value; when a ruler died, segments competed for his or her office, an office that simultaneously put them in conflict and united them in service. These insights (without their causal/functionalist assumptions) remain valid for Sakalava, except that in Boina each major faction maintains its own living ruler and line of succession.

**Complicating the Division of Labor**

While the Sakalava polity is certainly characterized by a segmentary or mechanical division of labor that produces fissioning, this is complemented by two other divisions I refer to as organic and particularist (Lambek, 2002). These are particularly manifest in respect to what one could call the ritual or religious domain, but which is also intrinsically political. I suggest that each mode of division produces its own characteristic forms of conflict or competition and raises its own questions and means of resolution. Of course, in practice, as Gluckman recognized, the divisions crosscut and interact with each other. The critical point is that conflicts within the organic division of labor cannot be resolved by fissioning or simple succession to office. Rather, they are resolved either by face-to-face negotiation—coaxing (*mitambitamby*), apology, redress, and compensation—or indirectly by various face-saving measures. In some instances, the offense is so extreme that resolution is not possible. The organic division itself could only be undone by revolution or disinterest.

What I call an organic division of labor is among Sakalava manifestly not constituted along the lines of the distinct institutions familiar to us—religion, law, and so forth. I sketch briefly what is actually a very complex system. The division may be seen in two ways, first between the realms of the living and the partially dead, and the latter composed of ancestors as well as the spirit mediums and the tomb guardians who manifest and care for them. The system is also hierarchical in that it is virtually only members of the royal clan who emerge as ancestors or have permanent guardians at their cemeteries. The servants of both living and dead members of the royal clan are known collectively as “ancestor people” (*razan’olo*)
and are themselves divided into a number of “kinds” (karazaña), each of which once had quite specific obligations. 14 “Kindedness” in this sense is passed on bilaterally, but generally today only one offspring need replace a parent in this role (although other siblings may pass it on to their children in turn). While some “kinds” were formerly slaves and may remain somewhat deferential today, each of them have specific privileges and sources of pride. Most Sakalava are neither primarily members of the royal clan nor “ancestor people,” but as a result of bilateral descent and exogamy, they have genealogical connections to one or more status groups that can be activated.

Crosscutting both hierarchy and the specificity of “kinds of people” is spirit mediumship, as mediums come from all walks of life and levels of society. Mediumship illustrates a third kind of division of labor that I call particularist because mediums work on behalf of the particular ancestors (always more than one) who possess them. Furthermore, each ancestor has his or her own specific tomb guardian and chief medium, as well as particular clients or devotees among the general population. As described elsewhere (Lambek, 1998; 2002), this division enables simultaneous voicing of the distinct historical periods from which the various ancestors come (i.e., when they lived). At moments of debate over procedure, ancestors assert or propose answers derived from their particular historical, political, and, sometimes, psychological perspectives, enabling different kinds of opinions and interests to be heard. At times, their respective interests may be posed against each other, even (and perhaps most saliently) within the body of a single medium. When speaking in the public domain, ancestral spirits have two major concerns—ensuring the sanctity of the shrine (organic) and speaking on behalf of the genealogical segments and positions they represent (mechanical). mediums of one and the same spirit or of closely related ones develop informal working alliances with one another, although these may be undermined by competition over public roles (e.g., having the ear of a ruler) and, increasingly, over access to wealthy transnational clients.

ORGANIC DISSENSION AT THE SHRINE

On May 4, 2009, my Malagasy friend called in some trepidation. He said, in summary, that the shrine in Mahajanga had lost its sacredness. It had been attacked by a large mob and subsequently closed. He doubted the relics were still there. In fact, the conflict concerned unresolved royal succession following the demise of the previous ruler some two years earlier (Lambek, n.d). The “attack” was carried out by the followers of one of the contenders, concerned that the other contender had taken over the shrine illegitimately and frustrated that he refused to negotiate or attend meetings called by the provincial administration. The so-called attackers came...
ostensibly to take back the sacred drum associated with the senior ancestor spirit, Babilahy, who championed their cause. The defenders trampled in the mud this senior spirit’s garments, which had been stored at the shrine. The police eventually stopped the fight and closed down public access to the shrine for a period. Moreover, because blood had been shed (one death), the shrine had become highly polluted. At this point, the ancestors took over. At the request of Babilahy, all the ancestors, from every generation of the genealogy, gathered at the shrine to cleanse and repurify it. Mediums came from the surrounding region and cattle were sacrificed, their blood being the only means to redress the spilling of human blood. I was told the activities took a month to complete.

