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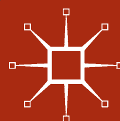
PERSPECTIVES ON FRENCH COLONIAL MADAGASCAR

Eric T. Jennings



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Perspectives on French Colonial Madagascar

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Note on Place Names

I have retained some colonial place names, like Fort-Dauphin (modern-day Tolanaro) and Diego-Suarez (Antsiranana today) but have through-out changed Tananarive, as the island's capital was called in French times, to its precolonial and postcolonial name, Antananarivo. This decision has largely to do with the age and duration of each designation, Fort-Dauphin having been termed as such as early as the seventeenth century, while the capital only held the designation of Tananarive only during the colonial era (1895–1960).

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Few English-language books have been dedicated to Madagascar under French colonial rule. Madagascar's leading Anglophone historians have tended to show greater interest in the pre-colonial empire, sometimes known as the Kingdom of Madagascar, or in the very first years following the French invasion of 1895.[1] On balance, the lion's share of English-language work on colonial-era Madagascar has been conducted in anthropology and environmental studies. Indeed, anthropologists systematically produce a far greater output of English-language scholarship on the island than do historians.[2] Perhaps predictably, more

[1] Gwyn Campbell, *An Economic History of Imperial Madagascar, 1750–1895: The Rise and Fall of an Island Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Pier Larson, *History and Memory in the Age of Enslavement: Becoming Merina in Highland Madagascar, 1770–1822* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2000); Stephen Ellis, *The Rising of the Red Shawls: A Revolt in Madagascar, 1895–1899* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[2] See for instance, Maurice Bloch, *From Blessing to Violence: History and Ideology in the Circumcision Ritual of the Merina of Madagascar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Maurice Bloch, *Placing the Dead: Tombs, Ancestral Villages and Kinship Organization in Madagascar* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1993); Gillian Feeley-Harnik, *A Green Estate: Restoring Independence in Madagascar* (Washington: Smithsonian Press, 1991); Michael Lambek, *The Weight of the Past: Living with History in Mahajunga, Madagascar* (New York: Palgrave, 2003); Andrew Walsh, *Made in Madagascar: Sapphires, Ecotourism and the Global Bazaar* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015); Jennifer Cole, *Sex and Salvation: Imagining the Future in Madagascar* (Chicago: University of

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extensive French-language histories of Madagascar—including that produced by Malagasy researchers—do not follow these same chronological patterns. Nor, arguably, has anthropology been as dominant in relation to historical work on Madagascar in the Francophone context as in the Anglophone one. This book certainly engages at once with French-language scholarship, including the prolific writings of Malagasy scholars, and with anthropological work. Indeed, over the years, it has been considerably enriched by interdisciplinary dialog at the annual Toronto–Montréal interdisciplinary workshops on Madagascar. However, the purpose of this brief, and overly schematic, state of the field is to suggest that large parts of Madagascar's political, social, medical and cultural history in the colonial period remain largely uncharted.

In short, historical engagement with Madagascar has been rather spotty. While the pre-colonial royal era, ending with the French conquest of 1895, as well as the dawn and twilight of colonial rule in Madagascar, and especially the repression of a nationalist revolt in 1947, no doubt constitute crucially important topics, the attention they have drawn in English-language scholarship has largely masked the *longue-durée* and complexity of the colonial period itself.[3] Colonial-era Madagascar offers a fascinating counterpoint to other French colonial contexts like North Africa and Indochina, as well as occupying a critical space as a hub of the southern Indian Ocean world system. In keeping with my *longue-durée*

Footnote 2 (continued)

Chicago Press, 2010); Lee Haring, *Verbal Arts in Madagascar: Performance in Historical Perspective* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992); Lee Haring, *How to Read a Folktale: the 'Ibonia' Epic from Madagascar* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2013); Rita Astuti, *People of the Sea: Identity and Descent Among the Vezo of Madagascar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) Jennifer Jackson, *Political Oratory and Cartooning: An Ethnography of Democratic Process in Madagascar* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); Genese Marie Sodikoff, *Forest and Labor in Madagascar: From Colonial Concession to Global Biosphere* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2012); Karen Middleton, ed., *Ancestors, Power and History in Madagascar* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); David Graeber, *Lost People: Magic and the Legacy of Slavery in Madagascar* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Lesley Sharp, *The Possessed and the Dispossessed: Spirits, Identity and Power in a Madagascar Migrant Town* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Conrad Kottak, *The Past in the Present: History, Ecology and Cultural Variation in Highland Madagascar* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980).

