

THE “MALAGASY CREOLES”  
OF TAMATAVE IN THE 19TH  
CENTURY

On the shores of Madagascar there appeared in the 19th century an influential group whose members were called—erroneously—by strangers as well as by the Merina oligarchy, the “Malagasy creoles”. As a matter of fact the latter are half-castes born of Malagasies and (prevalently) Frenchmen. However, their contemporaries did not confuse them with the mulattos or *malata* (*zona malata*), descendants of filibusters or pirates who frequented the East Coast, and their Malagasy mates; on the other hand they, themselves, refused the designation of *malata*. Thus the name of “Malagasy creole”—even if false, because it does not describe Europeans born in Madagascar—defines a precise social group well into the 19th century.

The self-assertion of this group is contemporary to the consolidation of the importance of Tamatave, at first a second rate trading post, then the main port on the East Coast. Tamatave’s fortune was decided by Jean René, who chose it for his trade

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settlement in about 1798, and by Decaen, the captain general (military governor) of the Islands, who made it his commercial capital (Filliot, 1974; 139-141; and Munthe, etc. 1976; 16-17). From this moment on the history of the town and the history of the "Malagasy creoles" are inseparable because this town become their own. In 1811 Jean René, founder of this group so deeply involved in the political events of the coast, succeeded in obtaining a recognition of himself as King of Tamatave, while his eldest brother Fiche became the chief of Ivondrona.

However the brothers were able to enjoy their new dignity in peace and privacy only for a short while. The ambitions of Radama I, who tries to unite the Grande Ile, and the policy of Farquhar, the governor of Mauritius, who plans to counteract the French influence in Madagascar and assure the provisioning of Mauritius, join together to control and use for their own goals, on one side, the rising power of the "Malagasy creoles", and on the other, the port of Tamatave.

Tamatave in fact becomes the kingdom of Madagascar's first and most important harbour, its principal foodstuff supplier of the Mascarenes and at the same time the distribution channel for foreign products. Soon it will become the concentration point of the branches of the great French, English, German and American merchant houses; it is also the place where the small traders from India, Mauritius and La Réunion try to make their fortunes by clever manoeuvring. All those traders and merchants meet there with the competition of the powerful Merina oligarchy members. Under these circumstances Tamatave is not only a port, but also the "attraction pole", the "meeting place" of men of varied origins (Mollat, 1980) with their own techniques, beliefs, feelings and ways of expression. The port is at that time a centre in which different cultures mix, forming a synthesis of civilization.

## I A RESTRICTED BUT IMPORTANT GROUP.

One might say that at the origin of the group stands Jean René, the "*Mpanjakamena*."<sup>1</sup> From the moment of his ascension to the

<sup>1</sup> For the table illustrating the family ties which unite the principal "Malagasy creoles" of Tamatave in the 19th cent. and which played such an important political and economic role see p. 64. For more details, see Chauvin (1945)

throne of Tamatave he himself, his brothers and their descendants are officially recognized as chiefs of the Betsimisarakas, not only by the latter, but also by the foreigners and by the Merinas.

Jean René, the group’s “founding father,” owed his success to the benevolence, even the support, of the traders, who ceased supplying arms and munitions to the *Zanamalatas*, the East Coast’s true chiefs. The latter, unable to repay their debts to Jean René, ceded to him the district of the Betanimenas, that is the central part of the Betsimisaraka lands.

The Betanimenas who refused to recognize their new master were overpowered by Jean René and his brother Fiche with the help of a small army they successfully organized and equipped. Having thus supplanted the *zana-malata* Tsiatana, the ancient king of Tamatave, Jean René, who had brought a hundred Africans and forged them into a devoted guard called the “Mangorandra” (Colançon, 1937; p. 8), imposes his eldest brother as the chief of Ivondrona. Thus, in control of the Betanimena country and its expanding port, the two brothers put an end to the internecine war which had devastated the area, and kept the sympathy and support of the traders, weary of the constant turmoil of the *malata* chiefs.

