Madagascar: Shaping a People's Identity through Its History

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ABSTRACT: The specificity, uniqueness, and authenticity of a people is given by their social identity. This social identity is related to his history, the good and bad events the people went through, cultural accommodation, to the internal relations established within the people or groups, to experiences and international relationships. In this article, we defined the identity of the Malagasy people in relation to their history. The Malagasy people and their history are linked today to the Republic of Madagascar, located in the Indian Ocean in southeastern Africa. The Malagasy people are made up of twenty different ethnic groups settled in Madagascar over two major migrations over the last two thousand years. These groups of Malays from Kalimantan, Bantu, and Swahili tribes from East Africa, Muslims and Arab traders from the Arabian Peninsula, and Gujarati people from the west coast of India were forced to live and share a history together. Although some of the groups that came along have retained elements of their original identity, throughout history, all these groups have managed to create a common identity, called the Malagasy identity.

KEY WORDS: social identity, Malagasy history, Malagasy identity, Malagasy kingdoms, Imperial Merina, French colonialism, Malagasization

1. Introduction

Every person has a personal identity and a social identity. If *personal identity* gives uniqueness, specificity and authenticity to him personally, *social identity*

gives belonging and similarity in relation to the group to which he belongs. This identity, both personal and social, is related to the history, experiences, relationships, and social roles the person plays in life. Sociologist Peter Covington defines personal or group identity in terms of the qualities, beliefs, personality traits, appearance and expressions which describe a person or a group (Covington 2008, 12). According to Peter Burke, "identities tell us who we are and they inform others of who we are" (Burke 2020, 63-78). Furthermore, identities later guide behavior, making 'parents' to behave like 'parents' and 'nurses' to behave like 'nurses' (Burke 2020, 63-78). Social identity is additional to personal identity, according to Ole Jakob Filtvedt, a theologian specializing in biblical sociology (Filtvedt 2015, 31). Social identity refers to that part of a person's identity which is derived from their adherence to a certain social group. A statement concerning social identity can therefore include a specific name and information about the social identity of that person. For example, saying 'Paul of Tarsus is/was a Pharisee' is both a statement of personal identity, and a statement about Paul's collective identity: of the Pharisee group, he lived part of his life or was born in Tarsus (Filtvedt 2015, 31). In sociology, the emphasis is on collective identity, where the identity of individuals is strongly connected to role behavior or the collection or group memberships which define them, says Burke (2020, 63-78).

In this article, we want to sketch the image or the identity of the Malagasy people through its history. This identity is certainly incomplete, because it does not include all the elements like culture, religious or spiritual life, geography, and relations with the external environment, except in passing. The space devoted to this article cannot include all these elements to be able to describe a people in all its complexity. However, we can draw some eloquent conclusions about the identity of the people settled in the territory of postmodern Madagascar, addressing the historical-political context in a period of two thousand years from its genesis. Therefore, in this study we will recreate the identity of this wonderful people settled in the Indian Ocean, southeast of continental Africa, looking at five historical stages which were defining for its forming as a people: its genesis, the period of forming the Malagasy kingdoms, the growth of imperial power in Madagascar, its colonization by the French administration and the period of the republics,

which formed and deformed it in the contemporary period. At the end of this article, we will make a short summary of the Malagasy national identity as shown in this research.

2. The proto-Malagasy stage and the birth of a multicultural and multireligious people

The proto-Malagasy stage is connected to the settlement of the first inhabitants on the territory of the island in the Indian Ocean. The most important questions that the researchers tried to answer had to do with the time of the settling of the first people in these places and who they were.

Philip M. Allen and Maureen Covell believe that the first inhabitants came to the island on the commercial routes which connected the south of Asia to northeast Africa and the Comoro Islands, and settled along the shores around 400 AD (Allen and Covell 2005, xxvii). This idea of an early settlement has been the most popular until recently, when new archeological and paleontological research seems to offer earlier dates of the first people settling in Madagascar. There are some sites, like Ambatovy, Anadrahome, Andranosoa, Behove, Itampolo, Taolambiby, and Anjolibe, which confirm the existence of populations of African origin who settled on the north and northwest coasts, having come to these territories about 2400 years before Christ, but who eventually disappeared (Goodman and Jungers 2014, 87-93). Paleontological research revealed animal bones with 'intelligent' markings on them, in the shape of a V, made with knives or axes, which only intelligent beings could have made. We are talking about communities that would have eaten monkey meat the bones of which would have been chopped with the V sign on them (Goodman and Jungers 2014, 87-93; Campbell 2016, 197-204).

