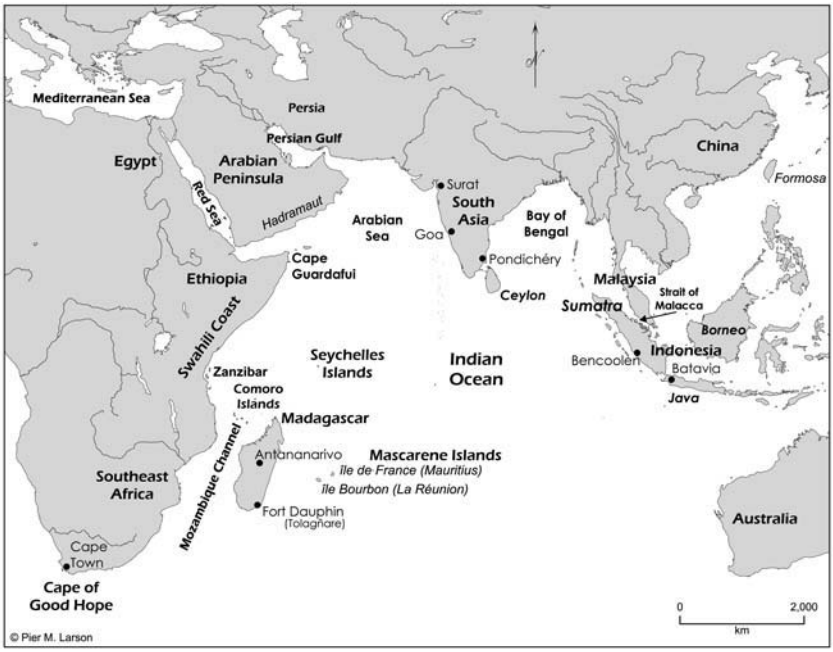
1 Departures

In early October 1847 a Malagasy woman named Mary Rafaravavy, then residing in Mauritius, composed a letter to Queen Ranavalona of highland Madagascar in their shared mother tongue. Rafaravavy's missive is an extraordinary correspondence exchanged between two exceptional women in the history of Malagasy vernacular literacy and Christianity. On one side was a ruler who prohibited Christian practices in her kingdom, including the reading of sacred texts, while at the same time appropriating the technology of writing in Latin characters to strengthen her domestic authority. On the other was a young and socially well-placed convert who defied the queen's orders about Christian praying, preaching, and reading. Rafaravavy was sentenced to a term of punitive enslavement when first condemned for her illicit proceedings. She fled Madagascar for her life in late 1838 with the assistance of Malagasy sympathizers and British Evangelical missionaries of the London Missionary Society (LMS) when denounced a second time for leading religious practices proscribed by the royal court at Antananarivo. (Rafaravavy is depicted on this book's cover as the Christian refugee at the far left.) As a free refugee in exile Rafaravavy traveled through Mauritius to the Cape Colony of South Africa and then to England, later returning to the Indian Ocean, ironically enough, to teach her many humble compatriots in British colonial Mauritius, most of them ex-slaves, to read and write in the Queen's Language of Antananarivo. Rafaravavy's Christianity, her travels, and her vernacular writing linked Madagascar's ex-slaves and Christian exiles at Mauritius with their nearby homeland and its rulers.[1]

[1] For more on Rafaravavy and her travels see Joseph John Freeman and David Johns, *A Narrative of the Persecution of the Christians in Madagascar* (London: John Snow, 1840), 275–298; Gustave Mondain, *Rafaravavy Marie (1808–1848): une martyre malgache sous Ranavalona I^re^* (Paris: Société des Missions Évangéliques, 1929); James Trenchard Hardyman, "Malagasy Refugees to Britain, 1838–1841," *Omaly sy Anio* 5–6 (1977), 141–189; Alison Fletcher, "'With my Precious Salvation and my Umbrella': The London Missionary Society and the Making of Empire in Early Victorian Britain"



Map 1.1 The Indian Ocean.

