

# From Tradition to Transformation: Globalization, Religious Leadership, and Cultural Identity in Antananarivo, Madagascar – A Qualitative Study

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	
Received: 10-03-2026	
Accepted: 20-04-2026	<p><i>Globalization reshaped the religious and cultural landscape of urban African spaces. Using a phenomenological qualitative approach, this study investigated how globalization shapes religious expressions and cultural identity and the role of religious leadership as a mediator in these processes. Participants (n = 28) were religious leaders, urban youth, and cultural practitioners recruited through a purposive and snowball sampling strategy in Antananarivo in 2025. Data from semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participant observation were analyzed using conventional content analysis.</i></p> <p><i>A total of three key themes were identified, which included: (1) religious diversification and hybridity within the trends of growth in transnational movements as well as local syncretism; (2) the transformation in cultural identity with the erosion of traditions and the creative innovation of traditions; and finally, (3) media, technology, and religious leadership as mediating roles. Muslims specifically demonstrated selective glocalization, embracing technology while setting boundaries in religious doctrine. In leading positions, leaders become the primary cultural brokers who enable the community to negotiate the global influences that make their rounds while retaining local cultures. These findings point out the imperative of adaptive, reflective leadership for the nurturing of resilient identities within globalization in urban centers. It is against this background that the need arises to support such leadership toward sustainable cultural and religious coexistence.</i></p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Globalization, religious leadership, cultural identity, Madagascar, qualitative research, hybridization, glocalization</p>
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## Introduction

Globalization, driven by technology, migration, media flows, and economic integration, has transformed the way in which religious and cultural identities are expressed and experienced around the world today. Thus, globalization, as an intricate phenomenon of increasing interconnectedness and interdependence of different parts of the world, which is a result of the impact of technology, economics, and politics on how we see and interact with the world (Yadav, 2025), has reshaped religious and cultural identity expressions globally. The dynamics of these forces are well articulated in the urban fringes of Africa, in local traditions that interface with global forces. Antananarivo, the global city of Madagascar, represents an important site to explore the intersection of local culture and globalizations in Antananarivo's own distinct cultural patterns, influenced by local African culture as well as Austronesian and French colonial traditions that are now being impacted by global

religious networks, the online world, and global culture patterns (Rakotoarivony, 2018; Ottino, 2005).

Although there is abundant literature on globalization, two significant gaps appear in the context of a country such as Madagascar. First, the geographical aspect is incomplete in the sense that it is necessary to explore the link between globalization and religion in the context of small island nations that are culturally different from the rest of the continental nations of Africa. Such exploratory studies are lacking in the context of small island nations compared to large continental nations (Gifford, 2015). Second, and more relevant to the subject of this study, there is a need to fill the knowledge gap in terms of the strategic function of religious leadership in the context of the link between globalization and religion. Although the effects of globalization have been widely analyzed, the mediating

function of religious leadership is more recognized than analyzed. Religious leadership does not function passively, but rather acts as a catalyst or mediator.

This particular research attempts to fill this gap by exploring how globalization influences religious expression and cultural identity formation in Antananarivo, with a particular focus on the perceptions and practices of religious leaders. It aims to answer the following research questions: How do religious leaders perceive and respond to globalization? How do they guide their communities in finding a balance between Malagasy cultural values and the new influences of globalization? Finally, what are the implications of this leadership for cultural sustainability and identity coherence? By examining these questions, this research makes a significant contribution to ongoing debates on religion, globalization, and leadership in the Global South.

## Literature Review

The effect of globalization on religious and cultural life has perhaps been the most important theme in social science research, leading to the development of key theoretical arguments relevant to our discussion of religious and cultural life in Africa. Early models claimed that the universal spread of Western culture throughout the world would lead to cultural homogenization (Ritzer, 1993); however, empirical studies have shown that the process by which globalization affects culture is much more complex and nuanced (Meyer, 2004).

