STUDIA UBB GEOGRAPHIA, LXVII, 1-2, 2022 (p. 123-136)
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI:10.24193/subbgeogr.2022.08

THE GREAT ISLAND OF MINI-OCEANIA: MADAGASCAR AT THE CROSSROADS OF EMPIRES

Csaba M. KOVÁCS[1]

ABSTRACT. – The Great Island of Mini-Oceania: Madagascar at the Crossroads of Empires. Madagascar, though rich in natural resources, is one of the poorest countries of the world. The mostly accepted explanation relies in its colonial past, which has become almost a cliché for many African countries. The great powers and empires played a major role in the formation and the evolution of the states, and Madagascar is no exception. The inheritance of the past, good or bad, is a burden for any country, but the evolution of national states, their successes and failures, depend on many more factors than their recent history. The present situation of many developing countries is not enviable, especially taking into consideration their enhanced vulnerability to world economic problems and environmental challenges.

Keywords*: Austronesian, piracy, missionary, colonialism, imperialism, insularity, slavery, independence, republic, president, faction, crisis.*

In November/December 2008 I had the opportunity of participating at a study mobility in Madagascar, within the framework of a doctoral school project, financed by the Francophone University Agency (AUF) and axed primarily on the problem of agriculture and climate change. Everything went well with the project and with the trip, and after a couple of months we had the occasion to receive at Cluj-Napoca, within the same project, two doctoral students, then two of our colleagues from the University of Antananarivo.

But in the meantime serious events took place in Madagascar: on January 26th 2009 the Malagasy political crisis began, started by the manifestations of the opposition in the capital city, under the leadership of mayor Andry Rajoelina,

[1] *„Babeş-Bolyai" University, Faculty of Geography, 400009, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, e-mail: csaba.kovacs@ubbcluj.ro*

which resulted in violence and casualties (dead and wounded), as a result of the intervention of the police and of the presidential guards. The final intervention of the army led to the resignation and escape from the country of president Marc Ravalomanana, the declaration of Rajoelina as an interim president on March 18th and the suspension of both chambers of the parliament on March 19th.

This was not the first political crisis in Madagascar since regaining independence in 1960. According to our colleagues from Antananarivo, besides the obvious social background of the manifestations, this was in fact fitting into a larger context of periodic riots and crises, triggered by a permanent political struggle between two big factions of the political elite, sustained from abroad: one pro-French, more conservative and also with a socialist-populist character, and the other pro-American, more liberal, more pragmatic and oriented to market economy.

1. MADAGASCAR, AN AFRICAN OR AN ASIAN COUNTRY?

Madagascar, the fourth largest island of the world, became inhabited relatively late. Though some sources claim that its first inhabitants could already have arrived around 2500 B.C. (in connection with early Austronesian and Dravidian migrations), there is no certain proof of permanent human settlements on the island before 600 A.D. According to linguistic evidence, the massive immigration from the islands of South-East Asia must have started after the beginning of the Iron Age in Indonesia (cca. 300 A.D.) and it ended before the Indian cultural influence on the languages of Austronesia (800 A.D.) (Fage, J.D., Tordoff, W., 2002).

As for the origins of the Malagasy people, there are a lot of controversies. According to the majority of the authors, the ancestors of the Malagasy came from the islands of Austronesia, but also from Melanesia, India, Sri Lanka, Persia, Arabia and Africa. The mostly divergent opinions concern the origins of dark skinned Malagasy. Some authors (Flacourt, Grandidier, Rusillon) claim an Asian origin, based on a dark spot on the skin characteristic for Asian newborn children. Others (Ferrand, Deschamps, Poirier, Vérin) sustain that the great majority of the Malagasy have an African origin and only a minority who came much later (in the 16th century) are from the islands of Indonesia. On the other hand, B. Rakotosamimanana says that Asian characteristics such as blood groups, fingerprints and palmprints coexist with African features in the great majority of Malagasy. This proves, if not a common Asian origin for all, at least a general ethnic mixture on the basis of their linguistic and cultural unity (Randriamamonjy, F., 2008).