Rafaravavy the Protestant traveler had been ailing with a disease of the lungs for several years at the time she penned her letter to Ranavalona. She removed from her residence in the Moka district of Mauritius to the drier climate of Port Louis city, near the ocean, where it was hoped she might recuperate (Map 6.1). The letter seems Rafaravavy's final reckoning with the potentate whose domestic policies had so significantly shaped her life course. Her ability to write with ease in her native tongue allowed her to convey sentiments of political loyalty and unrepentant Christian faith directly to Ranavalona in a mutually intelligible idiom. But the letter also evinces something deeper: Rafaravavy's longing for home, for a return in her maturing age to the land of her birth, and of her supposition, contrary to that of her queen, that allegiance to the court at Antananarivo and belief in Jesus Christ were not incompatible.

For its complexity as testimony of Christian feeling, political obeisance to Queen Ranavalona, and attachment to the Big Island of her birth, Rafaravavy's epistolary prose merits careful scrutiny:

(Ph.D. Thesis, Department of History, The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, 2003), Chapter. 3, esp. 180–190.

It is now some nine years since I departed from the land of Madagasickar [she began] and even if I am here on the other side of the sea I do not stop, but pray for you constantly, asking God to bless you . . .

Fa tokony hosivy taona izay no ny alako tamy ny tany Madagasickar ary amy ny Izany na dia aty Andafiny ny Riaka aza aho Izaho tsy mbola ny tsahatra fa mivavaka ho anao mandrakariva mangataka amy nAndriamanitra hitahy anao . . .

It was not for having done wrong that I was to be killed but because of my belief in the Word of God and because I ornamented myself with it. And for this reason I thank God who is compassionate and takes pity on the poor. And this is what I think, my queen.

Satria tsy tamy ny fa naovako ratsy no hahafaty ahy fa tamy ny finoako ny teny nAndriamanitra ka ny ravaka tamy ny Ary amy ny izany izaho misaotra an Andriamanitra izay miantra sy mamindra fo amy ny izay mahantra. Ary izany no mba heverikio Tompoko Mpanjaka ko.

May you live long. Perhaps you think your female servant is like a traitor [literally, "an oather"] and says to herself "I am going to make an agreement here and switch my political allegiance by coming to Mauritius and going to England." In all of this, my queen, I do not stray, even by one single law, from your presence. Yet I am as nothing in your kingdom, my queen and lord. It has pleased God for me to serve you, and also my ancestors, my father, and my children are your servants and your inheritance from your father.

Veloma mandrakizay hianao Angamba hianao mihevitra ny Ankizy vavinao toy ny mpiadina ka manao hoe izaho manao fanekena amy ny aty ka manao Andriankafa no nandehana ko hankaty Mauritius sy nalehako tany England. Ary raha amy ny izany Ry Mpanjaka ko dia tsy mba miala na dia lalana irai dia akory aho teo anatrehanao ka nefa aho kely sy toy ny tsinontsinona ao amy fanjakanao Ry Mpanjaka Tompoko. Fa hianao no soavin Andriamanitra ho tompoiko, ary ny Razako sy ny Raiko sy ny zanako mpanomponao sy lovanao tamy ny Rainao.

And this is what I say to you, madam, may you live long and well among your people. For even if I am here on the other side of the ocean I humble

Ary Izany nolazaiko amy nao Tompoko Trarantitra azamarofy hianao mifanantera amy ny Ambanilanitra hianao fa Izaho na dia aty Andafiniriaka aza aho

myself to you because I am your servant. My praying is to God and my belief is in Jesus Christ the son of God who died to replace the sins of people, and who lives again at the right hand of his father who is in heaven. And it is because of that praying to God that I live here. For I and my friends do not make an agreement with the Queen of the English to be her people, but it is because of my love of God that I live here.

mbola manetry ny tena ko amy nao hiany fa mpanomponao aho, fa ny Fivavahako amy nAndriamanitra sy ny Finoako any Jesosy Kraisty zanak' Andriamanitra izay efa maty ny solo ny heloky ny olona ary velona indray ao amy ny tanana nkavanany Rainy izay any Andanitra. Ary amy ny izany Fivavahana amy nAndriamanitra izany no itoerako aty. Fa raha ny amy ny mpanjaka ny English izaho sy ninamako tsy manao fa nekena hovahokany fa ny Fitiavako an Andriamanitra no itoerako aty.