Jean René, bent on strengthening his power, asked for help from Sir Robert Farquhar, the governor of Mauritius, and later from the governor of Bourbon. But his appeal remained unanswered because the British wanted to support the Merina king whom alone they thought capable of unifying all Madagascar; the French, on the other hand, dreamed only of reconquering their “ancient possessions” on the East Coast and so they could not, or would not, support him.

Radama’s conquest of the country not only didn’t put an end to Jean René’s influence but even consolidated his power. The treaty signed by the two men on July 9th, 1817 (Valette, 1964; p. 957-59) sealed their friendship, formed an offensive and defensive alliance and seemed to confer even a certain priority to Jean René, since its first article stipulates as follows: “Radama is bound by a great friendship and a profound respect for Jean

p. 58-60. Fontoynt & Nicol (1940) indicate that the mother of Fiche and Jean René had been a slave of Rezika, the mother of Philibert and Victoria Sija.

René, the king of Tamatave, and adopts him as his elder brother...” Only when an evolution of the balance of powers is accomplished, the subjection of *Mpanjakamena* by the king of Antananarivo becomes evident, but this situation doesn't diminish his influence at all. As the vassal and lieutenant of the Merina king, whom Great Britain acknowledges as the only king of Madagascar and whom it arms, Jean René wields an uncontested authority among the Betsimisarakas and before the foreigners. His whole family is protected and supported by Radama and his ally Farquhar, to the detriment of the *zanamalata* who rebel against Radama and even ally themselves with the French. The chiefs of these *malata* had been brought to Antananarivo as prisoners and were there executed in the reign of Ranavalona I.

Although Jean René had been a faithful lieutenant of Radama, for whom he subjugated the Vorinos in 1823, the French never fought against his “creole” family because he always avoided any direct confrontation with them. The position thus reached by the “Malagasy creoles” was strengthened by certain important privileges accorded to some of them by the Merina sovereigns and also by hereditary political and administrative functions bestowed on them. Thus, after Jean René's death in 1826, his “nephew” Corroller<sup>2</sup> succeeded him as governor and commander of Tamatave. Aristide Corroller, whose origin is doubtful, was born in 1799 or 1802 on Mauritius where he also received a pretty thorough education. He left Mauritius to join Jean René who made him his favourite collaborator. Therefore after the *Mpanjakamena's* death he succeeded him as “General Prince of Betanimene, Governor and General Commanding-in-Chief of Tamatave (Rakotovao, 1974; p. 110). Afterwards he was called to Antananarivo where he became Radama's General, secretary and aide-de-camp, all at the same time.

The important office of “Grand Judge,” vested in Jean René and Corroller, remained an apanage of the Philibert family since this position was in turn occupied by Philibert the father (Jean René's step-brother), Philippe Philibert and Alphonse Philibert. The exercise of this function shows the privileged position of

<sup>2</sup> For Corroller's biography see Rakotovao, 1974. Many authors maintain that Corroller was not Jean René's nephew but only his personal secretary. He himself, supported by Hastie, maintains the opposite.

the “Malagasy creoles” because to this hereditary office is attached “a vast domain as well as benefits identical with those of the *tompomenakely* of Imerina” (Fontoynt & Nicol, 1945, p. 35). These *tompomenakely* were lords who, in the king’s name, ruled their lands with all the royal privileges. What is more, the “Grand Judge” was the director of sanctions. He judged the quarrels between foreigners as well as those between the foreigners and the free natives. He was the overseer of the roads and the chief customs officer, and exercised control over the traders. Trade relations depended on his authority (*ibidem* p. 36). The exercise of this important function shows the ambiguous status of these men: the office was created by Radama I in order to honour and recompense the foreigners and their descendants for the particular services rendered by them to Madagascar. Thus, at the end of the 19th century Alphonse Philibert (or Banoma) benefits from the privileges accorded at the beginning of the same century to foreigners only, although he is considered a Malagasy and the Queen’s subject. However we must observe that since the reign of Ramavalona I the Grand Judge had been divested of some of those privileges, the collection of customs money and the judging in quarrels between the foreigners and the Malagasies or between two foreigners, for example, belonging, from then on, to the competence of the governors, members of the Merina oligarchy.

