



The Antalaotra People of Madagascar: Made and Unmade by the Sea

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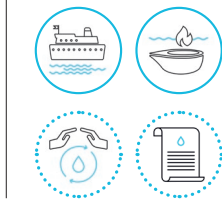
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The territory of Madagascar emerged from the unification of formerly independent kingdoms. These kingdoms were geographically distinct, with one main inland kingdom and several coastal ones. The “Kingdom of Madagascar” emerged in the nineteenth century from political conquests made possible by the trade effervescence taking place along the nearby Mozambique Channel, creating an island-based unity. The Antalaotra people, or “People from the Sea,” who lived in the Comoros archipelago and the northwest coast of Madagascar, acted as a bridge between the different territories. Over a period of five centuries, they laid a common cultural foundation for a Malagasy society. Their regional trading culture allowed them to penetrate the inland kingdom through economic and cultural exchange. However, their contribution to an emerging national heritage was quickly suppressed and by the nineteenth century the Antalaotra had disappeared in Madagascar as a community. Today, Madagascar’s national identity continues to emphasize the former inland Merina Kingdom, land of the Merina people, making national disparities significant in every aspect, especially culturally. Successive national governments have ignored the role of coastal heritage in the forging of national identity. This article dives into the past and inheritance of the Antalaotra people to argue for the inclusion and acknowledgment of their coastal heritage as part of the national identity.

Keywords: Antalaotra people, maritime trade networks, national unity, lost heritage, Madagascar



KEY THEMES



CLIMATE



Aw : Tropical Savanna Climate



< Fig. 1 The economic maritime landscape in Mahajanga (Source: Lauriane Verhoog, 2018).

Introduction

The Channel of Mozambique, along with the rest of the Indian Ocean, was once home to important maritime trading routes that connected inland kingdoms to coastal cities. The coasts served as convergence points for people, goods, religions and cultures, which led to the emergence of new political entities. By the eighteenth century, the northwest coast of Madagascar had become one of the most powerful kingdoms on the island, thanks to wealth derived from maritime trade. Trade routes through the northwest coast connected the Indian Ocean to the Merina Kingdom in the central highlands of Madagascar, leading to a concentration of cultural vitality in the coastal settlements (fig. 2).

For over five centuries, from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century, the Antalaotra people, a merchant sea community of “*extra-marine*” origins – or beyond the sea (Rantoandro 1984), lived at the heart of the northwest coast of Madagascar. In the eighteenth century, their trading role contributed significantly to the prosperity of an emerging Malagasy society. However, in the nineteenth century, their heritage was suppressed when a drive for national unity emphasized a land-focused identity. There are several reasons that can explain this isolation, but the Antalaotra people made significant economic, political and linguistic contributions to Malagasy society. However, even today, the national Malagasy identity struggles to combine these two strong and divergent cultural identities, resulting in a lack of a strong sense of national unity (Lecompte and Raberinja 1994). Could Antalaotra heritage be seen as one of the first common features of Malagasy identity? Using the Antalaotra people as a representative example, I discuss the ambivalence of Malagasy identity construction.

The Organization of Trade: “Trading Scale” Connecting the Inlands

In the fifteenth century, the northwest coast of Madagascar was home to an important trading system, what Pierre V erin (1975) refers to as “trading scales.” Major trading routes coming from the main port cities of the Indian Ocean converged at a few Malagasy port cities, from which smaller routes reached smaller coastal trading ports. Beginning in the seventeenth century, the Antalaotra people developed strong trade and cultural connections with East Africa and the Comoros archipelago, leading the coast of Madagascar to become a place of cultural interactions. But more important was the trading connection with the inland and its consequences. Although peoples of the coast and the inland retained their distinctive characteristics, the emerging role of the coast allowed common features to be shared between the territories. These included rice culture, *zebu* rites and even a Malagasy language that emerged in the inland area and was also spoken by the Antalaotra. Along the Malagasy coast, the role and importance of the Antalaotra was similar to that of the Swahili along the East African coast (Sanchez 2007); both peoples forged an urban merchant coastal identity that combined the identities of sea merchants with those of local cultures. Indeed, the early prosperity of the Malagasy coast is concomitant with the main migration phase from the African coast and India toward the northwest of the island (Urfer 2020). But it went further.