The paths followed during the migrations had at least two patterns for the original travellers: the first one, following the ancient commercial route from the northern shores of the Indian Ocean through Sri Lanka, India, Persia, Arabia, East Africa and the Comoros Islands, while the second one, probably much less used but not impossible, took more than 6000 km directly through the Indian Ocean, taking advantage of the seasonal Monsoons and of several favourable ocean currents. These ancient settlers were neither travelling for pleasure nor for business: most of them were refugees, people trying to escape from death or slavery following the frequent local wars between the tribes or after the massive migrations between the Austronesian islands. This is why they took with them not only their wives and children, but also animals and plants from South-East Asia, which explains the general present spread of these species and crops on the whole of the Great Island.

There is a theory claiming that black Asians who reached Madagascar came from South India and the Malay Peninsula much ealier (about 2500 B.C.) than light skinned Austronesians, in the larger context of the invasions of Mongols and Caucasians to South Asia. Some oral sources mention several ethnies of dark skinned short people (similar to pigmies or negritos) like the Taimbalimbaly, Taindronirony, Kimosy and Kalanoro, who were hunter-gatherers living in the forests and caves and who probably preceded the *vazimba,* the earliest Austronesian settlers.

Another interesting hypothesis is the early presence of Jews in Madagascar. This was the conclusion of Étienne de Flacourt who had visited Isle Sainte Marie in 1652 and discovered some local customs (like circumcision and several taboos) that reminded him very much of those of ancient Jews, though they knew nothing about the period after King David, so they were supposed to have settled there before 1000 B.C. Though we know about Jewish traders (Radanites) travelling along the commercial routes of the Indian Ocean between the Middle East, India and China since ancient times, there is no proof that they had any reason to settle in Madagascar, even if they reached the island occasionally. However, their early presence on the island was a frequently mentioned hypothesis until the 20th century, based on which Nazi Germany planned the deportation of European Jews to Madagascar during World War II. (Not being able to solve it logistically because they had no control of the Indian Ocean traffic, on January 20, 1942, at the Wannsee conference the Nazis chose the Final Solution of exterminating the Jews in death camps).

From the linguistic point of view, the idioms presently spoken in Madagascar show closest similarities to those of three Austronesian ethnic groups: the Maanjan, who live in the upper basin of the Barito river in Kalimantan (Borneo), the Lom of the Bangka Island in Indonesia (East of Sumatra) and the

Bajau of the Riau Archipelago in the South China Sea. The Maanjan were pushed to migrate by the Bandjar Malay and set foot temporarily on Bangka Island, but later the Hindu invaders tried to enslave them, this is why the Maanjan and the Lom decided to migrate far westwards, using the ocean currents, finally reaching Madagascar. After the spread of Islam in the Middle East, some of the soon emerging islamic sects' members (Zeidites, Ismaelites, orthodox Sunnites from Bahrain and Persian Shiites of Shiraz in 975) became persecuted or threatened with extermination, which is why they also fled to East Africa and some of them to Madagascar. During the 14th and 15th centuries, shipwrecked Indians from the Malabar Coast took refuge on the Western and Southern coasts of Madagascar, later becoming dominant and founding local dinasties in the Southern Plateau of Madagascar. The dark skinned African migrants probably arrived in smaller groups, most of them as slaves and usually without their families, which explains the disappearance of their initial Bantu languages and their relatively fast assimilation by the Austronesian speaking Asians (op.cit.)

Madagascar has been thus known to Asian and African merchants well before the arrival of the Europeans to the island. A developed network of commercial exchanges was working since the early antiquity along the shores of the Indian Ocean, where slavery developed and was one of the main interests for commerce since the earliest of times, among other merchandises like cereals, live animals (especially horses), dry meat and fish, fruits, leather, silk, frankincense, pearls, porcelain, spices, sugar, salt, alum and other minerals. The commerce was dominated by Chinese, Malay and Indians in the eastern half of the Ocean and by Persians, Arabs and Africans in the western half (Kovács, Cs., 2021).

2. MADAGASCAR AND THE COLONIAL POWERS

The name Madagascar appeared for the first time in Europe in the memoirs of the famous Venetian traveller Marco Polo, who never reached the Great Island, but heard of it from Chinese and Arab merchants during his returning voyage from China through the Indian Ocean and Persia in 1292/1293.

