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0521839351 - An Economic History of Imperial Madagascar, 1750-1895: The Rise and Fall of an Island Empire

Gwyn Campbell

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Introduction

The Context

Until recently, the history of Madagascar has been a well-guarded Gallic secret. France held long-established colonial claims to the island, which is the size of France, Belgium, and the Netherlands combined. Following a period of early French settlement (1642–74), Madagascar was incorporated into the French empire (1896–1960) and subsequently into membership in *la Francophonie* – the association of Francophone countries. French influence there is still strong. Francophone scholars have dominated the historiography of Madagascar, their views expressed through two broad schools of thought, the Colonial and Nationalist. These have focused on political and cultural, at the expense of economic, history – a relatively undeveloped discipline in France. The predominant themes of study are French historical claims to Madagascar; European political, social, and religious relations with the precolonial Merina state; and the French colonial era. While the two schools disagree on issues such as the justification for, and impact of, French colonialism, they concur that the history of Madagascar is an anomaly in the western Indian Ocean–Africa region because the island’s peoples speak dialects and hold to cultural practices that are predominantly Austronesian in origin. Consequently, most historians have considered Madagascar in historical isolation, an island museum largely unrelated to its immediate region – the western Indian Ocean and Indian Ocean Africa (IOA).

Historians of mainland Africa and of other Indian Ocean countries have largely respected the Gallic tradition. Consequently, they have excluded Madagascar from the scope of their research and publications. Influenced by the British colonial tradition, Anglophone scholars segmented the areas of Africa

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bordered by the Indian Ocean and its Red Sea extension into northeast, east, and southern Africa. Each of these became home to specialist scholars who rarely, if ever, alluded to Madagascar. Since the early 1970s, a small number of Anglophone scholars have broken into the field of Malagasy studies.¹ They have tempered the Francophone vision, notably with allusions to the African affinities of the first Malagasy and the role of predominantly British Protestant missions in the island. However, such studies have largely been set within the framework of the mainstream Francophone historical tradition that they have strengthened rather than challenged.

This volume breaks with the dominant tradition. It constitutes the first comprehensive study of the economic history of precolonial Madagascar during the period of Merina ascendancy.² Moreover, it places Madagascar within a regional economy that linked all countries lapped by the western Indian Ocean and, in doing so, reveals the basic structural unity of the regional economy.

¹ P. M. Mutibwa, *The Malagasy and the Europeans* (London: Longman, 1974); Bonar A. Gow, *Madagascar and the Protestant Impact. The work of the British missions, 1818–1895* (London: Longman & Dalhousie University Press, 1979); Stephen Ellis, *The Rising of the Red Shaws: A Revolt in Madagascar, 1895–1899* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Pier Larson, *History and Memory in the Age of Enslavement* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2000).

An exception is Raymond Kent, who, on grounds largely rejected by other scholars, argued for a major African historical influence in Madagascar – see his *Early Kingdoms in Madagascar, 1500–1700* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970).