Regarding the origin of these people, there have been two hypotheses (Domenichini 1993, 15-17). The first hypothesis claims that the inhabitants were *Austronesian*. This was largely supported by Alfred Grandidier, a French naturalist and explorer (Grandidier 1901, 180). This hypothesis is detailed by researcher Gwyn Campbell in the *Encyclopedia of African History*. He says the Austronesians left their territories in Indonesia-Pacific because they were flooded, and ventured to the west in their double-outrigger canoes on the warm currents of the Indian Ocean, first reaching Sri Lanka, then southern

India and finally the unknown territories of Madagascar, which they found uninhabited and similar to the habitat they had left in Indonesia (Campbell 2005, 872-73).

The second hypothesis is that the Malagasy people are made up of *Bantu tribes* from East Africa. Gabriel Ferrand, researcher of Orientalist studies, was especially in favor of this hypothesis after the 1970s. Gabriel Ferrand states that it was not the Malaysian-Indonesian people who settled first in Madagascar, but the *Bantu tribes* coming from East Africa. Moreover, he states that the migration of the Bantu tribes would have taken place before our era, and when they came to the territory of the Island, they found a pre-Bantu population (Ferrand 1909, 33). He brings linguistic and anthropological arguments that the native people on the west coast of Madagascar speak Bantu, and they are black with curly hair, while in the other parts of the island people are straight-haired and fair-skinned mulattoes who speak 'buki', meaning Malagasy, of Malayo-Polynesian origin (Ferrand 1909, 27).

Otto Christian Dahl, a missionary and linguist researcher, confirms that Madagascar's linguistic background is of Malayo-Polynesian origin, which includes loanwords from Sanskrit, Bantu and Swahili, and later from French and English. This Malayo-Polynesian language background is similar to the Indonesian language of Kalimantan Island (Borneo), attesting to the strong connection between the two regions of the globe (Randriamasimanana 1999, 26-43; Dahl 1951, 299-355).

Today, Madagascar is inhabited by people who come from all these migrations and cultures: Austronesian, East-African, Arab, Indian, over which Jewish, Chinese, Portuguese, French and British influences have settled throughout history in different parts of the island, especially in the coastal areas, through various migrations, the most influential culture coming from France, along with protectionism, and then, French colonialism (Oberlé 1979, 13). As the culture of different groups is naturally expressed by the religious imaginary, going hand in hand with one another, *from a religious point of view*, there are several layers of different religions: animism, or ancestral faith, Islam, Christianity, and to a lesser extent a few other religions (International Religious Freedom Report for 2015, U.S. Department of State).

3. The kingdoms stage and the formation of united and strong communities in development

The second distinct period in the history of Madagascar is the consolidation of Malagasy families and tribes in the form of independent kingdoms, with their own organization, autonomy, defense and forms of trade with the outside and with other ethnic groups located in the same geographical area. The formation of the Malagasy kingdoms is framed between the 14th and 19th centuries, and the climax of this period, Campbell concludes, is given by the development breadth of the Merina kingdom as an imperial power that wants to extend its domination over the other kingdoms of the Red Island (Campbell 2005, 873).

But how did the idea of royalty and kingdom develop? Did it exist in the identity of the groups located on the island territory from the beginning? It seems not. Aidan W. Southall and Maureen A. Covell point out that the approximately 20 ethnic groups that came to Madagascar settled in the first millennium along the shores of Madagascar because of the warm climate, which is favorable to dark-skinned populations, but also because of agricultural considerations, this soil being easier to work and more accessible than the mountain plateau of about 1600 km that crosses Madagascar from north to south and is infertile and with a temperate climate. They were ruled by tribal chiefs, but they did not claim the title of kings, they were only heads of families, and whose power was limited to their families (Southall and Covell, n.d.). Then, in the second millennium, Campbell points out, a second migration of peoples to Madagascar took place, forcing some coastal populations to go up to the mountain plateau, especially in the 12th-14th centuries (Campbell 2005, 873).

