

Austronesian Migration and the Establishment of the Malagasy Civilization: Contrasted Readings in Linguistics, Archaeology, Genetics and Cultural Anthropology

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Malagasy studies have been dominated, at least in the general opinion, rightly or wrongly, by the work of two great pioneers, Grandidier and Ferrand, who adopted opposing stances on the question of the peopling of Madagascar.

Grandidier (1908) represents the viewpoint privileging Hindu-Austronesian and even Melanesian origins. Ferrand (1908), over and beyond an initial undetermined settlement from Africa which he nevertheless supports, perceives there to have been a second wave of settlement from Africa followed by migrations of Austronesians with some Persian/Arab admixtures.

The major difference between these two viewpoints is that, for Grandidier, Africa played only a minor role late in the process, which he is inclined to relegate to recent slaving episodes, whereas the black element in the population he attributes to a Melanesian component. We show here that this reading is faulty. This position may perhaps be put down to the fact that Grandidier himself arrived in Madagascar from the east: health reasons had caused him to leave India to recuperate in the Mascarene Islands (Mauritius and Reunion), from where he travelled to Madagascar.

Ferrand, on the other hand, from the very beginning considered the earliest periods of settlement to involve a Bantu element. The Persian/Arab adjuncts are represented as occurring over a period of centuries, from around the 10th to the 16th. The Austronesian component, which he traces to the Indonesian archipelago, is very long established, but he has it preceded by the Bantu element. Though his views evolved somewhat between the end of the 19th century and his death in 1935, they continued to broadly conform to this schema.

These two authors, who both enjoyed a great scientific reputation, have been to a greater or lesser extent followed by other researchers throughout the 20th century,

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who tended to line up behind one or the other. In the second half of the century, however, a greater number of them subscribed to Ferrand's positions. First Deschamps (1960), then Kent (1970) and Vérin (1980), demonstrated the antiquity of the Bantu element, and even that certain populations of the Madagascan west coast were entirely constituted of this, an observation announced and confirmed by the reports of 16th- and 17th-century Portuguese navigators.

Fewer followed Grandidier, no doubt because the Hindo-Melanesian theory failed really to catch on. It was undermined, among other reasons, by the linguistic evidence established by Dahl (1951), but also because the study of Arab writings undertaken by Ferrand (1913–14) revealed the part played by Arabs in population movements of the Mozambique Channel as far as Madagascar long before the European-operated slave-trade. But it should also be remembered that Grandidier (1836–1921) was older than Ferrand and put forward his theories and hypotheses earlier than those of the latter, who used them to point a contrast to his own, in part wrongly, as when he took issue with Grandidier over the occurrence of Arab occupation in the Comoro islands in the 10th century, something which was later confirmed by archaeologists.

But in the end, the only problem which remained, *and which perhaps remains still*, is that of establishing which of the two main groups, one of African origin, the other Austronesian, settled in Madagascar first.

My aim is to try to make some progress in understanding the settlement patterns of populations which contributed to the formation of Malagasy culture, but equally to that of the island regions of the western Indian Ocean. To accomplish this, I re-evaluate the migrations that were effective in establishing the patterns of human settlement in the area by bringing forward evidence derived from certain cultural and physical anthropology studies. This also provides an opportunity to reflect on the concept of migration and on the link between this concept and the vectors which underlie it and which are often cited in order to equate the ethnic origin of migrant peoples with the artefacts, technologies, religious practices and even language(s) that these latter bring with them.

My first task is to review the knowledge which has become available to us in the fields of linguistics, archaeology and, recently, genetics over the half-century that has elapsed since the deaths of these two famous researchers. Where appropriate, I also take into account theories of technological diffusion and cultural anthropology. The overall study attempts to find responses to the questions: who, when and why?

Linguistics: the major literature

There is a general recognition that Otto Ch. Dahl's 1951 publication, *Malgache et Maanjan* (Malagasy and Maanjan) demonstrating the links between the former and the latter, which belongs with the Barito group of languages of South-East Kalimantan (Borneo), was a key turning-point in the development of Malagasy and Austronesian linguistic studies. Admittedly, the connection between Malagasy and Malay had been recognized by the Portuguese since the early decades of the 16th century (well before van Houtman in 1595 and Luis Mariano in 1614). Adelaar (1995)

drew attention to the close proximity between Malagasy and Samihim (also belonging to the Barito group), but signalled likewise the presence of borrowings from Javanese and Malay. He also pointed to links with the Toradja and Buginese languages of Sulawesi.