² A number of important studies relating to aspects of the economic history of Madagascar – but limited in scope, include Raymond Decary and Rémy Castel, *Études démographiques. Modalités et conséquences des migrations intérieures récentes des populations malgaches* (Tananarive, 1941); Hubert Deschamps, *Les migrations intérieures à Madagascar* (Paris, 1959); Paul Ottino, *Les économies paysannes malgaches du Bas-Mangoky* (Paris, 1963); Micheline Rasoamiaranana, *Aspects économiques et sociaux de la vie à Majunga entre 1862 et 1881* (Antananarivo, 1983); Yves Feugeas, *Le marché du riz pendant la période coloniale à Madagascar (1905–1940)* (Antananarivo, 1979); Albert Ralaikoa, *Fiscalité, administration et pression coloniales dans le sud Betsileo (1895–1918)* (Antananarivo, 1987); Jacques Dez, “Développement économique et tradition à Madagascar” *Cahiers de l’Institut de science économique appliquée* supplément 129, série V.4 (1962); *idem*, “Considération sur les prix pratiqués à Tananarive en 1870,” *BAM* 40 (1962); *idem*, “Éléments pour une étude de l’économie agro-sylvo-pastorale de l’Imerina ancienne” *Université de Madagascar: École nationale supérieure agronomique* 8 (1970); *idem*, “Monnaie et structure traditionnelle à Madagascar” *Cahiers Vulfredo Pareto – Revue européenne des sciences sociales* (1970); *idem*, “Éléments pour une étude sur les prix et les échanges de biens dans l’économie méridionale ancienne” *BAM* 48/ 1–2 (1970); *idem*, “La monarchie méridionale et le développement agricole” *Terre Malgache* 10 (1971); Jean Fremigacci, “Mise en valeur coloniale et travail forcé: la construction du chemin de fer Tananarive-Antsirabe (1911–1923)” *Omalý sy Anio* 1–2 (1975); *idem*, “La colonisation à Vatomandry-Mahanoro – Espérances et désillusions (1895–1910)” *Omalý sy Anio* 3–4 (1976); *idem*, “Les colons de la côte est centrale de Madagascar, de la prospérité à la crise (1924–1939)” *Omalý sy Anio* 15 (1982); *idem*, “Les difficultés d’une politique coloniale: le café de Madagascar à la conquête du marché français (1930–1938)” *Omalý sy Anio* 21–22 (1985); also see works by present author cited in bibliography.

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It also dispels the myth of the creation in the nineteenth century of a unified and civilized Malagasy nation state possessing a single cohesive economy. As significantly, it argues that the colonization of Madagascar is explicable less in terms of French historical claims to the island, or to the forces of French capitalism, than to a combination of two other factors. These are, first, the forces impelling the British forward movement in IOA from the 1870s and, second, the autarkic policies and mismanagement of the indigenous Merina regime that triggered the implosion of the Merina empire in Madagascar.

Historiographical Traditions: The Particularity of Madagascar

The historical particularity of Madagascar was central to the perspective of the French Colonial School, centered on the works of Alfred and Guillaume Grandidier whose arguments dominated the historiography of the island for most of the twentieth century.³ From the early 1970s, a new Nationalist School emerged, which currently dominates the field. Members of the Nationalist School accept an ancient African influence on Madagascar and reject the Colonial School's justification for the imposition of French rule in the island. Nevertheless, they have maintained the emphasis on the historical distinctiveness of the island. Of key importance here is the view that from c.1790–1810, the Merina of the central highlands forged of the different peoples of the island a single and progressive nation-state, unique in nineteenth-century Africa, and fondly referred to in the Nationalist School literature as “The Kingdom” (“Le Royaume”).⁴

The Nationalist School's interpretation of nineteenth-century Malagasy history runs approximately as follows: The founding father of the Malagasy nation, Andrianampoinimerina (r. c.1795–1810), united the central highland province of Imerina and gave to his people the first ever sense of a Malagasy identity. Radama I (r.1810–28) continued where his father left off. In the 1820s, he concluded an alliance with the British who provided him with the personnel and equipment to build a modern standing army and education system. He also banned the slave trade and admitted Christian missionaries into the country.

³ Alfred et Guillaume Grandidier, esp. *GH*.

⁴ Françoise Raison-Jourde, “Introduction” in *idem* (ed.), *Les souverains de Madagascar* (Paris, 1983), 7–68; Raymond K. Kent (ed.), *Madagascar in History. Essays from the 1970s* (Berkeley, 1979); Hubert Deschamps, *L'histoire de Madagascar* (Paris, 1972); Ellis, *Rising of the Red Shaws*; Guy Jacob, “Influences occidentales en Imerina et déséquilibres économiques avant la conquête française,” *Omalv sy Anio* 5–6 (1977), 223–31; *idem*, “La révolution industrielle et l'Imerina au XIXe siècle ou l'impossible transfert,” Colloque International d'histoire malgache (Antananarivo, 31 juillet - 5 août 1989); Larson, *History and Memory*.