[3] I have in mind Jennifer Cole's fine study on remembering and forgetting the 1947 insurrection: *Forget Colonialism? Sacrifice and the Art of Memory in Madagascar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

commitment, I conceive the colonial era in broad terms. Thus, I focus in Chap. 2 on some of the first French annexations in coastal regions like Nossi Be and Diego-Suarez from 1841 to 1895, before turning to consider the colonial era on the bulk of mainland Madagascar from 1895 to 1960.

There are, of course, notable historiographical exceptions to the rules I just described, mainly in the form of broader English-language volumes that include a chapter or two on Madagascar. They tend to be authored by scholars who would not consider themselves to be first and foremost historians of Madagascar. Instead, they self-identify either as practitioners of the so-called new colonial history, or as members of disciplines that include the history of urban planning and the history of science. Gwendolyn Wright's pioneering 1991 book on French colonial urbanism in Indochina, Madagascar and Morocco unmistakably started the trend. Two years later, Lewis Pyenson considered Madagascar as one of many interconnected sites of French scientific experimentation in the colonial era. Wright's triangular framework, as well as the mounting interest in colonial circulations and comparisons, colored the approach I adopted for my first book. Published in 2002, it dealt with Vichy French rule over three French colonies, Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina. Next, my 2006 *Curing the Colonizers* examined the network of French colonial spas that spanned Madagascar, the French Caribbean, Réunion Island, and Tunisia. J.P. Daughton's seminal and nuanced study of missionary-state relations in 2008 relied on a triangular construction, focusing on Madagascar, the South Pacific, and Indochina. Gabrielle Hecht's path-breaking 2012 *Being Nuclear* analyzed colonial legacies within the global uranium market. It similarly devoted a sizeable section to Madagascar. Michael Finch's 2013 exploration of colonial military strategies in Madagascar and Northern Indochina constituted a two-pronged case that followed the career of French general and counter-insurgency expert Joseph Gallieni. Margaret Cook Andersen's recent (2015) and innovative analysis of pro-natalism, settlement and French colonialism was similarly dually articulated around Madagascar and North Africa. Robert Aldrich's current comparative project on sovereigns under colonial rule will likewise encompass Madagascar as well as different Southeast Asian case studies.[4]

[4] Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991); Lewis Pyenson, *Civilizing Mission: Exact Sciences and French Overseas Expansion, 1830–1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Eric Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: The National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe*

Accounting for this series of book-length studies over the past quarter century that examine between two and four French colonies or spheres of influence,[5] of which Madagascar constitutes one example, is no simple task. Indeed, it remains perplexing even to those who practice it, insofar as it stands in contrast to other geographical areas. There is, for instance, no shortage of monographs devoted entirely to French colonial Indochina, to Algeria, to Tunisia, to the French South Pacific, and to West or Equatorial Africa.[6] The fact that each of the comparative

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Footnote 4 (continued)

and Indochina (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); Eric Jennings, *Curing the Colonizers: Hydrotherapy, Climatology, and French Colonial Spas* (Raleigh: Duke University Press, 2006); J.P. Daughton, *An Empire Divided: Religion, Republicanism, and the Making of French Colonialism 1880–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Gabrielle Hecht, *Being Nuclear: Africans and the Global Uranium Trade* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012); Michael Finch, *A Progressive Occupation? The Gallieni–Lyautey Method and Colonial Pacification in Tonkin and Madagascar, 1885–1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Margaret Cook Andersen, *Regeneration through Empire: French Pronatalists and Colonial Settlement in the Third Republic* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015); Robert Aldrich, manuscript in progress on monarchies under colonial empires.

[5] Hecht, Aldrich and Pyenson, constitute exceptions, for they have not limited their studies to the French empire.