Emerging in the mid-eighteenth century from an alliance between the Antalaotra and the local population named the Sakalava, Mahajanga was the last port city of the region to be established, where Arab and Indian merchants with large *dhows* (traditional sailboats) were travel-



^ Fig. 2 Map of the islet of Antsoheribory, former capital of the Antalaotra, from Pierre Chevreuil, 1673 (Source: gallica.bnf.fr /BnF).

ling to and from the main port cities of the Indian Ocean. The Antalaotra were in charge of the secondary trading routes along the Malagasy coast, using a cabotage system that was used to reach secondary trade centers with smaller *dhow*s. The Antalaotra were not only maritime navigators but were also developing inland routes, connecting the emerging Merina Kingdom with the rest of the Indian Ocean (Blanchy 1995). Although the Antalaotra tended to refrain from politics, they allowed cultural penetration throughout the eighteenth century, when they acted as intermediaries between the Indian Ocean and the Merina Kingdom (Blanchy 1995). More than just economic actors, the Antalaotra people allowed cultural and linguistic

penetration of the island, consolidating a territorial connection (Urfer 2020). Indeed, the west coast was essential to the initial prosperity of the Merina Kingdom. However, the inevitable expansion of the latter left no room for a shared cultural heritage in what would become known as the Kingdom of Madagascar.

From Sea to Land: The End of the Antalaotra

Before the eighteenth century, the territorial organization of Madagascar involved no clear separation between the highlands and the coast, although the two areas were culturally and politically distinct. The northwest coast was a major



^ Fig. 3 A rice field in Antsirabe, in Madagascar's Central Highlands (Source: Lauriane Verhoog, 2017).

region of hegemony with its trading port cities and its regional connection with the rest of the Indian Ocean. The inland kingdom of the Merina people remained a small political entity. However, the Merina king, Andrianampoinimerina, began to pursue unification and domination. Perceiving the trading connections as points of territorial penetration; he promoted the consolidation of a single Malagasy territory within the Mahajanga–Antananarivo axis. This led the Merina Kingdom to achieve political domination of the northwest coast, including the city of Mahajanga, which was conquered by the Merina armies in 1824.

As early as the eighteenth century, the Antalaotra and the Sakalava made political and economic alliances for trade purposes and used Mahajanga as a capital of both communities. But when

the Merina Kingdom took over the port city, the regional trade organization changed drastically. First, the Merina Kingdom prohibited Antalaotra and Arab merchants from building *dhows* for regional trade, disrupting the trading system and lifeways of the coast (Blanchy 1995). Then, between the 1820s and 1830s, Indian merchants quickly replaced the Antalaotra, who, although they did not seek to acquire political dominance, always protected their cultural distinctiveness and represented a threat to the Merina political hegemony because of their alliances with the Sakalava (Rantoandro 1984). Consequently, in the 1830s the majority of the Antalaotra fled to the Comoros archipelago in the Indian Ocean, off the northwest coast of Madagascar, leaving a minority in the Boeny Region in the northwest (Blanchy 1995).



^ Fig. 4 Avaratra, a neighborhood of fishing people in Mahajanga (Source: Lauriane Verhoog, 2023).

In a prolonged quest to build a united “Kingdom of Madagascar,” rice played an important role.

Indeed, at that time, rice culture was an important part of Merina culture, even becoming the kingdom’s trademark (fig. 3). During his conquest, Andrianampoinimerina swore on his political testament that “the sea will be the limit of my rice field” (Deschamps 1960) revealing his intent to establish cultural, as well as political, domination. From this point on, a cultural opposition emerged, putting a past common coastal inheritance to the side. In contrast, the coastal societies continued to affirm water as the center of their organization: the monsoon winds were followed for trading with the rest of the Indian Ocean and water was at the center of every traditional ceremony.