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Radama I's wife and successor, Ranavalona I (1828–61), was a traditionalist who expelled the missionaries, persecuted indigenous Christians, and generally adopted anti-Western policies. She also permitted a handful of commoners to accede to the top posts in government and the army, whose control was consolidated in a coup d'état in 1863, during which Radama II, Ranavalona I's son and successor, was killed. The effective ruler of Madagascar was subsequently Rainilaiarivony, who, as prime minister, married a succession of Malagasy queens. During his reign Rainilaiarivony performed a complex political juggling act, balancing policies designed to assuage Western demands for modernization with others aimed at keeping Westerners at bay and preserving Malagasy independence. He maintained a largely open door policy, encouraging foreign investment. He adopted Christianity as the state religion and, with missionary assistance, founded a compulsory national education system. He also instituted a constitutional monarchy, reformed the judiciary, and took the first steps toward the abolition of slavery.

Despite these evident signs of a progressive regime, the French asserted ancient colonial claims to Madagascar. These were backed up by the French Navy (which harbored enormous resentment at having suffered defeat in the Napoleonic and Prussian Wars), by the land-thirsty Francophone community of the neighboring Mascarene islands (Réunion and Mauritius), and from the 1870s, by the new belligerent imperialism espoused by capitalist forces in France. The Franco-Merina War of 1883–5 established a nominal French protectorate over Madagascar, but the Merina government ignored French pretensions to govern external policy. Their cause was supported by British missionaries and some British army officers. However, the British government remained aloof and in 1890 agreed to give the French a free hand in Madagascar in return for French recognition of British dominance in Zanzibar. The fate of Madagascar was sealed. In 1895, French forces overran the island. By that time, the Nationalist School argues, the Malagasy formed a united and progressive nation-state, the first in Africa, and responded with fury in a massive nationalist uprising. Although largely suppressed by 1897, the embers of revolt smoldered on into the first years of the twentieth century.

For a New Historical Context: The Indian Ocean World and Indian Ocean Africa

The present study challenges both the Colonialist and the Nationalist schools of thought, first by seeking to situate Madagascar historically as an integral part of the wider Indian Ocean world (IOW), a term that requires some explanation. For

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those who place Europe at the center of the development of world systems of trade and production, the Indian Ocean world is probably associated with Asian cultures, which in conventional Eurocentric histories are portrayed as archaic monoliths, characterized by intractable social and political structures utterly resistant to the forces of change and modernization. From this perspective, economic development, where it occurred in the Asian region, was a result of external, specifically European, forces.

However, a revisionist school has recently developed that argues that Asia, not Europe, forged the first global economy, which in turn emerged at a considerably earlier date than was previously thought. Adapting Ferdinand Braudel's concept of a Mediterranean maritime economy, K. N. Chaudhuri, and later André Brink, argued that an Asia–Indian Ocean global economy emerged alongside Islam from the seventh century and that Europeans achieved global dominance only in the eighteenth century. Others date the start of the Asia–Indian Ocean global economy to between the tenth and thirteenth centuries. Andre Gunder Frank considers that it may well have arisen much earlier and that European dominance was achieved only in the nineteenth century with industrialization and the emergence of a truly international economy.⁵ These revisionists largely omitted Africa from their analysis. Nevertheless, southern, eastern and north-eastern Africa, and the offshore islands, possessed strong historical linkages to the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, and the Far East. All formed an integral part of the Asia–Indian Ocean economy.⁶ Therefore, the entire area from the Cape to Cairo to Calcutta to Canton and beyond forms what is here termed the Indian Ocean world.

⁵ K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean. An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985); *idem*, *Asia Before Europe. Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); André Wink, *Al-Hind. The Making of the Indo-Islamic World* 2 vols. (Leiden, New York, Köln, 1996 and 1997); Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony. The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); George Modelski and William R. Thompson, *Leading Sectors and World Powers. The Coevolution of Global Economics and Politics* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1996), esp. pp. 142–5, 156; Andre Gunder Frank, *ReORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: Berkeley University Press, 1998); see also P. J. Cain & A. G. Hopkins, "Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Expansion Overseas I. The Old Colonial System, 1688–1850," *Economic History Review* 39.4 (1986).