[6] See, for example, on French West Africa: Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016): Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Duke: Duke University Press, 2006); Richard Roberts, *Two Worlds of Cotton: Colonialism and the Regional Economy of the French Soudan, 1800–1946* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996) and Elizabeth Foster, *Faith in Empire: Religion, Politics and Colonial Rule in French Senegal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013). On French Indochina, see Peter Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1962–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Christopher Goscha, *Going Indochinese: Contesting Concepts of Space and Place in French Colonial Indochina* (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2012); Charles Keith, *Catholic Vietnam: A Church from Empire to Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012) and Katie Edwards, *Contesting Indochina: French Remembrance between Decolonization and Cold War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016). On French North Africa, see: Patricia Lorcin, *Imperial Identities: Stereotypes, Prejudice and Race in Colonial Algeria* (London: Tauris, 1999); Mary Lewis, *Divided Rule: Sovereignty and Empire in French Tunisia, 1881–1938* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Jennifer Sessions, *By Sword and Plow: France and the Conquest of Algeria* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014); Julia Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans: North Africa and Europe in the Age of Migration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: the Algerian War and the Remaking*

efforts just described, my own included, makes Madagascar an example among many, may reveal historians' implicit attempts to de-marginalize Madagascar by blending the island into a broader fold. After all, Madagascar's alterity, its purported absolute otherness, was precisely what had fascinated French colonial ethnographers, historians, geographers and naturalists for decades. De-provincializing Madagascar by bringing it into a comparative frame may therefore reflect a deliberate methodological agenda, or at the very least a leveling device.

Interestingly, this same impulse is being reflected in French-language scholarship by Malagasy historians, but in subtly different ways. Thanks to the work of Faranirina Rajaonah, histories of Madagascar find themselves folded into comparative francophone collective studies dealing with colonial cities and with African urban festivities.[7] Solofo Randrianja has likewise set his comparative sights on Madagascar and South Africa.[8]

Similarly, historians of pre-colonial Madagascar have for decades connected the Great Isle to the Indian Ocean world, and historians of the Indian Ocean have long stressed the crucial place of Madagascar within that system. Thus, Edward Alpers has highlighted nineteenth-century ties across the Mozambique Channel, while he and Gwyn Campbell have consistently linked Madagascar to the Indian Ocean world system. Meanwhile, Philippe Beaujard has stressed Madagascar's early implication in multiple exchange systems. For their part, Sarah Fee and Samuel Sanchez have underscored Madagascar's role within trade networks

Footnote 6 (continued)

of France (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008). On the French South Pacific, see Kim Munholland, *Rock of Contention: Free French and Americans in New Caledonia, 1940–1945* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005); Robert Aldrich *France and the South Pacific since 1940* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993). Forthcoming on Algeria is Owen White's study of the colonial wine industry, on French Equatorial Africa JP Daughton's work on the Congo-Océan railway, and on Indochina, Haydon Cherry's *Down and Out in Saigon: Stories of the Poor in a Colonial City, 1900–1940.*

[7] See Faranirina Rajaonah's chapters in both Odile Goerg, ed., *Fêtes urbaines en Afrique* (Paris: Karthala, 1999), and Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch and Odile Goerg, eds., *La Ville européenne outre-mers, un modèle conquérent?* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000).

[8] Solofo Randrianja, "Les relations entre l'Afrique du Sud et Madagascar, 1967–1971" in Didier Nativel and Faranirina Rajaonah, eds., *Madagascar et l'Afrique* (Paris: Karthala, 2007), pp. 319–344.

down the east coast of Africa. And Pier Larson has tied the Great Island to the Mascarene Islands and to the movement of slaves.[9]

There is also, of course, the opposite impulse to see in Madagascar a counter-example to a larger rule. Yet regardless, it seems well worth considering French colonial Madagascar on its own terms, or perhaps more accurately as a "colonial situation"[10] of its own, a product of a particular set of global configurations, with the dialogical and power relationships that a colonial relationship implies. It strikes me as especially essential to decode and lay bare some of the colonial visions that underpinned, shaped, and flattened a very much plural French colonial Madagascar. In other words, an investigation into how and why Madagascar earned its reputation for radical otherness appears overdue, especially at a time when that otherness is still deployed as an explanatory device in languages of politics and development. This reputation for fundamental difference also long suffused, and in some cases continues, to color scholarship in the natural sciences, in history and other disciplines alike. Such a rebalancing seems all the more worthwhile given the conflicting and fantastical projections that colonials cast over the Red Island in