The first Europeans who actually reached in 1500 the eastern coast of Madagascar were the sailors of captain Diogo Días (brother of Bartolomeo Días), who was a member of the expedition of several ships led by Pedro Álvarez Cabral, the presumtive first discoverer of the coast of Brasil. Diogo Días' ship was separated from the rest of Cabral's flotilla during a storm and continued its travel to India not following the Straight of Mozambique like the other ships, but East of Madagascar, finding the island by accident.

After 1500, more and more European, Arab and Indian ships approached Madagascar mainly for commerce, establishing comptoirs and occasionally taking away people into slavery. Many of the so called merchants of the Indian Ocean were as a matter of fact pirates, which is why the pejorative surname of Europeans in Madagascar today is *vazaha*, initially meaning *pirate*. Piracy was and still is in the region a favourite occupation among all sorts of illegal sailing warriors, the remoteness of the islands in this part of the world making them very appropriate shelters for all kind of outlaws. According to some sources (Defoe, D., Bucquoi, J., Exquemelin, A.O., 2021), there was even a utopian primitive egalitarian society, founded by pirates on Ile Sainte Marie (Nosy Boraha) and named the *Republic of Libertalia,* though no reliable other sources confirm this ever existed in the reality.

The most important innovations coming from Europeans at the beginning were the attempts to conclude treaties with the local political powers in order to establish trading centers and to acquire land for agriculture, mining and future colonisation. The most important agreements between European travellers and local political powers until the end of the 18th century were (Randriamamonjy, F., 2008):

1. An agreement signed on March 8, 1642 between Adrien Van der Stel, the Dutch governor of Mauritius Island, and the king of Antongil, ceding Nosy Mangabe (a small island in the Bay of Antongil) to the Netherlands. No further evolution of this agreement is known.
2. In 1642, French settlers started to set foot at Manafiafy, in the Anosy province, on the south-eastern coast of the Island. One year later, 70 colonists led by the protestant Jacques Pronis built a fortress which was later named Fort Dauphin. In the same year, Pronis proclaimed the Ile Sainte Marie a French possession.
3. In 1645, English sailors under the leadership of captain Smart made an unsucessful attempt to establish a colony in Saint Augustine Bay, on the western coast of Madagascar.
4. Between 1665 and 1668, François Martin built a fortified settlement at Fenoarivo (a couple of miles from the west coast, up the Onilahy River), named Fort Gaillard, which was soon destroyed by hostile Malagasy.
5. In 1732, an agreement between the French captain D'Hermite and the king Ramasarahika of the Sakalava people, ceding Nosy Mangabe to the King of France.
6. On July 30, 1750, princess Betia, daughter of king Ratsimilaho, probably not understanding the full meaning of the deal, signed an agreement ceding Isle Sainte Marie to France.

The Island became thus a target for all kind of businessmen and adventurers, more or less representing some European governments and attempting to establish commercial partnerships and founding settlements for colonisation or slave trade. Portuguese merchants established first peaceful contacts in 1613 with Tsiambany, a local Anosy king who claimed to have ancestors in Mecca and in Mangalore in India and whose capital was Fanjahira. Tsiambany made an agreement with Paulo Rodrigues da Costa, written by himself in Malagasy with Arabic characters, by which he agreed among others to send his son Andrianjerivao to the Portuguese viceroy of Goa, to study and to be baptized.

The first French ship arrived to Anosy coast in 1527. The next known one brought François Cauche who departed from Dieppe in 1638 and explored the eastern coast of the island. He was already there in 1642, when the first settlers, employed by the Compagnie d'Orient, came to Saint Luce (Manafiafy) and established their colony under the self-proclaimed governor Jacques Pronis. Because of the unhealthy climate they chose to move one year later to a higher point situated on Toalankaro peninsula, where they built the fort later baptized Fort-Dauphin (present Tolanaro), honouring the French heir to the throne (later king Louis XIV). In the name of the company Pronis also took possession of the Bay of Antongil, Anosiboraha (Ile Sainte Marie) and Ile Bourbon. At first Pronis established good relations with the locals, marrying one of their women, but in 1646 a mutiny broke out because of frustrations and jealousies of the settlers, who accused Pronis of favouring his wife's relatives on the expense of the Company. As a result, Pronis exiled 12 men to the neighbouring Ile Bourbon (future La Réunion), where they were the first settlers and remained until 1649 led by Jean Leclerc des Roquettes (op.cit.).

