A History of Madagascar

Ephyia Publishing

Table of Contents

Introduction

To gaze upon a map of the world is to be confronted by a geographical curiosity. There, adrift in the Indian Ocean, lies Madagascar, an immense island sitting just off the southeastern coast of Africa. It is the world’s fourth largest, a landmass so vast it is often called the “eighth continent.” From a purely geographical perspective, its history should be a straightforward extension of its continental neighbor. It is a mere

four hundred kilometers away, a distance that, in the grand sweep of human migration, seems almost trivial. Yet, the story of Madagascar is anything but an African story. It is a narrative of profound isolation and startling connection, a history that stubbornly defies expectation.

The island’s very foundation is one of separation. For over 88 million years, since it sheared off from the Indian subcontinent, which itself had long since split from Africa, Madagascar has been a world unto itself. This long solitude allowed nature to conduct a spectacular evolutionary experiment. Life here evolved in splendid isolation, creating a menagerie of creatures and a forest of plants found nowhere else on Earth. It is a land of lemurs, those wide-eyed primates that leap through the canopy, of camouflaged chameleons, and of the majestic, upside-down-looking baobab trees that dominate the arid western landscapes. This unique biological heritage is not merely a backdrop to its human history; it is deeply interwoven with it, shaping its culture, its economy, and its future.

The central puzzle of Malagasy history, and the starting point of our story, is the identity of its first human inhabitants. Logic would dictate they came from the great continent next door. Yet the evidence tells a different, far more astonishing tale. The primary language spoken on the island, Malagasy, finds its closest relatives not in Africa, but thousands of kilometers to the east, in the family of Austronesian languages spoken in places like Indonesia and the Philippines. The first settlers of this great African island were not Africans; they were seafarers who had completed one of the most remarkable voyages of exploration in human history.

How and why these Austronesian pioneers crossed the vast, open expanse of the Indian Ocean remains a subject of intense scholarly debate. Whether they sailed directly, were blown off course, or island-hopped over generations, their arrival, sometime around 500 CE, marked the beginning of Madagascar’s human story. They brought with them a distinct cultural toolkit: new crops like rice, which would transform the landscape into a patchwork of terraced paddies; outrigger canoe technology; and a set of beliefs and social structures with Southeast Asian roots. They were the first people to encounter the island’s strange megafauna, including giant lemurs and the formidable elephant bird.

Of course, the story does not end there. Africa would eventually make its presence felt. At a later stage, Bantu-speaking peoples from the mainland began to arrive, crossing the Mozambique Channel and adding their own genetic and cultural threads to the emerging Malagasy tapestry. They brought cattle, iron-working skills, and different agricultural practices. This fusion of Austronesian and Bantu African created the foundation of the Malagasy people, a unique blend of two of the world's great migratory streams. This dual heritage is visible today in the faces of the people, their customs, their music, and their complex spiritual beliefs.

Out of this cultural synthesis, early societies began to form. For centuries, the island was likely a mosaic of small-scale communities, clans, and chieftaincies. Our understanding of this period is often filtered through oral traditions and the accounts of later visitors, which speak of enigmatic early inhabitants like the Vazimba. These figures, often described as the island's aboriginal people, were gradually assimilated or pushed into more remote areas by new waves of migrants and the rise of more organized political entities. The legacy of these early polities is the groundwork upon which later, more powerful kingdoms would be built.

Madagascar’s position in the Indian Ocean did not leave it isolated forever. By the medieval period, the sails of Arab dhows became a common sight along the island's coasts. These merchants and traders brought with them new goods, new ideas, and a new religion: Islam. While it never became the dominant faith across the entire island, Islam took firm root in the northern and western coastal towns, establishing a lasting cultural and commercial link with the Swahili coast of Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and lands further east. The island became a vital node in a thriving network of maritime trade, exchanging its own unique products, like slaves and spices, for cloth, ceramics, and other luxuries from across the ocean.

This engagement with the wider world and the accumulation of wealth through trade helped fuel the rise of larger and more ambitious political states. From the 17th century onwards, powerful kingdoms began to emerge, vying for control of territory and trade routes. Along the western coast, the Sakalava kingdoms, built on cattle wealth and the slave trade, created vast, sprawling empires. Their dominance would define the political landscape for generations, creating a dynamic of coastal power that contrasted with the societies of the interior.