But Dahl was also the author of two other significant contributions to this field: the first (1988) considered the idea of a Bantu substratum to Malagasy,¹ while the second, which appeared in 1991, shortly before his death, revisited the hypotheses formulated at the conclusion of his very first book. In this early work he attributed the proto-Malagasy migration to an Austronesian population, placing its beginning around the 5th century. In his later work, he brought forward the date of this migration to the 7th century, associating it with the beginnings of the Srivijaya thalassocracy. Adelaar in turn also adheres to this date, but construes a sea-going Malay culture exercising an attraction for the neighbouring Austronesian populations (which would explain the diversity of borrowings).

Dahl's third strand is the assertion of an initial Bantu presence in Madagascar, by which the Austronesian language of the Malagasy became modified through linguistic interference. But this viewpoint is far from meeting with universal acceptance. Other linguists willingly admit Bantu borrowings into Malagasy at a more or less early period, whether pre-Swahili or under Swahili influence, but refuse to recognize a structural incidence on the language.

Beaujard (2003) re-evaluated the Sanskrit element, limited to 75 words in Malagasy. Solange Bernard-Thierry (1959) had already demonstrated that 34 words of Sanskrit origin had transited via South-East Asia and did not constitute a vocabulary which had passed from the Indian subcontinent to Madagascar by the direct route. Another recent contribution to this debate is that of Beaujard (unpublished) relating to plants and their associated terminology (see also Allibert, 1991 and 1992, on the early introduction of bamboo and the coconut). Their Austronesian origins extend over a vast oceanic territory, as shown by Waruni Mahdi who examined the spread of the outrigger canoe over a large part of the Indian Ocean (we return to this point later).

Just as interesting (but open to debate) is the thesis of Pierre Simon (2006) who sees in Malagasy an initially Austronesian language which underwent phases of creolization and relexicalization. Simon characterizes the proto-Malagasy population as a people of Austronesian language coming into contact with proto-Bantu peoples (speakers of Sabaki) from around the first centuries of the Common Era.

Finally, it is important to note the interesting discovery made by Ferrand (1932) (reprinted by Hébert [unpublished]) and the inscription on the Bangka stele (686 CE) which he has dubbed the Indonesian Rosetta Stone. There are inscriptions in Sanskrit and in proto-Austronesian (might one even say proto-Malagasy?) of the curse directed at those who refused to yield to the new master race conquering the land. The interpretation of this text attracted close attention from the leading linguists (Ferrand, 1932; but also Coedès 1931) and epigraphists in the field. Ferrand claimed to have detected a Malagasy proto-language in which there figures the word *tafika* (army), which to this day has not been found in any Austronesian language other than Malagasy. But this proposition has not met with universal adherence despite the interest raised by the occurrence of the term *tafika*.²

Archaeology: Austronesian or African pathways?

Given the evidence of the Malagasy language's Austronesian origins, archaeologists have been led to search for forms of pottery presenting typological linkages with those of the Austronesian world. Unfortunately, to the present no typological relationship in a formal sense has been able to be shown, in the way that has indeed been achieved for pottery of the *lapita* type in Oceania, even if *lapita* pottery does present variants in which researchers have noted a 'dynamic conservatism' (Gosden, 1992).

Austronesian pottery of the first millennium CE is not well known as far as the western sector of its diffusion zone is concerned. One single decorative type has suggested a possible correspondence associated with decorative tracteries on the neck of the pots, but what is the degree of relevance of this decoration? Moreover, the dating of this particular pottery is very imprecise (1st millennium CE). Its location is in the south of Sulawesi (Allibert, 2002: 23, n. 34).

Furthermore, in the 9th- and 10th-century sites in Sumatra, for instance, local pottery examples are quite low in number, and they do not correspond to Malagasy pottery. In contrast, there is frequent and widespread evidence of imported potteries (Chinese, Arab and even Indian). These are found throughout the Indian Ocean, and it could well be that these imported potteries were used primarily. Finally, the Austronesian culture relied predominantly on plant materials (bamboo and leaves as receptacles) and such usage will not have left many traces.

It might well be more profitable to approach the problem of detecting pottery of Austronesian origin by looking along the western shores of the Indian Ocean rather than trying to rediscover pottery from South-East Asia by searching for its diffusion destinations in Madagascar and the Comoro Islands. One might ask whether examples of pottery can be found in Madagascar which bear no relationship to those of Africa and whose origin must therefore be sought with those of Austronesia, making the prior supposition that its typology has not been totally lost and that such Malagasy pottery of non-African appearance is not of specifically indigenous creation.