In 1647 the shareholders of the Compagnie d'Orient sent to Fort-Dauphin Étienne de Flacourt who fired Pronis and replaced him as governor. Flacourt arrived to Madagascar in December 1648 and remained on the island until 1655, during which he explored the southern part of the island. He also brought with him missionaries sent by Vincent de Paul. In the meantime, the company went bankrupt and relations with the locals deteriorated, so Flacourt had to use canons to overcome a massive revolt. He finally left the island in February 1655, replaced by Pronis, who came back from France, but died one year later. The next governor, Urbain Souchu de Rennefort, stayed only a few months at Fort Dauphin, after which the colony entered into a long phase of decay. More and more settlers chose to repatriate, until massacres by the Antanosy tribe finally made the last settlers to leave in September 1674 and take refuge on Ile Bourbon.

Though the French were not able to come back to Fort Dauphin until 1736, the French king still claimed his rights on the island, promulgating several orders (in 1719, 1720 and 1725) according to which the French East India Company was authorized to found new settlements in Madagascar. In 1736 two new missionaries arrived who started learning Malagasy but left the island after only a couple of months. In 1766 Fayd'herbe de Maudave, named by Louis XV commander of the island of Madagascar, arrived to Fort Dauphin to restart the previously abandoned colony but, after a short period of prosperity, because of the rivalry with the merchants of Ile de France (Mauritius) and Ile Bourbon, he was forced to leave in 1770.

One of the most famous adventurers who arrived to Madagascar in 1774 was a Polish-Hungarian nobleman, count Maurice Benyovszky, who had recently escaped from a forced labour camp in the Kamchatka Peninsula. Benyovszky had also a mandate from the French king to found a colony, which he did in the vicinity of the Bay of Antongil. He established such a good relationship with the locals that he was proclaimed "Mpanjaka Be" (Great King) and he made serious efforts in order to get his colony recognized, not just in France, but also in England and America (he made a travel to Baltimore in 1784). He was probably involved in the slave trade too but, unfortunately, he wasn't so successful in establishing good relations with his proximal French neighbours of Ile de France, who were jealous of his success. This is why he was finally killed by French soldiers sent by governor François de Souillac during a siege in 1786 (Balázs, D., 1983, Jókai, M., 2012).

The last attempt to revive the colony of Fort Dauphin was made by François Fortuné Joachim Albrand, who was also administrator of Ile Sainte Marie. In 1819 he persuaded De Freycinet, governor of Ile Bourbon, to send Annibal de Grasse with four soldiers to rebuild the comptoir. In 1825 the warriors of Radama I conquered Fort Dauphin, but they let the settlers leave the colony unharmed. Ile Sainte Marie (Nosy Boraha) was ceded in 1750 by the king of Betsimisaraka to the Kindom of France in a treaty, but the French colonists were slaughtered two years later. The French returned only in 1818, when they founded a penal colony on Ile Sainte Marie.

In the meantime, the political situation within the island of Madagascar changed significantly. During the reign of Andrianampoinimerina ("the King that Imerina was waiting for") (1787-1810), the smaller kingdoms of the central plateau, inhabited mainly by the Imerina nation, were unified following a long series of local wars. His son Radama I (1810-1828) extended his domination to almost the whole island and was the first King of Madagascar recognized by European powers. In 1817 Radama signed a treaty negotiated by James Hastie that granted him a formal alliance with the British crown. Radama invited the first Europeans to enter his kingdom and he encouraged the London

Missionary Society envoys to establish schools and to teach the nobles and potential military and civil service recruits. They also introduced Protestant (Anglican) Christianity and taught literacy using the Bible translated into Malagasy. Radama was at the same time an admirer of Napoleon Bonaparte and drew upon European structure and tactics to modernize his army, which was led by French and British generals.