The idea of kingdom comes from the Arab period, with the rise of the Islamic caliphates in the 7th century. Muslim traders end up dominating the main trade routes in the Indian Ocean, from the east coast of Africa to the Indonesian Archipelago. Due to the battles within the Muslim caliphates, groups of Arab and Islamic origin are beginning to seek refuge elsewhere, especially in east and southeast Africa. During these settling invasions of new favorable territories, Arab and Muslim groups are beginning to settle on the coasts of Madagascar, either by integrating into already formed communities

on the north and southeast coasts or by forming communities themselves (Campbell 2005, 873-874). One of these groups of Arab origin that settled in Madagascar is the *Antalaotra group*, which brought with it the idea of royalty, of land division, of labor management, of Arabic writing and arithmetic, and of the holy writings, called *sorabe* (Campbell 2005, 874).

This group is considered by Gwyn R. Campbell to be the catalyst for the idea of kingdom, a fact visible in the 14th century in the southern *Betsileo kingdom*, made up of ethnic groups gathered together from southeastern Madagascar, and in the 15th century in the *Sakalava kingdoms* in the west, and the *Amongo and Iboina kingdoms* in the north. As kingdoms, the tribes were stronger, they could negotiate more easily with the great imperial powers (Portuguese, Dutch, British and French), they could sell their products (rice, corn, animals) on the goods market in the Indian Ocean circuit and they could have access to international products, especially coming from India and China (Campbell 2005, 874). This development of the kingdoms continued even in the age of the great discoveries, the 15th-17th centuries, when the great European powers were seeking new territories in the Indian Ocean, which they could conquer and exploit (Malotet 1898, 6; 28-34).

4. The imperial stage and the desire of the Merina kingdom to expand and dominate over the other kingdoms

In the 18th century, one of the Malagasy kingdoms, the Merina, from the interior of the country, located in the central plateau, began to detach itself as an imperial power. The Merina kingdom, with the city of Tananarive as its capital, created a good relationship with the imperial European powers, Great Britain and France, which favored it in its development (Covell n.d.). In order to gain access to the supply of goods, slaves, and the purchase of weapons and products brought from these colonial empires, the Merina kingdom sought to have an outlet to the Indian Ocean. The nearest port was Toamasina, which was part of the Betsimisaraka Kingdom. So they conquered parts of this kingdom and created their access to the sea (Campbell 2018, 55-56).

The Merina Kingdom was developing more strongly than the other kingdoms, both agriculturally and industrially, its rice production being much improved due to innovations, due to the creation of channels through which

water could be transported to places which water could not reach, and due to the system of terraces they created through which they collected water from a spring and transported it to all the rice paddies in the terraces, from terrace to terrace (Campbell 2018, 55-56). The Merina Kingdom became one of the strongest suppliers of slaves in the Indian Ocean, which was very well received by the great colonial powers, who sought cheap labor for all the conquered colonies, offering them military equipment in exchange, especially cannons, and military training (Campbell 2005, 875).

The strongest desire of the Merina kings was to conquer all other kingdoms and assimilate them. One of the Malagasy rulers of the Merina kingdom, Ramboasalama, had as his life mission the conquering of the entire island territory as far as the Mozambique Sea and the Indian Ocean, as seen in his motto: "Ny ranomasina no valamparihiko", translated literally "The sea is the limit of my rice field"(Mairie d'Antananarivo, 2001). Due to the conquest battles for the expansion of the Merina kingdom, he was able to change his name from Ramboasalama to Andrianampoinimerina, which means 'Prince wanted by Imerina', taking the title of 'PRINCE'. Based on this title, the first Merina king was his son, *Radama I* (1810-1828), who proclaimed himself 'King of Madagascar' (Covell n.d.), setting up his capital in Antananarivo and modernizing the kingdom, introducing an educational system similar to the European one, offering Christian missionaries the possibility to spread the Christian principles, to translate the Bible into Malagasy, and to write the Malagasy language using the Latin alphabet (Oliver 1886, 46).