The discovery in the Comoros (in Mayotte in particular, at Koungou and Majikavu) of two different types of pottery is noteworthy. One, the so-called 'triangular incised ware' (TIW), dated from the 6th to the 8th centuries, is indisputably of African origin (Chami and Msemwa, 1997). The other has a decorative pattern of large shell impressions and is from the same period (though not precisely dated); its percentage occurrence rate steadily increases from the coast of Africa to Madagascar, or steadily decreases if read in the opposite direction, and it could well be the proto-Malagasy pottery, if not the proto-Austronesian pottery of the western Indian Ocean.

Finally, there exists another pottery of exceptional quality (bowls coated with graphite and/or coloured with red ochre) dated to the 9th and 10th centuries, whose origin is unknown, but which English-speaking archaeologists attribute to the 'Swahili corridor'.³

Cultural markers

Though it is always a little delicate to speak of cultural diffusionism, there are cases where correspondences show that this idea has indisputable relevance. Four examples, covered here, closely associate Madagascar with the Austronesian world.

The role of the maternal uncle (*zama* in Mayotte and in the north of Madagascar), whose function is central to the rites of circumcision of his nephew (see Flacourt, 1995). The Austronesian root (*iama*) of this term has been confirmed for me by Waruno Mahdi (see Allibert, 2002).

The second burial (*famadihana* in Madagascar, both among the Merina and Sakalava peoples) (Aujas, 1927) which is also found in the Philippines (Mangyan Patag people), in Borneo (among the Dayaks) and as far away as Samoa. In this regard, a recent thesis defended by Luquin (2004) on the Mangyan Patag has brought to light the fundamental significance of the figure eight among Austronesians: for the Malagasy, eight major bones must be brought back to the tomb, the eight deaths (eight generations) through which one must pass to attain the status of ancestors in other cases.

Also relevant is the Austronesian terminology used to designate the single- or double-outrigger canoe: *gala-gala* (Oceania) / *kolave* (Sri Lanka) / *galawat* (Gujerat) / *ngalawa* (Swahili zone and Comoros) and *lankang* (Indonesia) / *laka* (Madagascar) (Allibert, unpublished): examples which show a double diffusion pathway, one directly to Madagascar, the other by shorter sea-borne stages. We might also note the use made of the canoe as a coffin in the Austronesian dispersal zone.

Finally, the ritual pairing that associates a child with a reptile (monitor lizards, crocodiles, Komodo dragons, as practised among the Buginese) (Hamon, 1987: 9). Flacourt, in the celebrated Chapter XVI of his first book, tells the tale of the Malagasy princess Zafirami who learned she had given birth to a crocodile. From this can be derived the belief that perceives the spirits of ancestors living on in animals. Any such animal that is presented as the child's twin is brought up alongside it. This interpretation better elucidates the relationship of the Malagasy with crocodiles, especially among the Sakalava, and derives from a practice that is in no way African but Austronesian.

Genetics: a basic tool to be used with care

Genetic analysis is a technique whose use can be dangerously misleading, but which is also genuinely promising on condition that it is applied only after an indispensable prior analysis relating to genealogies. The main danger in effect is that of confusing concepts of ethnicity with designated social groupings. In this respect, it is problematic today in Madagascar to persist with the idea of distinct ethnic groups (distinctions which are more than one hundred years old but which already in the time of Gallieni's governorship were not universally accepted because of the extent of the migration of human populations towards the interior of the island).

The best example of such debatable research is a recent study (Hurles et al., 2005) of the 'Merina ethnicity', undertaken by a team publishing in an American journal,

which took as its research base a group of 362 men from four Madagascan 'ethnic groups' and ten populations potentially associated with Madagascar located in the islands of South-East Asia and the Pacific.

The main points derived from the study are raised briefly here in advance of a more detailed discussion:

- a genetic heritage from maternal and paternal lines was able to be attributed to an initial geographic zone, specifically the area of South-Eastern Borneo;
- the more or less evenly divided contribution between Asian and African heritage, as much from paternal and maternal branches;
- the South-East Asian admixture most probably occurred in a single migration episode (historians and cultural anthropologists do not agree with this view).