Radama I's successors continued the subjugation of the island to Merina hegemony, so that by the 1890s more than two thirds of the island were under the control of Antananarivo. The Sakalava, however, never accepted Merina rule and in the 1840s some of their chiefs actually concluded treaties of "protection" with French officers. These were the treaties upon which France laid claim to the north-western territories of Madagascar (Hardyman, J., Mutibwa, P. M., 1985). After Radama I's premature death in 1828 a short interlude of inner coflicts followed, after which his wife, princess Ramavo was crowned queen of Madagascar as Ranavalona I (1828-1861). Her long reign was characterized by a further reinforcement of the central power and domestic authority of the Kingdom of Imerina over subjugated provinces and the effort to preserve the sovereignty of Madagascar. To achieve this, she often entered into conflicts with European diplomats and missionaries, while persecuting the newly converted Christians. In 1835 she forbade the practice of Christianity among the Malagasy and soon nearly all foreigners were forced to leave the country (Randriamamonjy, F., 2008).

The Jesuits first came to Madagascar in the early 17th century from Goa. Two centuries later, in the 1840s the Jesuit superior general François Roothan sent six French Jesuits from Lyon to help the effort to evangelize the nation. In 1861 the French established the first Catholic mission, which quickly became a rival of the Protestant Church. The Catholic Church of Madagascar is organized today in 5 archdioceses and 21 dioceses.

Norwegian missionaries arrived first in Madagascar in 1866, when they founded the first Lutheran church in Betafo in the central region of the island. The American Lutheran mission began work in the south-west in 1888. The former missions were unified in 1950 under the name Malagasy Lutheran Church.

In the second half of the 19th century rivalry in Africa and the Western Indian Ocean between the French and British continued, but before the construction of the Suez Canal, France and the United Kingdom signed in 1862 an agreement concerning the future division of East Africa. According to this, the British recognized the priority of French interests in Madagascar, the Comoros Islands and the Straight of Mozambique, while the French ceded Zanzibar and the eastern coast of Africa to the British Empire (Fage, J.D., Tordoff, W., 2002). With the opening of the Suez Canal (1869), the strategic significance of Madagascar declined, especially from the British point of view.

Queen Ranavalona I's successor in 1862 was her son Rakotondradama, known as king Radama II, a pro-European who signed treaties with both France and Great Britain but who was murdered a year later during a rebellion of the army. He was followed on the throne by his wife Rasoherina, who negotiated and signed new agreements with France and Great Britain and initiated diplomatic relations with the United States too.

The next monarch of Madagascar was Ramasindrazana, crowned as queen Ranavalona II (1868-1884), former wife of king Radama II and sister of Rasoherina, who died in 1868. She was baptized into the Protestant religion next year, together with the prime minister Rainilaiarivony, who was chief commander of the army and divorced his wife in order to marry the queen, as the custom required (Randriamamonjy, F., 2008). The Protestant Church of England earned a privileged status in Madagascar and as an instrument of British influence became a rival of the Catholic Church, sustained by France. As the latter had territorial claims in and around the Big Island, queen Ranavalona II sent diplomatic missions in 1882/1883 not only to France, but to Great Britain, Germany and the United States to clarify the position of the kingdom in this matter, but unfortunately without any result.

Queen Ranavalona died on July 12th, 1883. She was followed on the throne by Razafindrahety, a 22-year-old princess who was crowned two days later as Ranavalona III and who was to become the last queen of Madagascar. She immediately confirmed Rainilaiarivony as prime minister and his government too.

The first Franco-Hova War began in 1883 when the French navy as intimidation started the bombardment of Malagasy coastal cities: Ambodiamdiro (May 7), Anorontsanga (May 15) and Mahajanga (May 16). As a result, riots broke out in Antananarivo. 92 French citizens were banned from the capital and the rest of them went under the protection of the army. Arrived at Tamatave on May 31, admiral Pierre launched an ultimatum, claiming the immediate cession of the Malagasy territories situated North of the 16th parallel (op.cit.).

The Berlin conference of 1884/1885, though didn't directly concern Madagascar, sealed the fate of the Great Island too by fixing the future spheres of interest of the European powers in Africa. Among others, at the "Congo Conference" (as it later became known) they had also agreed new ground rules for European occupation of Africa's coastline. Henceforth, any state wanting to claim African lands on any part of the coastline was required to notify in advance other states signing the Berlin agreement to enable them to make known any claims of their own. Furthermore, to be valid, all future claims had to be supported by "effective occupation" (M. Meredith, 2014, p. 394).