In the central highlands, a different power was stirring. The Merina people, living amidst the irrigated rice paddies of Imerina, began a process of state-building that would ultimately have the most profound impact on the island's history. Under the shrewd and ambitious king Andrianampoinimerina, the late 18th century saw the unification of the Merina people and the beginning of a campaign of expansion. His vision was to create a single kingdom that would stretch to the sea, a goal that his son and successor, Radama I, would pursue with vigor.

The 19th century was an era of dramatic transformation, defined by the Merina Kingdom’s expansion and its complex, often fraught, engagement with a new force in the Indian Ocean: Europe. Radama I, recognizing the potential power of European technology and knowledge, invited British and French traders, artisans, and missionaries to his court. He sought to modernize his army and administration to solidify his control over the island, effectively opening Madagascar to the wider world in an unprecedented way. This opening brought with it schools, literacy, and Christianity, which would spread rapidly through the highlands.

This period of openness, however, was followed by a powerful reaction. The reign of Queen Ranavalona I is often remembered as a time of fierce resistance to foreign influence. Viewing Christianity and European political maneuvering as a threat to Malagasy sovereignty and traditional values, she expelled missionaries, persecuted native Christians, and sought to insulate her kingdom from the outside world. Her long and formidable rule demonstrated a determined effort to chart an independent course, resisting the tide of European imperialism that was sweeping across Africa.

Yet, the pressure was relentless. Throughout the latter half of the 19th century, under Ranavalona's successors, the Merina monarchy navigated a treacherous diplomatic landscape, playing British and French interests against each other in a desperate bid to maintain independence. A series of prime ministers from the powerful Rainilaiarivony family attempted to implement reforms, modernizing the state and legal system to meet the standards of the European powers. Despite these efforts, French imperial ambitions intensified, culminating in a military invasion in 1895. Two years later, the monarchy was abolished, the last queen was sent into exile, and Madagascar's centuries of independence came to an end.

The colonial period brought sweeping changes to the island. France established a new administrative system, built infrastructure designed to extract the island's resources, and imposed a cash-based economy, often through the coercive system of forced labor known as *corvée*. While the French presence brought some modern developments in medicine and education, it was fundamentally an era of subjugation and economic exploitation. The colonial project was designed to benefit France, and it did so at the expense of the Malagasy people, who were relegated to the status of subjects in their own land.

French rule was not accepted passively. From the very beginning, it was met with resistance. This opposition ranged from localized revolts to more organized, nationalist movements that grew in the early 20th century. The simmering resentment against colonial rule exploded in 1947 with a major uprising. Though brutally suppressed by the French military, with tens of thousands of Malagasy killed, the 1947 Uprising was a watershed moment. It shattered the myth of a "benevolent" colonial power and became a foundational event in the national consciousness, galvanizing the movement that would eventually lead to independence.

The post-war years saw a gradual, often reluctant, move towards self-rule, culminating in the establishment of the Malagasy Republic in 1960. The First Republic, however, struggled to break free from its French neocolonial ties and was eventually toppled by protests in 1972. This led to a period of military transition and the establishment of the Second Republic under Didier Ratsiraka, who embarked on a long and often calamitous socialist experiment. For over a decade and a half, Madagascar aligned itself with the Eastern Bloc, nationalizing industries and pursuing a policy of self-

sufficiency that ultimately led to economic stagnation and isolation.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the wave of democratization that swept the globe in the early 1990s did not bypass Madagascar. Popular protests forced a transition to a multi-party system and the creation of the Third Republic. The decades that followed have been a tumultuous journey marked by political crises, contested elections, and unconstitutional changes of government. The 2009 crisis, which saw the democratically elected president ousted in a populist-backed coup, plunged the country into a prolonged period of political instability and international isolation, from which it is still recovering. The establishment of the Fourth Republic has been an ongoing effort to restore constitutional order and tackle the deep-seated challenges of governance and development.

This book aims to narrate this complex political journey, from the first canoes to the modern republic. But a nation’s history is more than just a sequence of rulers, wars, and constitutions. Therefore, we will also explore the enduring themes that shape Malagasy life. We will delve into the island’s profound environmental challenges, as its unique biodiversity faces threats from deforestation and climate change, and examine the politics of conservation. We will investigate the intricate relationship between ethnicity, language, and the construction of a national identity in a country of diverse origins.

