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**"THREE ZAFIMANIRY CARVINGS FROM THE SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS OF
MADAGASCAR AND THEIR SYMBOLIC MEANING"**

by

Emily Krupp

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of

Arts in

Art History and Visual Culture

at

Lindenwood University

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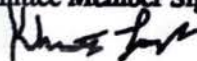
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“THREE ZAFIMANIRY CARVINGS FROM THE SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS OF
MADAGASCAR AND THEIR SYMBOLIC MEANING”

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the College of Arts and Humanities
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master Fine Arts
at
Lindenwood University

By

Emily Krupp

Saint Charles, Missouri

July 2024

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: “Three Zafimaniry Carvings from the Southern Highlands of Madagascar and Their Symbolic Meaning”

Emily Krupp, Master of Fine Art, 2024

Thesis Directed By: Marie N. Pareja, Consulting Scholar, University of Pennsylvania Museum

The Zafimaniry people are a community living in the southern highlands of Madagascar, most known for their geometric, low-relief works of art that they carve onto wooden surfaces throughout their villages. The shapes that make up the designs signify the Zafimaniry people’s ideologies, but motifs carved into the homes specifically represent their beliefs about marriage and societal structure. Three metaphorical symbols have been translated within the motifs by the Zafimaniry people as the patriarch, the family, and the community. A comparative cultural study between the motifs on Zafimaniry window shutters and Swahili doorways reveal similarities in material culture, visual elements in their artwork, and the social significance of the carvings. Through applying these connections to three previously undescribed Zafimaniry motifs on window shutters, it becomes possible to further understand the Zafimaniry people’s traditions surrounding the home, marriage, and the role these motifs serve in the Zafimaniry community .

Keywords: Zafimaniry, Ideologies, Carving, Motif, Madagascar

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	II
Acknowledgements.....	III
List of Figures.....	V
Introduction.....	1
Identifying the Motifs Visual Elements.....	4
Background.....	8
Literature Review.....	14
Methodology.....	30
Symbols and Context of the Motifs.....	34
Theories of Meaning.....	42
Avenues for Future Research.....	45
Conclusion.....	51
Images.....	53
Bibliography.....	63

List of Figures

Figure 1. <i>General Map of Madagascar</i> . Nations Online Project.....	53
Figure 2. Zafimahefa. <i>Window</i> . Date Unpublished. Found in Ambohimanjaka, Current Possession of The British Museum, Museum Number Af1985,17.52.....	54
Figure 3. Zafimahefa. <i>Window</i> . Date Unpublished. Found in Ambohimanjaka, Current Possession of The British Museum, Museum Number Af1985,17.51	55
Figure 4. Zafimaniry. <i>Untitled</i> . Photographed Between 1996 and 2006 by Sophie Bazin.....	56
Figure 5. Swahili. <i>Door/Shutter</i> . Artstor 0068434.....	57
Figure 6. Swahili. <i>Door Posts with Shallow Geometric Relief and Floral Motifs</i> . Specific Artist and Photographer Unknown. Photo taken either in June 1969 or July 1970.....	58
Figure 7. Scanned by Emily Krupp. June 20th, 2024. Traced from: Zafimaniry. <i>Window</i> . Originally Found in Ambohimanjaka, Current Possession of The British Museum, Museum Number. Af1985,17.52.....	59
Figure 8. Scanned by Emily Krupp. June 20th, 2024. Traced from: Zafimaniry. <i>Window</i> . Originally Found in Ambohimanjaka, Current Possession of The British Museum, Museum Number Af1985,17.51.....	60
Figure 9. Scanned by Emily Krupp. June 20th, 2024. Traced from: Zafimaniry. <i>Untitled</i> . Originally Photographed Between 1996 and 2006 by Sophie Bazin.....	61
Figure 10. Zafimaniry. <i>Untitled</i> . Date Unpublished. Copyright: Jérôme Ségur.....	62

Introduction

In order to understand a work of art or craft, it is equally important to learn about the culture of those who produced it. The context of a symbol, object, or even color choice could be a key to decoding a previously unknown insight into an element of a culture. In the southern highlands of Madagascar, the Zafimaniry people are known for their geometric, radiating patterned wood carvings (Fig. 1). These designs are not only beautiful adornments on buildings, objects, and walls; they also symbolize core values and beliefs of the Zafimaniry people. This is a nuanced system of communication where each motif bears a message embedded in the symbolism of the patterns and shapes. A craft that was once spread across the island now lives solely in one community that works hard to ensure its survival, primarily through its continuous usage.

Throughout a Zafimaniry community, the motifs are seen covering most wooden surfaces, including the home. To the Zafimaniry people, the building of a home is deeply linked to life and marriage customs. Women are courted by men who quickly erect a wooden home, then if the match is deemed fit, the woman will move into the home, and the construction of that home will continue.¹ More durable materials eventually are used, and that is when the low relief symbols begin to be carved into the wooden surfaces of the home. These geometric motifs associated with the home are meant to symbolize the strengthening of the family unit and marriage.

Few scholarly texts attempt translations of the symbols' meanings, but there is much emphasis in scholarship on the fact that these carvings represent a variety of themes, such as the patriarch, the family, and the community. This investigation analyzes three motifs with recorded

¹Elaine Forde, "From Cultures of Resistance to the New Social Movements: DIY Self-Build in West Wales," In *Self-Build Homes: Social Discourse, Experiences and Directions*, ed. Michaela Benson and Iqbal Hamiduddin (UCL Press, 2017), 86.

connections between the themes and their symbols, while also exposing where research does not yet provide explanation between the motifs and the Zafimaniry ideologies surrounding marriage, family, and the home. Only one source has explained general characteristics of identifiable symbols in Zafimaniry designs, and these categorizations will be applied to three previously unlabeled motifs associated with the home.² Understanding the meanings of the carvings requires a deeper study of the designs. The symbols present in the three motifs will be labeled and explored within their cultural context by a qualitative analysis of texts and verbal accounts of Zafimaniry ideologies surrounding marriage, the community, and the home.

Zafimaniry motifs represent ideologies in the culture, so each carving is observed with this assumption. The three selected examples were carved into window shutters, each consisting of a design unique to that motif. To begin, it is necessary to identify their visual elements, and describe their similarities and differences in appearance. These descriptions will provide the foundation for discussing the symbols represented in the designs and the significance of the choice of wood used as the medium. Finally, the carvings will be contextualized regarding their cultural significance and relevance to the ideals they are meant to represent.

This research is groundbreaking for Zafimaniry Art History. Zafimaniry motifs have not received this thorough description before in literature, and often the physical characteristics of the works are not delineated. An examination of the symbols within the motifs have not been compromised in this way within their cultural context, and those conclusions are being drawn from primary, Zafimaniry sources. In order to clearly see the symbol categorization in the carvings, new digital scans of the work have been made with clearly identifiable labels. An innovative, cross-cultural comparison is made between the Zafimaniry motifs and Swahili doors;

²*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood*, Directed by Jérôme Ségur, (2006; ZED - Manuel Catteau), Youtube Video, 50:42, May 20,2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBwICiW2FOE&t=1369s>.

revealing similarities in the origins of the work and the craft's execution. Combining this research together provides the clearest readability of Zafimaniry motifs, new interpretations of the symbols, and lays the groundwork for future avenues of research.

In comparison to western art history, limited research has been done on Malagasy art history, specifically work by the Zafimaniry people. This is the case for much of African Art History in general. With Madagascar's history of colonization, it is important to highlight artwork made by the indigenous people on the island and showcase their values and ideologies. The Zafimaniry people make up a small portion of Madagascar's population, and represent just one of the many diverse communities in the country. These motifs are a window into the Zafimaniry perspective on family and societal structure and contribute, not only to the conversation around Madagascar's Art History, but Madagascar's contribution to Art History as a whole. This work contributes to a deeper understanding of non-traditionally-western art and symbolism, and provides opportunities for other non-western art history to be studied and considered.

With a more direct translation of the symbolic patterns in Zafimaniry wood sculptures, more Zafimaniry motifs can be analyzed from this lens. There is much more to be learned about the symbols that connect to the ideologies of the Zafimaniry people. Through examining the assortment of shapes, lines, and patterns of three wood carvings, their symbolism, and material choice, then studying their context, it is possible to further understand the Zafimaniry culture.

Identifying the Motifs Visual Elements

Three different carvings showcase the connection between the visual elements of the motifs and the cultural significance of their meaning.³ Each design was carved into a window shutter on a Zafimaniry home. The motifs each have the geometric, radiating characteristics typical of a Zafimaniry design but have arrangements that are unique to each carving. Previous scholarship's descriptions of the works are fairly brief when considering the complexities of the designs. For the purpose of this investigation, each work of art is described using the stylistic features of the Elements of Art (line, shape, texture, form, space, color, and value). These characteristics are used to identify the patterns starting from the central point of each motif, then describing how the pattern expands outward to the edge of the window shutter. The most relevant elements of art for this examination are line, shape, space, and color.

Each design has been hand carved into the flat wood surface of a window shutter. No color has been added with paints. The only color comes from the values created through the different depths in the low-relief carving and different tones of the wood. Areas of the wood range in values of various shades of brown and tan. The contrast between the flat surface of the wood and the carved elements reveals the pattern of the motif. In this investigation, the motifs will be referenced by their figure number.

The first motif, the larger British Museum window shutter, is carved onto Tamboneka Wood (Fig. 2). This is wood that comes from a tree in the laurel plant family. Starting at the central point of the design, there are four almond-like shapes extending outward and

³The three chosen window shutters have not been discussed together before this investigation. Two of the three examples come from the British Museum collection, and share the same name and material. The third example was photographed, but not given a title or description of the specific works. In order to clearly distinguish the window shutters, they are given descriptive names for the purposes of this investigation. The object in Figure 2 will be referred to as the "Larger British Museum Window Shutter" because it is the larger of the artifacts referenced from this collection. The object in Figure 3 will be referred to as the "Smaller British Museum Window Shutter" because of the object's dimension size in comparison to "Larger British Museum Window Shutter." Then finally, the window shutter in Figure 6 will be referred to as "Bazin's Shutter" for the photographer's name.

overlapping. The innermost portions of the almond-like forms perpendicularly, up and down and side to side. Together, they create a four petal flower-like shape in the center of the composition. Surrounding this shape is a circular band with two rows of dots. Each dot is evenly spaced apart, and the rows of dots radiate from the center of the flower-like shape. A circle created by a thin line separates the inner and outer portions of the motif. Outside of this circle, but all still physically connected, are four semi-circles carved with solid double lines, each aligned with the almond-like petals in the center. Between each of the semicircles are straight lines created by two rows of dots that end with two spirals.

Disconnected from the central pattern, there are two rings of dotted circles surrounding it. On the outside of these larger dotted rings, there are four more semicircles connected, and they are positioned between where the central semicircles are located. The motif is finished with a rectangular border that frames the central design with two rows of alternating dots again.

The second window shutter, the smaller British Museum window shutter, is carved onto the surface of Tamboneka Wood as well (Fig. 3). Starting at the center point of the carved design, the central circle appears to be wheel-like, with sixteen spokes radiating from the focus of the circle. Four rings of circles encompass the center wheel, each with a different pattern bordering the circle before it. The next ring after the central wheel is thin with diagonal lines. The next has two rows of zigzag lines that create a criss-crossing pattern. These criss-crosses appear to make a pattern through a series of "X"es. The third ring has radiating lines that point towards the center of the entire design, then finally there is another ring of the zigzag and criss-crossing design.

Outside of the interior ring of circles, are four semi-circles evenly spaced around and connected to the fourth circle. There is a striped rectangle in the middle of each semi-circle. Three lines outline each semicircle, almost rippling around the shapes. Connected to the rippling

line are two larger patterned rings encircling the entire design. The first ring, closest to the center, is made of thick, zigzagging lines. The external ring is made through notches in the wood that create a chevron pattern. Striped rectangles protrude out of the chevron patterned ring and point to the four corners of the wood panel. At the top, there are a series of five parallel lines that continue to the edge of the wood.

The type of wood used in the final example, Bazin's shutter, is not labeled or specifically identified in the accompanying text (Fig. 4). In the center of the motif seen on Bazin's shutter, there is another wheel-like central shape with eight pyramid-like spokes radiating from the focus of the circle. Five rings of circles surround the central shape. The first is a pattern with alternating line forms that resembles the letters I, V, and A. A solid ring surrounds this, with no pattern carved into the surface. The third ring is thicker and a series of dots creates a band, then it is surrounded by a band with carved chevron lines. The fifth and final ring surrounds the others with dots encircling the entire interior design.

There are four semi-circles connected to the dotted circle pointing to each corner of the window frame. Multiple semicircles are stacked, creating almost colorless rainbow-like shapes. The layers of the semicircle shape closest to the center are made by two rows of dotted lines, then the next is a band with diagonal, radiating lines, then the outer semicircle is a single dotted line. No pattern is carved into the space between the edges of the window shutter and the outer dotted line surrounding the motif.

When compared to each other, the motifs share many similarities. All share the existence of a central shape, then extend out to surrounding shapes that are connected to the central shape. Each window shutter has a minimum of four semicircles within the surrounding area outside the

central circular shape. All contain patterned circular bands encompassing the motif to some extent, while some motifs represent more variety and quantity of patterned bands than others.

Each has unique qualities that distinguish one from another. The wood of the object seen in the smaller British Museum window shutter is much darker than the wood that makes up the objects seen in either the larger British Museum window shutter or Bazin's shutter. The relief is more deeply carved in the smaller window shutter and Bazin's shutter, creating more sculptural forms. The carved motif itself extends all the way to the edge of the wood as seen in both the larger and smaller window shutter, but not in Bazin's shutter. The larger shutter is the only example that has a carved rectangle border surrounding the entire motif. The image of Bazin's shutter is a bit blurrier, so some of the details are more difficult to identify and describe. This piece was chosen for this investigation because it is confirmed that it is a window shutter and having a consistent object of focus is important for comparison. There are no parallel lines or perpendicular lines seen disconnected from the central curved pattern on the same flat wooden surface on Bazin's shutter. This is the only example that shows a small portion of the window frame, which seems to have parallel lines covering the wood surrounding the shutter.