Other “Malagasy creoles” such as Juliette Fiche (or Reniboto), Reddington (or Papay) etc. have been nominated *Andriambaventy*, meaning judges, magistrates. They occupy choice positions in the provincial hierarchy and enjoy noteworthy material benefits. Indeed, the distribution of percentages of the customs duties conceded to the administration agents of Tamatave marks the importance of the part due to the “Malagasy creoles”. While the governor-general received a sixth of the total sum and his deputy a twelfth, the two Malagasies classed below them, Alphonse Philibert and Juliette Fiche, received respectively a twelfth and a twentieth of the distributed sum (Esoavelomandroso, 1976, p. 392).

However, these profits represent only an insignificant part of the family income. More important is the participation of its members as associates of the Merina oligarchs in the economic exploitation of Madagascar’s east region.

Just like them, the family, owning huge herds, exports oxen to the Mascarenes (Florent, 1979; p. 100). Great land owners, they command an abundant and free labour, not only because they own many slaves—like Juliette Fiche who had several hundreds in about 1860<sup>3</sup>—but also because they surround themselves with a corps of aides-de-camp (Esoavelomandroso, 1976; p. 97-98) who assist them in their various business ventures and guard their interests.

Politically important as well as very rich, the “Malagasy creoles” represent the ruling group of the Betsimisaraka population. This privileged and well-to-do group will be the go-betweens chosen by the foreigners and by the Merina oligarchs. Throughout the 19th century the former and the latter try to win them for themselves in order to use them for their own purposes. The creoles are in fact the ideal intermediaries for anybody who wants to control the East Coast either directly (like the Merinas) or indirectly (like the English and later the French).

## II A GROUP USED BY THE FOREIGNERS AND BY THE MERINA OLIGARCHY.

The British, the French and the Merinas, either simultaneously or successively, used the “Malagasy creoles” for the realization of their own political ambitions and economic aims.

In order to apply their policy to Madagascar—that is to eliminate the French influence, to open the Grande Ile to the British commerce, to direct the Malagasy production to Mauritius, to abolish trading—Farquhar stakes his bids on Radama as well as on Jean René. Having overwhelmed the *Mpanjakamena* with favours and gifts, the governor of Mauritius gains the confidence of the Merina king, by donating to him a modern army. His agents in Madagascar succeed in convincing the two of them (the king and Jean René) to conclude an alliance treaty. But very soon Jean René acknowledged Radama as his king and was in turn recognized as his viceroy, in Tamatave, where he maintained an almost inde-

<sup>3</sup> In about 1860 Juliette Fiche owned three categories of slaves: the *Tsimaloto*, inherited from the Fiche; the *Maromagniri*, part of the Napoléon de Lastelle estate; and finally the *Marotsara*, part of the Berora and Corroller estate.

pendent authority, while formally acknowledging Radama's sovereignty (Munthe *et al*, 1976; p. 37-38). From then on, although he continues to wield an incontestable authority in the Tamatave territory and knows himself to be powerful enough to impress both the traders and the natives (Colançon, 1937; p. 15), still the *Mpanjakamena* is only a part of the whole, second to Radama, nominated to defend the interests of the latter; and from the other point of view nothing but a chief used by the English for the realization of their own designs. Silvain Roux, the French agent, also pursues the same policy as that of Farquhar, but he is not listened to. Thus, to the foreigners Jean René seems to be the necessary intermediary between them and Radama.