For whether today or at a time pleasing to my Queen, she says, "Return Rafaravavy for you can pray now to God in the land of Madagascar, and practice your faith in the son of God," I will return. For no one will hold me here as their subject or servant. [I fled] only because of my apprehension of being killed without reason and out of my fear that you would be angry with me and have me killed.

Fa na dia ankehitriny sy amy ny Andro izay tiany ny Mpanjakako hanaovany hoe Modia Rafaravavy fa misy hanaovanao ny Fivavahana amy n'Andriamanitra hiany ny tany Madagasikara, Ary ataovy ny finoanao ny zanaka Andriamanitra, Dia mody aho fa tsy hisy olona hihiazon'aty toy ny vahoakany na toy ny mpanompony, fa raha ny amy ny fahatahora ny ahy ho faty foana ary Andrao mbola tezitra amy ko hianao ka asainao vonoina aho.[2]

We do not know if or how the daring words in Rafaravavy's letter reached Ranavalona, who was "slightly acquainted with the elements of reading and writing" Malagasy in the Latin alphabet but who was also surrounded by literate military officers who secured her in power and screened most correspondence directed to her. It is tempting to think that Rafaravavy felt her life slipping away as she composed these

[2] Rafaravavy to Ranavalomanjaka, Port Louis, Adijady, 6 October 1847, LMS AO 2 3 B, 1, 3 & 4. This copy of Rafaravavy's letter entered the collections of J. J. Freeman during his visit to Mauritius in 1850.

poignant lines to her sovereign, despairing of ever setting foot again in the land of her birth where she had learned to read and write her mother tongue, yet hopeful nevertheless of the possibility of doing so some time in the near future as an openly practicing Christian. It was about this time that Rafaravavy confided her verbal will to a close friend and fellow Protestant refugee, David Ratsarahomba, with whom she had learned the arts of literacy, escaped from Madagascar to Mauritius, and traveled to South Africa, England, and back again to Mauritius. Rafaravavy had likely acquired the disease eating her lungs – probably tuberculosis – during her travels to Britain, but the scourge may also have commenced in highland Madagascar before her departure. And we do not know if the physician Rafaravavy was seeing in the colonial city of Port Louis for her "consumption" had informed her of her poor prognosis.[3]

These were anxious times for Rafaravavy and her many Malagasy companions in Mauritius, Christian refugees who arrived as free people and ex-slaves born in Madagascar who had been progressively liberated by British legislation between 1835 and 1839. Protestant missionaries who knew Malagasy ex-slaves in Mauritius and elsewhere in the Indian Ocean sometimes reported on their desire to return to the Big Island. Many apprentices in Mauritius, noted Welsh missionary David Jones in 1837, "told me that they intend returning to their native country & among their own people & relatives after the expiration of their apprenticeship term of years." "Great numbers within the last three years have returned to their native country," wrote another LMS missionary a decade later of Malagasy ex-apprentices in the colonial island. At the Cape of Good Hope, too, James Cameron reported in a letter addressed to Queen Ranavalona in 1836 that "there are even some [ex-slaves] who want to return to the land of their ancestors (*ka misy hiany izy mba tehiverina amy ny tany ndrazany*)." Despite the successful repatriation of some ex-apprentices to Madagascar, the aspirations of most ex-slaves in the western Indian Ocean of returning to their nearby island homeland were fading in the face of the longevity of both Queen Ranavalona (who the same missionary labeled as "that female Nero" for her public stance against Christianity) and her domestic policies. Those difficult policies included heavy burdens of forced labor of the sort that ex-slaves had just

[3] Freeman and Johns, *Narrative of the Persecution*, 87 (quotation). In a letter to her sister and daughter in highland Madagascar written at about the same time, Rafaravavy indicates that the purpose of her communication with Ranavalona was to tell "our queen" (*ny Mpanjaka ntsikia*) that Britain, not France, had her best interests in mind. This geopolitical message, however, is not the gist of the far more personal letter she composed: Mary Rafaravavy to Razafy and Mary Ravao, Port Louis, 20 Adijady 1847, LMS AO 2 3 B, 3–4 (quotation in this note).