Furthermore, we will look at the economic forces of urbanization and globalization and how they are transforming Malagasy society, creating new opportunities and new forms of inequality. We will also celebrate the island’s rich cultural heritage, from its haunting musical traditions and vibrant arts to its unique customs and philosophical concepts like *fihavanana*, a deeply held value of kinship and solidarity. Finally, we will place contemporary Madagascar in its regional and global context, understanding its place in Africa, the Indian Ocean, and the wider world. The story of Madagascar is the story of a land that is at once a continent in miniature and an island world entirely of its own making. It is a history of surprising connections, profound isolation, cultural fusion, and remarkable human resilience. It is this epic and singular journey that we now invite you to explore.

CHAPTER ONE: Origins and Austronesian Settlement

The story of how Madagascar was populated is one of the most remarkable chapters in the epic of human migration. For an island of its immense size, lying just 400 kilometers off the coast of a continent teeming with hominid history for millennia, its long vacancy is a profound mystery. Even more curious is the identity of its eventual colonists. They did not arrive from Africa, the landmass practically within sight.

Instead, they undertook an astonishing transoceanic voyage from the opposite direction, from the islands of Southeast Asia, a region located at least 6,000 kilometers away. This improbable event was the final, westernmost pulse of one of humanity's greatest expansions.

This expansion began around 3000 BCE, when populations speaking Austronesian languages started to push out from Taiwan. Possessing sophisticated sailing technologies like the outrigger canoe and a profound understanding of the sea, these peoples spread with incredible speed over thousands of years. They moved south into the Philippines, and then east and west, populating the vast stretches of the Pacific Ocean all the way to Easter Island and settling the thousands of islands that constitute maritime Southeast Asia. Their arrival in Madagascar, sometime in the first millennium CE, represented the ultimate testament to their seafaring prowess, an achievement akin to the Polynesian settlement of the remote Pacific.

The most compelling evidence for this journey lies in the island's language. Malagasy, the tongue spoken throughout Madagascar, is unequivocally a member of the Austronesian language family. Its vocabulary, grammar, and structure bear no relation to the Bantu languages spoken on the neighboring African mainland. Instead, linguists have traced its specific origins with remarkable precision to the island of Borneo. Malagasy’s closest living relative is Ma'anyan, a language spoken by Dayak communities along the Barito River in South Kalimantan, Indonesia. The connection is so clear that many basic words are cognates, sharing a common root, such as the words for 'stone' (*watu* in Ma'anyan, *vato* in Malagasy) and 'fire' (*apui* in Ma'anyan, *afo* in Malagasy).

Genetic science has powerfully corroborated the linguistic data. Studies of the Malagasy population’s DNA reveal a foundational mix of two ancestral groups: Austronesian and African Bantu. While centuries of intermarriage have created a spectrum of physical appearances, the genetic signatures are distinct. Genome-wide studies show that while both ancestries are present throughout the island, the Austronesian component is a fundamental part of the Malagasy genetic landscape. Early studies focusing on maternal (mtDNA) and paternal (Y chromosome) lineages suggested a pattern where the Austronesian ancestry was more pronounced in the female gene pool, indicating that the initial founding groups may have had a disproportionate number of Southeast Asian women.

While the "who" and "where from" of the first settlers are well-established, the "when" is a subject of intense and evolving debate. For many years, the consensus, based on the earliest village sites, pointed to a settlement date around 500 CE. However, a series of startling archaeological finds has challenged this timeline, pushing back the evidence of human presence by millennia. The most dramatic of these discoveries are the bones of extinct megafauna, such as elephant birds and giant lemurs, bearing unmistakable signs of human activity.

In 2018, a groundbreaking study analyzed the bones of elephant birds, the colossal flightless birds that once roamed the island, and found distinct chop marks, cut marks, and fractures consistent with butchery. Using direct radiocarbon dating on these modified bones, scientists determined they were over 10,500 years old. This finding suggests a human presence on the island more than 6,000 years earlier than previously thought, radically altering the timeline of the island's human history.