⁶ Peter Boomgaard, "Human Capital, Slavery and Low Rates of Economic and Population Growth in Indonesia, 1600–1910," in Gwyn Campbell (ed.), *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 83–96; Abdul Sheriff, "The Slave Trade and its Fallout in the Persian Gulf" and Nigel Worden, "Indian Ocean Slavery and Its Demise in the Cape Colony" – in Gwyn Campbell (ed.), *Abolition and Its Aftermath in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2004/5).

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While possessing some unique features, Madagascar was historically part of an IOW that included IOA. The first human settlers of Madagascar were of Austronesian and African (Bantu-speaking) origin.⁷ They imported plants and economic techniques from both Indonesia and Africa and at first maintained links with both regions. In time, relations with Africa grew and those with Indonesia diminished, notably with the rise of Portuguese maritime activity in the IOW during the sixteenth century.

The rise of a plantation economy on the French Mascarene islands of Réunion and Mauritius from the mid-eighteenth century inaugurated a new phase in the island's economic history as it was by far the closest source of provisions and slaves for the plantations. In the late eighteenth century, a French commercial empire was proposed, stretching from the Mascarenes to the Swahili and Mozambique coasts, in which Madagascar would play a central role. The island was critically important as a supplier of provisions and plantation workers for the Mascarenes, and its trade "is so linked to that of the coast of Africa that we believe it impossible to separate them."⁸ The following century, Madagascar played a critical part in the east African slave trade, developed commercial ties with South Africa, and became steadily incorporated, alongside other countries in the region, into the burgeoning international economy.

There is a cogent argument that the major economic changes in West Africa resulted mainly from its integration into the international economy during the nineteenth century.⁹ The catalyst for this change was the industrial revolution, not colonialism. Industrialization and the concomitant rise of the international economy led to the demise of the slave trade and the rise of free commodity trade. These in turn laid the basis for European colonial takeover. Growing integration of West African regions into the international economy increased their vulnerability to world market fluctuations. This first became evident in the severe and protracted depression of the 1880s. The depression strained Afro-European commercial relations to the extent that European traders called upon their home governments to secure their commercial interests through political intervention in West Africa. Until that time, indigenous elites had largely

⁷ The uniquely Austronesian origin of the Malagasy people has been convincingly disproved as DNA analysis has for the first time demonstrated that the Malagasy are overwhelmingly of mixed African and Austronesian origin – see, R. Hewitt, A. Krause, A. Goldman G. Campbell, T. Jenkins, "B-Globin Haplotype Analysis Suggests that a Major Source of Malagasy Ancestry is Derived from Bantu-Speaking Negroids," *American Society of Human Genetics* 58 (1996), 1303–8.

⁸ Morice, "Mémoire sur la côte orientale d'Afrique" (Isle de France, 15 juin 1777) – ed. de Coigny 1790, *BL*. Add.18126.

⁹ See, e.g., A. G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (London, 1977), esp. Ch. 4.

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possessed sufficient political, economic, and military power to repel outside intervention. However, by the 1880s, European intervention in Africa was facilitated by a number of factors. First, the slave export trade, upon which rested the power of dominant West African elites, had been critically undermined by the 1860s. Second, powerful imperialist pressure groups in Europe, such as the French Navy, backed demands for intervention by their nationals trading in Africa. Finally, by the late nineteenth century, key technological spin-offs of the industrial revolution, notably the application of steam power to transport, the invention of the Gatling gun, and the medical application of quinine as a malarial antidote, enabled Europeans to settle and survive in tropical Africa for the first time.