escaped in Mauritius and a prohibition against the "praying," by which Christianity was commonly known in highland Madagascar and to which many of the emancipated scions of Madagascar in Mauritius and South Africa were drawn. "Once when I visited her," at Petite Rivière just south of Port Louis, recounted Rafaravavy's friend, David Ratsarahomba, in a Malagasy vernacular letter he despatched to an acquaintance in London,

we went to the oceanside and sat down together, and she looked westward toward Madagascar and said, "David, oh my happiness when I think of the day God will provide when I will accompany you to Madagascar on that ocean in front of us. Perhaps in two or three years God will open the door, and I will depart with you to preach the Word of God to our families and our nation." And as she looked at me I began to cry, remembering the doctor's words that perhaps she would not live, and she was surprised and said [Ratsarahomba here code switches from Malagasy to English (bold text), suggesting that Rafaravavy did the same in her verbal comments], **"David what is the matter, your tears burst out?"**

Indray maka aho namangy azy teny ka nankeny ny amorondranomasina izahay Kianara ka nipetraka izahay ka nijery any andrefana mankany Madagascar izy dia hoy izy David, Endrei ny hafalia ko raha mihevitra ny andro izay homena Andtr antsikia ka hiaraka amy nao aho hoany Madagascar amy ny ranomasina anoloantsikia io, ngamba raha afaka roa na telo taona hovahan'Andratr ny varavarana, ka miafaka amy nao aho hitory ny teny n'Andtr amy ny mpianakavy sy ny firenentsikia sady mijery ahy izy, ka latsaka ny ranomasoko noho ny fahatsiarovako ny tenin Doctor fa angahamba tsy hovelona izy dia taitra izy, ka nanao hoe, **David what is the matter, your tears burst out?**[4]

Rafaravavy's verbal will and Ratsarahomba's tears for her and for their "families" and "nation" across the sea were prescient, for just at dawn on the morning of Easter Sunday 1848 (April 23) a blood vessel ruptured abruptly in Rafaravavy's lungs while she lay in her bed at Moka. Her anguished cries awakened British Nonconformist missionary friends

[4] David Jones to Revd. W. Ellis, Port Louis, 24 August 1837, LMS ILMAU 2 2 C, 2 (intend returning); A Resident [pseud.], *Madagascar, Past and Present* (London: Richard Bentley, 1847), 95 (great numbers), 146 (female Nero); James Cameron to Ranavalomanjaka, Cape Town, 8 Adizaoza 1836, ARM AR DD 9, 17r (are even some); David Ratsarahomba to J. J. Freeman, Port Louis, 1 May 1848, LMS ILMAU 3 4 B, 7. The author of *Madagascar* was probably LMS missionary printer Edward Baker.

nearby, who found her with "blood gushing out both by her mouth & nostrils." The distressed associates "had her lay back in warm coated mustard, mildly applied plasters to both her legs, and applied leaches to her chest." But to no avail. Rafaravavy speedily suffocated in her own blood as the hemorrhage progressively weakened her from within. Neither Rafaravavy nor Ratsarahomba ever returned to live in their natal home, the "land of Madagasickar." They each paid ephemeral visits to the Big Island's coast and its nearby islets, prevented by Queen Ranavalona from remaining on soil she ruled and unwilling to live in areas she did not. Ratsarahomba (also depicted on the cover illustration of this book as third from the left) was diagnosed with consumption soon after Rafaravavy's death and expired in Port Louis just two years later, in late August 1850. The two friends were laid near to each other in a Port Louis cemetery, both mourned by Madagascar-born ex-slaves and refugees who on separate occasions followed their bodies to their final resting places far from the land of their birth and of their lingering dreams.[5]

Language and creolization

Rafaravavy's exile, her epistolary communication with Queen Ranavalona, her longing for home, and her death in colonial Mauritius amidst Malagasy ex-slaves who also yearned for a homecoming to the Big Island, frame many of the concerns taken up in *Ocean of Letters*. The formation of a Latin-alphabet literacy in the Malagasy language through recurrent intellectual engagements between Malagasy and Europeans in the western Indian Ocean enabled Rafaravavy to convey her sentiments in writing to the queen with whom she continued to feel considerable affinity despite a narrow escape from the clutch of her executioners and her safe refuge in Mauritius. The making of a vernacular Christian literacy in the Malagasy tongue was bound up with the economic, political, and human ties between Madagascar and the colonial Mascarene islands of îles de France and Bourbon, and also with the Big Island's relations with the Cape of Good Hope and the Comoro archipelago. Each of these places, along with Madagascar, was a focal point of European imperial interest in the western Indian Ocean from the sixteenth century.