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[9] Edward Alpers, "Madagascar and Mozambique in the Nineteenth Century: The Era of the Sakalava Raids (1800–1820)," *Omaly sy Anio*, 5–6 (1977): 337–353; Edward Alpers, *The Indian Ocean in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 38, 86–87. Gwyn Campbell, forthcoming book on the Indian Ocean world with Cambridge University Press, as well as Gwyn Campbell, ed., *Southern Africa and Regional Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region* (London: Curzon, 2003); Philippe Beaujard, "The Indian Ocean in Eurasian and African World-Systems Before the Sixteenth Century," *Journal of World History* (2005) 16:4, pp. 411–465; Sarah Fee, "The Political Economy of an Art Form: the Akotifahana Cloth of Madagascar and Trade Networks in the Southwest Indian Ocean" in Walter Little and Patricia Macaulney, eds., *Textile Economies: Power and Value from the Local to the* Transnatoinal (Lanham: Altamira, 2011): pp. 77–100. Samuel Sanchez, "Évolution du commerce maritime sur la côte occidentale de Madagascar au XIXe siècle: destinations, rythmes des échanges, marchandises," *Tsingy*, 9 (2008): 44–56; Samuel Sanchez, "Navigation et gens de mer dans le canal de Mozambique: Le boutre dans les activités maritimes de Nosy Be et de l'ouest de Madagascar au xixe siècle," in Nativel and Rajaonah, eds., *Madagascar et l'Afrique*, op. cit., pp. 103–136; Pier Larson, "Malagasy at the Mascarenes: Publishing in a Servile Vernacular before the French Revolution," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 49: 3 (July 2007): 582–610; Pier Larson, "La diaspora malgache aux Mascareignes (XVIIIe et XIXe siècles): notes sur la démographie et la langue," *Revue Historique de l'Océan Indien*, 1 (2005): 143–155.

[10] Georges Balandier, "La situation coloniale: approche théorique," *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, 11 (1951): 44–79 .

particular, many of which would prove more enduring than empire itself. It is the kaleidoscope of such perceptions that lies at the heart of this book.

Of the few English-language studies that are at once historically grounded and focused squarely on colonial Madagascar, many have tended to stress the role of environment, reflecting no doubt the current concerns over deforestation and habitat change on the Great Island.[11] In contrast, this book considers a set of understudied colonial projects and perceptions relating to the Red Island that revolve around power, vulnerability, health, conflict, control and identity. The Madagascar that emerges from my study is plural and fractured. It is the site of colonial dystopias, of grand schemes gone awry, of skewed readings. It is a story of colonials lost in translation, of lessons missed, of shock waves and tensions, and of multiple indigenous reactions.

The book draws its material from many sources, most notably the French colonial archives in Aix-en-Provence, which contain the bulk of colonial-era holdings on the great island, from the regional level up to the colony-wide. It further relies on documents held at the National Archives of the Republic of Madagascar and at the Académie Malgache library, both in Antananarivo. Additionally, it makes use of sources housed in the branch of the French naval archives in Toulon, in the Chamber of Commerce archives in Marseille, the Centre historique des troupes d'outre-mer archives in Fréjus, and the Propaganda Fide archives in Rome. It taps into several archives in Paris: the Pasteur Institute and the Museum of Natural history archives, as well as the Ligue des droits de l'homme holdings at Nanterre. Finally, it makes use of files held at the Quaker missionary archives in London.

The work is structured along three broad lines. The first concerns health, fragility and domination; the second involves the two world wars; and the third surrounds the mystery of Malagasy origins. It showcases

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[11] Jeffrey Kaufmann, ed., *Greening the Great Red Island: Madagascar in Nature and Culture* (Pretoria: Africa Institute of South Africa, 2008); Jeffrey Kaufmann, "La question des Raketa: Colonial Struggles with Prickly Pear Cactus in Southern Madagascar, 1900–1923" *Ethnohistory*, 48 (2001): 87–122; Genese Sodikoff, "Forced and Forest Labor Regimes in Colonial Madagsacar, 1926–1936" *Ethnohistory* 52:5 (2005): 407–435; Genese Sodikoff, *Forest and Labor in Madagascar: From Colonial Concession to Global Biosphere* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2012). Christian Kull, *Isle of Fire: The Political Ecology of Landscape Burning in Madagascar* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

some of Madagascar's defining, yet often neglected, features within the French colonial realm and the Indian Ocean network. Its conquest at the end of the nineteenth century's scramble for Africa was notable for the way it shattered plans to make it a French settlement colony analogous to Algeria, Australia or South Africa. Its colonization coincided with a growing French need for troops in the buildup to military conflict in Europe. Lastly, the origin of the island's people continued to both baffle and fascinate French colonial experts, be they ethnographers, linguists or historians, from the beginning to the end of the colonial period. Together, then, *Perspectives on French Colonial Madagascar* probes the relationship between domination and health fears, the island's role during the two world wars, and its enduring fascination as a site that defied conventional geographies, as it could never be neatly categorized as either African or Asian. Its disappearing act on some logos and diagrams of Africa is symptomatic of this phenomenon.

