Ocean of Letters

*Ocean of Letters* is a remarkable history of imperialism, language, and creolization in the largest African diaspora of the Indian Ocean in the early modern period. Ranging from Madagascar to the Mascarenes, the Comores, and South Africa, Pier M. Larson sheds new light on the roles of slavery, emancipation, oceanic travel, Christian missions, and colonial linguistics in the making of Malagasy-language literacy in the islands of the western Indian Ocean. He shows how enslaved and free Malagasy together with certain European colonists and missionaries promoted the Malagasy language, literacy projects, and letter writing in the multilingual colonial societies of the region between the seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. Addressing current debates in the history of Africa and the African diaspora, slavery, abolition, creolization and the making of modern African literatures, the book crosses thematic as well as geo-imperial boundaries and brings fresh perspectives to Indian Ocean history.

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The first page of a letter from Malagasy Christian refugees Josefa Rasoamaka and Josia Andrianilaina to the Rev. J. J. Le Brun of Mauritius, composed in the Malagasy vernacular at “Mohilla” (Moaly/Mohéli island in the Comores), August 29, 1850. Image courtesy of the School of Oriental and African Studies Library; reproduced from the London Missionary Society/Council for World Mission Archive (LMS ILMAU 4 1 A)
Ocean of Letters

Language and Creolization in an Indian Ocean Diaspora

Pier M. Larson
En l’absence presque totale de données sur les réalisations linguistiques des esclaves durant cette période historique, l’importance de l’approche sociolinguistique est déterminante. Il ne faut cependant pas désespérer de voir apparaître, ici ou là, des documents anciens susceptibles d’apporter des lumières nouvelles et, qui sait, de renouveler l’état de la question.


Then the old man asks the boy to give voice to the notebooks. Let them share their enchantment as they have shared their food. “It’s just as well you know how to read,” the old man comments. If it weren’t for the reading, they would be condemned to solitude. Now they could wander along the letters of that writing.

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Archives abbreviations

ACCL Auckland City Central Library, Auckland
   SGGL SC (Sir George Grey Library, Special Collections)
   GMSS (Grey Manuscripts)

ACM Archives de la Congrégation de la Mission, Paris
   1501 (Incoming letters and documents, Madagascar)
   1502 (Incoming letters and documents, Madagascar & Mascarenes)
   1504 (Incoming letters and documents, Mascarenes)
   1505 (Outgoing letters, Mascarenes)

ARM Archives de la République malgache, Antananarivo
   AR (Archives royales)
   BB (Correspondance avec les provinces)
   DD (Relations diplomatiques)
   IIICC (Correspondance provenant des provinces)
   PP (Familles)
   SS (Érudites)

BL MD British Library, Manuscripts Division, London
   Add. Mss. (Additional Manuscripts)

CAOM Centre des archives d’outre-mer, Aix-en-Provence
   C 5A (Ministerial Archives, Série Géographique: Incoming letters, Madagascar)

LMS London Missionary Society Archives, London
   AO (Africa Odds)
   HO Ex (Home Office, Extra)
   ILM (Incoming letters, Madagascar)
   ILMAU (Incoming letters, Mauritius)
   ILSA (Incoming letters, South Africa)
Archives abbreviations

JMM (Journals, Madagascar and Mauritius)
SOL (Southern outgoing letters)

MNA Mauritius National Archives, Coromandel
HA (Miscellaneous)
HB (Madagascar)
JB (Judicial)
RA (Secretariat Correspondence)

NAB National Archives of Britain, Kew
CO 167 (Colonial Office, Mauritius incoming)
CO 168 (Colonial Office, Mauritius outgoing)
CO 172 (Colonial Office, Mauritius Miscellanea)

NLW National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth

PP MS James T. Hardyman Collection, School of Oriental and African Studies, London
Textual notes and acknowledgements

A work spanning more than two centuries and focused on a region with which many in the anglophone and Atlantic worlds are not familiar obliges me to clarify certain uses of terminology, methodology, and vernacular. The two principle Mascarene islands of the western Indian Ocean have changed names several times with the shifting fortunes of European imperialism (Map 1.1). The Portuguese collectively named the islands “the Mascarenes” after Pedro Mascarenhas, the navigator who charted them in the early sixteenth century. The Dutch called the northeastern island Mauritius when they occupied it in the late sixteenth century. The southwestern island, generally known early on as Mascarenhas, was renamed île Saint-Paul and then île Bourbon by French colonists in the seventeenth century. When France occupied Mauritius from 1721, it renamed the island île de France. The island of Bourbon reverted to La Réunion for a time during the French Revolution and then île Bonaparte during the Napoleonic period. When Britain captured the Mascarenes in 1810, it renamed île de France as Mauritius. Île Bonaparte reverted again to île Bourbon at the end of the Napoleonic Wars and was changed for a final time some decades later (in 1848) back to La Réunion. To minimize this confusion of changing names I refer to the southwestern island as île Saint-Paul and then île Bourbon until 1848, and thereafter as Île Bourbon; the northeastern island is termed île de France during the French period up to and including 1810, and thereafter as Mauritius.