Numerous theological and sociological works have demonstrated the significant impact of transnational Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity on the religious landscape of various African states, particularly the nature of its influence on the construction of local religiosity and experiences of modernity (Meyer, 2004; Marshall, 2009). While studying the complex interaction between global and local cultures, researchers have also used the terms “glocalization,” which mainly refers to the local construction of global culture (Robertson, 1995), and “hybridity,” which refers to the culture emerging as a result of glocalization (Bhabha, 1994). This study is essential for understanding the continental powers of the African continent, particularly Nigeria, Ghana, and South Africa (Gifford, 2015). Studies on continental powers have contributed significantly to the establishment of continental culture. However, they have failed to focus on cultural and geographical changes in the island nations of the global scenario. In the African context, the island of Madagascar is essential, given the unique cultural heritage of the Austronesians and indigenous Africans (Rakotoarivony, 2018).

Linked to religious change is a transformation in cultural identity. Bhabha’s idea of hybridity has facilitated a way to describe the “third-space” identities that arise from the confluence of cultures, moving beyond a straightforward binary between tradition and modernity. Among urban Africans, youth are often pioneers in forging such hybrid spaces; partly adopting global cultural forms in fashion, music, and digital media, while still maintaining links with the localized traditions of their ancestors (Larkin, 2008).

Digital technology facilitates this, hastening the process that some researchers have named the mediatization of culture and religion: media become constitutive agents in social change (Hjarvard, 2008; Campbell, 2010).

A key but less studied factor that cuts across these themes is religious leadership. While most research has focused either on institutional growth or on the experience of believers, the role of leaders as cultural mediators remains under-theorized. Leaders have the difficult task of interpreting doctrinal messages in the local context, coordinating the introduction of new technologies, and dealing with the moral and social tensions resulting from rapid change (Csordas, 2009). It is therefore their role as cultural intermediaries that determines whether globalization promotes disruptive conflict or creative synthesis, and their particular perceptions and strategies remain an understudied variable.

The specific gaps identified as relevant to this study, as presented in this article, are twofold: on the one hand, the geographical perspective does not focus on island nations such as Madagascar, and on the other hand, religious leadership is not sufficiently taken into account as an important mediating factor in the glocal perspective. The various objectives of this particular study are to fill the gaps with a view to a more effective application of the glocalization perspective, with a particular emphasis on the role of leaders in managing glocality.

## Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study will draw theoretically on the concept of glocalization, developed and popularized by the sociologist Roland Robertson (1995). This concept transcends the simplistic dichotomy between homogenization and heterogenization by situating global experience and action invariably within the local context. This conception can be summarized by the expression proposed by Robertson (1995): “universalization of the particular and particularization of the universal.” This theory is particularly relevant to our study because it addresses the often complex and abstract involvement of individuals in Antananarivo in transnational religious movements and global cultural flows.