Different economic forces were at work in IOA, from the Cape to Cairo to Madagascar to the Mascarenes. Conventionally, it has been argued that the traditional staples of foreign trade – slaves, gold, and ivory exchanged for arms, cloth, alcohol, and ironmongery – were similar but directed toward Muslim countries to the north rather than to North America or Europe.¹⁰ This critically delayed the impact of the European-based industrial revolution upon the region, prolonging the traditional nature of foreign trade. The rise of the Mascarene plantation economy from the late eighteenth century, and the demands of the Atlantic slave trade from c.1810–50, greatly stimulated slave exports from Mozambique and Madagascar. Also, Middle Eastern and Indian demand sustained a vigorous slave and ivory export trade from the Swahili coast.¹¹ For Ralph Austen, Abdul Sheriff, and more recently William Clarence-Smith, the Islamic commercial nexus based on Zanzibar is the central issue in the story of the integration of East Africa into the international economy.¹² However, the basis of colonialism was laid not by the 1880s depression, for the price of slaves and ivory remained buoyant, but by the growing abolitionist pressure placed upon the Zanzibar court by the British. Europeans optimistic about the economic potential of the interior backed calls for colonization of East Africa and Madagascar, often justified by demands for the abolition of slavery. Such pressures had by the 1880s undermined the power of local elites, laying the way open for growing European commercial and political intervention.

The case of Madagascar is somewhat different. The island possessed two overlapping precolonial economies, that of the Merina empire and that of the

¹⁰ Ralph Austen, *African Economic History* (London, 1987), 101.

¹¹ Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar* (London, 1987).

¹² W. G. Clarence-Smith, "The Economics of the Indian Ocean and Red Sea Slave Trades in the 19th Century: An Overview," in *idem* (ed.), *The Economics of the Indian Ocean Slave Trade* (London, 1989), 1–20; see also articles by Austen and Sheriff in same volume.

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independent south and west. Staple exports from the Merina empire comprised cash crops, forest products, cattle, and, from the 1880s, gold. Staple imports comprised not only cloth and arms, but also slaves. Indeed, Malagasy slave imports sustained the east African slave export trade after the eclipse of Brazilian and Cuban demand by 1860 and British suppression of the Swahili coast trade by the 1880s. The same pattern of foreign trade applied to areas of the island independent of Merina rule, with the important exception that they also exported slaves, mostly captured from within the Merina empire.

The Rise and Fall of a Secondary Empire

A central theme of this study is secondary imperialism. Like Egypt under Mohammed Ali and Thailand under progressive monarchies, the nineteenth-century Merina crown in Madagascar attempted to counter the menace of European colonial intervention through secondary imperialism and economic modernization. Within this context, the conventional view of a progressive nation-state emerging in precolonial Madagascar is a major historical distortion. Rather, the precolonial Merina regime was a polity built on imperial expansion, successive nineteenth-century Merina states being motivated by the drive to create and exploit an island empire.

The Origins of Merina Imperialism

This study commences by examining the economic basis for the rise of the Merina state. The expansion of hydraulic riziculture in the eighteenth century enabled the build-up of grain surpluses, which in turn fueled demographic growth and permitted the development of a specialist artisan sector. Division of labor promoted trade, whereby agricultural and artisanal products traveled along local and long distance domestic trade networks. This overlapped with foreign trade networks, a traditional one involving the export of slaves, food, and other tropical produce from the west coast into the predominantly Muslim maritime network of the western Indian Ocean, and the other, from the mid-eighteenth century, exporting slaves and produce to the Mascarene plantations.

The rise of the Mascarene plantation economy from c.1750 was the major stimulus for the development of the Merina state. It established a large demand for provisions and slaves from Madagascar, which rapidly grew with conversion to sugar monoculture in the early nineteenth century. This provoked internecine battles in Madagascar over sources and trade routes. Civil wars in the highly populated central plateau provided Merina princes with slaves who they sold

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to foreign traders for cash and arms. However, from the 1790s when central Imerina became unified, Merina armies increasingly subjected and enslaved neighboring peoples. At the same time, they sought to eradicate middlemen and impose direct control over trade routes. The state that Andrianampoinimerina had militarily carved out of a number of small competing highland polities by 1810 was founded on control of the slave export and arms import trades.