My friend’s concerns proved premature; the sacredness of the shrine is, in fact, remarkably resilient, but this is thanks less to the members of the royal clan or the shrine managers than to the energy and moral conviction of the spirit mediums. The question of maintaining sanctity in the face of conflict and change had been highly salient throughout my fieldwork (Lambek, 2002). My main consultants were active spirit mediums, and they directed my attention to the growing disquiet among worshippers, especially mediums and shrine servants, about the actions of the reigning monarch and the shrine manager, particularly their increasing authoritarianism, sense of entitlement, and specifically the ways in which they cut corners with respect to the elaborate traditional division of labor. They were also concerned with the lack of transparency over the redistribution of money and resources. Finally, they worried about the ways in which new forms of privilege polluted the shrine (e.g., deferring to state officials and admitting strangers into the sacred precincts).  

Thus, whereas factional conflict concerned who had control over the sacred relics, this conflict concerned the manner in which the relics were cared for and their sanctity preserved. This could not lead to fissioning or civil war because it expressed the organic division of labor; it was a dispute over responsibility and the right way to do things, and consisted primarily of what one could call an ethical disquiet and critique. Ultimately, it concerned the kinds of practices that were necessary to maintain the sanctity and power of the relics themselves against the practical challenges of the present and the tension between short-term and long-term gains. If the relics were polluted or profaned, as some saw it, they lost their ability to establish the truth of things.

Despite the depth of feeling, people were reluctant to express their concerns publicly or to provoke open confrontation with the ruler and the shrine authorities. The relics attracted numerous spirit mediums and worshippers, who told me repeatedly that their allegiance was less to the living ruler than to the ancestors, as manifest primarily in the relics. They said that the factional fighting was restricted to members of the royal clan and had nothing to do with them. The fact that the ruler appeared
to skim off donations to the shrine and to exploit the shrine servants irritated people, but not to the point where they withheld their contributions. They were honoring the ancestors by their donations and sacrifices; as to what the living ruler did with them, they said, *Zahay s’en fou* ("We don’t give a damn"). The living ruler’s wrongdoings would be punished eventually by the ancestors, and it was not for other members of society to interfere.

Thus, people were unwilling to rebel openly, claiming loyalty to the ancestors and the system rather than to any particular living royals, in a manner that calls to mind Gluckman’s argument (following Maine, Evans-Pritchard, and others) concerning the significance of the office relative to the office holder. As John Comaroff (1978, p. 3) said about a Tswana chiefdom, “While they conceive of the chiefship as the epicentre of their political universe, the Tshidi combine an esteem for the office with a highly critical attitude towards its holder. The chief, although entitled to formal respect and ceremonial precedence, is regarded as a fallible human being who may or may not be powerful, and who may rule efficiently or ineptly.” Sakalava hold exactly this view about their monarchs and simultaneously conceive their own action and devotion as directed toward their predecessors, the royal ancestors, irrespective of their ambivalence toward the incumbent.

However, corruption on the part of office holders could not simply be disregarded when it was seen that their actions not only supported their personal affairs at the expense of the community but also insulted the ancestors and, much more seriously, threatened to undermine the entire structure by wearing away the sanctity of the shrine and relics, thereby weakening the ancestors themselves. Among the concerns was the way the shrine manager gave powerful or wealthy guests access to the relics in ways that broke the major taboos associated with the shrine. Thus, the disquiet was not simply about particular office holders, but their impact on the nature of the shrine. In other words, if ancestors are the source of sanctity and grant legitimacy to the acts of living rulers, what happens when acts are permitted that pollute or weaken the ancestors and, hence, threaten the very grounds of sanctity itself? At least such was the concern of the more thoughtful spirit mediums. The rulers might have said that their authority now stemmed from state law; this, however, was hardly the avenue to encourage popular devotion, and hence, they would have miscalculated.

**Voices of the Spirits**

It took me some time to get over the assumption that the ancestral spirits who rose in charismatic spirit mediums could and should assert their points of view, “speak truth to power,” redress wrongdoing, resolve
conflict of this sort, impose sanctions on the miscreants, or serve, as the judicial systems of Western states are supposed to do, as a check and balance to the executive branch. In fact, the spirits and their mediums with whom I worked were careful to avoid interfering explicitly in conflicts among members of the royal family, despite the fact that the living members of the royal clan who were in conflict with one another were all descendants of the more senior spirits. At the same time, each faction and royal protagonist did have access to some loyal mediums, who were thereby also factionalized, even when the mediums of different factions were possessed by the same ancestors. These mediums could, however, lose popular authority and risk being declared impostors if they took sides too clearly. The mediums with whom I worked were often torn between their feelings of support for one protagonist and the need to remain neutral and disinterested.

