

Perceptions of Ranavalona I: A Malagasy Historic Figure as a Thematic Symbol of Malagasy Attitudes Toward History

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Ranavalona I was a nineteenth century Malagasy queen whom textbooks almost unanimously portray as a barbaric and xenophobic tyrant for refusing to cooperate with European rulers. Since the majority of Malagasy history texts are written by French, British, or American authors—and not by Malagasy ones—I traveled to Antananarivo, Madagascar to interview inhabitants about their own perceptions of the famous queen. My hypothesis was that Malagasy views of Ranavalona would be more positive. After speaking with around fifty Malagasy citizens, professors, pastors, and lower government officials, I found that many Malagasy do indeed laud Ranavalona I as patriotic and heroic for fighting European attempts at control of the island; many Malagasy, however, use these same struggles between the queen and the Europeans to condemn her as anti-progressive and anti-Christian. Even one hundred and fifty years after her death, Ranavalona’s legacy remains extremely complicated because Malagasy sentiment of her place in history largely depends on citizens’ perceptions of Malagasy religion, ethnic group conflicts, and Malagasy history as a whole.

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Though one hundred and fifty years have passed since Ranavalona I, of the dominant Merina ethnic group, ruled in Madagascar, the controversy surrounding her reign continues in the present day capital of Antananarivo. During her reign, Ranavalona reversed several of the policies of her late husband, the previous king, who had hastily westernized the island and welcomed European settlers. Diplomatically, her intentions were clear: she prohibited the renewal of the visas her husband had eagerly issued to foreign missionaries and tradesmen. Domestically, she was more ruthless, ordering the deaths of Malagasy citizens who refused to relinquish their newly acquired Western Christianity. In the nineteenth century, Ranavalona’s efforts were unsuccessful; after her death, Madagascar was taken over culturally and politically by Europe. However, as the political chaos over the Madagascar’s elections in 2001 demonstrates, her rejection of European influence is still a controversial topic today. Two men, each claiming to be president, one adhering to the status quo of French influence, the other advocating true independence for

Madagascar, represent the rupture in Malagasy society that Ranavalona instigated. As the first to perceive the threat of European control, Ranavalona survives today not only as a historical figure, but also as a current political influence. In light of the controversies still surrounding Malagasy Christianity, past colonization, and present nationalism, how do contemporary Malagasy citizens view Ranavalona I?

Western historical perspectives of Ranavalona tend to portray her in an understandably negative light for obstructing “undeveloped” Madagascar’s entry into capitalistic, Christian, and Western civilization.¹ A Malagasy historian recently noted this unilateral European condemnation of the queen: “Foreign historians . . . could not forgive her for breaking with Europe.”² The French historian La Devève refers to the queen as “Ranavalona la Sanguinaire” (“Ranavalona the Bloody”).³ As the last significant Malagasy ruler before French colonial conquest, Ranavalona, in the eyes of many European historians, embodies the final bulwark against the spread of European “enlightened” culture in

Madagascar.

Ranavalona is remembered in Madagascar, however, in more complex ways. Her reign marks the transition among a myriad of different historical movements: the emergence of indigenized Christianity, domestic anti-European purges—in essence, the culmination of eighteen different ethnic groups attempting to preserve its cultures against an increasingly imposing West. The cultural divisions created by differing peoples and a succession of differing governments may very well contribute to these multiple interpretations of Ranavalona that exist in Antananarivo. As of the elections on December 16, 2001, Malagasy citizens are sharply divided in their support of a president who promises to lead them into true independence from France, in efforts vaguely reminiscent of Ranavalona. The reactions of modern day Antananarivo citizens to Ranavalona and politicians who evoke her legacy prove that her role now in Malagasy political heritage is just as vibrant as her role in nineteenth century reality.