These carvings came to be because of a deep history of Madagascar and the Zafimaniry people. To more fully understand the works of art requires further research into their ancestral heritage, experience with trade and western influence, and the journey of their written language.

Background

Overview of Madagascar's History of Trade and Colonization

Madagascar is a large island off the coast of east Africa that is approximately the size of California, consisting of over 28 million people, with 18 different ethnic groups that all speak varying dialects of Malagasy⁴. It is separated from the mainland of Africa by the Mozambique Channel, directly south of the Arabian Peninsula, and south-west of Asia (Fig. 1). The island has a long history of foreign influence. DNA and linguistic studies indicate that Malagasy people have both Asian and African ancestry.⁵ For the past two thousand years, the Indian Ocean has been used for long distance trade between Africa and Asia, and the island is within close proximity to ports on both continents.⁶ Madagascar is located along established trading routes, and Indian ships make landfall in Madagascar en route to east Africa and vice-versa.⁷ This vast variety of global interaction and exchange is in part accountable for the similarities in linguistics, DNA, and culture between Madagascar and both Africa and Asia.⁸

European trade flourished in the nineteenth century when the French colonized Madagascar. The arrival of European Protestant and Jesuit missionaries in 1818 had a major impact on trade and especially education in the country.⁹ The arrival of western missionaries contributed to the colonization of knowledge in Madagascar. Missionaries were critical to the

⁴"Map of Madagascar," *One World - Nations Online*, accessed April 8, 2024, https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/madagascar_map.htm; Robert E. Dewar, and Alison F. Richard, "Madagascar: A History of Arrivals, What Happened, and Will Happen Next," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41 (2012): 503, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23270724>.

⁵Dewar and Richard, "Madagascar: A History of Arrivals, What Happened, and Will Happen Next," 503.

⁶Dewar and Richard, "Madagascar: A History of Arrivals, What Happened, and Will Happen Next," 503.

⁷Sarah Fee, "The Handweaving Arts of Madagascar," Royal Ontario Museum, <https://www.rom.on.ca/en/collections-research/research/the-handweaving-arts-of-madagascar>

⁸Randall Bird, "Objects as Envoys: Cloth, Imagery, and Diplomacy in Madagascar," *African Arts* 36, no. 2 (2003); accessed June 1, 2023, <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=PPFA&u=sain20269&id=GALE|A111847721&v=2.1&it=r&sid=bookmark-PPFA&id=60d146d4>.

⁹Jocelyn Rabeson, "Jesuits and Protestants in Nineteenth-Century Madagascar," in *Encounters Between Jesuits and Protestants in Africa*, ed. Robert Aleksander Maryks and Festo Mkenda (Brill, 2018), 172. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctvbqs62t.11>.

establishment of public education in Madagascar, leading to the reshaping of indigenous knowledge and traditions. Schooling was implemented by the missionaries in Madagascar for seventy years before the country was colonized by the French.¹⁰ With such a long history of foreign trade and European influence, Malagasy people still have their own religious practices and societal structure independent of the western ideologies brought by the French, and they are reflected in the Zafimaniry geometric designs. The low-relief patterns are a form of visual documentation that highlight how the Zafimaniry view their community and express their values.

Oral and Written Malagasy History

The first evidence of the Malagasy language existing in written form was when Muslims brought Islamic manuscripts to the island that were written in Arabic script in the sixteenth century, but some of these manuscripts featured adaptations to/of the Malagasy spoken language. These manuscripts are called Sorabe, meaning “great writing” or “big writing.”¹¹ Sorabe manuscripts are difficult to read because they are written in three languages: Ancient Malagasy (which is very different from Malagasy spoken today), Arabic, and Pidgin.¹²

Today, Malagasy is written in Latin script. The Malagasy language only began to be written down in Latin script with the arrival of Missionaries.¹³ Missionary activity began in the Merina kingdom and included starting schools, translating the Bible to Malagasy, and publishing other works, such as proverbs and tales.¹⁴ Protestants and Jesuits documented Malagasy history in the Latin script, and they also created geographic maps of Madagascar.¹⁵ While their presence

¹⁰Brigitte Rasoloniaina and Andriamanivohasina Rakotomalala, “Questioning ‘Restitution’: Oral Literature in Madagascar,” in the book *Searching for Sharing: Heritage and Multimedia in Africa*, ed. Daniela Merolla and Mark Turin (Open Book Publishers, 2017), 130.

¹¹Philippe Beaujard, “The Sorabe Islamic Manuscripts Used by Diviners-Healers in Southwestern Madagascar,” March 27, 2017, *Boston University Libraries*, Mp4, 79:03, <https://open.bu.edu/handle/2144/23381>.

¹²Beaujard, “The Sorabe Islamic Manuscripts Used by Diviners-Healers in Southwestern Madagascar.”

¹³Rasoloniaina and Rakotomalala, “Questioning ‘Restitution’: Oral Literature in Madagascar,” 123.

¹⁴Rabeson, “Jesuits and Protestants in Nineteenth-Century Madagascar,” 173.

¹⁵Rabeson, “Jesuits and Protestants in Nineteenth-Century Madagascar,” 182.

allowed for additional modes of documenting Malagasy history, their intention was to spread western beliefs to the Malagasy people.

Some of the first school books contained oral fables with which Malagasy people were already familiar, and films and recordings were a way of documenting local rituals and culture. In 1834, a book called *Angeno (Tales)* was published throughout Madagascar, and it is the first known book written in Malagasy. The book consisted of both European fables and Malagasy folk tales.¹⁶ These stories focus on traditional heritage and highlight Malagasy history before colonization. Because local histories were composed of oral narratives, auditory recordings of them told by Malagasy people were a more authentic manner of documentation.¹⁷

Visual communication can take many different forms. History and ideals can be recorded through symbols without the use of words or script.¹⁸ The Zafimaniry people carved geometric motifs into wood long before western arrival. The motifs are made up of repeated patterns and are a visual mode of record keeping and communication, as opposed to written words. Messages encoded into the geometric, circular patterns express the Zafimaniry people's social history and values. Until recently, these visual traditions were only practiced and kept by the Zafimaniry people. Scholars and researchers outside the community have only just begun to translate the carvings' symbols with the help of those who create them, so that people aside from the Zafimaniry may understand their meanings. This allows for Zafimaniry traditions and history to be shared more and more.

¹⁶Rasoloniaina and Rakotomalala, "Questioning 'Restitution': Oral Literature in Madagascar," 130.

¹⁷Rasoloniaina and Rakotomalala, "Questioning 'Restitution': Oral Literature in Madagascar," 132.

¹⁸For more connections between art and writing, see; DeniseSchmandt-Besserat, *When Writing Met Art: From Symbol to Story*, (University of Texas Press, 2007).

Zafimaniry History

The Betsileo is an ethnic group of Madagascar that is located in the highlands south of the country's capital, Antananarivo. The central highlands take up a majority of the central part of Madagascar, starting around the city of Maevatanana in the north to the Ivakoany Massif in the south (Fig. 1).¹⁹ The Zafimaniry people are a subculture within the Betsileo people.

Approximately 25,000 Zafimaniry people live throughout one hundred different villages across the southern highlands of Madagascar.²⁰

Zafimaniry literally means "the people of the forest," and the Zafimaniry communities live in remote areas of the forest. Ambositra is the largest city within close proximity to the Zafimaniry communities. People from these communities can walk up to four hours to trade at markets in larger towns, and the farthest Zafimaniry village is around a ten hour hike away from the Ambositra markets.²¹ The community struggles with food shortages, and they cannot prevent the counterfeiting of their well known carved designs. They make little money while their distributors of the craft thrives.²²

The Zafimaniry have not always lived in this specific area in the highlands, though. Originally, in the eighteenth century, the Zafimaniry people lived in the central highlands. Because of gradual depletion of their natural resources, they moved south in search of more forest.²³ Deforestation is a challenge throughout the island, and the Zafimaniry were relocating to have more access to this vital material. Current farming practices are a root cause for why the

¹⁹"Map of Madagascar."

²⁰"Woodcrafting Knowledge of the Zafimaniry," UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, Accessed February 18, 2024, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/woodcrafting-knowledge-of-the-zafimaniry-00080>.

²¹Fabrice de Lestang, "The Sacred Wood of Madagascar's Zafimaniry," *The UNESCO Courier*, May 2008, 8, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000210783>.

²²Lestang, "The Sacred Wood of Madagascar's Zafimaniry," 8.

²³Johary Ravaloson and Sophie Bazin, *Zafimaniry Intime: Relation de Voyage Entrepris Chez Les Zafimaniry entre 1996 et 2006*, trans. Emily Krupp, (Éditions Dodo vole, 2008), 6.

effects of deforestation are still felt today.²⁴ Slash and burn cultivation has been one of the highest contributors to the depletion of the tree population. This is where trees are cut down, then all remaining vegetation is burned to promote new growth for farming and cattle grazing.²⁵ With slash and burn cultivation, farmers must relocate every 5 years and repeat this process, and it is believed that after 25 years the forest reclaims the previously burned sites.²⁶ The country's population has rapidly grown, contributing to the need to expand and access more natural resources.²⁷ There have been many initiatives to counteract this technique, but it has been difficult to police scattered populations of deeply traditional people to change their ancient habits.²⁸

Today, the area surrounding Zafimaniry villages is devoid of trees. Their economy is closely tied to the environment, so both have been gradually declining. Younger generations have begun to leave the community in pursuit of work outside of Zafimaniry traditions.²⁹ In an attempt to counteract the damage, in 2006, three hundred rosewood trees were planted. Elders within the community continue to encourage younger generations to plant as many new trees as possible, ensuring the survival of their important craft.³⁰

The low-relief carvings are not only produced to be sold at market for profit, but adorn many of the permanent structures within the communities. Homes are covered with these subtle motifs, which represent the lives of the people that live within their homes. A home is originally constructed as a proposal from a man to a woman, and it continues to be modified throughout the

²⁴Ravaloson and Bazin, *Zafimaniry Intime: Relation de Voyage Entrepris Chez Les Zafimaniry entre 1996 et 2006*, 6.

²⁵Mervyn Brown, "Madagascar: Island of the Ancestors," *Anthropology Today* 3, no. 1 (1987): 16.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3033267>.

²⁶Ravaloson and Bazin, *Zafimaniry Intime: Relation de Voyage Entrepris Chez Les Zafimaniry entre 1996 et 2006*, 24.

²⁷"Map of Madagascar."

²⁸Brown, "Madagascar: Island of the Ancestors," 16.

²⁹Lestang, "The Sacred Wood of Madagascar's Zafimaniry," 8.

³⁰*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood*.

marriage of the couple. Both the home and the marriage are seen as an ongoing process.³¹

Families living within the home are reflected in the symbols throughout the external carvings.

This unique form of communication has become internationally recognized for expressing Zafimaniry customs and traditions.

In 2003, the Zafimaniry wood carvings were proclaimed a masterpiece of oral and intangible heritage by UNESCO.³² This means that UNESCO plans to safeguard and provide funding to ensure the survival of this tradition. Associations will be created, and UNESCO would finance shops to sell Zafimaniry wood.³³ Also, there will be workshops to promote teaching the woodworking skills, and reforestation programs will be implemented to protect the Zafimaniry's access to wood.³⁴ The goal is for the skills and traditions that make up Zafimaniry carvings to be continuously passed from generation to generation.³⁵ Funds from this project will improve living standards for the Zafimaniry community, preserve their natural environment, and raise awareness of their unique craft.

³¹Fokke Gerritsen, "The House and Its Inhabitants," in *Local Identities: Landscape and Community in the Late Prehistoric Meuse-Demer-Scheldt Region*, (Amsterdam University Press, 2003), 36, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46n0fq.6>.

³²Lestang, "The Sacred Wood of Madagascar's Zafimaniry," 8.

³³*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood*.

³⁴"Action Plan for the Safeguarding of the Woodcrafting Knowledge of the Zafimaniry," UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, accessed February 18, 2024, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/projects/action-plan-for-the-safeguarding-of-the-woodcrafting-knowledge-of-the-zafimaniry-00015>.

³⁵*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood*.

Literature Review

Geometric patterns address much about the Zafimaniry culture, value system, social structure, and spiritual beliefs.³⁶ Their ideologies surrounding marriage customs and familial structure are represented in these carvings found on the home.³⁷ Limited consolidated information about the Zafimaniry wood sculptures and the Betsileo culture exists, and there are gaps between the descriptions of this work and its intended meaning. Scholars publishing these sources often do not reference or cite the works of each other. Their lack of intercommunication makes for more isolated studies, rather than building upon each other's ideals surrounding the Zafimaniry people. Each scholar creates and employs various terms and frameworks, resulting in varied perspectives and analyses. The collected sources are organized thematically in order to illustrate the development of the theories about the Zafimaniry community, Malagasy artifacts, sources that focus on the symbolism in Zafimaniry artwork and materiality, and the documentation that exists of the motifs. Then, Zanzibar and Lamu doors made in Swahili culture on the east coast of Africa will be considered, as they serve as a cross-cultural comparison for motifs on homes. This discussion is the first to combine the few and varied sources on Zafimaniry wood carvings, to establish a foundational terminology from which to build (regarding motifs), and to consider Zafimaniry art (to include culture and materiality) in light of nearby east-coast Swahili art. A multidisciplinary approach to this research is essential in order to converge two major subjects: Malagasy culture and beliefs, with the visual appearances of the Zafimaniry wood carvings.

³⁶“Action Plan for the Safeguarding of the Woodcrafting Knowledge of the Zafimaniry.”

³⁷*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood.*

Understanding the Zafimaniry Community

Many Zafimaniry beliefs about marriage and the community's social structure are represented in the building and modification of their homes. Fokke Gerritsen wrote about the social and symbolic meanings of houses and focused on the Zafimaniry people's homes in "The House and Its Inhabitants" in 2003.³⁸ Houses are reflections of socio-cosmological order and provide insight into "cultural ideas and values that structure daily life in and around the home."³⁹ This occurred during the Bronze Age and Iron Age in Europe, as well as modern day Betsileo homes in Madagascar.⁴⁰ Objects and the home reflect aspects of the people that produce and use them.⁴¹ A house provides a part of an individual's social identity, and the home (the physical structure) in Zafimaniry culture specifically symbolizes the (abstract and social) household and the marriage of the principal couple.⁴² This reading focuses on the process of building an entire home, rather than the motifs that are carved into it. Gerritsen draws on studies that address Zafimaniry traditions performed while a home is being built, the life of the couple while living in the home, and the ways in which the home is treated after the couple's death.