When spirit mediums disapproved of what living members of royalty were up to, they were often afraid to speak out directly. The ancestral spirits, too, often spoke obliquely or took out their anger on their mediums rather than on the culprits themselves.

Thus, when the shrine managers called upon Babilahy, the senior Bemihisatra ancestral spirit with direct authority over the shrine, to request permission to conduct a renovation of the sacred enclosure and then promptly ignored what the spirit had told them they needed to do in order to purify or sanctify the changes, it was the medium herself who was the victim of the ancestor’s displeasure. She developed a painful swollen cheek, as though she had been slapped. The royal clothing belonging to Babilahy that was stored at the shrine also disappeared. When the clothes were discovered missing, the other ancestral spirits and mediums gathered in support at a night-long ceremony at the shrine during which the spirit was invested with new clothing. This was a showing of great solidarity among the ancestral spirits in the face of the insult perpetrated by the shrine manager, and while it caused the swelling on the medium’s cheek to recede and perhaps restored to the ancestors and the shrine some lost dignity, it did nothing to directly redress or punish the actions of the shrine manager and reigning monarch (Lambek, 2002, pp. 227–230). It illustrated that mediums and devotees are at least as vulnerable to ancestral anger as members of the royal clan. It was only some time after the fact that it was learned, by the medium herself as well as by everyone else, that it was Babilahy (rising in the medium in the absence of any witnesses) who in anger had thrown away his own clothing.

One could argue that in refusing to get directly involved in face-to-face conflicts with the monarch and shrine manager, the mediums were attempting to preserve their distance and the source of their sanctity. In Rappaport’s (1999) terms, they were refusing to resort to specific information or interest (idolatry) and risk the very thing of which they accused
their opponents, namely of undermining the sacred. Indeed, as I have indicated, the larger concern of the more reflective among them was to protect the very basis of sanctity at the shrine. To have reacted too quickly to particular faults or to have taken sides in relatively petty political battles would have weakened ancestral authority and sanctity and been, in effect, self-contradictory.

While specific conflicts could be worked out between the mediums/spirits and shrine managers, it is apparent that over the long-run mediums and spirits serve as both the upholders and manifestations of sanctity. Hence, they do serve as a kind of check to royal power, as ethical watchdogs vis-à-vis the executive branch, and sometimes as vehicles for voicing popular dissent. Although their agency in the political realm is self-limiting, the potential for standing in disagreement with respect to the living rulers is also an intrinsic part of the politico-religious system. Conversely, wise monarchs and managers attempt to keep the ancestors happy, but cannot submit to all their demands. The smooth running of the shrine entails mutual deference and continuous efforts to maintain a balance among the interests of the various constituencies (especially between the present and the past, the short term and the long term, and the contingent and the continuous), but the effect is not to resolve all conflict so much as to leave the spirits some room to voice autonomous and possibly critical opinions.

**CONCLUSION**

If this volume concerns the role of religion in disputes, my own contribution has been to inquire about disputes within religion itself, and especially in contexts where there is no autonomous or effective legislative or juridical body at arm’s length from religion. If sanctity authorizes law, what happens when the conflicts engage sanctity itself?

I have addressed these issues with respect to an ancestral polity within the present-day state of Madagascar, examining, first, conflict over control of sacred relics by competing royal factions, and, second, conflict over the appropriate governance of the shrine at which the relics are housed. I described these as mechanical and organic divisions of labor, respectively, and suggested that the former can be resolved only by secession or succession. Implicitly this raises the question concerning what constitutes “resolution” and what is the “other” to resolution? In the absence of clear succession or secession, this “other” might be continuous squabbling, but it could equally well be conceptualized as the ongoing conduct of political life, as characterized by the ordinary exercise of responsibility. If dispute resolution gives way, on the one side, to political solutions, on the other it defers to ongoing ethical practice (Lambek, 2010). I think that is what characterizes the actions of the spirits and spirit mediums in
the second conflict insofar as it entails tensions between individual and collective interests and between short-term, present-oriented pragmatic solutions and long-term, past-oriented system-maintaining ones, and it requires continuous practical judgment. The guardians of the sacred cannot invest too heavily in politics without thereby undermining the force of sanctity itself.