The boom in foreign trade promoted the development of a market economy in Imerina. At the same time, advances in riziculture techniques permitted the growth in Imerina of large grain surpluses. In conjunction with commercial profits, these encouraged the emergence of a small number of full-time craftsmen and professional middlemen.¹³ Supply and demand strongly affected foreign trade, as well as the iron and textile manufacturing sectors, notably in Imerina where money, market speculators, and usurers developed. However, the allocation of resources, incomes, and outputs continued to be heavily influenced by nonmarket factors such as caste,¹⁴ kinship, and political patronage. Moreover, indigenous political authorities maintained tight control over land and free labor, which they exchanged on a redistributive basis. They also largely dominated the external trade in arms and slaves, the possession of which underpinned their economic and political power.

It was on this basis that the Merina emerged as the predominant Malagasy polity. From c.1810, Radama I pursued Andrianampoinimerina's policy, creating a small empire by expanding to seize control of further slave sources and trade routes to the coast. The 1820 British alliance earned him international recognition as king of all Madagascar, although he was then ruler of only a small area of the island, comprising part of the central plateau and a narrow corridor connecting it to the main east coast port of Toamasina. However, in return for a ban on slave exports, the British promised the Merina crown military, artisanal, and educational aid with which to effect the conquest of the entire island and build a new enlarged economy in which cash crops and manufactures would replace slaves as Madagascar's staple exports.

Autarky: Origins and Impact

By 1825, Merina armies had subjugated most of the eastern littoral of Madagascar and forged an outlet to the major west coast port of Mahajanga. However, British agricultural and artisanal techniques proved ill-adapted to local

¹³ See Paul Bohannon and George Dalton, "Introduction" to *idem* (eds.), *Markets in Africa* (Evanston, 1962); Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (London, 1974), 277–314.

¹⁴ For fuller explanation of caste in Madagascar, see Chapter 6.

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conditions and, with the ban on slave exports, foreign trade revenues slumped. At the same time, British imperial pretensions to the island competed with those of the Merina. As a result, the Merina court rejected the British alliance and free trade and adopted autarkic policies, the three main pillars of which were state monopolies, *fanompoana* (unremunerated forced labor for state ends¹⁵), and the creation and exploitation of an island empire. Moreover, contrary to the conventional historical viewpoint, Ranaivalona I adopted and expanded Radama I's autarkic policies, pursuing them with vigor.

Autarkic policies were initially successful. By 1836, a major industrial center had been created, possibly the first in Africa and contemporaneous with similar projects in Europe, producing manufactures ranging from cannon to glass. Moreover, Malagasy apprentices had by then mastered the techniques of industrial production from European personnel. Also, missionaries had through schools inculcated in local youth a loyalty to the Merina crown and empire and a basic literacy and numeracy. Most scholars were drafted into the industrial workshops and factories, or into the ranks of the army, but some received a more elaborate education before being drawn into the imperial bureaucracy. Finally, a newly formed British-trained standing army launched unceasing campaigns into non-Merina regions of Madagascar. They subjugated and enslaved local populations, seized their cattle and land, and established military colonies protected by Merina forts.

However, by mid-century, the autarkic impulse had run out of steam. Attempted industrialization failed. So did efforts to develop large-scale plantation and craft production for export. The internal transport and communications system remained rudimentary and costly. Court monopolies imposed limits on the growth of manufacture and trade. In addition, Merina armies failed to establish effective Merina rule over more than one third of the island, the southern and western reaches of which remained largely independent. Moreover, anti-Merina uprisings characterized conquered areas, while in disputed regions Merina convoys were harried and their outposts attacked. Guerrilla tactics deprived Merina armies of provisions, while the malaria prevalent in lowland regions so decimated highland troops that increasing numbers deserted. Soldiers and workers reacted to *fanompoana* and harsh work conditions by flight – many joining brigand bands – and protest (industrial workers sabotaged machinery). By the mid-1850s, the industrial experiment had failed, and Merina hopes of establishing an island empire had evaporated.

¹⁵ For fuller explanation of *fanompoana*, see Chapter 6.