Part I explores the relationship between health, forms of knowledge, and colonial fragility. The first chapter charts the radical change in attitude towards the vast isle, from a perceived paradise free of disease, to a lethal land responsible for cataclysmic morbidity rates during the 1895 colonial conquest. The ensuing chapter analyzes how French colonial knowhow in treating and preventing a specific "scare disease" was utilized to cement conquest, with unexpected consequences.

The book's second part opens with a chapter that explores the language of sacrifice in Madagascar during and after the Great War. Between 1914 and 1918, some 30,000 Malagasy served in French uniform, and one in seven French colonial losses in the Great War hailed from Madagascar. This chapter considers the memorial stakes of this sacrifice in the form of a hybrid war monument intended to commemorate the dead from the entire island. The following section examines the consequences of Madagascar's sudden isolation and authoritarian turn in 1940, when its rulers sided with the Vichy camp. Although colonialism had always relied on forced labor and other instruments of power, the advent of the Vichy regime still ushered in radical changes on the ground, as this detailed examination of one community in highland Madagascar demonstrates.

The third part considers colonial fantasies surrounding the enduring mystery of Malagasy origins and history. Building on missionary texts, many anthropologists, archeologists and linguists posited a Jewish connection in Madagascar over the course of the nineteenth century. This

widespread notion soon wound its way into international conversations over the fate of Jews persecuted in Europe, and was recast by anti-Semites and Zionists alike in the 1930s. The final chapter follows the path of a mid-ranking French administrator in Madagascar from the 1930s through the 1950s. This functionary's desire to categorize and classify Malagasy village custom was matched only by his passion for the question of Madagascar's early settlement. He rekindled the Jewish theory in the 1950s, positing that rock markings in area of Fianarantsoa were none other than secret messages in archaic Hebrew. This final chapter combines several threads, bringing together the wartime years with the question of colonial fantasies of Malagasy origins and Madagascar's unique place in the colonial mind.

Throughout, I seek to marry the history of practices with that of representations, ideologies, and strategies. A product of the "new colonial history," the book examines Madagascar in a global perspective while reading a wide range of colonial sources against the grain. The different chapters all set about globalizing colonial Madagascar in different ways. To give but three examples, Chap. 2 illustrates in part how Madagascar was viewed through the prisms of French India, Algeria and Indochina. Chapter 3 showcases a dialogical relationship between Madagascar as a site of experimentation, and the Pasteur Institute in Paris. Chapter 6 takes the reader through a tangled web of missionary and early anthropological work, from Berlin to Warsaw, Paris and London by way of Mauritius, the Vatican, and back to Antananarivo.

PART I

Health, Power and Vulnerability

Madagascar, the world's fourth largest island, has long been shape-shifting in European minds. Multiple strata need to be considered, of course, from the island's place in popular fantasy to its role on the international stage. As the race for colonial domination over both Africa and Asia intensified over the course of the nineteenth century, Madagascar came under especially sharp focus. From the wax museum in Paris, to the corridors of the British Foreign Office, to exhibitions the world over, considerable attention was paid to things Malagasy. The island state had only recently been unified, a process that had been given considerable impulsion under Merina (the highland ethnicity from the Imerina region) King Radama I (1810–1828), son of the warrior monarch Andrianampoinimerina. By the time of Radama's death in 1828 some two thirds of the island stood under his control, ruled from the highland capital Antananarivo, the city of hills. This island nation utilized a single language and was ruled by a Merina monarchy that looked to Europe and beyond for administrative, military and technological inspiration. Although undoubtedly plural and indeed divided—the Sakalava people of the west coast still maintained their own sovereigns irrespective of the fact that the Merina monarchy ruled the entire island by the time of the French conquest—Madagascar seemed to offer a greater model of integration than most parts of the nearby African content.

This being said, the process of Malagasy national unification was not yet complete when already major French colonial encroachments began.