The first conflict could not be settled because there was no autonomous and authoritative structural position for a neutral mediator beyond the mechanical divisions; mediators who emerged were rapidly factionalized themselves. The second conflict concerns preserving a balance in the organic division of labor and respect for independent, if suitably cultivated, voices. Things became heated when the king and the manager tried to take the spirits and mediums for granted, and the latter were unwilling and unable to be fully silenced.

Although the central theme of this volume concerns the blurring of boundaries as religion becomes increasingly subject to juridification and the law to religious argumentation and idiom, this chapter has analyzed a different kind of social formation in which religion and law have never been fully disembedded in the first place (albeit in a particular postcolonial context). Yet the question of the limits to what constitutes “resolution” might hold for religion more generally. Just as certain kinds of conflicts in polities such as the Sakalava or those described by Gluckman can be resolved only by means of succession or secession, so too for conflicts in what have come to be disembedded and objectified “religions” or religious institutions. When the autonomy or authority of the sacred is contested or eroded, there is no other resolution possible. “Succession” happens when the stronger voice or contestant prevails over the weaker; “secession” happens when one party exits or is forced out to found its own sect or denomination. Serious dissent is only resolved by some kind of revolution or structural transformation, whether with respect to the nature of the sacred itself (hence “religious”) or with respect to the authority or power of the custodians of the sacred (hence “political”). Without revolution, certain disputes are interminable.

**Notes**

1. This chapter was written for the workshop “Religion in Disputes”, held at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale, Germany, October 27–29, 2010, and benefited from insightful comments there as well as at the Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto. I am indebted to the SSHRC, the Canada Research Chairs program, numerous consultants in Madagascar, my host family there, and Jackie Solway and Franz von Benda-Beckmann for extremely helpful suggestions.
2. Deep connections between the law and the sacred are postulated by Agamben (1998) and Derrida (1989–1990), among others. Discussion of their arguments is beyond the scope of this chapter.

3. My title is intended to evoke Freud’s (1937).

4. “Voice” and “exit” are terms borrowed very loosely from Hirschman (1970).

5. I conducted ethnographic research over the course of six visits between 1993 and 2001, and again in 2007 and 2009.

6. Ballarin’s work, conducted in the archives and through interviewing the lawyers and other leading protagonists, corresponds in its event history and general conclusions with my own account, based almost entirely on informal interviews within the community of ancestral practice.

7. As Franz von Benda-Beckmann suggests (personal communication), the very existence of the state avenue may have served to prolong the conflict. The analogy with current disputes over the presidency of Madagascar is striking.

8. Class could be a fourth.

9. Here, I overlook the distinction between the relics—small bones, teeth, hair—and the reliquaries—their ornate containers. For a broader discussion of conflicts arising from materiality, see Keane 1997.

10. Bemazava restrict possession to fewer mediums, conforming more closely to precolonial practice (Lambek, 2006).

11. Analysis of the succession dispute is developed in a separate paper (Lambek, n.d.).

12. In reality, succession obviously cannot operate in this way in every generation. In fact, there are a number of different and potentially conflicting criteria for selecting a new monarch (Lambek, n.d.; Gluckman, 1963c).

13. Gluckman (1963b) observed that fission and fusion needed to be analyzed in relation to one another and pioneered the analysis of crosscutting mechanisms. He also brilliantly analyzed juridical case-based dispute resolution among the Lozi (1955), very different from what is effected by means of cycles of ritual performance. I am unaware of parallel institutions among Sakalava, although, in the past, there must have been the means to resolve such disputes, and the monarch was defined as the person who made the final decision as he “cut speech” (manapaka volaña).

14. In the past, handing out specific duties such as authority over communities of the dead (and thus receipt of cattle brought to the cemeteries) was one means to satisfy junior lines of royalty. Later, colonialism encouraged a politics of the dead by curtailing the politics of the living (Feeley-Harnik, 1991). It is hard today to know the salience of the dead in the past, but it is likely that they were always significant. Where and with whom one is buried are critical throughout Madagascar (Astuti, 1995; Bloch, 1971; Middleton, 1999). Moreover, there was a complex division of labor among the kinds of services owed to dead royalty. In recent decades, there has been a reduction in the kinds of people and practices associated with royal burial. At the same time, spirit mediumship
has vastly expanded, albeit as the authority of individual mediums has decreased.

15. All these issues resonate for me with concerns over the neoliberal management of universities.

16. This disquiet was no doubt fuelled by the failure to resolve the factional conflict.

17. Mediums are not conscious of what transpires while they are actively possessed.

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