While observing objects, traditions, and customs informs much of scholarship on the Zafimaniry community, Maurice Bloch performed a psychological study in a Zafimaniry village in 2008 that engages with visual culture by examining the cognitive connections between object, memory, and trust. Bloch's article, "Truth and Sight: Generalizing without Universalizing," argues that sight is trusted over memory and that sight and truth are linked, but this is not a

³⁸Gerritsen, "The House and Its Inhabitants," 36.

³⁹Priorities made in building a home show priorities in the culture. For example, the number of bedrooms may show the ideal family size. Gerritsen, "The House and Its Inhabitants," 31.

⁴⁰Gerritsen, "The House and Its Inhabitants," 32.

⁴¹Gerritsen, "The House and Its Inhabitants," 32.

⁴²The abstract and social structure mentioned here encompasses how individuals in a society interact with one another. This includes relationships and roles in society, or the principles instilled by the society's beliefs. Maurice Bloch, "The Resurrection of the House Amongst the Zafimaniry of Madagascar," In *How We Think They Think*, (New York: Routledge, 1998), 69-83; Gerritsen, "The House and Its Inhabitants," 32.

universal belief.⁴³ While the study was not specific to the wood carvings, it gives insight into Zafimaniry beliefs and ideas surrounding language and communication. The study involved a test where they had parents observe tasks children were asked to do, and studied their observations. Basically, the experiment performed is called the “false belief task.” An object was hidden under a hat, and the participant was asked to leave, then they were told that the object was moved. When they returned, Bloch wanted to observe if they checked the original hiding space, or began with looking elsewhere. It was found that for older children and adults, they would check under the hat before looking elsewhere, then children under the age of six would look elsewhere first.⁴⁴ An account or story is believed more when it was seen versus if it was told in speech. This supports Bloch’s theory that truth is linked with sight.⁴⁵

Bloch summarizes a conversation with Zafimaniry individuals that was inspired by the experiment. They said that both humans and animals are believed to be capable of thought, but humans invented language to convey it. According to the Zafimaniry, this makes humans superior to animals.⁴⁶ The author later connects this to their own argument about how language is what makes humans able to lie as well, hence the idea that memory is unreliable. The Zafimaniry believe while thought is independent from language, language is dependent on thought. This same logic could be applied not only to verbal language, but visual communication. The basis of this thesis is understanding how the Zafimaniry convey a message through imagery, and studying

⁴³Bloch does not cite Gerritson in his work. His sources have more focus in anthropology and psychology. Maurice Bloch, “Truth and Sight: Generalizing without Universalizing,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14 (2008): S22, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20203795>.

⁴⁴Bloch, “Truth and Sight: Generalizing without Universalizing,” S24.

⁴⁵Bloch, “Truth and Sight: Generalizing without Universalizing,” S28.

⁴⁶The Zafimaniry believe non-human animals are just as capable of thought as people. They are able to strategize their actions through thought, but they are not able to express them through words. Bloch, “Truth and Sight: Generalizing without Universalizing,” S25.

the thought that went into the imagery. This perspective invokes one of Bloch's original questions, "what is language for if not for thought?"⁴⁷

Malagasy Artifacts

There is interest in Malagasy culture from both scholars and the general public, but there are limited collections displaying Malagasy-made objects. The collection and distribution of Malagasy artifacts contributes to the wider spread of knowledge about artwork produced in Madagascar, and documentation of such collections and exhibits is preserved in exhibition catalogs. Mervyn Brown published "Madagascar: Island of the Ancestors" about an early exhibition in 1986 at the Museum of Mankind in London, which shared Madagascar's diverse culture with the general public.⁴⁸ Dr. John Mack was responsible for collecting these objects and mounting the exhibition, and the two wood carvings from the British Museum Collection referenced in this investigation were among the works of art displayed.⁴⁹ The exhibition focused on the national practices of cattle-herding and rice-growing and the importance of ancestors to the people who inhabit the island, while also addressing the significance of artifacts in different subcultures, including those of the Zafimaniry people. Part of the exhibit included a full-scale reconstruction of a furnished Zafimaniry home, with a wooden coffin.⁵⁰

Mack's collection included works of art of all mediums, but there are other noteworthy collections where textiles are the main focus. Lisa Aronson's article, "Unwrapping the Textile Traditions of Madagascar" from 2006, shared information focusing on Madagascar's textiles and the history of their influence.⁵¹ In 1925, the curator Ralph Linton retrieved over 600 artifacts

⁴⁷Bloch, "Truth and Sight: Generalizing without Universalizing," S25.

⁴⁸Brown, "Madagascar: Island of the Ancestors," 14.

⁴⁹Dr. John Mack's exhibition is the sole source for this publication. The connection made that the two carvings were specifically included in the collection was from the description of the works of art and this publication. Brown, "Madagascar: Island of the Ancestors," 16.; Zafimahefa, *Window*, The British Museum Collections Search.

⁵⁰Brown, "Madagascar: Island of the Ancestors," 16.

⁵¹Lisa Aronson, "Unwrapping the Textile Traditions of Madagascar," *African Arts* 39, no. 1 (2006): accessed May 25, 2023, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A147301080/PPFA?u=sain20269&sid=bookmark-PPFA&xid=7152bb63>.

from across Madagascar.⁵² He spent an extensive amount of time exploring the island and collected works from a variety of subcultures. At the time, there was a large group of textiles located in Queen's Palace Museum in Antananarivo as well, but in 1995 a fire destroyed this entire collection. Because of this, Ralph Linton's collection is the most extensive assemblage of Malagasy textiles to this day.⁵³ Mack is credited for collecting a majoring of the Malagasy Artifacts in the possession of the British Museum.⁵⁴

Understanding of Symbols in Zafimaniry Motifs

Throughout this research, it is evident that scholars are in agreement that the Zafimaniry motifs represent the ideologies of the Zafimaniry culture. It is important to first acknowledge that there is intentionality behind the direction the homes are built in accordance to the sun's position and cardinal directions. Fabrice Lestang's work, "The Sacred Wood of Madagascar's Zafimaniry" in 2006, identified that the cardinal directions serve great importance to the arrangement and decoration of the home.⁵⁵ This text did not provide an explanation for the origin of this Malagasy belief and explain why, but Johary Ravaloson and Sophie Bazin reference in their work that the Zafimaniry intentionally built their homes so that the doors would open to the west. The sun would then enter the home creating a kind of sundial, and this was seen as a connection to their ancestors.⁵⁶ A deeper exploration of this may in part clarify why certain symbols may appear on different walls, especially since Lestang stated that the Zafimnairy believe that the most sacred direction is the north-east.⁵⁷ Lestang did not include images nor

⁵²Aronson, "Unwrapping the Textile Traditions of Madagascar."

⁵³Aronson, "Unwrapping the Textile Traditions of Madagascar."

⁵⁴This was concluded from an overview of the British Museum's online collection.

⁵⁵The direction of the sun and the cardinal directions are important considerations when the homes are being built. This aspect is deserving of extended study, but is not possible with the parameters of this project. Lestang, "The Sacred Wood of Madagascar's Zafimaniry," 8.

⁵⁶Ravaloson and Bazin, *Zafimaniry Intime: Relation de Voyage Entrepris Chez Les Zafimaniry entre 1996 et 2006*, 16.

⁵⁷Lestang, "The Sacred Wood of Madagascar's Zafimaniry," 8.

drawings of any of the carvings but focused on the symbolism of the motifs. “The Sacred Wood of Madagascar’s Zafimaniry” also emphasized that the craft and Zafimaniry people are greatly impacted by deterioration of the environment and touched on the negative economic impact of counterfeit work and inequitable payment to the artisans and distributors.⁵⁸ The environment and socio-economic contexts of these carvings greatly impact their production.

Then when moving into the motifs on the homes themselves, few publications serve as primary sources from the Zafimaniry perspective. *Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood* was a documentary made in 2006, where the documentarian traveled to a Zafimaniry village and interviewed woodworkers in the community.⁵⁹ The documentary followed the building of a traditional Zafimaniry home, while recreating ancestral home-building techniques. The entire process is shown, from cutting down the trees to the family moving into the home. At one point a Zafimaniry man, named Dada Monjy, addresses the process of carving the motifs and their cultural significance. He points to sections of the design and identifies what each section is meant to symbolize. This source is one of the most thorough explanations of the patterns’ meanings, and it is explained by a Zafimaniry person.

The author Elaine Forde compared western home building to that seen in Madagascar in 2017. Forde wrote “From Cultures of Resistance to New Social Movements: DIY Self-Build in West Wales” to talk about low impact dwellings and homes in off-grid communities in Wales, but she also addressed Zafimaniry techniques specifically.⁶⁰ The comparisons between a DIY home in Wales and Madagascar are not entirely equal, when considering necessity, affordability, and accessibility. Forde acknowledges that in a Zafimaniry village, building a home yourself is

⁵⁸Lestang, “The Sacred Wood of Madagascar’s Zafimaniry,” 8.

⁵⁹*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood*.

⁶⁰Forde, “From Cultures of Resistance to the New Social Movements: DIY Self-Build in West Wales,” 81.

the only option.⁶¹ Forde provided insight into the relationship between marriage and homebuilding in Zafimaniry culture. Both marital relationships and the homebuilding process, combined with the material selection, are catalysts for the creation of Zafimaniry motifs.

Materiality - Significance of Types of Wood

Often in art history, identifying a work of art's material or medium is used to categorize the work. Depending on the material an object was made with will completely define the work. Material is observed to distinguish whether something is craft versus art, "high" art versus "low" art, or whether the object serves an aesthetic or utilitarian purpose. Historically throughout literature, there is a hierarchy of materials where paintings and monumental sculpture is often held in higher regard. Art history has often stuck to older categorizations, often discrediting mass produced objects, and prioritizing the idea behind the work over the material. Scholar Michael Yonan reflects on art history's material culture, and argues that studying matter and material are more than just a layer to understanding a work of art, they are essential. Materiality takes an object and turns it into a commodity.⁶² Giving material a more significant role is especially important when studying non-western societies, because material is fundamental to understanding the meaning of the work.⁶³ Items are frequently collected from their original context by westerners and kept away from where they were intended to be. This often begins to obscure the original meaning and shift the meaning towards the perspective of the privileged, wealthy people who hold onto the work.⁶⁴ Then, with digital versions of artwork being much more readily available in modern art historical study, looking past the image and examining the materials choice and qualities is often overlooked. It is important to keep in mind that the three

⁶¹Forde, "From Cultures of Resistance to the New Social Movements: DIY Self-Build in West Wales," 85.

⁶²Michael Yonan, "Toward a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies," *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 18, no. 2 (2011): 246, accessed July 1st, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1086/662520>.

⁶³Yonan, "Toward a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies," 234.

⁶⁴Yonan, "Toward a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies," 237.

motifs are objects carved into a wood material, not just images of patterns. The grain, density, and hardness of the wood are as much part of the pieces as the semicircles and chevrons carved into it.

Wood holds practical, symbolic, and metaphysical significance in the Zafimaniry community. This material not only is the surface they carve into, but it provides the foundation of the homes they live in. There are two noteworthy publications that address the symbolic meanings behind types of woods and their purpose in Madagascar. In 1879, James Sibree talked about how different species of trees are associated with different things in Malagasy culture.⁶⁵ This early observation provided insights into Malagasy beliefs and lore, and information about the Betsileo region's social and spiritual relationship with animals and trees. A variety of trees are referenced, including the famous Baobab trees, which are believed to belong to the gods; and the Hasina tree, which is often seen connected to idol-worship.⁶⁶ In Malagasy, the word for this tree is "masina," which is an adjective used when talking about sacred things. The Zahana tree is an evergreen tree often used as an ornamental timber.⁶⁷ James Sibree wrote in reference to the Zahana tree, "But there is an old superstition regarding it, and still believed in by many, to the effect that any one planting it in his grounds will meet with an early, if not sudden, death."⁶⁸ Then, in the southern part of the island, the Tamarind tree grows and it is seen as one of the finest trees.⁶⁹ To the Sakalava people, an ethnic group found in the western part of the island, a tree

⁶⁵James Sibree Jun., "Malagasy Folk-Lore and Popular Superstitions," *The Folk-Lore Record* 2 (1879): 29. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1252463>.

⁶⁶Portions of Baobab trees are often colored black, white, and yellow and adorned with charms. Sibree Jun., "Malagasy Folk-Lore and Popular Superstitions," 29.

⁶⁷The Zahana tree has pink flowers and glossy green leaves. It is most commonly seen in the central province of Imerina. Sibree Jun., "Malagasy Folk-Lore and Popular Superstitions," 29.

⁶⁸Sibree Jun., "Malagasy Folk-Lore and Popular Superstitions," 29.

⁶⁹Sibree Jun., "Malagasy Folk-Lore and Popular Superstitions," 29.

called Hazomanitra (“fragrant wood”) is associated with the birth of children. This tree is planted when a child is born to show that the father of the child acknowledges that it is his own.⁷⁰

The Betsileo people specifically are briefly mentioned in Sibree’s publication, “Malagasy Folk-Lore and Popular Superstitions,” and this source provides crucial information for understanding the material Zafimaniry people use for carving their motifs. Sibree also addresses that not only are geometric patterns carved into wood, this region also has a history of sculpting wooden charms to protect people from evil spirits in Zafimaniry villages.⁷¹

Sibree expands on this topic by sharing that Wooden charms are worn by everyone in the Bára, Tanála, and East-coast communities to protect from evil spirits.⁷² The charms were worn as necklaces and smeared with either animal oil or castor oil. Sometimes they were worn around the knees or chest, and they were shaped like a canoe, small men or women, or other small objects.⁷³ In the Betsileo community specifically, these wooden charms are worn to ward off evil spirits that inhabit sick people.⁷⁴

The accessibility of wood is directly tied to the environmental conditions in which the trees grow. Randall Bird has written extensively about Madagascar’s textile crafts and general landscape. “Objects as Envoys: Cloth, Imagery, and Diplomacy in Madagascar”⁷⁵ and “The Merina Landscape in Early Nineteenth Century Highlands Madagascar”⁷⁶ are his most important publications on these topics. While these sources are not directly about the Zafimaniry wood carving, they provide context about the significance of the landscape surrounding the Betsileo

⁷⁰Sibree Jun., “Malagasy Folk-Lore and Popular Superstitions,” 29.