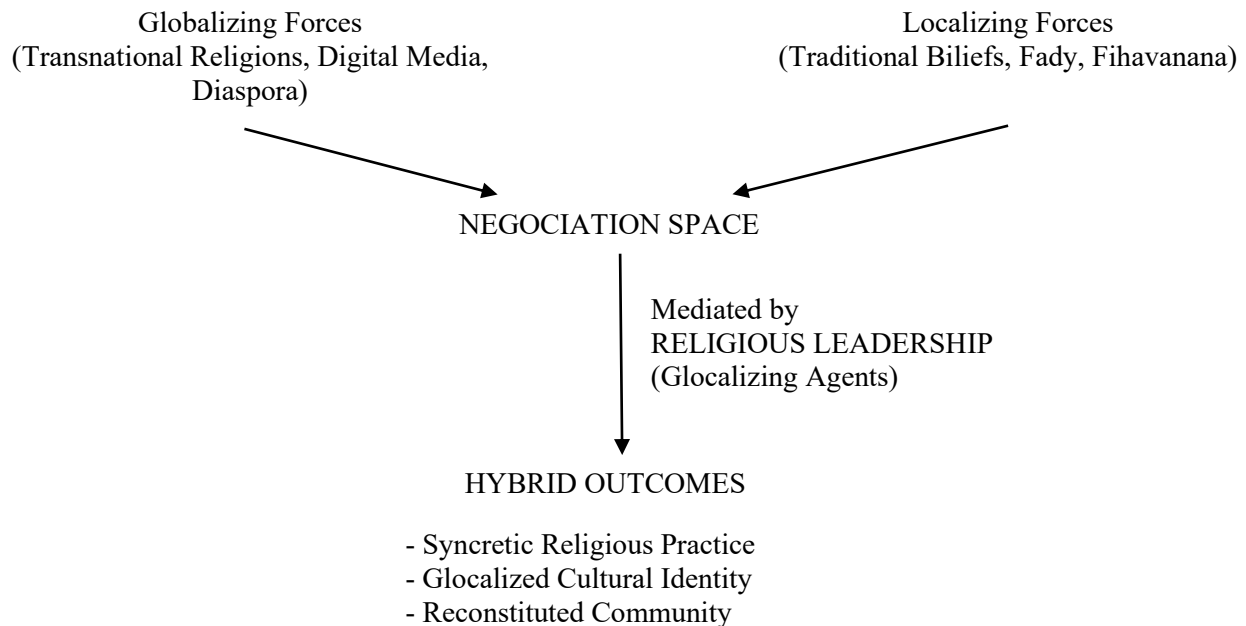
Glocalization provides the fundamental logic underlying the action at the heart of this study: the action of religious leaders and community members in negotiating global influences. In doing so, the analysis shifts from passive reception to active negotiation, allowing for the study of the empirical realities of blending (e.g., famadihana in Christian practice), adaptation (e.g., global styles of worship using the valiha), and strategic mediation. Here, religious leaders are theorized as “agents of glocalization” who perform the important work of translating global religious doctrines and practices through the lens of local values such as fihavanana (social harmony) and respect for ancestors.

To implement the above theory in the context of this research, the following framework was used (as illustrated in Figure 1). This framework affirms the role of globalization forces as well as localization forces that

converge in the space of the city of Antananarivo. This convergence is presented as the space of negotiation in which the main process of glocalization takes place. It also affirms the important role of religious leaders as mediators of the negotiation process through interpretation, adaptation, and synthesis. Finally, the framework asserts that the results of the process are the hybrid forms reported

by the research, including syncretic forms of religious practices as well as glocalized forms of cultural identities with reconstituted community ties. This framework clarifies the focus of the research on the role of leadership as a pivotal variable influencing the convergence of glocalization forces toward generative coexistence or disruptive conflict.

**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: Glocalization and Mediated Negotiation**



## Method

### Research Design

The research used the qualitative phenomenology research design to investigate the lived experiences of the people of Antananarivo in relation to the perceptions of the effects of globalization on the religious practices and cultures of the people (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research methodology was used because of its ability to offer in-depth insights.

### Participants and settings

Through purposive and snowball techniques, 28 participants were recruited from four different neighbourhoods in Antananarivo, ranging from socio-economically different areas, including Analakely (commercial district), Isoraka (middle-class neighbourhood), Andohalo (historical religious neighbourhood), and Ankorondrano (modern diplomatic neighbourhood). Data saturation was reached to end the sampling.

Participants were divided into three groups: Religious Leaders and Adherents (n = 12); this comprised leaders, as well as active members, of Adventists, Catholics, Protestants, Pentecostals/Charismatics, and Muslims, together with the indigenous Malagasy tradition.

Urban Youth (n = 10): People aged 18-35 years old who have been highly exposed to traditional and globalized forms of culture.

Cultural Practitioners/Elders (n=6): Researchers, artists, and community leaders well-versed in Malagasy culture, as well as how they have changed over time.

All participants were living in Antananarivo for at least three years. Demographic variables can be found in Table 1.