For two hundred years between the mid-seventeenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries Madagascar was an important center of gravity in

[5] Rafaravavy's fatal crisis may have been a pulmonary embolism, often associated with advanced tuberculosis. J. Le Brun to Revds. Tidman & Freeman, Port Louis, 26 April 1848, LMS ILMAU 3 4 A, 2 (quotations); J. J. Le Brun to LMS Directors, Moka, 26 April 1848, LMS ILMAU 3 4 A; David Ratsarahomba to J. J. Freeman, Port Louis, 1 May 1848, LMS ILMAU 3 4 B.

histories of diaspora and imperialism in the western Indian Ocean. Sizeable numbers of Big Islanders living in the Mascarene islands, in the Comoros, and at the Cape of Good Hope formed communities of Malagasy vernacular language and identity until at least 1860. The position of Madagascar and its language in the history of the western Indian Ocean has been much obscured by a narrow definition of Africa's Indian Ocean diaspora (excluding Malagasy from it or subsuming people from the Big Island into continental African ethnic categories), by the structures of historical knowledge and training in African history (sidelining Madagascar to the exotic), by the nature of the colonial archive (mostly in European tongues), by researchers who do not know the Big Island and its language, and by a rather restrictive modern interest in linguistic and cultural hybridity – creolization, or, loosely, *créolité* in French – to the exclusion of cultural heterogeneity in European colonies of the area. The regional history of Malagasy language, literacy, and longing which I offer in this book visits key sites of creolization and of the Afro-Malagasy diaspora of the western Indian Ocean and seeks to reconfigure how we think of language and culture change in the European colonies of the area.

The sentiment of displacement and the intense yearning for return developed in Rafaravavy's letter tucked away in an ecclesiastical archive and bound up with dense feelings of political loyalty and religious faith, testify impressively to a lost dimension of the Malagasy diaspora in the western Indian Ocean: the lingering of Malagasy language and the dispersion of its letters well past a time most scholars assume ex-slaves and other Malagasy travelers were thoroughly creolized or monolingual in the colonial languages of their places of exile. Aspirations for return to the Big Island by travelers such as Rafaravavy and Ratsarahomba, and by the many ex-slaves born in Madagascar among whom they lived and worked, also suggest the double consciousness of Malagasy in exile during the post-emancipation period. Malagasy in the western Indian Ocean were versatile individuals well adapted to their colonial lives and mostly competent in the French creole (and sometimes also in English or basilectal Dutch) but still yearning for their Big Island origins and speaking their ancestral mother tongue. The smattering of English in David Ratsarahomba's letter and in Mary Rafaravavy's speech, together with the frequent code shifting among European tongues and the Big Island's vernacular in their and others' writing, attests to this double consciousness. For a variety of reasons, only a small share of refugees and ex-slaves from the Mascarenes actually returned to the nearby Big Island of their origin. But their sense of longing and belonging as Malagasy and as ethnic identity groups from Madagascar

in the colonies of the western Indian Ocean is little known by scholars of the region.[6]