⁷¹Sibree Jun., “Malagasy Folk-Lore and Popular Superstitions,” 45.

⁷²Sibree Jun., “Malagasy Folk-Lore and Popular Superstitions,” 43.

⁷³Sibree Jun., “Malagasy Folk-Lore and Popular Superstitions,” 43.

⁷⁴Sibree Jun., “Malagasy Folk-Lore and Popular Superstitions,” 45.

⁷⁵Bird, “Objects as Envoys: Cloth, Imagery, and Diplomacy in Madagascar.”

⁷⁶Randall Bird, “The Merina Landscape in Early Nineteenth Century Highlands Madagascar,” *African Arts* 38, no. 4 (2005): accessed January 22, 2024,

<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A144296579/PPFA?u=sain20269&sid=bookmark-PPFA&xid=3e5d47f5>.

region, the history of other crafts produced throughout Madagascar, and the impact trade and deforestation has had on the country. The deforestation mentioned in his work specifically impacted the Zafimaniry people's access to the principal raw material needed to create their artwork.⁷⁷ Many of the textiles and other items that provided the evidence in his article were observed through photographs and illustrations, rather than looking at the material itself.

Two years later, Bird expanded on the topic and wrote more about the ties that types of wood have to societal structure. "The Merina Landscape in Early Nineteenth Century Highlands Madagascar" from 2005 addressed the markers of social rank, including the use of rare hardwoods for the royalty starting in the late 1860s.⁷⁸ The Merina people, an ethnic group just north of the Betsileo, surrounded their villages and royal enclosures with small forests that were considered sacred and they were protected from forestation. These forests were a visible marker of social rank, because they were a stark contrast from the vast deforested landscape. Hardwoods would be carried over one hundred miles when building houses and palaces for the royal and elite Merina people. Types of trees were even a marker of western influence. Bird explains, "By the 1820s, as increasing numbers of Europeans settled in the highlands, Western 'landscape models' were superimposed onto Merina ones."⁷⁹ With the arrival of Europeans came non-native plants and trees. The highland's climate was ideal for the growth of these new plants.⁸⁰

Bird, unlike Sibree, mentioned that building with the ficus tree is considered taboo, because its roots suffocate other trees and are believed to be destructive to life.⁸¹ His study also focused on the use of stones in building as well. He touches on the fact that Malagasy people see stones as a hard, permanent wood, so it is used for monuments throughout the country. Both

⁷⁷Lestang, "The Sacred Wood of Madagascar's Zafimaniry," 8.

⁷⁸Bird, "The Merina Landscape in Early Nineteenth Century Highlands Madagascar."

⁷⁹Bird, "The Merina Landscape in Early Nineteenth Century Highlands Madagascar."

⁸⁰Bird, "The Merina Landscape in Early Nineteenth Century Highlands Madagascar."

⁸¹Bird, "The Merina Landscape in Early Nineteenth Century Highlands Madagascar."

Sibree and Bird are in agreement that the type of wood is important when considering the purpose of what is being built. The surface that the Zafimaniry carve their most precious designs into is no different.

Documentation of the Carvings

Having clear, detailed images and documentation of these wood carvings is essential to labeling their symbolic meanings. There is no comprehensive catalog of Zafimaniry wood carvings that exists. The motifs only began to be replicated through documentation by Sibree when he wrote “Decorative Carving on Wood, Especially on Their Burial Memorials, by the Bètsilèo Malagasy.” in 1892.⁸² This was published thirteen years after “Malagasy Folk-Lore and Popular Superstitions.” Sibree was inspired by a researcher, George A. Shaw, and included many of his rubbings and sketches capturing the appearance of the radiating patterns. These early illustrations provided an extensive visual description of the Zafimaniry wood carvings.⁸³ While this is an outsider’s perspective, he references many carvings that began to rot away during his years of study and have most likely deteriorated or eroded since then.⁸⁴ Having such a detailed historical record will provide the opportunity to compare recent carvings with their past carvings, and observe if any symbols or patterns have changed. He calls for other scholars to draw connections to these patterns and meanings he has collected.⁸⁵ Because of his meticulous recording, it may be possible to identify some of the meanings behind the carvings he observed and documented over 130 years ago.

Now, even with cameras to capture the Zafimaniry wood carvings, the images are often low quality. The fact that there are no updated photos suggests that there have been no recent

⁸²James Sibree, “Decorative Carving on Wood, Especially on Their Burial Memorials, by the Bètsilèo Malagasy,” *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 21 (1892): 230, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2842549>.

⁸³Sibree, “Decorative Carving on Wood, Especially on Their Burial Memorials, by the Bètsilèo Malagasy,” 230-231.

⁸⁴Sibree, “Decorative Carving on Wood, Especially on Their Burial Memorials, by the Bètsilèo Malagasy,” 235.

⁸⁵Sibree, “Decorative Carving on Wood, Especially on Their Burial Memorials, by the Bètsilèo Malagasy,” 244.

requests for high quality photos by individuals studying the objects. Two window shutters photographed by the British Museum serve as examples for this examination (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3). Both are credited for being made by a carver named Zafimahefa. The wooden panels have been removed from their original context of the Zafimaniry home in 1985 by John Mack, but the photos of them are two of the clearest images documenting Zafimaniry wood carving in the collection held by the British Museum.⁸⁶ While these works are captured in high resolution, there is very limited context to explain their origins and their methods of collection.

On site images taken of carvings in their original context provides for more opportunities of observation, including the location of the motif on the home and what may be on the window frame surrounding the window shutters. In 2008, Johary Ravaloson wrote *Zafimaniry Intime: Relation de Voyage Entrepris Chez Les Zafimaniry entre 1996 et 2006* and included many on site photos.⁸⁷ Then in 2010, he wrote *Zahay zafimaniry = Nous, Zafimaniry = We, Zafimaniry*.⁸⁸ These books included a variety of original photographs of Zafimaniry carvings and life.⁸⁹ Ravaloson is a Malagasy author who has multiple publications focusing on the Zafimaniry. Many of the photographs were taken by his French wife, Sophie Bazin, on their travels.⁹⁰ Their photographs continue to be one of the largest collections of images of the Zafimaniry community and their motifs. There are few explanations and direct descriptions of individual images, so the connections between the text and images are often up to interpretation. The literature

⁸⁶These carvings were originally from Ambohimanjaka, and the previous owner's name is John Mack. He is a British academic who joined the British Museum in 1976. There is limited information about the history of the window shutters before 1985. Zafimahefa, *Window*, Current Possession of The British Museum, Figure 2; Zafimaniry, *Window*, Current Possession of The British Museum, Figure 3.

⁸⁷Ravaloson and Bazin, *Zafimaniry Intime: Relation de Voyage Entrepris Chez Les Zafimaniry entre 1996 et 2006*, 1-84.

⁸⁸Johary Ravaloson, *Zahay zafimaniry = Nous, Zafimaniry = We, Zafimaniry*, (Éditions Dodo vole, 2010), 1-88.

⁸⁹Ravaloson and Bazin, *Zafimaniry Intime: Relation de Voyage Entrepris Chez Les Zafimaniry entre 1996 et 2006*, 1-84; Ravaloson, *Zahay zafimaniry = Nous, Zafimaniry = We, Zafimaniry*, 1-88.

⁹⁰Ravaloson and Bazin, *Zafimaniry Intime: Relation de Voyage Entrepris Chez Les Zafimaniry entre 1996 et 2006*, 30.

accompanying the photographs in Ravaloson's book, *Zahay Zafimaniry = Nous, Zafimaniry = We, Zafimaniry*, is limited in context and information, but rich with imagery and proverbs important to the Zafimaniry people. Both publications include crisp images,⁹¹ the general locations of these carvings, and directly translated sentiments from the Zafimaniry people.

Carved Motifs Seen in Swahili Doors

The concept of carving geometric motifs into windows and doorways of the home is also seen in the doorways seen in Swahili culture. West of Madagascar, the Swahili Coast spans from Somalia to Mozambique. Swahili people share both African and Arab ancestry. Merchants from Arabia and the Persian Gulf traveled to the east coast of Africa as early as the late seventh century in search of natural resources on the continent.⁹² At the time, gold, ivory, spices and enslaved people brought interested buyers from around the world.⁹³ Many travelers settled down on the African coast, developing and influencing their own unique culture, thus forming the Swahili people. As part of this new cultural tradition, doors were commissioned as signs of social prestige and affluence. These elaborate doors arose from a time of prosperous trade in the nineteenth century, and can still be seen throughout the east coast of Africa.⁹⁴ They showed anyone who entered this space that rich individuals lived within.⁹⁵

In Zanzibar, an island off the coast of Tanzania, the doors are massive, elaborately designed entryways that share similar qualities of Zafimaniry motifs. Nancy Ingram Nooter wrote, in "Zanzibar Doors," about the origins of the carved designs and their symbolic

⁹¹These images were not used for this investigation because the surface the motifs were carved into was not identified. Photographs had been cropped to highlight the motif, so it could not be proven that they were on a home, or specifically a window shutter.

⁹²Monsoons made travel difficult half of the year, so visitors and merchants had to stay on the east coast of Africa several months at a time. Nooter credits this for why so many travelers stayed and married into African families. Nancy Ingram Nooter, "Zanzibar Doors," *African Arts* 17, no. 4 (1984): 34. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3336155>.

⁹³Usam I. Ghaidan, "Swahili Art of Lamu," *African Arts* 17, no. 4 (1984): 54. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3334617>.

⁹⁴Nooter, "Zanzibar Doors," 34.

⁹⁵Nooter, "Zanzibar Doors," 34.

meanings.⁹⁶ Similar to the Zafimaniry, these symbols represent their values but also display Swahili aspirations and wealth. The motifs differ from door to door, but most of them are theorized to originate from India because of the well-known curvilinear floral and foliate patterns there.⁹⁷ Brass fittings found on the doors further support this theory as well.⁹⁸ Evidence of foreign influence is apparent in the appearances of the door, but nevertheless, Nooter emphasizes that they are unquestionably an African tradition.⁹⁹

The older sections of Zanzibar city are home to larger more elaborate doors, then this is seen less and less in the homes outside the city.¹⁰⁰ They span across the entirety of Tanzania, but the elaborate designs are most commonly seen along the coast in towns most associated with trade.¹⁰¹ On each home, the decorative carvings cover the door frame, lintel, and center post; but the panels of the doors are not carved. Often instead of carvings, the panels have metal embellishments such as spikes (Fig. 5). The wood selected for the doors is chosen for its strength against time and intruders, as well as its ability to be sculpted. Wood used carving was from imported teak or African ebony from India, but more recently, jackfruit and mango trees have been used because they are more available.¹⁰² Older frames are rectangular, while arched lintels were increasingly used in the nineteenth century. Some motifs seen on the doors include rosettes, lotus flowers, chain ornaments, frankincense, date palms, fish and varying wavy lines.¹⁰³

In Lamu, an island off the coast of Kenya, the Swahili doors share a geometric relief similar to the Zafimaniry (Fig. 6).¹⁰⁴ Usam I. Ghaidan wrote “Swahili Art of Lamu” including

⁹⁶Nooter, “Zanzibar Doors,” 34-96.

⁹⁷Nooter, “Zanzibar Doors,” 37.

⁹⁸Brass fittings were unseen before the arrival of Indian innovations in the late nineteenth century. Sultan Sayyid Barghash ruled in Zanzibar at this time. Nooter, “Zanzibar Doors,” 35-36.

⁹⁹Nooter, “Zanzibar Doors,” 38.

¹⁰⁰Nooter, “Zanzibar Doors,” 34.

¹⁰¹Nooter, “Zanzibar Doors,” 35.

¹⁰²Nooter also mentioned the Mbamba kofi (*Azelia quanzensis*) tree. Nooter, “Zanzibar Doors,” 36.

¹⁰³Nooter, “Zanzibar Doors,” 36.

¹⁰⁴Ghaidan, “Swahili Art of Lamu,” 54.

images of multiple door posts seen in Lamu.¹⁰⁵ These door posts are adorned with both radiating, flower-like motifs, as well as parallel lines and designs up and down the wood. Singular motifs such as rosettes or rows of scalloped lines, are seen at the top and bottom of the posts. Then, the length of the posts have rows of varying patterns, such as a series of X's, squares, leaf-like shapes, and floral motifs.¹⁰⁶

The doors are divided in two, and in Swahili culture the right is considered the “male door” and the left is the “female door.”¹⁰⁷ While little evidence suggests that the symbols on the doors represent the householders who commissioned the doors, Nooter states that; “The persistence of the motifs and their classic uniformity over more than a century of use implies meaning and not just decorative value alone. Because the entrances themselves were of prime significance as indicators of status, messages contained in their carvings could serve to enhance, confirm, and preserve the standing of the householder.”¹⁰⁸ There is insufficient evidence that proves the symbols signify the specific patrons or carvers, but it can be inferred that the doors are a statement about the economic and social status of the inhabitants.¹⁰⁹ Chain motifs most likely signify security, the frankincense tree could be a symbol for wealth, and the lotus and rosette may represent fertility and reproductive power.¹¹⁰ Some symbols may be misinterpreted though, or falsely assigned a figural identity when the visual element is simply an abstract motif, such as fish possibly being paisley patterns.¹¹¹ As styles and culture changed through time, contemporary

¹⁰⁵Ghaidan included these pictures while completing fieldwork with students in June of 1969 and July of 1970. The photos are not specifically credited to one photographer, but general participants on the trip. He states that they were under the direction of M.M.A.A. Sadaruddin, while expenses were paid by a research grant from the University of Nairobi. Ghaidan, “Swahili Art of Lamu,” 84.

¹⁰⁶The accompanying description of these door posts only includes a name for the floral motifs, all other visual descriptions here are my own. Ghaidan, “Swahili Art of Lamu,” 54.