A Suppressed Heritage at the Expense of Contemporary Society

During the nineteenth century, and even more so in the twentieth, national unity in Madagascar depended on the dominance of the Merina highlands. Today, the inland and the coastal regions maintain their distinctiveness. Still, the nation-state of Madagascar is predominantly Merina (Raison-Jourde 1991; Fournet-Guérin 2009), and the national identity is fragile and complex. The political control exerted by the Merina people has marginalized water-based cultures and territories, introducing a certain ambiguity to the nation’s territorial integrity. Although Madagascar is an island, the national identity was developed in opposition to water. This calls into question the role adopted by the Merina of na-



^ Fig. 5 The implantation of Sakalava traditions on an urban beach (Source: Lauriane Verhoog, 2022).

tional representation. Is the land-sea opposition compatible with the country's cultural plurality? The change from sea-based to land-based territory remains visible today as the infrastructure is still not connected. Economic development has been greatly impeded as a result. The national capital in the highlands is only connected to the coast to benefit from the main national port of Toamasina. More than half the country is not connected to any major transportation axis. This impedes regional integration and the development of strong and sustainable provincial capitals (Lecompte and Raberinja 1994).

Throughout the national process of territorial unification, as the connection with the sea has drifted further from the national vision, the Antalaotra heritage has begun to disappear from

social memory. Support for Antalaotra identity has been limited to the northwest coast. Today, the Antalaotra people have disappeared as a communal entity but some individuals remain in the Boeny Region. They claim to be of Antalaotra descent and carry with them the water heritage that still plays a central part of life on the west coast (fig. 1). Although the cabotage system is not used in urban areas, smaller communities still rely on it and on water as a means of subsistence (fig. 4) and as a place of worship on the outskirts of cities.

Mahajanga was the last capital of the Antalaotra and the Sakalava people. It is now the capital of the Boeny Region. It was conquered by the Merina Kingdom and illustrates the ambiguity of Madagascar's water heritage. As a

point of heritage convergence, it is the country's most cosmopolitan city. Thus, within the city of Mahajanga, the inhabitants have opposing relationships with its water heritage although the latter was at the heart of the city's prosperity. During the Merina conquest of 1824, sacred places of the Sakalava were moved outside the city. New worship places are now coming back to the urban landscape. One of those places, called a *doany*, was recently erected on the Village Touristique beach in Mahajanga (fig. 5). However, the *doany* is still associated with superstition, and there is no common acceptance of this water heritage among the population of Mahajanga. This *doany* can be interpreted as a territorial mark struggling for legitimacy and representative of the tension related to heritage in the urban landscape. Water in general is still feared by some Malagasy islanders and is not yet accepted as part of a shared urban identity.

Conclusion

The formation of Malagasy society was a delicate process marked by considerable regional inequalities and a sharp cultural divide. National identity was built on an opposition between the coasts and the central highlands. Rice is to the Merina people what water is to the coastal communities. This division between land-based and water-based activities persists. However, the comprehension of a shared inheritance of water heritage could help transcend the divide and reduce inequality between regions. After all, rice needs water to grow. In the eighteenth century, the Antalaotra served as the first connection between the highlands and the west coast, fostering economic and cultural exchange. However, the process of establishing a heritage based on this shared history has been fraught with cultural and political complexities that could not withstand colonial disruptions.

Although this coastal heritage was instrumental in building the nation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, water has not assumed its rightful place as national heritage and is instead relegated to the local level.

Policy Recommendations

- Acknowledging the lost community of Madagascar's national heritage could help reduce inequalities and cultural disparities between coastal and highland regions. Exploring the lost inheritance of local communities facilitates the building of bridges between regions and can encourage national unity.

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Lauriane Verhoog is a PhD candidate in cultural geography at the University of La Réunion with a research focus on the evolution of urban identities on the coasts of the Mozambique Channel. With fieldwork at the center of her research, she is investigating common regional aspects of coastal cities, focusing on Mahajanga in Madagascar and Inhambane in Mozambique.

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