Effective occupation was exactly what the French intented to do in Madagascar, once they had green light from the other European powers. Admiral Galiber continued to claim all territories North of the 16th parallel on the basis of the more than dubious agreement made in 1841 with queen Tsiomeko and king Tsimiharo of the Sakalava people. After a new rejection, admiral Miot restarted the bombardment of the ports of Madagascar: Mahanoro (May 17), Vohémar (November 5) and Diégo Suarez (December 1884). However, the French didn't have at the moment enough forces to occupy the ports and a tropical cyclone damaged three of their vessels, so one year later (December 1885) they signed the Peace Treaty of Tamatave which put the French in a position of controlling Madagascar's foreign affairs and gave them permission to occupy the port cities of Tamatave and Diego Suarez.

On August 5th 1890 the British recognized the French protectorate of Madagascar in return for British control over Zanzibar (previously exchanged with Germany for Heligoland Island). This agreement didn't stop the British colonel Shervington in 1894 to sell 7000 rifles and ammunition to the Malagasy government. They were soon going to need them, as in December 1894 the French started the full invasion of Madagascar (second Franco-Hova War) by occupying the cities of Tamatave (11 December 1894) and Majunga (14 January 1895), where General Duchesne, leading a French expeditionary corps of 15000 soldiers, soon landed. After heavy losses due mainly to disease, the French arrived on September 29 to Ambohidempona (near the present site of the University of Antananarivo) and the next day they started the bombardment of the Rova (Royal Palace) in the capital city (Randriamamonjy, F., 2008). A year later the Malagasy monarchy was abolished and Madagascar became a French colony. A rebellion known as Menalamba broke out in early 1896, but it failed to drive out the French. It was supressed with great brutality, so that by 1900 most of the island had been "pacified" (Hardyman, J., Mutibwa, P. M., 1985). The colonial regime abolished in 1896 slavery in Madagascar (about 500000 slaves were freed), but also introduced in 1901 the discriminative legal system of the *indigenat*, in order to control the individual and social life of the natives by severe administrative and punitive measures (Blanc, G., 2022).

Like all French colonies, Madagascar played an important role in the war effort during World War I: 46000 men were mobilized (putting Madagascar among the first colonial recruiters compared to its total population) of whom 41355 soldiers were enlisted, 20425 were sent to the theater of war, and 2471 perished. Malagasy troops participated in battles on the Western front, and also on the Balkan theater of operations (Jennings, E.T., 2017).

In the 1930s, Nazi Germany developed the Madagascar Plan, making the island a potential site for the deportation of Jews, but the plan never materialized.

During World War II, after the German occupation of France in June 1940, the colonial government of Madagascar followed the collaborationist regime of Vichy, until May 1942, when the British navy and army occupied the ports and then the whole island (Operation "Ironclad") in order to prevent a possible Japanese or German invasion. As a result of the vehement protests and pressure from General De Gaulle, in January 1943 the British ceded the civil administration of Madagascar to the authority of the Free French government, while maintaining the military occupation until the end of the war (De Gaulle, C., 1956).

Though officially Madagascar was "pacified" by 1900, especially by the brutal measures of general Gallieni, anticolonial resistance never ceased on the island. As a result of colonial repression, more than 100000 Malagasy (from a total population of cca 3 million) were killed between 1897 and 1947. After 1945 the colonial administration, strongly compromised during the war, never could regain full control over Madagascar. As a result, a massive revolt (the Malagasy Insurrection) broke out in March 1947, to which the French Army (here mainly African soldiers from the other colonies) responded by a bloody repression, causing tens of thousands of victims by summary executions, deportation, torture and burning of villages.

An overseas territory (territoire d'outre-mer) between 1946 and 1958, Madagascar became an autonomous republic on October 10th, 1958, within the French Community. The first president, Philibert Tsiranana was elected on May 1st, 1959. Finally, on June 26th, 1960, Madagascar became an independent republic.