Study Design

In July 2001, with support from a President's Scholar Grant, I traveled to Madagascar to investigate Ranavalona's legacy by examining how she is portrayed in textbooks, documents, and personal accounts. My goal was to compare historical records of the queen with forty contemporary inhabitants' perceptions of her controversial rejection of European culture in an attempt to delineate how contemporary Malagasy views of Ranavalona correlate with national identity. The interviews consisted of a series of questions covering factual knowledge of the queen and personal perceptions of her. My interviewees were all Antananarivo residents, although several of the

them had provincial backgrounds and only lived in the capital for education or work purposes. My subjects ranged an age span of 40 years and an educational background span of anywhere from no schooling to doctorate degrees. Even though I completed my interviews six months before the presidential elections, I was able to sense much political divisiveness. I had expected to find that while Western history portrays Ranavalona as a negative force in Madagascar's development as a modern country, local perceptions would paint Ranavalona as a hero who attempted to withstand European intrusion.

Findings

Contrary to my hypothesis, over half of my subjects expressed a negative opinion of the queen. However, my interviews revealed that Ranavalona continues to fascinate contemporary residents and influence current politics, transcending expectations for the influence of a woman who lived 150 years in the past. Even those subjects who strongly disagreed with her politics admitted a begrudging acknowledgment of her strength as a ruler.

Ranavalona "le Diable Incarné": Negative Views of Ranavalona

Though several other members of nineteenth-century Malagasy royalty have their names enshrined by landmarks, streets, or even occasionally as first names of current-day residents, no street is called "Ranavalona," and subjects laughed when I asked if they knew a person with the same name as the infamous queen. Her name is often employed as an insult, a derogatory term used for demanding women or strict mothers.⁴ One subject even recognized Ranavalona's name as an insult before he remembered her exact place in Malagasy history.

The negative responses among the subjects were frequently marked with vehemence laden with Christian overtones: "She was the devil incarnate."⁵ Many responses were based on Ranavalona's infamous executions against her political enemies: "You just can't kill people like that."⁶ Disapproval stemmed most strongly from her anti-Christian bias. When asked why he thought Ranavalona was cruel, one subject replied, "I'm not in agreement with any of her actions because they were all against Christianity."⁷ Another subject simplified Ranavalona's persona: "It's obvious she was a bad queen—she didn't believe in God!"⁸ Most of the subjects' knowledge of the queen was limited to her "paganism" and her violent purges directed against Christianity.

A significant number of subjects blamed their mostly negative impressions of the queen on European educational influences and Malagasy lack of interest in local history. According to my interviewees, during the time of French colonization, school curricula in Antananarivo were limited to European history. Some Malagasy subjects in this study had not been taught their country's history at all and claimed that they could list the sovereigns of Madagascar's colonizers, the French, more easily than they could the rulers of their own country.⁹ If present at all, the few facts taught about Malagasy history usually did not include Ranavalona; when she was mentioned, it was only to emphasize her savagery toward Europeans. Many subjects of all ages recounted memories of primary school teachers portraying Ranavalona as a cruel dictator.

Ranavalona the Defender of the Malagasy: Her Position Against European Powers

Subjects were divided on their opinions of Ranavalona's policies

toward the French colonialists. Thirty-eight percent of my interview subjects lauded the Queen for her endeavors to ward off European influence. These subjects tended to see Ranavalona as a strong and insightful ruler who protected Malagasy culture as much as she could before European takeover. Forty-seven percent of the subjects condemned her anti-European actions, however, blaming her instead for obstructing progress. They even attributed current Malagasy technological lags to her nineteenth century intolerance of European immigrants, who might have brought more scientific knowledge to the island. Seventeen percent of subjects actually held Ranavalona responsible for much of the misery of colonization, claiming that her hostility toward foreigners provoked vengeance and the colonizers' subsequent cruelty toward the Malagasy. Others denounced her actions as attempts to stall the inevitable. One subject stated bluntly, "In my opinion, she didn't help anything. Colonialism wasn't a thing to be stopped."¹⁰ These subjects' disagreements about Ranavalona reflect the continuing controversy over colonization today.