In 1821, France formally occupied the isle of Sainte-Marie (formerly Nosy Ibrahim), a former pirate haven, off Madagascar's east shores. The following year, King Radama challenged the land grab, amassing troops on Madagascar's east coast, but never attacked French positions in Sainte-Marie proper.[1] Then in 1841, France annexed the island of Nosy Be off Madagascar's northwest coast. In 1883, on the initiative of a Réunion Island lobby group, the French Third Republic launched a first war against Madagascar, which yielded an 1885 peace treaty with Queen Ranavalona III. It, in turn, afforded France a strategic base on the far north of Madagascar, on the Bay of Diego-Suarez. A decade later, France embarked on its final conquest of the rest of the great island.

Naturally, it was neither the island nation's rapidly shifting contours nor its relatively swift unification that beckoned outside attention. Invariably, European proponents of colonizing Madagascar evoked instead its purported riches, its strategic location on the road to India and China, its place in the vast chessboard of international influence (Franco-British rivalry over Madagascar was but a continuation of the battles over the Mascarene Islands), and its potential for settlement.

The main sticking point with respect to possible conquest and future settlement had to do with health concerns. Long before its 1895 conquest, Madagascar was already known as "Dead Island" to some, "the Frenchman's grave" to others. Already in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, would-be explorers were warned to write their will before setting off. A French traveler named Eugène Nicole, whose brother had been dispatched on a botanical mission to Madagascar in 1820, saw his sibling perish from fevers—likely malaria— near Tamatave. Seven years later, Nicole concluded tersely: "It is painful to think that such a beautiful land is perhaps the most unhealthy on the planet." He added that on their travels he and his brother had seen many rotting bodies of Europeans, a sight that "did little to raise [their] spirits."[2]

[1] Admiral Duperré, *Précis sur les établissements français formés à Madagascar* (Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1836,) pp. 28–32.

[2] Eugène Nicole, "Dissertation sur une maladie qui règne à l'île de Madagascar: conseils hygiéniques pour l'éviter" Thesis in Medicine. Paris: Didot le Jeune, 1827, pp. 9, 16–17, 24. Nicole added that travelers were so worried by rumors of lurking dangers in Madagascar, that before setting off from Bourbon or Mauritius they engaged in all sorts of "excesses"—in sex, food, and alcohol. On "Dead Island" see "Madagascar" *All the Year Round: A Weekly Journal*, May 2, 1885, p. 152.

These verdicts and clichés were not merely projected onto the great isle; they were sometimes embraced from within it as well. Thus, in 1885, British missionary William Ellis attributed the following phrase to King Radama: the sovereign claimed to have two great generals protecting Madagascar; one was Hazo (the forest) and the other Tazo (fevers).[3]

This image stuck. As Chap. 2 will show, in France skeptics and enthusiasts waged a prolonged battle over the course of the nineteenth century. To the former, Madagascar was unequivocally a graveyard for Europeans. To the latter, it was healthier than parts of France, like Sologne or Rochefort, both still infamous for their fevers in the mid-nineteenth century.[4] Thus, in 1846, one author described the climate of Madagascar's high central plateau as "superior to France's."[5] A decade later, a reassuring report to Napoleon III held that the use of quinine sulfate would make Madagascar easy and safe to settle. The same document went on to ask, rhetorically: "Has the genius of civilization ever backed down against fevers?…These fears never prevented us from converting the Antilles into flourishing colonies… Have harmful climates prevented the British from settling India, the Dutch Java, and the Spanish Cuba?"[6] If Cuba, India and the East Indies were colonizable, went this reasoning, then surely so too was Madagascar. Many deeper issues were being played out through this particular debate, including questions concerning the cosmopolitanism of humankind, the risks of degeneration through migration, and the relationship between averred white fragility and the drive to dominate.[7]

How did colonial medicine deal with catastrophic disease rates on the ground? How did the colonization optimists react to them? What lessons were learned from early colonial incursions in the area, most notably the decades of French rule over Sainte-Marie, Nosy Be and Diego-Suarez? How was colonial expertise asserted when Western medicine seemed at

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[3] William Ellis, *Three Visits to Madagascar* (London: John Murray, 1859), p. 319.

[4] F. H. Bonnavoy de Fremot, *Rapport à l'Empereur sur la question malgache et la colonisation de Madagascar* (Paris: H. Carion, 1856), pp. 86–87.