These results present little new information, since there is general agreement on the ethnic links of the Malagasy with Austronesian and African groups. Questions remain as to what meaning can be attributed to the term 'ethnic groups' (unnamed, and if one might still attribute a sense to this concept in the local environment, in view of the numerous migrations over the centuries towards the island's interior) at a time when, for example, all inhabitants of the Imerina region are called Merina – that is to say, in circumstances where the concept of genetic group markers is no longer observable under a designation which is essentially geographic and no longer genetic.

What conclusions can be drawn from this? Supposing that it is still possible to establish a point of departure within a population that is genetically more Austronesian than African (or vice versa), the appropriate approach would not be to begin from randomly chosen study subjects but to work from the studies of genealogical anthropologists, historians, geographers and sociologists. In this way one would secure the possibility of taking blood samples from groups with a higher chance of authentically significant results in the historic dimension. However, this approach was not the one taken, or if it was taken, has not been explicitly so stated by this team of geneticists. Will the 50:50 result obtained be robust enough for the purpose of defining the genetic characteristics of all Merina groups (considering the different origins of the Andevo, etc.)? It would have been preferable had lines of descent been previously established in well-defined groups.

The other two results to claim attention, if the limited relevance that we have been led to accord to the preceding observations can be relied on, are of some interest. The first, almost too precise to be true, confirms the south-eastern Barito (Borneo) origin of the population studied, defined half a century ago by Dahl on the linguistic level. The second postulates a single migration arrival.

A second study (Soodyall et al., 1996) has brought out, in further research into the postulated ethnic groups (p.18), the fact that the Sakalava group is largely Bantu, but from Mozambique rather than the Kenyan coast. The Merinas are shown as being more Austronesian.

This particular study, even if once again it presents the disadvantage of relying on a concept of ethnic groups without attesting a prior methodology based on cultural and genealogical anthropology (the designation of Sakalava is given to those living in the Sakalava region!), has at least the advantage of putting the case for this erroneous principle!

Nevertheless, one important piece of information should be retained from it: the authors affirm that no Indian genetic marker was found. The conclusion to be drawn is that the migratory passage to Madagascar was not accomplished in short coast-bound or island-hopping stages but by a direct route, a finding which confounds the hypotheses of Deschamps (1960). But which were the population groups studied? Was there any inclusion of populations from the south-east coast described by Flacourt (1995), which in the 17th century may have presented certain Indian or Persian traits?

The third study (Ducourneau et al., not yet published), addresses the island of Grand Comoro. It is general knowledge that the Comoro archipelago is considered a conservatory of the cultures of the Indian Ocean. The research was based around 93 Grand-Comoran men living in Marseille whose genealogical history had been established. Several genetic markers were observed:

- a very dominant Bantu marker, against an African background;
- a marker from the area of the Persian Gulf, Arab or Persian (probably Shirazian) at 5–6%;
- an Austronesian marker (6%) unexpected in Grand Comoro, perhaps a little over-dimensioned because of the notion of drift due to insularity, but definitively present;
- a noted total absence of markers from South India.

Conclusion: comparing and contrasting the data

If a corroborative contrasting of the data obtained from archaeological and linguistic studies has proved difficult to substantiate, one which sets the results obtained from genetics against the linguistic evidence is indeed possible. Thus, as we have seen, the linguistic connection of Malagasy to the Barito language of Kalimantan has been confirmed by genetic studies. Similar genetic analysis applied to plants, set against the terminologies used to name them,⁴ can explain their spread. Genetics and archaeo-technology⁵ can be equally complementary. The contrasting of technological typologies with genetic markers can prove eloquent, even if a human grouping is not necessarily the manufacturer of the technology that it carries: it was not the Chinese who brought the Chinese pottery (tang and song) into the region. That is why one cannot assert with total conviction the existence of an ethnic migration under the blanket of a diffusion of technologies. But it cannot be completely ruled out either. Contrasting the percentage of potsherds with the shell-impression pattern (fairly rare on the African coast and gradually increasing the more one approaches Madagascar) with the Austronesian genetic marker (haploid group O), which similarly increases in percentage terms from the Comoros to Madagascar, needs to be taken into account in any future plan of study.