Ranavalona the "Xénophobe": Her Influence on Modern Nationalism

In my study, views on nationalism corresponded with perceptions of Ranavalona. Those citizens who expressed an appreciation for European culture and who recognized Malagasy dependence on Europe were harsh in their evaluations of Ranavalona, echoing the portrayals most Western historical texts create of the queen. They saw her expulsion of European peoples and ideas as a rejection of proffered relations with the outside world. One subject considered Ranavalona a "xénophobe" and criticized her isolationist policies because

"foreigners bring civilization."¹¹ Another subject stated the Malagasy need for foreigners even more simply, summarizing the relationship: "There is no development in Madagascar if there are no Europeans in Madagascar."¹² These negative opinions of the queen reflect local perception that the island is inevitably economically dependent on other countries. Subjects who felt this way obviously disapproved of the xenophobic queen.

On the other hand, subjects who demonstrated a strong pride in Malagasy culture expressed admiration for the queen. One subject, who promoted the memory of Malagasy history ("We should be proud; we should not forget"), also advocated a reappraisal of Ranavalona: "She was the smartest and most powerful ruler, and we should all learn from her."¹³ For these patriots, Ranavalona represents a legendary ideal to imitate and admire.

Conclusion

My research in Madagascar points to strong—though often conflicting—feelings about a queen who represented the turning point for the island, especially the Merina tribe, as it entered what Western civilization deems the modern era. Even though the conventional Western perception of Ranavalona's negative influence on her country dominates Malagasy historical views, a strong undercurrent of admiration perseveres. This is evident in the significant number of subjects who approved of her extreme devotion to Malagasy, especially Merina, tradition. In fact, as the research suggests, Malagasy views of Ranavalona in the historical past are inevitably linked to Malagasy religion, colonialism, and nationalism.

Recently a campaign has been launched to change Ranavalona's negative image through

informational segments on television and radio. These bulletins give alternative reasons as to why Ranavalona persecuted Christians and expelled the Europeans, explaining that she suspected a European desire for control and believed that Madagascar needed to develop internally before it could expand externally.¹⁴ This conscious redirection of the nineteenth-century queen's legacy in the present capital attempts to restore—or rewrite—the history of an anti-European and anti-Christian royal figure in the context of a Francophone Catholic nation. Whereas the queen battled European military and missionary forces during her lifetime, her legend still struggles for a respectable place in history against European ideological forces. Her very existence as "the most contested sovereign in Malagasy history" reflects the unresolved conflicts she sparked against Western culture, which still engulf the nation today.¹⁵ In this way, her legend serves as both as the memory of a powerful queen and as the naissance of an acknowledged opposition between European and Malagasy cultures. Antananarivo citizens might never agree on Ranavalona's historical influence, but very few of those same citizens would protest that the controversy over her legacy is not representative of the divided ethnic, religious, and nationalistic positions on Malagasy history. In this sense, she is more symbolic of the Malagasy people now, as a legend, than she was as a nineteenth-century queen. As events unfold in recent months, Ranavalona's views become even more crucial to Malagasy self-identity; her determination for a true Malagasy independence is being reenacted on the current political scene, while further studies will determine whether her legacy is being molded yet again to serve the nation's purposes.

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- ² Translated from the Malagasy by Mami Razifikoto. July 13, 2001.
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- ⁴ Interview # 12 July 7, # 13 July 7, # 19 July 9, 2001.
- ⁵ Interview # 27, July 18, 2001. Original in French: "C'était le diable incarné."
- ⁶ Interview # 19, July 9, 2001
- ⁷ Interview # 20, July 9, 2001
- ⁸ Interview # 18, July 9, 2001
- ⁹ Interview # 8, July 7, 2001
- ¹⁰ Interview # 22, July 12, 2001
- ¹¹ Interview # 2, July 6, 2001
- ¹² Interview # 10, July 6, 2001
- ¹³ Interview #24, July 12, 2001
- ¹⁴ Interview # 14, July 8, # 15, July 8, # 19, July 9, # 22, July 12, # 23, July 12, # 25, July 13, # 26, July 16, # 27, July 16, 2001, and Interview with Marc Rakoto, Malagasy Minister and Christian Film Director, July 10, 2001
- ¹⁵ Ayache S. *Omaly Sy Anio*. Antananarivo: Revue d'Etudes Historiques, 1975: No. 1-2.

Suggested Reading

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