After his death his intermediary role was maintained by the members of his family; Corroller's career is the best example of this fact. In 1826 he succeeded to Jean René's post as governor and commander of Tamatave thanks to the intervention of Hastie, who supported his claim as Jean René's nephew and gave the kingdom's most important port into his hands "to serve the interests of Britain and to fight with all our might the French Bourbon influence". (Rakotovao, 1974; p. 104.) What is more, he also fills the functions of the Grand Judge. But the very next year he is called to the capital where he gains the confidence of Radama and then of Ranavalona I. He becomes generalissimo, replacing Brady. In 1829 he is sent to Tamatave again as its military commander. Until 1835 he fills, besides this military function, the posts of governor-general and Grand Judge at the same time. The Queen's loyal servant, he succeeds in frustrating various enterprises of the French who tried to make Ravalona accept the existence on the East Coast of an area dominated by themselves. He is one of the instigators of the Malagasy foreign policy at this time (Ravonintsoa, 1971; p. 54); some authors (Frontoynont and Nicol, 1940; p. 47) present him as extremely anti-French and pro-English. As a matter of fact, "deeply attached to his adopted country," he held off from the French as well as from the English and, if necessary, fought against both of them. Didn't A. Dayot, the French representative in Madagascar, write with a strong patriotic bias: "I don't want Madagascar delivered to political factions and I would rather die under its ruins than be unable to preserve its unity under the flag of Tananarive. I don't serve

kings or queens, but the country of my forefathers”?<sup>4</sup> He is echoed by Marius Arnaud,<sup>5</sup> who—half a century later—writes to Pakenham, Her British Majesty’s consul in Tamatave, in order to explain that he is not English: “Since my mother, of Malagasy origin, bore me in Mauritius you want me to become English? Because I legitimized my children on the island of Mauritius I should become English? I don’t believe, Mister Consul, that there is a law in the world which can make me lose my Malagasy nationality. I am and will remain a Malagasy, notwithstanding and in spite of everybody, and I won’t serve under any other flag than that of my queen” (Fontoynont and Nicol, 1940; p. 54).

However the attitude of other “Malagasy creoles” was not always so intransigent. Juliette Fiche was judged differently because of her position, which did not allow her to enjoy all of her freedom all the time. To the people who accused her of being the tool of the English interests, a devoted agent of the Merina government, her biographer retorts that her efforts were always directed to favour the French, whom she treated as privileged friends and to whom she tried to render services in every circumstance (Siegrist, 1937; p. 21). However for political reasons she tried to fulfil well her role as *Andriambaventy*, since—as she herself explained to her trusted friends—the oligarchs “are our masters, and we have to keep up good relations with them in order to preserve our lives and our property” (Lacaze, 1881; p. 86). Thus she fulfils her role as a royal agent, informing the Antananarivo court about the plans of the English, and keeping the Prime Minister posted about the intentions of the French.

On the other hand, Alphonse Philibert, Grand Judge and chief of the *Andriambaventy*, seems to have been a kind of “interested but quite independent notable” in his dealings with the foreigners as well as with the Merina oligarchy. In 1891, while the majority

<sup>4</sup> Macquerie, J.-L., *Voyage à Madagascar*, Paris, 1884, quoted by Rakotovoao, 1974; p. 103.

<sup>5</sup> Marius Arnaud, who affirms his Malagasy nationality, had an adventurous personal history. Ranaivalona I admitted him, together with Lastelle and Fourbon, to the caste of the *Andriamasinavalonas*, but the very same Ranaivalona expelled him in 1857 after a plot to depose the old queen in favour of her son; thus he exiles himself to Mauritius. In 1863 he becomes *Zazamarolaby* (the highest nobility caste) and receives a letter patent nominating him a Knight of the Order of Radama II.



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of the *Andriambaventy* enter or make their children enter the auxiliary forces of the royal army, Alphonse Philibert remains one of the rare dignitaries who does not volunteer (Esoavelomandroso, 1976; p. 420). In 1894 when Rainandriamampandry, the East Coast’s governor-general, retires with his troops to the Manjakandrianombana fort, the Grand Judge remains in Tamatave occupied by the French forces. Does he thus reveal a momentary choice or a permanent one?