[5] M. Macé Descartes (Henry d'Escamps), *Histoire et Géographie de Madagascar* (Paris: P. Bertrand, 1846), p. 239.

[6] de Fremot, *Rapport à l'Empereur*, pp. 86–87.

[7] On this fragility in another French colonial context, see Michael Vann, "Of le cafard and other tropical threats," in Jennifer Yee and Kathryn Robson, eds., *France and Indochina: Cultural Representations* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005).

a loss to handle epidemic disease? How was knowledge from other parts of the globe marshaled and adapted to Madagascar? How did Malagasy people grapple with newly arrived French experts and approaches? These are some of the questions that will guide the following two chapters.

CHAPTER 2

Disease and Conquest

This chapter explores some of the received wisdom, disillusions and quotidian health practices surrounding the earliest colonial phase in Madagascar. Although France did not colonize Madagascar proper until 1895, it annexed the island of Nosy Be off its northwest coast in 1841, and launched an operation against the main island in 1883. Without going so far as to suggest that these incursions somehow constituted dress rehearsals for 1895, there can be no doubt that imperial knowledge gained, and somehow lost or missed, during these two sets of Malagasy experiences would subsequently shape the conquest and the colonial era.

In examining questions of health and power, I seek to expose some of the stratagems utilized to cope with pathogens the colonizers did not fully comprehend. One of these devices involved the endurance of the highland sanatorium as a response to tropical illness. Such responses reflected an explanatory terrain in which Madagascar could at once be likened to other allegedly insalubrious colonies, like Senegal or Guiana, while also being marked as fundamentally different in its reputed toxicity. This difference was articulated in both kind and degree. Additionally, I wish to highlight the very selective, indeed patchy, use of medical precedent during the conquest phase and shortly thereafter.

This chapter is based in part on underutilized medical reports from maritime ship convoys (including hospital ships), as well as on voluminous sources emanating from the isle of Nosy Be, and archives relating to the sanatoria of Nosy Komba and Joffreville . It also draws from

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select sources pertaining to the conquest of Madagascar in 1895. That the invasion of 1895 has not been studied in detail its own right remains something of a mystery.

Received Wisdom on the Eve of Conquest

Clichés about Madagascar abounded prior to the French conquest of the great island in 1895. As Guy Jacob has demonstrated, a large percentage of this European conventional wisdom depicted Madagascar as nothing short of an "Eldorado." In the realm of health, specifically, a low-grade war of public relations raged over Madagascar, with Creole writers from Réunion, and some metropolitan French advocates of colonial expansion, leading the charge against skeptics. Although framed around labor supply and colonial grandeur, at its core the debate over colonizing Madagascar hinged on questions of climate, environment and miasmas. Some insisted on the central highlands' "healthy" or even "French" climate. Others claimed that acclimatization of French settlers would be straightforward. Anxieties over acclimatization can be read at least partly as shorthand for everything from loss of identity by way of creolization, to death by tropical afflictions. The point here is that the most optimistic colonial enthusiasts saw in the Red Island not only a settlement colony, but also the future "Hong Kong of the Indian Ocean"![1]

Vice-Admiral René Edmond Thomasset, who doubled as president of the colonial lobby group known as the Société des Etudes Coloniales et Maritimes, occupied a key position among the optimists. In 1885, he boldly declared that: "the largest part of the country, inland, the high plateaus especially, enjoy a temperate and healthy climate, where white men can live and work." He brazenly added: "A distinguished French naval officer who explored Madagascar compared it to a tropical Normandy, inhabited by vast quantities of cattle."[2] Equally misleading accounts emanating from the Malagasy kingdom seemed to confirm these rosy impressions. Consider an 1882 report that depicted Madagascar's highlands as a "veritable sanatorium."[3]

[1] Guy Jacob, "La France et Madagascar de 1880 à 1894" Ph.D. Thesis, Université de Paris IV, 1996, pp. 90–92.

[2] "Lettre adressée aux Chambres de Commerce au sujet de Madagascar," *Journal commercial et maritime*, November 21, 1885, p. 1.

[3] Quoted by Gwyn Campbell in: "Crisis of Faith and Colonial Conquest. The Impact of Famine and Disease in Late Nineteenth-Century Madagascar" *Cahiers d'études africaines* (1992) 32: 127: 425.