One of the things that caused the Merina kingdom to be frowned upon by the other Malagasy kingdoms and even made them often rebel was the social constraint of a labor tax by law, called *fanampoana*. This was free forced labor of all free citizens, along with the slaves of those times, to support the industrial and agricultural revolution in the country. A man had to work unpaid in factories in the capital for almost two months a year, building bridges or ports in the country, while his family barely made a living from one day to the next (Campbell 1988, 466-67).

The Merina imperial power took *the line of a royal dynasty*, although those who were part of the dynasty were only from the extended royal family, not always the legal heirs. King Radama I died in 1828, quite young (only 36 years old), and one of his wives, Ranavalona I (1828-1861) succeeded him

to the throne, developing the monarchy and the capital (Oliver 1886, 43-46). She followed a dictatorial and authoritarian direction, fighting against Christianity, opposing western ideas and promoting the ancestral religion followed by most Malagasy families, earning the title of modern day 'Bloody Mary' (Townsend 1835, 112). One of her sons, Radama II, was enthroned after her death, but was assassinated by a political group who did not agree with the very open direction towards the West during his first two years of reign, and who were also tired of his rather bold decisions made because of psychological problems (Townsend 1835, 129; Oliver 1886, 88-105). The opposition group that assassinated the king suggested to his widowed wife, Rasoherina, that she rule under certain conditions that they demanded, and she agreed (Townsend 1835, 130). So, she was enthroned as queen and laid the foundation of a constitutional government on the Island, in which the power and decisions were not entirely in her hands, but she was to rule with a number of nobles and representatives of the people (Townsend 1835, 130). After Queen Rasoherina, her niece Ramoma ruled, who took the royal name Ranavalona II. She married the Prime Minister, Rainilaiarivony (1864-1895), who had been the consort of her aunt, Queen Rasoherina, her consort and then, after her, the consort of the third queen, Ranavalona III (Nandrianina 2016, 61-63).

From a social point of view, during the Merina royalty we see a quite clearly outlined division into three classes: the nobility and the aristocracy (Andriana) in leadership; a second class were the poor but free people (Hova), who had to pay the fanompoana, the forced labor for the imperial power of about two months for nothing every year; the third class were the slaves (Andevo), who were forced to work for nothing for the nobles or for the Merina kingdom and were a commodity for sale on the international colonial market (Covell n.d.).

5. The colonial stage and the presupposition of French cultural superiority: 'colonize and civilize'

The reign of the last queen, Ranavalona III (1883-1897) was abruptly ended by France's entry into Madagascar, which it occupied in 1895. After first entering Madagascar as a protectorate in 1882, on January 14, 1895

they disembarked with troops in the northwestern port of Majunga and reached the capital Antananarivo in the same year, taking over its governance (Ranaivoson 2016, 17; Ellis 1990, 20).

Due to the huge revolts of the population, called the *Menalamba Revolt* (Red Shirt Revolt), which took place between 1895-1897, the French general Joseph-Simon Gallieni was sent to Madagascar as governor to restore order, with a battalion of legionaries (Cahisa 2019). He dissolved the monarchy in February 1987 and sent queen Ranavalona III and her husband, Prime Minister Rainilaiarivony, to France, after which they were sent into exile in Algiers by the French government (Deschamps 1961, 237-238). Thus, Madagascar entered another stage, the colonial stage, for about seventy years (Ellis 1990, 67).

French colonialism offered both negative and positive aspects to the Malagasy society impoverished by the Merina imperial period. On the positive side, Faranirina Rajaonah claims that slavery was abolished, benefiting more than 50,000 people on the island (Campbell 2005, 879). Then a national system of internal and external transport was created, consisting of roads, railways and ports, so that goods could move in and out of the country, especially coffee, vanilla and other spices. On the educational level, improvements were made by encouraging education and creating schools and training teachers. The health system was developed nationwide, one of the struggles being to eradicate diseases caused by poverty and the tropical climate. There was an increase in the birth rate in Madagascar. Trade unions were being set up to defend workers' rights. The first production cooperatives were created (Rajaonah 2005, 881).