Be it as it may, foreigners and royal officials alike rely on the “Malagasy creoles” in the pursuit of their policies. While they don’t always respect their puppets, they often feel the need to manipulate them, since they constitute both an “intermediate group” necessary to relations between the foreigners and the oligarchy, and a “buffer group” between the same oligarchy and the Betsimisaraka population.

The “Malagasy creoles” were able to maintain this double role thanks to their origin, to their formation, to their riches and positions. In this 19th century Tamatave, with the gates of its kingdom open to the outside world, they appeared as the product of a secular intermingling of populations and of cultures in the southwest Indian Ocean.

### III A GROUP BORN OUT OF THE INDIAN OCEAN.

These “Malagasy creoles” whom their contemporaries and the royal official documents distinguished from the *zana malata*, differ from the latter not only because of their recent origin (the beginning of the 19th century) but also and above all in their way of life, which made it possible for them to become a link between the Malagasy world and the outside one.

Contrary to the *zana malata*, almost all of them went either to Europe or to the Mascarenes for their formation or education and therefore were able to feel at home in both cultures: Western and Malagasy.

Jean René, who owed his fortune to his arms and to his generosity, was noticed by Farquhar because he “could speak perfect French as well as Malagasy” (Munthe *et al.*, 1976; p. 36). Sometimes “he put on a Malagasy dress, a cashmir for a simbon

and a kind of muslin tunic” (Frappaz, 1939; p. 138) and sometimes “dressed up like an elegant creole of the period, he rode beautiful horses” (Siegrist, 1937; p. 13). At his ease everywhere, he represents a successful synthesis of both worlds.

Corroller received a “fairly thorough education, his father being very well-off” (Rakotovao, 1974; p. 103). Speaking fluent Malagasy, French, English as well as the creole dialect, a passionate reader of Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, Jean René’s “nephew” admirably fulfilled his role as an intermediary between the foreigner and the court of Antananarivo. But the knowledge he acquired from the former, he used to defend the interests of the latter. That is why Prince Corroller is considered as a “traitor” by the former, while the queen recompenses him for his patriotism.

Juliette Fiche did not make such a definite choice between the two possible allegiances. She proclaims herself a Malagasy but does not burn the bridges leading to the foreigner; she serves her queen but does not rise against the *vazaha*. While she affects the Malagasy eating customs—sitting on the floor, using a folded or twisted banana leaf to serve as a spoon or a glass and drinking *ranonampango*—hot water tinted by roasted rice (Lacaze, 1881; p. 85)—she doesn’t disdain the comfort of the Western way of life. She likes “to consult the healer and the soothsayer” and to cure “her household with remedies distributed by them and according to their mysterious diagnosis,” but she also likes to appear in the attire of a European woman of good family, “wearing silk or muslin dresses in the ample crinoline fashion”; to be a perfect hostess reading and commenting with ease and erudition “Molière, Beaumarchais, the writers of antiquity, the contemporary authors” (Siegrist, 1937; p. 17-20). Radama I might have loved this mixture of tradition and modernism, this successful synthesis of the ancestral heritage and of the import of the West, represented by Juliette Fiche.

While Jean René, Corroller, Reniboto were raised and educated on Bourbon or on Mauritius, Marius Arnaud, Borora and Ferdinand Fiche underwent a profound and extensive education in the best schools of France. Having frequented the Pension Maurin in Paris together with Marius Arnaud, Berora entered the École Polytechnique where “he unfortunately soon died in strange circumstances” (Fontoynt & Nicol, 1940; p. 42). Ferdinand

Fiche, brought to France by Lastelle, was a brilliant student, which opened to him the doors of the École Centrale.

On his return home he became, quite naturally, the distillery manager at Sbamandrakizay, providing roof and board for such passing guests as Ida Pfeiffer—the great Austrian traveller—or Desirée Charnay (Decary & Jammes, 1968; p. 73).