The term Malagasy is plastic: it can be employed today either as a noun or an adjective. The word designates the people of Madagascar (the Malagasy, a Malagasy person), their language (Malagasy, the Malagasy language, Malagasy speakers), and things associated with them and their island (a Malagasy boat, Malagasy dances, the Malagasy coastline). As is convention in both the English and the Malagasy languages, I employ the term in all these manifestations throughout this book, obliging the reader to determine the appropriate meaning from the context. I explain in Chapter 7 how persons writing in the mid-nineteenth-century vernacular of Madagascar avoided the term
Malagasy as an adjective. My use of the adjective anachronistically in Ocean of Letters is one of those unavoidable choices in communicating with a modern audience.

Every writer knows the importance of synonyms. To minimize repetition, I employ the terms “vernacular” and “vernacular literacy” in a broad and descriptive way to designate speaking, reading, writing, and numeracy in varieties of the Malagasy language as well as colonial linguistic projects in that tongue. “Madagascar” and “the Mascarenes” are liberally interchanged in the text with “the Big Island” and “the colonial islands,” respectively. The first of these geographic synonyms is purely descriptive; the second is rather more analytical and requires some explanation. The tendency among scholars of slavery is to think of the western Indian Ocean through the logic of the Atlantic and to assimilate the Mascarene islands to those of the colonial Caribbean. The analogy works to a great extent, but there are important differences. Uninhabited before the sixteenth century, the Mascarene islands lay much closer to the African and Malagasy sources of their captive labor than did the Caribbean islands. Both labor supplying and receiving regions in this system lay on the western confines of the Indian ocean, not at opposite ends of the sea as was the case in the Atlantic. At the same time all of the western Indian Ocean islands are considered – unlike the Caribbean – to be insular extensions of Africa. Professional journals and book series focusing on Africa, for example, all publish scholarship on the Indian Ocean islands. In part this is due to the proximity of the islands to the mainland, in part to their history, and in part also to modern politics. Today independent countries, Mauritius, Madagascar, and the Seychelles, along with three of the Comoro Islands, are integral members of the African Union. Madagascar and Mauritius are also members of the Southern African Development Community. La Réunion has been a French overseas department since 1946; Mahore (Mayotte) an overseas territory, and now a “departmental collectivity,” of France since it was hived off from the Comores in 1974 (Map 1.2). The Caribbean, on the other hand, is politically part of the Americas, not Africa, though Guadeloupe, Martinique, and French Guiana each enjoy the same legal-national status as La Réunion.

Unless otherwise noted all translations from Malagasy and French into English are mine. Where I have translated Malagasy language passages from vernacular originals, I have also included the corresponding Malagasy passage either in the text (for block quotations) or in the footnotes (for shorter passages). I have chosen to retain the Malagasy vernacular alongside English translations throughout Ocean of Letters for two principal reasons. The original texts are visual reminders of a legacy...
of multilingualism in the western Indian Ocean. Out of sight in an academic study, that legacy slips rather more easily out of mind. Second, for those who read Malagasy, the texts offer a flavor of the dialectal and orthographic diversity in vernacular writing during the period under study. Although many of the texts approach modern standard Malagasy (the dialect of Antananarivo) they differ in a number of notable respects, including orthography, spelling, and word division. The diversity and historical specificity of the texts are a significant part of the story told here but are lost when passages are offered only in translation.

Folio and page numbers for most cited archival material are provided in footnote references, following the comma. If folio numbers are offered in the references, the original document is foliated; if page numbers are provided, the original document may or may not be paginated. When the original document is not paginated, the page number offered after the comma has been calculated by the author (counting pages containing text from the beginning of the document in question) and serves as a rough guide for readers wishing to expeditiously locate the original reference.

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Finally, and with the greatest of pleasure, I dedicate this book to my namana an-dalana / compagnons de route Michelle Boardman and Anthony Larson, without whose love, companionship, and support *Ocean of Letters* would never have come to fruition. This is for you.