The downside of French colonialism was the further exploitation of the people, using the structure already formed by the Merina power through poorly paid forced labor and the harsh regime. All those with access to education were forced to learn French. Although the creation of production cooperatives was encouraged, the export of Malagasy products to the foreign market would favor France, not Madagascar, which eventually led to *the 1947-1948 insurrection*. This insurrection was harshly rejected and poorly managed by the French colonial authorities, leading to a huge loss of lives, especially among the Malagasy, who were tortured, executed and starved (Cole 2005,

880). Jennifer Cole, a historian who investigated these two events of Malagasy rebellion that took place under French colonial rule - the Menalamba Revolt (1895-1897) and the Malagasy Insurrection (1947-1948), estimates that the Malagasy price was more than 100,000 lives (Cole 2005, 880).

The *Carta Atlantica*, an agreement signed on August 14, 1941 between the United States and Britain, laid the groundwork for cooperation between the great powers that led to the process of decolonization of countries under world imperial powers in Africa, America, and Asia, so countries like Britain, France, Spain, Germany, Italy, Portugal and Belgium were forced to find solutions to give the conquered countries autonomy or protection through various partnerships (Wikipedia 2022).

Madagascar chose a peaceful way to work with the French colonial administration for the progressive transfer of power in the decolonization process. France chose its own favorites from Malagasy parties, preferring deputy Philibert Tsiranana as the future president of the future Malagasy autonomous country. He, at the head of the PSD party (Social Democratic Party), officially proclaimed the establishment of the Republic of Madagascar on October 14, 1958, a new state, with its own flag and its own national anthem (Rajaonah 2005, 882).

6. The Republican stage and the idea that the strongest decides the direction of the country

With the withdrawal of the French administration from Madagascar in 1959, the young Malagasy state and its leaders had almost all the levers to make this a thriving and prosperous country. But the following 60 years showed that the transition from a foreign colony to an autonomous and prosperous country was not easy for the presidents and governments that would have to run the country. Madagascar went through several major crises, huge strikes, four transitional periods, coups, and the Constitution was changed four times, each change producing a new Republic.

Some of the presidents who had a strong influence on the direction the country took were: Philibert Tsiranana, Didier Ratsiraka, Albert Zafy, Marc Ravalomanana, Hery Martial Rakotoarimanana Rajaonarimampianina

and Andry Rajoelina, the current president of the Democratic Republic of Madagascar.

Philibert Tsiranana was the first president of the Republic of Madagascar, establishing the First Republic (1960-1972). Leading the country for 12 years together with the PSD party, he established an autocratic regime, especially in the last two terms (Rajaonah 2005, 882). Internally, a process of Malagasization and homogenization began, trying to bring people from all ethnic groups into the administration, the army and education (Rajaonah 2005, 883). He moved away from France and moved closer to the socialist and communist bloc. He ignored rural poverty by practicing state interventionism, which led to riots by both peasants in 1970 and other groups, such as medical students who shortened his term, the country reaching a painful transition regime (Rajaonah 2005, 883).

A second prominent and influential president was the Commander of the Navy, *Didier Ratsiraka*, a very skilled politician who led the country for almost three terms, the second being interrupted by a strong popular movement against him (Wikipedia 2021). He continued Tsiranana's plan to move closer to the communist east, such as the USSR, North Korea and the communist countries of Eastern Europe (Rajaonah 2005, 885). He changed the Constitution through a referendum, establishing the Second Republic in 1975 (Democratic Republic of Madagascar) and, together with the AREMA (Vanguard of the Malagasy Socialist Revolution) party, failed to raise it to a better economic level in the so-called 'socialist revolution'. On the contrary, his government's leadership plunged Madagascar into poverty, chronic scarcity, food shortages, and a lack of infrastructure for product circulation. Faranirina Rajaonah, a Malagasy analyst, considers this period a difficult one for the Malagasy people, in which the Marxist and totalitarian policy promoted by the government proved to be a failure, leading to tension among the population (Rajaonah 2005, 885).