All these “Malagasy creoles” play, more or less successfully, the role of mediators between Madagascar and the foreigners. They have links with the outside world, facility for foreign languages, the material possibility to receive the passing guests, so numerous in Tamatave; in short, they constitute an ideal source of information for the royal government and for the court. They keep them up to date on the London or Paris decisions, on the colonialist ambitions of La Réunion, on the traders’ needs and even on the changes of fashion.

In the execution of their duties, the Grand Judges and the *Andriambaventy* are in constant contact with foreigners. The Malagasy officials try to copy the habits of these dignitaries who know everything that happens in the outside world, but sometimes they try to exploit them. Lacaze writes, speaking of the receptions offered by the Tamatave officials (1881; p. 153-154): “The arrangement of a banquet is always directed by a foreigner or by the ‘Malagasy creoles’ who, being born in a white environment, acquired their customs and habits in childhood. These English or French mulattos fulfil the role of their higher servants. Very submissive towards the Hova chiefs, they often pay a very high price for the small honours bestowed on them. Sometimes they are given the posts of judges or of superintendents; but when they are well-off they have to furnish wines, liqueurs, table silver for the banquets; they are being politely and amicably robbed.” In this way the “Malagasy creoles” propagate not only the eating habits and etiquette, but also the fashion in dress, furniture and interior decoration. Even more important are their convictions and this religious influence. They are catholics, while the Merina officials of Tamatave are protestant. Some of the Betsimisaraka who associate protestantism with the royal administration follow their superiors and become catholics. They hope thus to escape the pressure of the agents of the “Palace Church”, that is of the protestant Church of State.

If the Tamatave Fathers are not always satisfied with the behaviour or the faith of the “Malagasy creoles,” they always approve of their actions. Lacomme<sup>6</sup>—the Catholic Mission chief for the East Coast—who reproaches Juliet Fiche for having led in her youth “an extremely adventurous existence”—admitted that from 1836 on “she took on the guidance of the neophytes in order to form the first Christian nucleus. She helped the Fathers at all times in the exercise of their vocation, although her own religious ideas were far from enlightened. She gave to the Mission a good piece of land in Andevorante...” The same missionary did not spare praises for Madame Orioux, the daughter of Nicol, *i.e.* of Lambros, the Great Judge of Mananjary. Most respectable mother of a family, a convinced catholic, she founded the “little Christian Community of Saint Anne (Ambohimaesaka) which consisted of her slaves and of some Christians”. She teaches them religious songs and keeps up their faith by daily meetings which she directs and enlivens. Better still, she donates to the Mission a piece of land in Ambohimaesaka.

This generosity of the “Malagasy creoles,” as well as their example, enticed many Betsimisaraka into the Catholic Church.

In the 19th century the history of the “Malagasy creoles” is inseparable from the history of Tamatave, this cosmopolitan town, this last refuge of men come from all over the Indian Ocean.

Many cultural entities coexist in its port and its interior, but only two of them—the Malagasy and that of the West—ever interpenetrate, a synthesis incarnate in the “Malagasy creoles”.

The appearance of such a social group clearly proves the role of a crossroads, of a crucible played by Tamatave and, by extension, by the whole East Coast. The economic and, above all, political importance it acquired shows that it was not considered by the Malagasies as a foreign body, notwithstanding some unfavourable individual reactions. Quite the contrary, it seemed to be integrated into the Malagasy whole. However, its members never dissolved entirely into this totality. They are integrated but they continue to preserve their originality by maintaining solid bonds with the outside world. While appropriating certain European

<sup>6</sup> Lacomme, *Histoire de la Mission de Tamatave*, t. II, Archivium s.j. V. prov. madecess. S. IV, n. 2 (chap. II et III).

behaviour, they still did not abandon entirely the Malagasy practices and attitudes; they became Christians, but did not forsake all the traditional beliefs. Born in Madagascar or in the Mascarenes, but living in Madagascar, they knew various islands and therefore constituted the ideal intermediary linking Madagascar with the Mascarenes and, beyond them, with Europe.

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