### Data Collection

Data was collected between September and December 2025. The main techniques used: semi-structured Interviews (n = 28); lasting anywhere between 45 and 60 minutes, these interviews were semi-structured, meaning that they involved a guide that primarily covered elements of religion, culture, globalization, leadership, and media. Examples of questions that could be asked during an interview: "How has globalization impacted your religion?" and "How do leaders of your religion address it?"

Focus group discussions (n = 4): These are discussion sessions conducted in separate groups with youths and religious leaders, aimed at creating an interactive discussion and involving 5 to 7 individuals.

Observation: Performed at six religious events and three cultural festivals to contextualize the interview findings.

All the interviews and talks were recorded audioactively and were transcribed verbatim. Translation was done from the Malagasy language to English.

## Data Analysis

The study applied conventional content analysis techniques to extract patterns and themes from the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The software NVivo aided the coding of the transcripts for analysis. The analysis procedure included the following steps: (1) reading the transcripts for familiarization, (2) open coding for the formation of initial codes, and then the formation of sub-topics and main-topics by comparing the codes. Interrater reliability of the study community of the two analysts coding a set of transcripts stood at 92%, and the disparities were clarified by discussion with the third researcher.

## Reliability

Reliability was ensured in several ways (Lincoln & Guba, 1985): credibility was established through extended

participation in the study (4 months), methodological triangulation, and validation by eight participants. The reliability of the study was guaranteed by a comprehensive audit system and discussions with academic experts. The transferability of the study results was increased by writing a detailed description of the context and participants.

## Results

### Participant Demographics

The mean age of participants was 34.2 years (SD = 9.8), while the mean length of residence in Antananarivo was 18.6 years (SD = 11.4). More than half were female (57.1%), while most held a bachelor's degree or higher (60.7%) (See Table 1).

**Table 1 \*Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 28)\***

Characteristic	n	%	Characteristic	n	%
<b>Gender</b>			<b>Age Group</b>		
Male	12	42.9	18–25 years	6	21.4
Female	16	57.1	26–35 years	9	32.1
			36–50 years	8	28.6
			Over 50 years	5	17.9
<b>Education</b>			<b>Religious Affiliation</b>		
Secondary	5	17.9	Traditional Malagasy	4	14.3
Some university	6	21.4	Catholic	8	28.6
Bachelor's degree	12	42.9	Protestant	6	21.4
Master's or higher	5	17.8	Pentecostal/Charismatic	7	25.0
			Muslim	2	7.1
			Multiple/Syncretic	1	3.6

## Thematic findings

Analysis identified three main themes and eight sub-themes, as outlined in Table 2.

**Table 2: Themes and Sub-themes on the Impact of Globalization**

Theme	Sub-theme	Key Illustrative Codes
<b>1. Religious Diversification and Hybridity</b>	1.1 Emergence of New Movements	Pentecostal growth; international missionaries; religious competition
	1.2 Syncretism & Blended Practices	Mixing rituals; dual participation; ancestral veneration in Christian contexts
<b>2. Cultural Identity Transformation</b>	2.1 Hybrid Identity Formation	Blending values; multiple selves; selective adoption; generational differences
	2.2 Erosion of Traditions	Declining <i>fady</i> ; reduced ceremony participation;

Theme	Sub-theme	Key Illustrative Codes
<b>3. Mediating Role of Media, Tech &amp; Leadership</b>		language shift
	2.3 Cultural Innovation	Music fusion; fashion with Malagasy motifs; digital storytelling
	3.1 Access to Global Content	Online sermons, religious TV, and social media communities
	3.2 Digital Cultural Exchange	Diaspora connections; global trend adoption; online learning
	3.3 Leadership in Adaptation	Pastors as cultural brokers; teaching discernment; promoting glocal synthesis, strategic technology use for faith propagation; maintaining doctrinal purity while adopting modern tools

### ***Theme 1: Religious Diversification and Hybridity***

Participants spoke of a marked increase in religious diversity, especially the rise of global Pentecostal and charismatic churches. An Adventist pastor spoke of this competitive yet responsive environment as follows: “When I first entered the ministry, there were only a few churches in this area. Now there are well over twenty, with many of them incorporating global architectural designs. We have had to ponder ways to remain authentic and yet relevant, incorporating media use while establishing our young people upon biblical and health principles” (Adventist Pastor, Interview 14).