¹⁰⁷The idea for right being for male and left being for female is a theme seen all over the world. Nooter’s source J.J. Adie emphasizes that they are especially seen in Swahili culture. Nooter, “Zanzibar Doors,” 38.

¹⁰⁸Nooter, “Zanzibar Doors,” 39.

¹⁰⁹Nooter, “Zanzibar Doors,” 39.

¹¹⁰W.H. Ingrams, *Zanzibar: Its History and Its People*, (London: Frank Cass & Co. 1931), 218-19; J.J. Adie, “Zanzibar Doors,” *A Guide to Zanzibar*. (Zanzibar Government Printer, 1946-47), 22; Nooter, “Zanzibar Doors,” 38.

¹¹¹Nooter questions the symbol's significance in Swahili culture. Nooter, “Zanzibar Doors,” 38.

artists may not have retained memories of symbolism of older motifs, or they may have chosen to innovate as new techniques developed.¹¹²

The tradition of carving large, elaborate doors as displays of wealth and power seems to have stopped along with slavery, but the carving and installation of smaller, less elaborate doors continues to this day.¹¹³ As of 1976, 560 doors still stand in Zanzibar city.¹¹⁴ Most are over 100 years old, and have outlived the stone structures that surround them.¹¹⁵ The blessings of wealth, security, and protection are seen to this day carved into the entrances of Swahili homes.

¹¹²Nooter, "Zanzibar Doors," 39.

¹¹³Nooter, "Zanzibar Doors," 39.

¹¹⁴Esmond Bradley Martin, *Zanzibar: Tradition and Revolution*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1978), 22-23; Nooter, "Zanzibar Doors," 36.

¹¹⁵Nooter, "Zanzibar Doors," 36.

Research Methodology

This project examines the imagery in three Zafimaniry wood carvings and identifies specific symbols and their meanings within Zafimaniry culture. No singular study has combined these resources that study the Zafimaniry beliefs, culture, history, customs, and language in this way before. There is no standard for symbolic explanations of Zafimaniry motifs that is available to a non-Zafimaniry audience. The labels given to the three referenced motifs were assigned based on the descriptions provided in the documentary *Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood*.¹¹⁶ Through the documentary's insight and academia's almost 200 years of scholarship about the Zafimaniry wood carvings, readers will develop an understanding of how these carved surfaces relate to the ideals surrounding marriage and social structure of the Zafimaniry people.

To lay the groundwork for talking about these motifs, it is important to establish a common vocabulary for describing the pieces. Initially, observations of the work were described by assessing the physical properties of the design that is carved into the wood. This formal analysis is done by assigning terms to distinguish various lines, shapes, colors, and composition. These elements contribute to the impression of the work. Descriptions of the work avoided the biases of western vocabulary such as categorizing the work as “representational,” “abstract,” or “non-objective” in appearance. This is similar to the Formalism in methodology, but the analysis continues past these objective observations.

The three motifs selected for this study were not accompanied by detailed descriptions of the symbols in the work. In order to accurately label the visual elements within these works, information needed to be collected from other sources describing different Zafimaniry motifs. In the documentary *Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood*, a Zafimaniry man serving as a spokesperson for the community, named Dada Monjy, stands next to a motif on a home, pointing to different

¹¹⁶*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood*.

sections, identifying their symbolic meanings.¹¹⁷ He generalizes where the designs represent themes, such as what signifies the patriarch of the family or the entire Zafimaniry community. Receiving this information from a primary source gives the information more credibility and accuracy. While the motif used as an example in the documentary is different from these three objects in the photographs used for this study, the following examination and discussion is based on an assumption that the same categorization can be applied to all motifs found on the home.

In order to more clearly see the symbols for the purpose of this investigation, the images of the chosen motifs were printed, then carbon transferred onto a new piece of paper. This was to clearly show the patterns carved into the wood. They were then scanned, and each symbol was highlighted a different color. Yellow shows the patriarch symbol, green shows family, and red shows symbols of the community (Fig. 6, 7, and 8). Other symbols have been referenced in literature such as honeycombs or spiderwebs, but they have not been assigned to a specific image to identify them.¹¹⁸ The patriarch, family, and community symbols that are being labeled are the only three that were confirmed by Dada Monjy.

Once the symbols are identified, it is important to take the research a step further by providing the context and significance of these symbols in Zafimaniry culture. The carvings were analyzed through the role they serve in the Zafimaniry culture as well. Multiple sources provided the information explaining marriage customs, family dynamics, and societal structure. Ideologies of Zafimaniry culture are expressed through these geometric, radiating designs; so each wood carving is observed with the assumption there is a metaphorical theme related to the artwork. This may explain why the Zafimaniry want to memorialize what they do and why the motifs are related to the context of the home.

¹¹⁷*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood.*

¹¹⁸“Woodcrafting Knowledge of the Zafimaniry.”

In order to better understand and contextualize Zafimaniry art and tradition within the broader world of non-western art, comparable material culture was identified along the eastern coast of Africa. Zanzibar doors were selected as comparanda because of their close physical proximity to Madagascar, shared historical connection to strikingly similar populations and trade routes, the objects' similar visual elements, materiality, and readily visible nature on domestic structures. Considerably more scholarship exists on Swahili culture and their Zanzibar doors than on the Zafimaniry, particularly on their carved shutters. This comparative study provides an additional way to understand Zafimaniry window shutters based on what is known about Zanzibar doors.

With Madagascar's long history of old-world global interconnections and exchange, coupled with later French colonialism, the information gathered about the wood carvings and culture is considered here through a Postcolonial lens. This is where the impacts on politics, economy, and the society related to colonization are studied. In order to identify culture that is quintessentially Malagasy, it is necessary to understand what in Malagasy society has been affected by western influence. Zafimaniry motifs are a form of visual communication, so it is important to consider them of equal significance as Latin script or other western forms of written documentation.

This investigation requires a balance of thinking like an Art Historian and Anthropologist to learn about ways to interpret individual and sets of motifs in ways that are largely foreign to western cultures and systems. An art historian looks at a work of art or craft closely, observing all of the elements of art including the colors, lines, shapes, and textures. Once these are considered, they find the context such as when the work was made and where it was found. An anthropological point of view is considered when sources explain the Zafimaniry people's

perspectives and when the Zafimaniry people are studied in general. This thesis bridges these findings, explaining how the Zafimaniry wood carvings are not isolated from the culture of the people who made them.

Symbols and Context of the Motifs

Symbols within the Motifs

1. *Patriarch*

Dada Monjy, the Zafimaniry man, in the documentary *Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood* established that the smaller central circle of the patterns symbolizes the patriarch of the family.¹¹⁹ This is the male head of the family. A central circle is seen in each figure, although each has its own unique design carved into the center of the circle. The documentary did not explain why the patterns appear differently across all three motifs, but it is explained by Dada Monjy that they share symbolic meaning because of their shared shape and location in the motif.¹²⁰ In order to provide a clear labeling, the motifs have been scanned and color coordinated based on the different symbols being depicted.¹²¹ The patriarchal symbol is shown highlighted in yellow in each example. As seen in the larger British Museum window shutter and its scan, the patriarch of the family is depicted with four almond-like shapes that radiate from the focus of the central circle (Fig. 2 and 7) . The band of the circle consists of two rows of dots, completing the central symbol.

The smaller British Museum window shutter and Bazin’s shutter share a wheel-like quality, but Bazin’s shutter has sixteen spokes radiating from the focus of the circle (Fig. 3, 4, 8 and 9). This is surrounded by four rings, and each ring has its own unique pattern encircling the central wheel (Fig. 8). Five rings of circles surround the central shape in Bazin’s shutter, where

¹¹⁹*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood.*

¹²⁰*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood.*

¹²¹As mentioned before, each motif was assigned the names, “Larger British Museum Window Shutter,” “Smaller British Museum Window Shutter,” and “Bazin’s Shutter.” Each of these examples were digitally scanned and labeled, so when referring to the scanned version it will be prefaced that it was scanned. (i.e. “Scan of Larger British Museum Window Shutter,” “Scan of Smaller British Museum Window Shutter,” and “Scan of Bazin’s Shutter”).

the wheel-like center consists of eight triangular spokes radiating from the focus (Fig. 9). Each motif has a patriarch symbol that fits the criteria described by Dada Monjy.¹²²

2. *Family Members*

In *Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood*, Dada Monjy also explains that radiating shapes and patterns outside the central signify other members of the family. These shapes and lines are connected and touching as the family is, even if the members are scattered.¹²³ Dada Monjy explains that all radiating shapes connected and surrounding the patriarch symbol in the center represent family.¹²⁴ Scans of the motifs are highlighted in green to show the symbols of family. Immediately outside the central patriarch symbol in the larger window shutter, there are four semi-circles aligning with the almond-like petals in the center of the motif (Fig. 2 and 7). Carved between each semi-circle and connected to these shapes are two rows of dots connected to two spirals. Surrounding these semicircles and spirals is another ring with dotted circles, and four more semicircles almost appearing to be rippling or rainbow-like.

At least four semicircles are represented in each of the three motifs; they are just each located in different places. All three figures share semicircles as a shape in the part of the motif that represents family. In each figure, the semicircles are connected to the patriarch symbol of the motif. This marks the beginning of the family member symbol portion of the design. In the smaller window shutter specifically, within the semicircles on the motif, there is a small, striped rectangle (Fig. 3 and 8). Each semicircle is surrounded by three lines bordering them, and this border is connected to two larger bands of circles enclosing the design. Each band contains its own unique pattern, then protruding from the outermost layer are four striped rectangles. This is

¹²²*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood.*

¹²³*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood.*

¹²⁴*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood.*

the last connecting shape to the patriarch symbol (Fig. 8). The smaller window shutter's representation of family is much larger than is depicted in the larger window shutter.

Finally, in Bazin's shutter, the patriarch symbol was much larger than the first two as well, while the symbol of family is much smaller (Fig. 4 and 9). The semicircles reflect the central design more closely than the first two examples. This is the example with five rings of circles surrounding the central shape, and the outline of semi-circles have many layers as well. The patriarch and family symbols share rows of dotted lines and a band of diagonal, radiating lines (Fig. 9). The final border of a single dotted line concludes not only the family symbol in Bazin's shutter, but also the entire motif itself (Fig. 9).

The Zafimaniry Community

The final symbol identified in *Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood* relates to the entire Zafimaniry: those who are part of the community and not living within the home. Beams of wood surrounding the radiating patterns are adorned with parallel lines. Dada Monjy explains that these lines represent that the Zafimaniry are "upright" people. He used the word "upright" but did not define what that meant specifically in Zafimaniry culture.¹²⁵ Without this context, the assumption is that this refers to the honesty and morally sound nature of Zafimaniry people. The parallel lines are seen represented in the motifs disconnected from the central pattern, often surrounding the radiating pattern.¹²⁶

The final symbol is represented in the scans with a red highlight. Parallel lines, such as those in the larger window shutter, create a border around the patriarch and familial central symbol (Fig. 2 and 7). This border frames the work with a rectangle border containing two rows

¹²⁵*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood.*

¹²⁶*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood.*

of alternating dots. This is the farthest outer carved element into the first window shutter example.

The parallel lines in the smaller window shutter present themselves differently (Fig. 3 and 8). Instead of an enclosed border around the motif, there is just a row of five parallel lines present at the top of the design. These lines are not connected to the motif itself, so they fit the criteria for the Zafimaniry community symbol in the work. The lines continue to the edge of the wood, and are not seen anywhere else on the panel of wood.

The Bazin's shutter has no parallel lines outside of the motif, the design ends at the semicircles mentioned before (Fig. 4 and 9). It looks as though the wood that was used to create the window frame has parallel carved lines present, but the entirety of the frame is not present in the documentation of the image. Since this example does not have clear identifying features for a symbol that represents the Zafimaniry community, according to Dada Monjy in *Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood*, it is assumed that the symbol is not present (Fig. 4).¹²⁷

The Material

Intentional symbols are carved into the surface, but the significance of material is important to call attention to as well. It is established that each tree signifies a social status, spiritual purpose, or function, but it is the rosewood tree that is generally used to produce the Zafimaniry motifs. The same documentary in which the symbols were identified, also addressed the wood choices for the motifs versus the building's construction.¹²⁸ While the framing used for the internal structure of the homes uses less valuable wood, objects and surfaces that will bear the motifs are done with rosewood. This is a much more precious tree that has become a dwindling resource. Zafimaniry men travel up to two days to find rosewood trees, and they

¹²⁷*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood.*

¹²⁸*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood.*

return to the village carrying the wood on their backs. The rosewood tree has extremely dense and hard wood, and there is a ring of light wood surrounding a darker core. It is ideal for sculpting. Rosewood is becoming more and more difficult to access, and the Zafimaniry have begun to reconsider the traditional material they have used to carve their craft.¹²⁹ While the rosewood tree is the only one mentioned in the documentary, the existence of the two motifs from the British Museum collection are evidence that other types of wood are used. They were both carved onto the surface of tamboneka wood, of the laurel plant family. The wood used for the window shutter in figure 4 is not identified.

Context of the Carvings

While the visual symbols and material of the carvings are important, to fully understand them it requires a deeper study of their context. These specific motifs were carved onto the window shutters of Zafimaniry homes (Fig. 10). The process of building a home is ingrained into marriage traditions and family structures, which are reflected in the symbols chosen to be represented in the motifs. The ideas of the patriarch, family, and community are given more weight when their relationship to the creation of the symbols are memorialized. Iconology is interpreting a work of art through the interpretation of the artist's culture, therefore, the Zafimaniry culture surrounding the reason for the motif's creation is essential for their analysis.

The Home and Marriage

The environment in which a person or community builds themselves can be a direct reflection of their world views. A home can be a symbol of an individual, one's social status, and their position within the home and community.¹³⁰ In regards to a home's role in society, Fokke Gerritsen said;

¹²⁹*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood.*

¹³⁰Gerritsen, "The House and Its Inhabitants," 33.