3. CONFLICTS OF THE POST-COLONIAL ERA

The first Malagasy Republic reamained strongly attached to France by bilateral cooperation agreements, while its economy was substantially aided by the former colonial power. The dependance from France, perceived as neocolonial exploitation, eventually led to the fall of president Tsiranana in 1972, replaced by an army general, Gabriel Ramanantsoa, former prime minister, until 1975, when after a period of new demonstrations, riots and political instability, Didier Ratsiraka, a captain of the navy, was declared president and chief of the government. Ratsiraka proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Madagascar (the second Malagasy Republic), of marxist inspiration, establishing a political system on the Cuban model, with the unique party AREMA (Avantgarde of the Malagasy Revolution) and relying mainly on the Eastern block for the functioning of the economy. Though not a typical socialist country, Madagascar became an active member of the non-aligned movement and in 1976 expelled the French military still stationed in the country, followed by the suspension of diplomatic relations with France and the introduction of a new currency, the Malagasy Franc.

Like in many other developing countries, the Socialist experiment proved to be a total failure and in 1990, after the fall of the marxist regimes in Europe, the government was forced to admit the access of private investors, not least in order to cease the famine affecting ever larger parts of the country. After new riots and political instability, a new Constitution was adopted in 1993 (the third Malagasy Republic), followed by the election of Albert Zafy as president. However, the economic and political liberalization didn't produce the expected growth, so a new crisis and a deep conflict between the president and the parliament resulted in the destitution of Zafy and the election of Norbert Ratsirahonana as interim president.

In 1997 a surprising chain of events (which will seem to repeat itself several times in the next decades) resulted in the reelection as president of the formerly failed admiral, Didier Ratsiraka, this time sustained by the French government. A short period of economic stability (until 2001) followed, during which Madagascar's average annual growth rate was 4.3%. After a long political turmoil that put the country on the verge of civil war, the former mayor of Antananarivo Marc Ravalomanana was elected president in 2002, then reelected in 2006. In 2007 the Constitution was amended by referendum, permitting the president to rule by decree in case of emergency or catastrophe. At the same referendum, English was proclaimed the third official language, the administrative organisation of the country was modified (replacing the six autonomous provinces by 22 regions) and the separation between the state and the church was suspended. The latter measure was severely criticized by the Catholic Church, taking into consideration that Ravalomanana was at the same time vice president of the Reformed Church of Madagascar.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The theory according to which rival factions of the elite supported by foreign powers are permanently fighting for power and periodically shifting each other at the top functions of the country is well known and very familiar to the smaller countries, including Romania, where pro-Ottoman, pro-Russian, pro-Austrian, pro-German, pro-French and pro-British cliques fought and changed each other during centuries. Nevertheless, it would be exagerated and unilateral to consider the small countries just toys in the hands of the great powers.

The role of the local elites is always important in the evolution of nation states. The appearance and the fight for political power of the local bourgeoisie is essential in the formation of modern nations. The problem with the African coutries is that there was no bourgeoisie when they became colonies, the great

majority of them being in the stage of feudal or pre-feudal development. The appearance and the spread of the colonial systems was mainly based on the cooperation of the local elites, whether it started with the slave trade or by any kind of trade. The local potentates had usually no scruples in selling into slavery or mercilessly exploiting their subjects when they saw advantages for themselves and later the colonial regimes were primarily based on the cooperation of these elites, whether the colonists were Portuguese, Spanish, British, French, German or Italian. Part of these elites survive until today and represent the link between the new nation states and their former colonist countries. They are still dominating the countries' political systems and their main goal is to maintain their privileges, even if this means exploiting the masses of poor people, being involved in corruption and electoral fraud or imposing dictatorships by force.

Though we cannot generalize for every African country, Madagascar is no exception from this sad pattern, it is just more complex then the rest of the former colonies. On the one hand, the ethnic structure of Madagascar, formed by 18 standard ethnic groups, is dominated by the Merina at least since the political unification of the island in the late 18th/early 19th centuries. On the other hand, slavery was a common practice until precolonial times. Though it was rather functioning as a feudal system of exploitation, its consequences are still visible today, manifested in rivalries and resentments even inside the local communities. However, former slave owners are not always rich people nowadays, on the contrary: sometimes former slaves became dominant groups during and after the French colonisation, like in the case of Betapho (Graeber, D., 2007).