One of the presidents who proved to be a good administrator of the country was *Marc Ravalomanana*. He surprised the IMF and the World Bank by his ability to attract foreign investors to Madagascar, his tax reforms and the creation of a good infrastructure for transporting goods to the island (Deschamps and all. 2021). He steered the country towards the West, and many Malagasy people consider his period one of growth and

prosperity. Unfortunately, this upward trend did not last long. Although he was considered a good president, Ravalomanana allegedly abused his power on several occasions, with Malagasy and international newspapers publicly considering him a dictator or money launderer, and Malagasy public opinion turning against him (Covell et al. 2021). Pursuing a protectionist policy for certain political and business groups and a reductionist one for others (Savonnerie Tropicale, Le Quartz, Viva), he finally managed to come into conflict with certain influential public figures, such as the mayor of the capital, Andry Rajoelina, producing a wave of protests against him, such as the *Orange Revolution*, an event which led to him leaving the country and losing power during his second term (Randrianarimanana 2009).

7. The Malagasy identity seen through history

In conclusion, looking through the historical-political lens, the identity of the Malagasy people is not complete. But we can see certain things that are common throughout each historical stage that the Malagasy society has gone through and in this way, we can define quite accurately who the Malagasy people are.

The Malagasy society is a mixed one, encompassing a wide cultural and religious diversity, due to their origins, with roots in the Indonesian, East African, Indian, Arab, Muslim, and later European areas. This means that there is sufficient flexibility in relationships within society and a high degree of acceptability of others, tolerance of the different. Looking at the Malagasy society through the prism of the forming of the kingdoms stage we can draw the idea of unity and unification of different groups, of cohesion within different families who share the same ideas to become stronger and for all members of the group to benefit. The unification of families with similar cultural values in the kingdoms (Betsileo, Sakalava, Amongo, Iboina, Merina) gave everyone a commercial and military advantage and identity.

In general, people tend to be self-serving and often live on a competitive basis, rather than offering value or serving others, according to the Golden Rule. The rise of Merina imperial power stage demonstrates this, with a small part of society, kings, aristocracy and nobility assuming certain advantages and trying to enslave the weaker ones for their own interests or to weaken

their power in order to use them as slaves. For this purpose, the Merina imperial power used both *fanampoana* (forced labor) to increase its power, and military power to subdue the other ethnic groups by military force. During this stage, a part of society learned to be submissive and to have a docile approach, while others preferred the warrior approach, fighting against different authoritarian regimes.

The colonial period greatly influenced the Malagasy society, the colonial idea of 'civilization' being a powerful nail in the collective consciousness of poor people. Civilization is about money, personal and family happiness is about money, and money is about white skin and the western origins of foreigners. This implies a lack of creativity and a 'slave' mentality for many Malagasy individuals working with foreigners. They are waiting to be told what to do, they are waiting to be taken care of, which leads to a lack of personal responsibility. This collective thinking can be seen in the conversations with the people on the street: "We are not doing well because of the president!" "It is the government's fault; it is the political power's fault!" It is easier to blame those who carry power than to analyze your situation and try to improve your life where you are.

The social lesson we can draw from the republican stage is related to instability and the lack of a coherent, honest and ready-to-take-responsibility leadership in support of the common good, so that all people can enjoy security and improve their lives. Each president analyzed was the best solution for change for the better, the hope for a better future and the potential for a change for the better in daily life. But 'power' amplified something bad in some of the Malagasy presidents, and the style of democratic leadership with which they began was transformed over the last few terms into authoritarianism and personal gain. Instability in character and abuses of power eventually led to pain for society as a whole.

The Malagasy people are a wonderful people, but they must have self-confidence, taking personal and collective responsibility for the development of the country. They must find their roots in lasting moral values and continue to maintain the same open and tolerant inter-ethnic and religious attitude and, in unity, to seek to raise the level of this rich and beautiful country on the southern Tropic.

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