“Houses can be reflections and structuring features of socio-cosmological orders. They can provide the context for a particular ‘dwelling-habitus’ consisting of cultural ideas and values that structure daily life in and around the house. As a result of its materiality, visibility and symbolic potential, a house can also be used profitably for representing power and social status, or to engage in social relationships, competitive or otherwise, with other individuals and groups.”¹³¹

In Zafimaniry culture specifically, the house is seen almost as an extension of the family.¹³² It is a reflection of the marriage of the principal couple rather than a symbol of the head of the household. The Zafimaniry people believe that marriage is a lifelong process and commitment, and that the partnership continues after death.¹³³ Their home is deeply linked to the couple, starting from the home’s initial build to how it is maintained after they have both died. Over a lifetime, the wooden home changes as the couple’s relationship and family grows.

The beginning of building a Zafimaniry home is closely associated with the courting process of the couple who will inhabit it. The original construction of the home is made of flimsy bamboo and reeds by sons prior to marriage.¹³⁴ The home will be assessed as well as the man for if they are well suited for the woman. This is seen as a proposal to a woman, and if the marriage is deemed a good match, the home will continue its construction. The wife will move into the home only when the home has a hearth and a central post, but the entire community will continue with the construction. Little by little, the bamboo and reed will be replaced with hardwood, and the home is adjusted as the couple have offspring. As the house is modified, the geometric motifs are carved into the surfaces of the home and are symbolic of the strengthening marriage (Fig. 9).¹³⁵ The house and the marriage are linked, and one cannot be built without the other.

¹³¹Gerritsen, “The House and Its Inhabitants,” 1.

¹³²*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood.*

¹³³Gerritsen, “The House and Its Inhabitants,” 6.

¹³⁴Forde, “From Cultures of Resistance to the New Social Movements: DIY Self-Build in West Wales,” 86.

¹³⁵Forde, “From Cultures of Resistance to the New Social Movements: DIY Self-Build in West Wales,” 86.

Process of Building

Since Zafimaniry communities do not have electricity, their homes are considered low impact dwellings.¹³⁶ It takes up to three months to build the home, and it is capable of lasting a century.¹³⁷ The home is entirely constructed by the patriarch of the couple and other Zafimaniry community members; and the wood used to construct it is only retrieved by the surrounding area.¹³⁸ Trees are chosen based on the dimensions of the home and are carried on the builder's backs from the forests to return into the community, such as the continuously depleted rosewood tree.¹³⁹ Scraps from the home's construction are used for other objects such as planks for chests. The entire structure is made without using any nails, screws, or written plans. The homes are completely built from traditional Zafimaniry practices passed on from generation to generation.¹⁴⁰

Zafimaniry people believe that a successful project means that the ancestors are pleased.¹⁴¹ Ancestors are considered throughout the entire construction, and ritual offerings are given throughout the process. As the tree for building is selected and cut down, caned alcohol is poured on the trunk of the tree as a gift to the ancestors.¹⁴² Then once the home is complete, a cow or "omby" is sacrificed, and everyone in the community is invited to share its meat. Beef is not eaten often in a Zafimaniry community, and its consumption marks a special occasion.¹⁴³

¹³⁶Forde, "From Cultures of Resistance to the New Social Movements: DIY Self-Build in West Wales," 83.

¹³⁷Lestang, "The Sacred Wood of Madagascar's Zafimaniry," 8.

¹³⁸*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood.*

¹³⁹*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood.*

¹⁴⁰*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood.*

¹⁴¹*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood.*

¹⁴²*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood.*

¹⁴³*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood.*

Abandonment

Even once a couple dies and the house begins to crumble, the Zafimaniry will not tear down the home.¹⁴⁴ The house is always seen as belonging to the founding couple, but once they die, it goes to the son to maintain it. The children continue to add to the beautification of their parent's home. Descendants of the original couple do this even after they have moved out and began to build a new home for themselves.¹⁴⁵ The house becomes a holy space; the descendants of the original couple use it as a place for rituals, a location to reconnect with kinship ties, and where they can receive blessings from their ancestors.¹⁴⁶ It will always be seen as a symbol of the marriage and life of the couple that built it. No one will physically inhabit it again.

¹⁴⁴*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood.*

¹⁴⁵Gerritsen, "The House and Its Inhabitants," 37.

¹⁴⁶Gerritsen, "The House and Its Inhabitants," 37.

Theories of Meaning

Arab and Indian merchants traveled to both the east coast of Africa and Madagascar – in later colonial periods, even more people, cultures, and practices moved between these areas. The eastern coast of Africa and Madagascar are only separated from one another by the Mozambique channel, and historically, merchants often made landfall in Madagascar en route to east Africa from India, and vice versa.¹⁴⁷ Both groups also share an Arabic lineage, suggesting an even more global, interconnected heritage for the people, cultures, and practices of each of these regions. Given historical trade routes and ancestral heritage in both Swahili and Malagasy cultures, it remains possible that carvings produced by these groups could have developed from shared traditions, and therefore they also may, in some ways, share meaning.

Both Zafimaniry and Swahili people's motifs are produced with wood. This natural resource speaks to the environment of the community, being an extension of the identity of the people who interact with it. Four types of wood are mentioned being used by the Swahili people, both regional and imported trees. While types of wood are selected for their strength and sculptability, accessibility is a common theme with both communities. When imported woods are not available, Swahili people turn to mango and jackfruit trees. The Zafimaniry have less international trade access, and rely solely on the natural resources that surround their communities. The accessibility of the rosewood tree is heavily affected by deforestation, so their material choice is a reflection of the scarcity of the trees around them. Future Zafimaniry carvings made with rosewood will be a direct result of forest rehabilitation efforts.

¹⁴⁷Future research should integrate similar comparanda from Indian and the southern Arabian peninsula. Robert, "Madagascar: A History of Arrivals, What Happened, and Will Happen Next," 503.

Motifs are revealed from the wood through a subtractive process. This is when wood is carved, cut, or taken away to reveal different shapes and forms.¹⁴⁸ Material is not added to the motifs through nails, screws, or glue to build upon the wooden foundation. The subtraction method is used for both, but in Swahili doors more material is carved away to reveal more three-dimensional forms. Zafimaniry designs are portrayed through lines creating shapes that are flatter to the surface in comparison, almost flushed.

Each culture produces a unique, identifiable art form, but their similarities are undeniable. These relatively flat surfaces are ornate, intentional designs. Their shared visual elements appear through the carver's shape and line choices. In just the examples used for this investigation, there is an overlap of radiating floral motifs, repeated X's, circular motifs, and parallel lines (Fig. 2, 3, 4, and 6). When the pieces are displayed, the two cultures position their work outward, directly facing anyone standing in front of it – not inward, facing those inside the home.

The wood is essentially removed from the surrounding natural environment, and shaped, then added to the human made architectural environments. Destruction of trees is necessary for this creation. Both communities made the decision to take the trees and use them to adorn their homes with meaning-laden motifs.¹⁴⁹ Out of all of the types of buildings within a community, homes are the most specific to individuals. A home is where someone sleeps, lives, raises a family, and spends a majority of their time. It is the most personal architectural space there is. Swahili doors and Zafimaniry window shutters are clearly visible portals into the home. They are, in some ways, symbolic of those who live inside of the home, and they are outward-facing

¹⁴⁸An examination of the various carving techniques used in both Zafimaniry and Swahili traditions would greatly serve this investigation. Unfortunately, limitations of time and length require the exclusion of such work at present.

¹⁴⁹The direction of the sun and the cardinal directions are important considerations when the homes are being built. This aspect is deserving of extended study, but is not possible with the parameters of this project.

symbols of the family and community's ideals. Swahili doors more blatantly reflect economic prosperity of a household, while Zafimaniry carvings reflect familial and social relationships; but in a way these are both an effort to control how they are perceived by others. They are a way for onlookers to see what is inside the lives of those who dwell in the home.¹⁵⁰ These portals are the parts of themselves they would like on display for others to observe. The fact that the particular wooden material is chosen for spiritual and symbolic reasons is an extension of this symbolic representation. Continuing to interpret this imagery, however, requires the participation of the artisans and community who produced it.

Although there are commonalities between the artwork crafted by the Zafimaniry and Swahili communities, these are nevertheless two distinct cultures. As for differing visual elements: motifs in Swahili doors are not centralized in the same way as those seen on Zafimaniry window shutters. Swahili circular, radiating shapes are more figural and seen at the tops and bottoms of the door's posts, and the flat panels are generally left uncarved, with metal spikes or embellishments added. The carved elements on the Zafimaniry window frames are limited, while the main focus is on the lines carved into the flat panel of the window shutter.

The Zafimaniry and Swahili people live in considerably different areas of east Africa, ultimately resulting in distinct traditions and ideologies. Despite vast distances, these two communities share a high degree of historical interconnectivity. Only by studying the subtle connections between these two cultures and their art, and utilizing multidisciplinary approaches to the study of material culture, can one begin to unravel the multifaceted relationships and identities that each of these groups embody today.

¹⁵⁰This is similar to how this investigation is an outsider's perspective as well.

Avenues for Future Research

Each motif from the Zafimaniry's wood shutters employs the symbols of a patriarch and family according to Dada Monjy's description, but there is no documented explanation for the differences in line quality, shapes, size and spacing between the motifs.¹⁵¹ When considering the patriarch symbol, there seems to be no consensus regarding the significance of the number of spokes in the wheel or why some central motifs consist of more rings than others. The smaller window shutter and Bazin's shutter both have more elaborate central shapes than that seen in the larger window shutter, but it is unclear if this is related to the man they represent. Then, when looking at the symbols of family, Dada Monjy only explains that the shapes connected to the patriarch symbol represent the family of the patriarch, but does not explain what the different shapes or varying sizes across different motifs signify.¹⁵² Parallel and perpendicular lines meant to symbolize the community are present in each motif to some extent, but they appear in inconsistent ways throughout the three examples. Due to the image quality and how it was cropped, it is unclear if the parallel lines depicted in Bazin's shutter are even intentional marks (Fig. 4).

This is only the beginning of this type of work. There are so many carvings on so many objects in Zafimaniry homes and throughout the community, that more questions than conclusions exist right now. The fact that they are unique to the families leads to speculation about the differing appearances of symbols across motifs. Each wood panel was documented or collected from a Zafimaniry home, each fit the criteria of a typical Zafimaniry design, and each share similar shapes and repetition with the others; but they are each uniquely their own. Perhaps these differences reflect the difference between the families living in the home associated with

¹⁵¹*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood.*

¹⁵²*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood.*

each motif. A simple versus elaborate patriarch symbol could show how he sees himself or others see him, or it could relate to his accomplishments in life. Even the significance of being the central symbol in which all other shapes surround may reflect the societal structure of the people that the shapes represent. There was no reference to a matriarchal figure included in the motif, only of the children that she bears and the husband that she has married. Are mothers represented through another motif not located on window shutters? Is there a significance to this exclusion, when the home is meant to represent the marriage of the principal couple living within the home?

More questions surface when moving on to the next radiating section from the center, shapes that represent the family. Why do these motifs have different quantities and layers of semicircles? Four seems to be a recurring number seen in the motifs, it may be insightful to see where this number appears in other aspects of the family lives. The number of semicircles carved into the family section of the motif could be representative of the number of children, or differing shapes could record the gender of the children the primary couple had. Since only the patriarch is represented in the motif, are female children excluded as well? There may also be a story represented in the protruding rectangles and spirals coming from the semicircles. Multiple sources referred to the younger generation leaving for economic opportunities, perhaps there is a distinction between the children who have stayed and left, whether physically or spiritually. Knowing when the carvings were made in the timeline of the couple's marriage would inform how much information they could portray. Are the symbols made before the couple has conceived their children, or when the children have moved out of the home?

Then, there is the distinction of the shapes and lines being connected and unconnected. The connected elements represent the people within the home, while those in the community

outside the home are surrounding the patriarch and family symbols, unconnected. Since there seems to be varying degrees of community memorialized in each motif, maybe this is related to the community's involvement in the building of the home or relationship of the couple. Perhaps the window shutters without a community symbol are just incomplete, and one was meant to be added later. Knowing the timeline of a motif's creation would answer if certain milestones need to be accomplished before details are added. Further study and additional insights from indigenous Zafimaniry people are required to better understand and interpret the theories that arose from the limited information presented by Dada Monjy in the documentary *Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood*.¹⁵³

Even the adjective used to describe the Zafimaniry people, "upright," is unclear in this cultural context.¹⁵⁴ When Dada Monjy uses this word to describe the type of people that the parallel lines represent, the term remains unclear. Does the Zafimaniry definition equate to the English one? This word is so closely related to morals, which differs based on a culture's viewpoint. An elaboration on Zafimaniry morals would lead to a more thorough description of the community symbols seen in their motifs.

This research has established that the baseline categorization of symbols (the patriarch, the family, and the community) often can be identified when Zafimaniry motifs meet specific criteria; They are located on a window shutter on a home, they have geometric and radiating qualities, and there is a symbol present in each identified location. This is a clearer proposed readability than had existed before in literature.

Translations of motifs on the home are currently solely sourced from one Zafimaniry man's account, Dada Monjy. While his explanation holds more credibility than a westerner's

¹⁵³*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood.*

¹⁵⁴*Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood.*

interpretation of the symbols, it is worth confirming with other Zafimaniry community members. Translations between languages are not always exact, and translators often explain through their own interpretation. Hearing another account from a Zafimaniry woodworker, another translator, or a community expert on the subject may provide an opportunity for a deeper and perhaps different understanding. Until such interviews can be conducted, Dada Monjy's explanations are assumed to hold the most cultural accuracy as of yet.

It is worth noting that all documentation referenced in this investigation was acquired through western involvement.¹⁵⁵ Two of the three motifs on the window shutters that constitute the focus of this investigation are housed at The British Museum, meaning the panels have been completely taken away from their intended context, and they no longer exist on the island of Madagascar (Fig. 2 and Fig 3). Bazin's shutter image was taken by a French photographer (Fig. 4). While the text that accompanies Bazin's shutter explains the entire journey to acquire the photo, there was no mention of the permission to take the picture. Then even less information is given in the description of the British Museum's two objects, and there is no mention of the context in which the wood panels were received. With Madagascar's history of colonization, it is even more important to inquire about the ethical retrieval of information about indigenous traditions. The fact that Zafimaniry crafts adorned with their unique patterns are sold to tourists and at outside markets suggests that their work is not meant to always be kept within the community, or even a secret. Homes are maintained as holy spaces for the principal couples though, so were these pieces ever meant for a context outside of the southern highlands of Madagascar?