There is a significant contrast between the living standards of rural and urban areas, most of the former being characterized by extreme poverty, while in the cities, not very rich either, there is a visible layer of nouveau riches who can afford almost European consuming patterns. These contrasts cause deep frustrations which, associated to the endemic corruption and indifference of the political leadership, represent a permanent hotbed for political turmoil, errupting explosively in periodic uprisings, coups d'état and revolutions, while the economic and social situation of the masses doesn't change at all or sometimes even worsens. A relative calm was characteristic for the capital and its surroundings in 2008 (while I was travelling there), but as it came out later, it was just the silence before the storm. Violent demonstrations, illegitimate power structures, disease (malaria, plague outbreaks in 2014 and 2017, then Covid in 2020), catastrophic floods caused by tropical storms or extended droughts in other regions, even locust invasions and famine were frequent if not chronic symptoms of Madagascar's crisis in the last decade, aggravated by a demographic explosion which seems to be uncontrolled (the total population raised from 18.6 million in 2000 to more than 28 million in 2022) and has an increasing impact on the environment.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Allen, P.M., Covell, M. (2005), *Historical Dictionary of Madagascar. Second Edition,* The Scarecrow Press, Inc., Lanham, Maryland, Toronto, Oxford.
2. Alpers, E.A. (2014), *The Indian Ocean in World History,* Oxford University Press.
3. Balázs, D. (1983), *Bozóttaxival Madagaszkáron. Az Indiai-óceán gyöngye geográfus szemmel (Cu taxi-brousse în Madagascar. Perla Oceanului Indian văzută cu ochii unui geograf),* Edit. Gondolat, Budapest.
4. Blanc, G. (2022), *Décolonisations. Histoires situées d'Afrique et d'Asie,* Éd. Du Seuil, Paris.
5. Chapin Metz, H. (ed., 1994), *Indian Ocean. Five Island Countries,* Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
6. Defoe, D., Bucquoi, J., Exquemelin, A.O. (2021), *Libertalia. Szabad közösségek - az újkor első demokratikus alaptörvényei (Libertalia. Comunităţi libere - primele legi fundamentale democratice din epoca modernă),* Atlantis, Budapest.
7. Fage, J.D., Tordoff, W. (2002), *A History of Africa,* Routledge, London & New York.
8. Fremigacci, J. (2007), *La vérité sur la grande révolte de Madagascar,* L'Histoire no.318, III 2007.
9. Gaulle, C. De (1956), *Mémoires de guerre 2. L'Unité,* Éd. Plon, Paris.
10. Graeber, D. (2007), *Lost People. Magic and the Legacy of Slavery in Madagascar,* Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis.
11. Hardyman, J., Mutibwa, P.M. (1985), *Madagascar in the nineteenth century,* in: Historical Atlas of Africa, Longman Group Limited, Burnt Hill, Harlow, Esssex.
12. Hebran, M. (2019), *La "tragédie oubliée" de Madagascar,* Historia Special no. 49, IX-X 2019.
13. Jennings, E.T. (2017), *Perspectives on French Colonial Madagascar,* Palgrave, McMillan, New York.
14. Jókai, M. (2012), *Benyovszky Móric életrajza (Biografia lui Maurice Benyovszky),* Nemzeti Könyvtár, Magyar Hősök, Magyar Közlöny Lap- és Könyvkiadó, Budapest.
15. Kovács, Cs.M. (2021), *Mini-Oceania sau Indioceania? Importanţa geostrategică a insulelor din Oceanul Indian,* Geographia Napocensis nr. 1.
16. Laidler, K. (2005), *Female Caligula. The Mad Queen of Madagascar,* General Press, Budapest.
17. Meredith, M. (2014), *The Fortunes of Africa. A 5000 Year History of Wealth, Greed and Endeavour,* Simon & Schuster, London, New York, Sydney.
18. Randriamamonjy, F. (2008), *Histoire des régions de Madagascar des origines à la fin du 19ème siècle,* Éd. Trano Printy, Antananarivo.
19. Sharp, L.A. (2002), *The Sacrificed Generation. Youth, History, and the Colonized Mind in Madagascar,* University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London
20. Singaravélou, P. (2013), *Les empires coloniaux (XIXe-XXe siècle),* Éd. Points, Paris.