In conclusion, it seems that:

1. Austronesians never reached Africa (or at least not as far as Mozambique) and hence the Austronesian technologies found in Africa are a result of simple diffusion. No linguistic or genetic trace has been detected there,⁶ nor have any archae-

- ological typologies. But it will be important to see whether the same applies to the north-eastern region of Africa, from Somalia to Tanzania, and about the coasts of South Africa, or even further afield in west Africa.
2. The genetic data from the Comoros confirms an early Austronesian presence there, which conceivably became more marked in moving from west to east, which would not surprise us but leaves open the problem of the direction of migratory movements preceding sedentarization (east–west or west–east?). If the shell-impression typology is an Austronesian marker (or even simply proto-Malagasy), the decrease in frequency that it reveals from east to west in the Mozambique Channel would confirm a movement from Madagascar towards the Comoros and possibly even the African coast.
 3. The contemporaneous association of Bantu TIW pottery and shell-impression pottery of probably Austronesian (proto-Malagasy) influence seems possible in Mayotte between the 5th and 8th centuries. This interpretation would lend support to the linguistic hypothesis of Simon and his concept of the creolization of the Malagasy language. This composite may then have been overlaid from the 14th century on by a push of Swahili from out of Africa.
 4. Arab and Persian genetic markers have been detected in the Comoros, but the south-eastern coast of Madagascar has been insufficiently studied. Indian genetic traces are abnormally absent, whether they be from the north of the sub-continent (Gujerati, for example) or from the south (Dravidian).
 5. The direct migration of already established Austronesian families contradicts the historical tales of Flacourt⁷ who rather favoured a concept of waves of migration.
 6. The Austronesian influx comes from the southern part of Sulawesi (Buginese) and from Kalimantan, Borneo (Maanyan). Resemblances in characteristics of cultural anthropology and religion such as the belief in child–animal twinning but also the practice of double burial (found in the Philippines) complement genetic and linguistic indicators.
 7. The trans-Indian Ocean migration probably occurred around the 7th century. Both linguistics (Dahl and Adelaar) and archaeology support this hypothesis.

In the light of this consideration centred on the Indian Ocean, it should be noted that the migration concept, studied on four levels (genetic, archaeo-technological, cultural and botanical),⁸ may not necessarily expect the same results for determining the ethnic composition of these voyagers.

Only genetics will be able to provide definite information on the origin of the human vector involved. All the other factors can appropriate a human vector which is not necessarily their inventor: a technology, a plant, a language, a cultural input, a religion can be carried by a third party. Examples of this are numerous: we have only to think of the Vikings/Norsemen who introduced the French language into England.

Only genetic analysis may be considered a secure source of evidence, but this only under certain strict conditions, involving significant numbers (the practice of percentages), undertaken with the greatest vigilance and with corroborative comparisons made with other disciplines (genealogical anthropology, history, etc). The ideal situation, something we would all hope to discover, would be the following: a

necropolis containing numerous skeletons, permitting a comparison of DNA readings with carbon-14 dating from one of the earliest possible periods. Something like a Vohemar⁹ site, more than a thousand years older and more carefully excavated.

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Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

Notes

1. Other researchers rather see it as an adstratum.
2. I pass over the incidence of Persian which is real but of relatively minor significance, often interspersed with Arabic with which it is used.
3. Term derived by Horton.
4. Following this method I have been able to follow the diffusion of the coconut palm from East to West through the Austronesian terms *buahniu* (Bali) / *voanio* (Madagascar), not to mention *vanu* in the Loyalty Islands, but also from *narikela* (Sanskrit) / *nargil* (Arabic, Persian) / *mnadzi* (Bantu), a double linguistic pathway for the same tree, the one directly across the Indian Ocean, the other via the north of the same ocean.
5. As for the previous note, mention can be made here of the double pathway shown by the terminology used for designating the single or double outrigger canoe: *gala-gala* (Oceania) / *kolave* (Sri Lanka) / *galawat* (Gujerat) / *ngalawa* (Swahili-speaking areas and Comoros) on the one hand, and *lankang* (Indonesia) / *laka* (Madagascar) (see Allibert, unpublished paper presented at the CNRS-Lyon II-Maison de l'Orient colloquium).
6. Which goes against the theories of Jones, recently taken up by Dick-Read.
7. One declarative, identified as from 500 years before the presence of the governor, that is in 1150; the other contextual, supposing Ramini as having been contemporary with Mahomet, hence in the 7th century.
8. Associations can be made between the diffusion zone of South-East Asian plants: for example, *Barringtonia asiatica* and the distribution zone of the single or double outrigger canoe.
9. Necropolis from north-east Madagascar (13th–18th centuries)

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