Not having access to information about the principle couple for whom these motifs were originally made hinders further investigation into the motivation behind these three specific

¹⁵⁵This project was also done from a distance, without direct engagement with the Zafimaniry.

design choices. The only dates associated with the three carvings were when the pieces were acquired and when the photo of the motif was taken. Bazin's shutter shows the only window shutter that was photographed from the home in which it was carved onto, but the type of wood used was not mentioned. The documentary *Living Cultures: Wizards of Wood* mentions the significance of the rosewood tree, but two out of the three carvings are labeled that they are made from Tamboneka Wood. What is the significance of this wood choice? Could it be because the rosewood tree is as scarce as the documentary suggests?

There are efforts being made for the future survival of this craft. UNESCO became involved with the Zafimaniry community in 2003, and had many plans to keep the craft alive and help the Zafimaniry to prosper. According to UNESCO's periodic reports, the most recent activity published was in 2011.¹⁵⁶ A UNESCO representative was present in the *Living Cultures; Wizards of Wood* documentary in 2006, and since then, three awareness-raising workshops have been held for Zafimaniry's wood carvings.¹⁵⁷ The intention of these workshops is to spread awareness of this craft through debates and exhibitions. With the help of UNESCO, a bilingual book was published called *Zafimaniry- A Culture Preserved*. The Zafimaniry people received money from Japan Funds-in-Trust, which were used to fund a series of activities with heavy community involvement.¹⁵⁸ An association was created called, Fikambananan'ny Zafimaniry Mpiangaly Hazo Association (FIZAMPITAHA), and their goal is to safeguard, promote, and pass on wood carving knowledge.¹⁵⁹ Although there was a periodic report that took place on December 15th, 2023, the notes are not yet publicly available.

¹⁵⁶“Madagascar: Periodic Reporting on the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage,” UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, Accessed June 12, 2024, <https://ich.unesco.org/en-state/madagascar-MG?info=periodic-reporting>.

¹⁵⁷“Madagascar: Periodic Reporting on the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.”

¹⁵⁸“Madagascar: Periodic Reporting on the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.”

¹⁵⁹“Madagascar: Periodic Reporting on the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.”

This is one of the biggest steps recorded in the direction of spreading awareness about Zafimaniry wood carvings, but how far has that brought the Zafimaniry's fame? Madagascar in general rarely appears in an art history book, let alone the Zafimaniry. It may be important to first establish how widely the Zafimaniry would like their craft to be known. The involvement of UNESCO might have been for the economical advantages of tourists, the sale of their craft, or to be considered in the same regard as artwork produced in more well-known areas. If it is wanted, the Zafimaniry's crafts are worthy of praise and further research. This thesis provides the background knowledge essential to conduct an informed interview with Zafimaniry wood workers, and a jumping off point for productive questions to be asked that will develop a more universal understanding of Zafimaniry geometric motifs.

Conclusion

The history of the Zafimaniry people is one that is deeply connected to the forest. Their journey to where they are now in the southern highlands was brought about by a threat to the material essential for their craft. Internal and external efforts continue to be made to spread awareness and ensure the survival of their traditional geometric carvings. These marks made on Zafimaniry homes are an expression of their ideals about marriage and society, so it is essential for an outsider to understand the symbols in order to understand the Zafimaniry worldview.

Zafimaniry people and their carvings have appeared in literature as early as 1879, and have continued to gain recognition for their unique contribution to Malagasy Art History. There is interest from the general public and scholars to study their artwork, but limited concrete translations exist of the values that the Zafimaniry so proudly display on almost every wooden surface that comes from their community. Only one source has sought out the insight of a Zafimaniry man, Dada Monjy, to explain motifs found on a home, and this dialog has laid the foundation for further research. This investigation has defined the characteristics of three motifs and applied Dada Monjy's insights in order to clearly explain what is depicted, while also putting the symbols into the context of what they're meant to represent. This is only the first time this method of describing the designs has been attempted, but can be implemented anytime a motif on a Zafimaniry home is being studied.

The cultural comparison between the Swahili doorways and Zafimaniry window shutters shed new light on the similarities between the cultural roles these carvings share. Materiality proved to be essential to building a stronger connection to the artwork and the identity of the culture who produced it. The existence of these carvings are proof that outward appearances hold

a great significance to Zafimaniry people. A home is such a personal space, so these motifs are outward reflections of a person's identity.

With new explanations, came more questions. If these motifs depict the patriarch, the family, and community of the people living in the home they are carved on, is the artwork just as unique as the family that lives within the home? Further research done through Zafimaniry interviews and observations about the family units within the homes would even further clarify the depiction of the ideologies written into the wood.

The Zafimaniry's nuanced mode of communication has been around longer than Latin script has been used on the island, and the future of this craft is at stake because of depleting materials, a struggling economy, and younger generations fleeing the area. The artisans who may be able to answer these questions are becoming more and more scarce.

Images

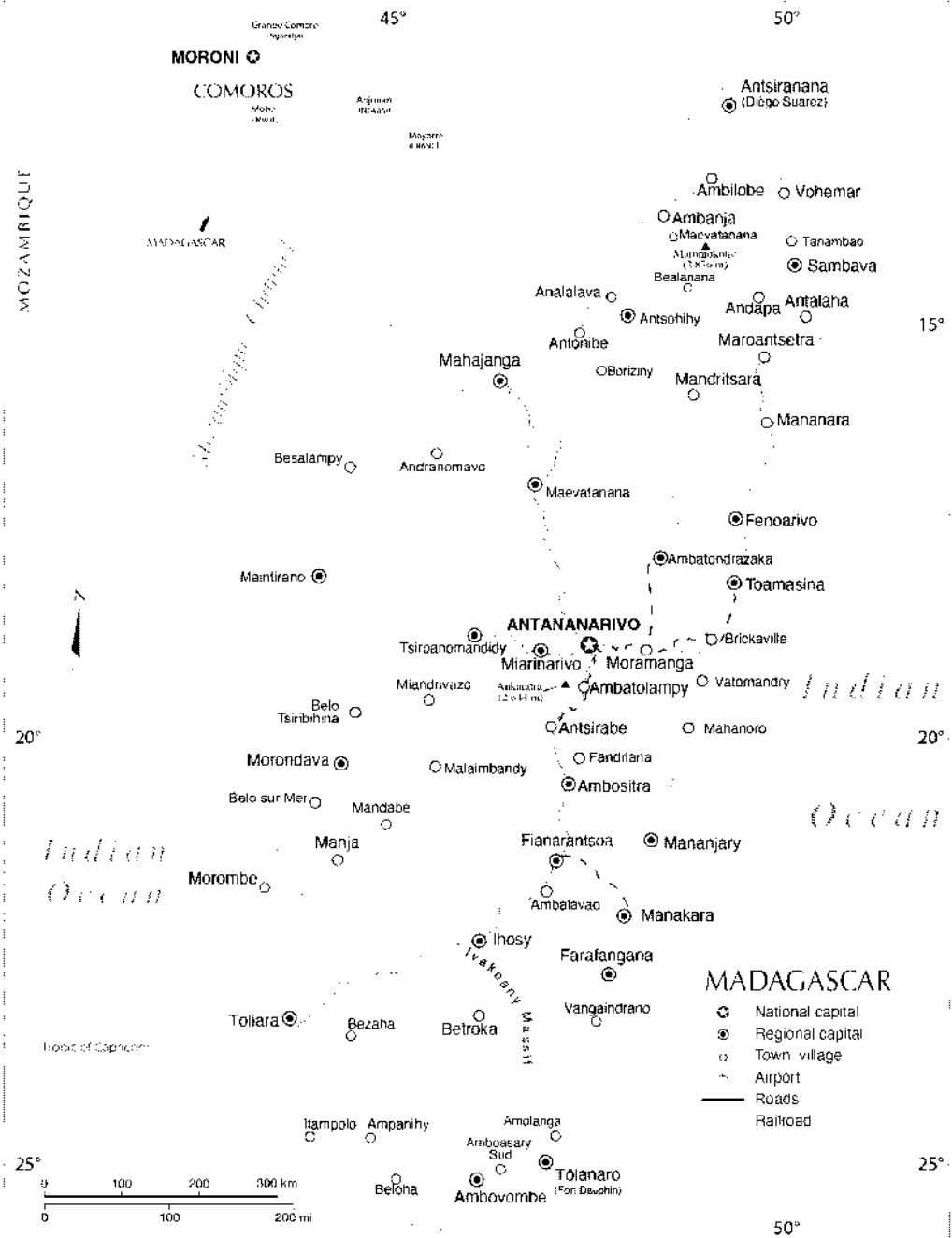


Figure 1. General Map of Madagascar. Nations Online Project.



Figure 2. Zafimahefa. *Window*. 59 centimeters x 41.50 centimeters x 3.50 centimeters.
Tamboneka Wood. Acquired July 26th, 1985. British Museum Number Af1985,17.52.



Figure 3. Zafimahefa. *Window*. 55.50 centimeters x 40.20 centimeters x 4.50 centimeters.

Acquired July 26th, 1985. Tamboneka Wood. British Museum Number Af1985,17.51.

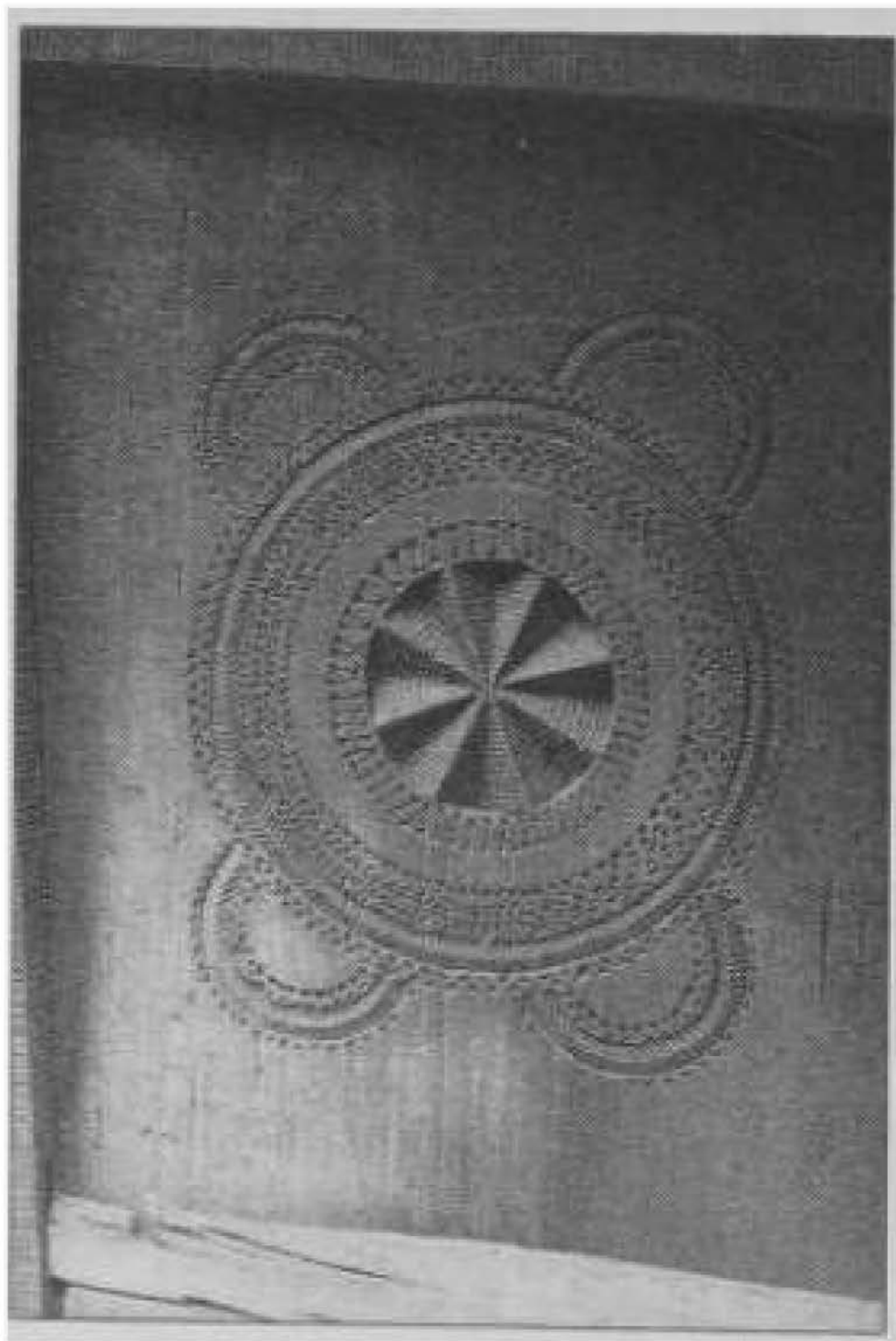


Figure 4. Zafimaniry. *Untitled*. Photographed Between 1996 and 2006. Photo by Sophie Bazin.

Page 40 of *Zafimaniry Intime: Relation de Voyage Entrepris Chez Les Zafimaniry entre 1996 et 2006*.



Figure 5. Swahili. *Door/Shutter*. Height: 200 (Specific Unit Unpublished). Wood. Artstor

0068434.