Syncretism was prevalent. A young Adventist related: “Being an Adventist myself, I do follow my family to famadihana activities, or 'turning of the bones', to ancestral burial places. It is not a contradiction to us, but a form of cultural heritage. In church, our pastor is teaching us to incorporate culture into our faith in a manner that does not destroy it but instead enriches it” (Adventist Youth, Interview 19).

### ***Theme 2: Cultural Identity Transformation***

Participants, especially young people, shared experiences of “living in two worlds.” A university student explained: “At home, I follow fady [taboos] and speak Malagasy. Online and with friends, I am into K-pop and global fashion. I am not losing myself; instead, I am developing my identity” (Interview 20).

While there was criticism from seniors about the loss of traditions such as "fady," there was also recognition of innovative creativity. A musician spoke of combining elements of traditional music in Madagascar, such as “valiha”, with electronic music: "It's a new Malagasy sound for a global audience" (Interview 16).

### ***Theme 3: The Mediating Role of Media, Technology, and Leadership***

Digital media proved to be a double-edged sword, in that it both opened access to religious content from all over the world and caused information overload. It was important to have leadership on how to navigate this. One Adventist pastor made this point with the emphasis now on curation: We have WhatsApp groups just for prayer and sermon streaming, but we also have Bible studies on digital discernment. We ask, 'Does this online teaching align with our core values and local reality?' (Adventist Pastor, Interview 14).

Religious leaders constantly served as cultural brokers. A Protestant pastor summarized this role as: “We have to translate and build bridges, help our people receive the ideas of global citizenry filtered through a Malagasy lens. We do this to maintain the cohesiveness of fihavanana, or kinship solidarity that holds us together” (Interview 9).

Muslims showed a strategic approach to technology while being steadfast in their adherence to their core beliefs. An imam said: We don't reject technology; we use it. I record sermons and share them on WhatsApp and Facebook. We have a YouTube channel teaching the Quran in Malagasy and Arabic. However, when it comes to our faith, we do not compromise. We take the technology, but not the values that come with it, from elsewhere (Imam, Interview 23).

A young Muslim university student had a balanced attitude, saying globalization connected him to the global ummah and reinforced his faith (Muslim Youth, Interview 26). This phenomenon illustrates selective glocalization. Muslims remain deeply religious, but they use the global connections offered by technology to build community and spread their religious traditions through exchanges with other Muslims around the world. These connections also help distinguish them from their Christian counterparts, who may do similar things.

## Discussion

This study explains how globalization is mediated religiously and culturally in Antananarivo, resulting in unique religious leadership as a key mechanism of glocalization. The findings add empirical depth to Robertson's (1995) theory of glocalization by clarifying the agency work performed by local actors, specifically leaders, in negotiating the global-local interface.

The widespread religious syncretism, as demonstrated by Adventist youngsters engaging in a famadihana ceremony or healers adapting to a Christian context, offers a direct understanding of the concept of "the particularization of the universal" (Robertson, 1995). It is not just a question of 'coexistence,' but rather a practice of indigenization. It is true, as Meyer (2004) points out, that cosmologies have lingered, but what is demonstrated here is the means by which, through implicit or explicit permission issued by a leader, as a translator of culture, religion is not viewed as an imposition from outside. The Adventist pastor's attempt to embrace a digital landscape while also promoting local values like fihavanana is a glocalization act.