This much earlier evidence has created a new puzzle for researchers. Does a butchered bird bone from 10,500 years ago signify a permanent colonizing population, or does it merely point to sporadic visits by seafaring foragers? Some scholars argue that these early signs reflect transient contact, perhaps by hunters who did not establish lasting settlements. They point out that the main archaeological record of settled villages, pottery, and widespread environmental change doesn't appear until much later, closer to the traditional dates of the first millennium CE. This debate highlights the difference between first contact and full-blown colonization.

Regardless of the precise date of the very first footfall, it is clear that a significant wave of settlement occurred between roughly the 5th and 8th centuries CE. It was during this period that the people who would form the basis of the Malagasy culture arrived in numbers, bringing with them a specific and transformative cultural package from Southeast Asia. This was not an accidental drift of a single boat, but a deliberate and successful colonization.

The question of "how" these pioneers crossed the vast Indian Ocean remains a topic of speculation, though several plausible theories exist. One scenario suggests a direct, open-ocean voyage, a daring feat made possible by sophisticated knowledge of seasonal monsoon winds and currents, and by their technologically advanced outrigger canoes. Another possibility is a more gradual, multi-generational coastal migration, with groups island-hopping along the coasts of India, the Arabian Peninsula, and East Africa before making the final crossing of the Mozambique Channel. Genetic evidence indicating some Austronesian ancestry in East African populations lends some credence to this coastal route theory.

A fascinating hybrid of these theories involves the powerful maritime trading networks of the time, such as the Srivijaya empire based in Sumatra. It’s possible that the Ma'anyan people, who were river-dwellers and not known as deep-sea sailors, were brought along as laborers, slaves, or crew by more experienced Malay or Javanese seafarers who dominated Indian Ocean trade routes. The strong presence of Malay and Javanese loanwords in Malagasy, especially terms related to navigation, supports the idea of a mixed-crew voyage led by experienced sailors.

These voyagers did not arrive empty-handed. They carried with them a portable ecosystem of crops and animals that would fundamentally reshape the island. The

most significant of these was rice. Archaeobotanical studies have confirmed the presence of Asian rice varieties at the earliest settlement sites in Madagascar, a stark contrast to the African crops found on the mainland and nearby islands. Alongside rice, they introduced other Southeast Asian staples like taro, yams, bananas, and coconuts, forming the agricultural foundation of Malagasy society.

The material culture they brought was equally transformative. Chief among their technological assets was the outrigger canoe, a vessel perfectly suited for both oceanic voyages and coastal navigation. The very word for "people" in Malagasy, *vahoaka*, is thought to derive from the Proto-Malayo-Polynesian word **vaka*, meaning "canoe," suggesting a deep cultural identity tied to their seafaring origins. They also brought knowledge of iron-working, weaving, and distinct architectural styles, such as building houses on stilts, all of which have Southeast Asian roots.

Upon arrival, these first permanent settlers would have encountered a world utterly alien to them, a land that had evolved in isolation for 88 million years. It was an island of giants. The forests were home to enormous lemurs, some the size of a gorilla. Dwarf hippos grazed in the wetlands, and giant tortoises lumbered across the landscape. Patrolling the forests was the giant fossa, a predator far larger than its modern descendants. Perhaps most spectacularly, the island was the domain of the elephant bird (*Aepyornis*), a flightless behemoth that stood up to three meters tall and laid eggs larger than those of any dinosaur.

The arrival of humans marked the beginning of the end for this unique megafauna. The settlers were skilled hunters and foragers, and these large, slow-moving animals, having evolved without major predators, would have been easy prey. The practice of slash-and-burn agriculture, known as *tavy*, which the settlers used to clear forest land for their crops, also began the long process of habitat destruction that would doom many species. Within a millennium of sustained human settlement, nearly all of Madagascar's large animals were extinct.

While hunting was a factor, the megafaunal extinction was not an instantaneous event. Evidence suggests that for thousands of years, humans and giant animals coexisted, albeit in a changing balance. The final wave of extinctions seems to coincide not with the first human arrival, but with a later period around 1,000 years ago when the human population began to grow rapidly. This population boom was likely fueled by the expansion of pastoralism and more intensive agriculture, leading to greater pressure on habitats and resources. The story of the Austronesian arrival is thus inextricably linked to the island's first great ecological transformation, setting the stage for all of its subsequent human history.