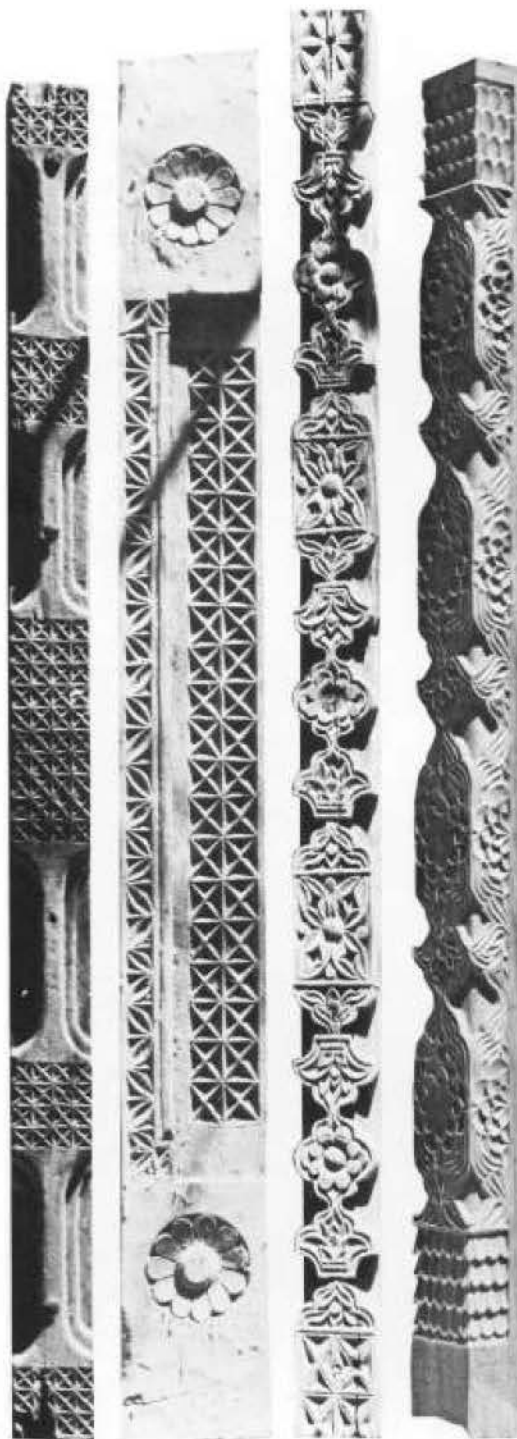


Figure 6: Swahili. *Door Posts with Shallow Geometric Relief and Floral Motifs.* Artist and Photographer Unknown. Dimensions Unknown. Material Unknown. Photo taken in June 1969/July 1970.

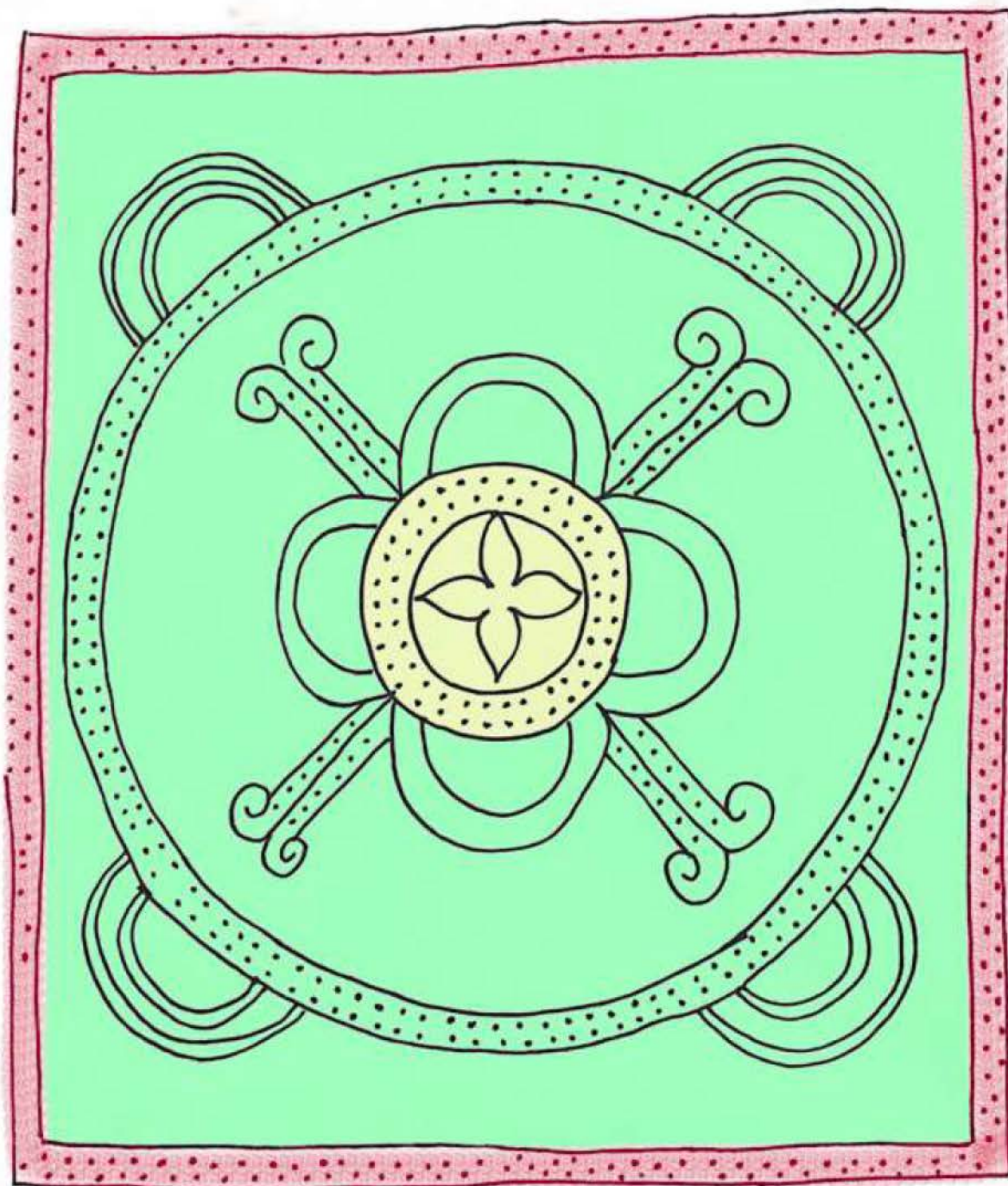


Figure 7. Scanned and Traced by Emily Krupp from: Zafimahefa. *Window*. 59 centimeters x 41.50 centimeters x 3.50 centimeters. Tamboneka Wood. Acquired July 26th, 1985. Scanned June 20th, 2024.

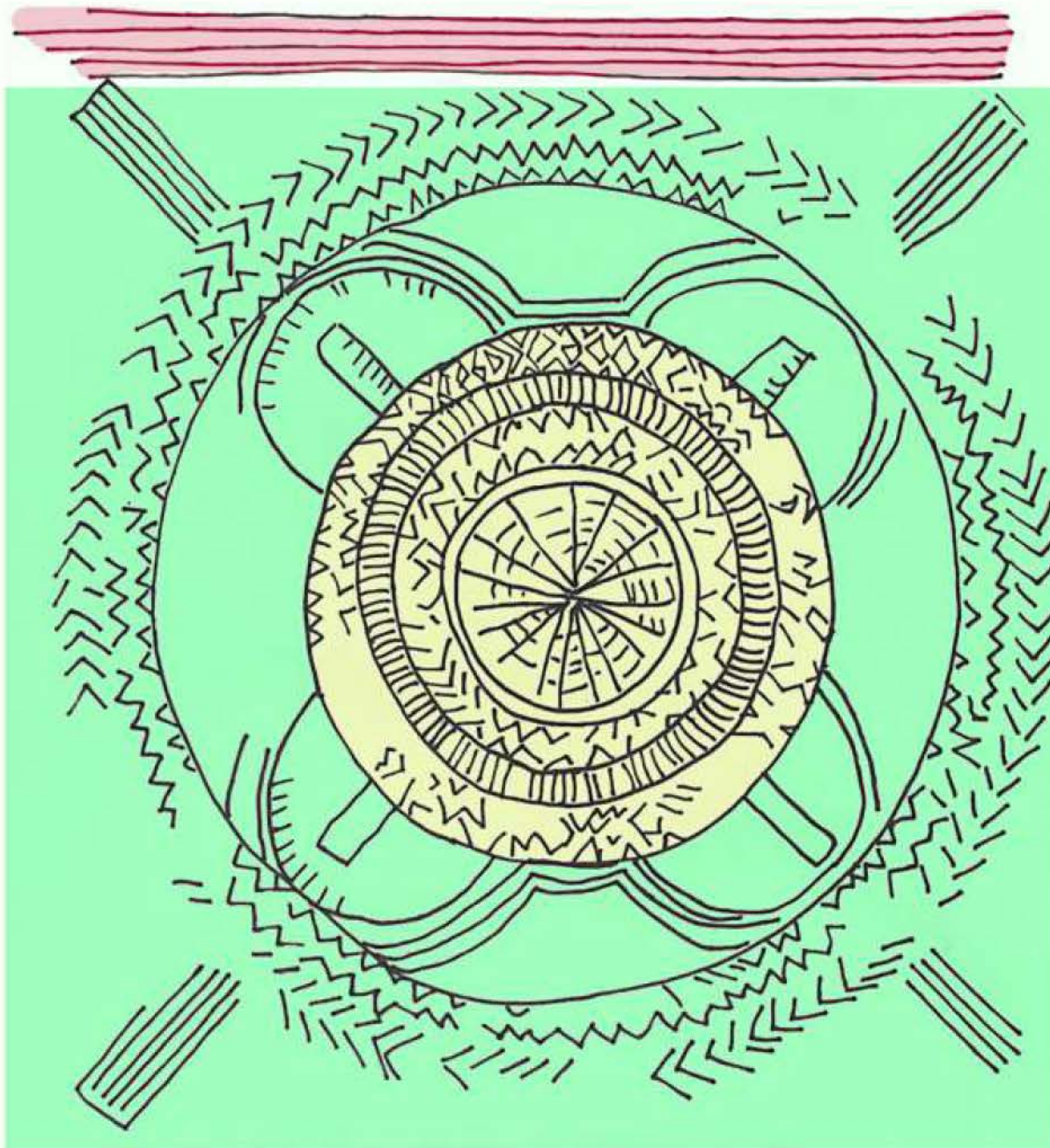


Figure 8. Scanned and Traced by Emily Krupp from: Zafimahefa. *Window*. 55.50 centimeters x 40.20 centimeters x 4.50 centimeters. Acquired July 26th, 1985. Tamboneka Wood. Museum Number Af1985,17.51. Scanned June 20th, 2024.

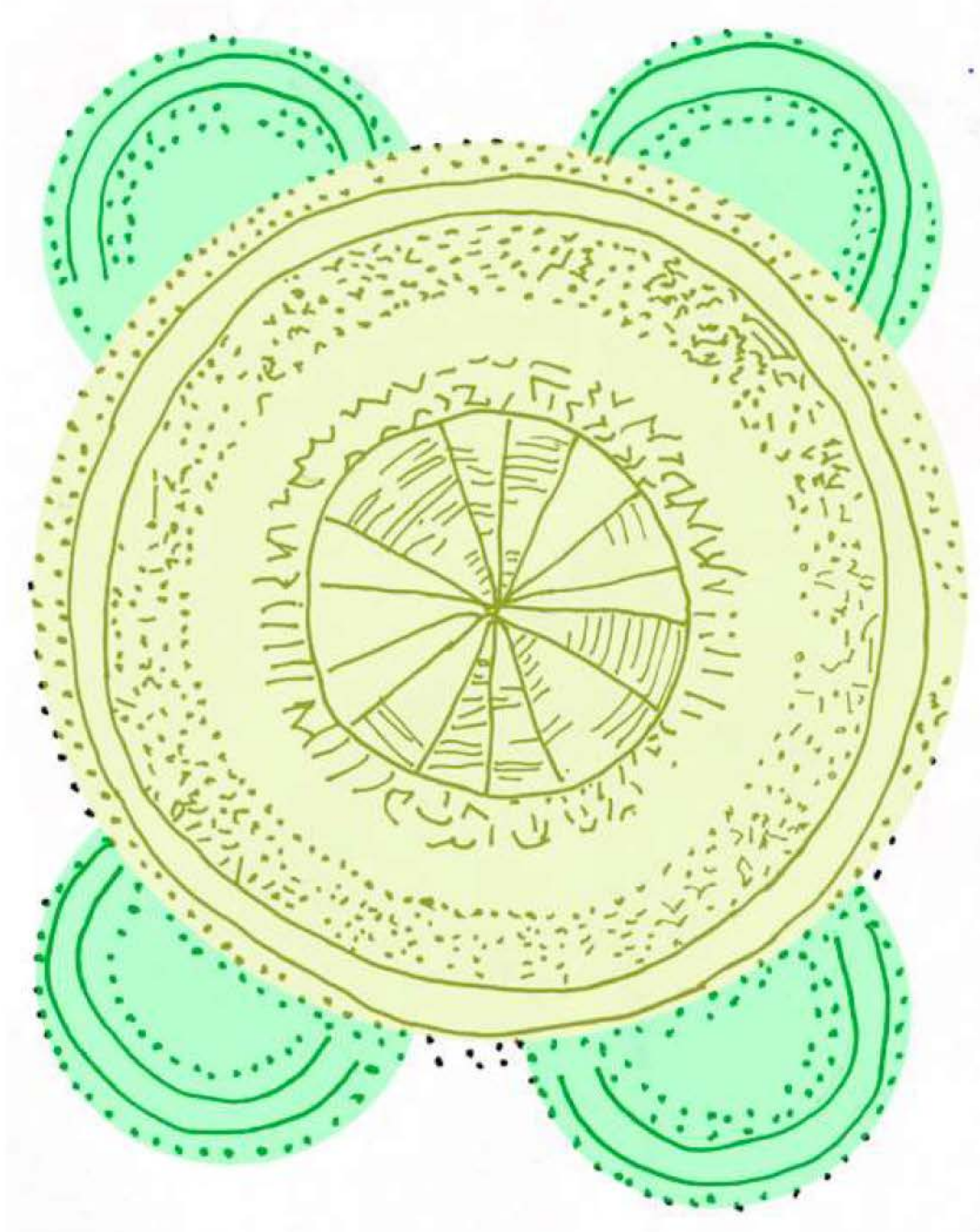


Figure 9. Scanned and Traced by Emily Krupp from: Zafimaniry. *Untitled*. Photographed Between 1996 and 2006. Photo by Sophie Bazin. Page 40 of *Zafimaniry Intime: Relation de Voyage Entrepris Chez Les Zafimaniry entre 1996 et 2006*. Scanned June 20th, 2024.



Figure 10. Zafimaniry. *Untitled*. Image from “Woodcrafting Knowledge of the Zafimaniry.”

Dimensions Unpublished. Date Unpublished. Copyright: Jérôme Ségur.

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