Similarly, the youth's negotiated hybrid identities find echoes in Bhabha's (1994) notion of "third space". However, the glocalization framework goes beyond characterizing this space towards an explanation of its contentious constitution. The tension between erosive fady and innovative cultural fusion represents the negotiation field in Figure 1. Therein, leadership is invariably crucial. Leaders who, while offering a steady moral compass, validate Selective Adoption (e.g., a musician playing valiha with electronic music) are in a position to manage the "confusion in identity" participants identified, leading to hybridity toward incoherent disintegration.

The mediating role of digital technology further highlights the changing landscape of religious authority in the glocalized world (Campbell, 2010). Religious leaders are no longer the sole authorities on religious knowledge, but must now contend with the rise of global voices in an online environment. For effective religious leadership, digital discernment, that is, the selection of global content from a local ethical perspective, is an important aspect, as our data show. An important new skill for any agent of glocalization is to actively engage in managing media flows to ensure that technology supports, rather than undermines, community cohesion.

This study illustrates how Muslim participants implemented the concept of selective glocalization. Unlike the Christian participants in this study, who adopted a syncretic approach, the Muslims employed a model of strategic technology adoption while maintaining strict doctrinal consistency. An example of intentional glocalization is the imam's declaration that he would "adopt the technology, but not the values it conveys"; in other words, he would tailor the medium (technology) to their needs while keeping the message (religious teaching) constant. This finding is in line with what Mandaville (2020) found: "the majority of Muslim communities do not see globalization as a way to become more like everyone else, but rather as a way to strengthen their religious identity

through the use of global technologies." These results contradict the common belief that globalization automatically leads to secularization or a decline in religion (Bunt, 2018).

Finally, the current study illustrates the bridging role of leadership. The schisms between tradition-bound elders and globally engaged youth can be conceived of as a glocalization impasse. Visionary individuals capable of connecting fihavanana and virtual communities, or elders attached to traditions and the aspirations of young people focused on the world, play an invaluable mediating role. Their ability to legitimize both worlds can ultimately reduce tensions and enable the intergenerational dialogue deemed necessary for cultural continuity.

## Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this study exist in its urban setting and use of subjective data. Further research is required to compare urban and rural processes and to take a longitudinal approach to tracking the development of identity. A particularly worthwhile application study would involve evaluating professional and informal training paradigms for cultivating adaptable and intercultural competency.

## Conclusion

This article shows that the globalization of Antananarivo is subject to complex processes of change, which should be described as processes of glocalization. Indeed, religious and cultural change is not unidirectional, but rather an area in which change is subject to negotiation.

Ultimately, the main conclusion concerns the role of religious leaders who, according to the author, act as mediators between glocalization and, primarily, the agents of glocalization who bring about change through strategic interpretations and syntheses leading to hybridity and/or conflict.

The study reveals that Muslim perspectives enrich our understanding of glocalization: *selective adoption*. Some groups create a hybrid form integrating both global and local elements, while others adopt globalized ideas much more selectively, while clearly defining the boundaries of their core beliefs. Thus, the findings of this study contribute to broadening our overall understanding of how all religious groups, including diverse Islamic communities, use their room for maneuver to cope with the impact of the global environment on their lives.

Theoretically, this research will make an important contribution to the theory of glocalization, particularly with reference to the agentic role of intentional leaders and their institutions in a non-Western, urban island context. Furthermore, it aims to refine this framework into a microsociological tool for analyzing pastoral strategy in a community context.

In practical terms, it demonstrates an important need to promote adaptive and reflective religious leadership. Capacity development among religious leaders should not only include theological training but also cultural hermeneutics, media literacy, and conflict mediation skills,

among others. Various religious institutions, educational centers such as the Adventist University of Africa, and policy-makers should invest in developing and cultivating religious leaders who can reflectively lead their respective religious entities in safeguarding their respective religious heritages and at the same time be actively involved in globalizing forces. Such leadership is not only important but absolutely vital to shaping cohesive identity in Madagascar and elsewhere in Africa.

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