These lives and sentiments of political-cultural affiliation, and the letters that bring them to us, speak directly to the nature of the Afro-Malagasy diaspora of the Indian Ocean. One of the questions that has preoccupied historians of African dispersions into the Indian Ocean is the degree to which slaves, ex-slaves, and their descendants identified with African and Malagasy origins in the various sites of their dispersion, as we know they tended to do in the Americas. Looking primarily at succeeding rather than charter generations, some researchers argue for very weak material and memorial links between Africans in dispersion and their continental homelands of origin, reasoning that the lack of an explicit identification with African heritage after some generations disqualifies Indian Ocean dispersions from having formed a genuine diaspora. What Africans sought about the Indian Ocean, they suggest, was sociocultural integration into the societies of their forced migration rather than a separate identity; homeland affiliations must have fallen away quickly. Others reason in a different manner, pointing to ways in which some migrants and their descendants today remember Africa or continue to practice African cultural forms and speak ancestral languages in dispersion. Historians, they suggest, require a fresh set of criteria for defining African diaspora in the Indian Ocean, ones different from those traditionally employed in studying the Atlantic. Still others propose to compare and contrast the lives of Africans and their descendants in various parts of the Indian Ocean world, paying careful attention to similarities and differences in relationships with masters and the dominant society, residential and marriage patterns, work rhythms, and community formation (or dissolution) to tease out the varying features of African and African-descended communities in that broad region.[7]

[6] Ancestral language is a term borrowed from the linguistic politics of modern Mauritius, where many schools teach Hindi, Urdu, Arabic, Tamil, Chinese, and other Asian languages to the descendants of the island's immigrants under the assumption, not always correct, that their immigrant ancestors spoke those languages. African languages and Malagasy are not taught in Mauritius, revealing the racially inequitable nature of the policy. Ancestral language is a useful term in this study because old-country tongues were not always the first languages of slaves and ex-slaves. See Patrick Eisenlohr, *Little India: Diaspora, Time, and Ethnolinguistic Belonging in Hindu Mauritius* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), esp. Chapter 1.

[7] Gwyn Campbell, "The African-Asian Diaspora: Myth or Reality?" *African and Asian Studies* 5, 3–4 (2006), 305–324; Edward A. Alpers, "The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean: A Comparative Perspective," in Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya and Richard Pankhurst, eds., *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2003), 19–50; Pier M. Larson, "African Diasporas and the Atlantic," in Jorge

What has been missing from these debates about African and Malagasy self-perceptions in Indian Ocean exile is a close examination of changes in community, consciousness, and language *over time and generation*. A researcher working in modern Mauritius, La Réunion, and South Africa, for instance, would be unlikely to discover Madagascar-identifying communities there today, in part because the descendants of slaves now typically imagine bondage as linked to African connections rather than Malagasy ones. One sent back to the eighteenth century or even to the mid-nineteenth century, however, would find ample evidence of ongoing links to and strong affinities for the Big Island of the western Indian Ocean in each of these regions, together with communities of native Malagasy language speakers. While addressing broader issues about the nature and timing of diasporas resulting from forced African migrations into the Indian Ocean, this history of Malagasy in dispersion, their language, their sentiments about their island home, and their affinities for each other outside the Big Island suggests that a consciousness of ethnic distinctiveness and yearning for home was a characteristic of the Malagasy diaspora of the southwestern Indian Ocean until at least 1860. African identities in European slave colonies of the region seem to have been more inchoate, less solidified than those of Malagasy in the same places. Nevertheless, recent studies by historians Edward Alpers and Patrick Harries suggest that East Africans espoused "Mozambique" and "Mozbieker" identities in Mauritius and at the Cape well into the nineteenth century. Close examination of community and identity formation among slaves and ex-slaves in the western Indian Ocean, then, demonstrates that historical processes of cultural distinction were more important than typically assumed.[8]

The sentiments of Mary Rafaravavy and David Ratsarahomba at Mauritius in the mid-nineteenth century speak directly to issues of language and creolization in the Afro-Malagasy diasporas of the Indian Ocean. Creole studies, which have guided much thinking about Africa's diasporas in European slave colonies, originated with a particular interest in language before morphing into a related study of culture. European

Cañizares-Esguerra and Eric R. Seeman, eds., *The Atlantic in Global History, 1500–2000* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2007), 129–147.

[8] Edward A. Alpers, "Becoming 'Mozambique': Diaspora and Identity in Mauritius," in Vijayalakshmi Teelock and Edward A. Alpers, eds., *History, Memory and Identity* (Port Louis: University of Mauritius, 2001), 117–155; Edward A. Alpers, "Mozambique and 'Mozambiques': Slave Trade and Diaspora on a Global Scale," in Benigna Zimba, Edward Alpers, and Allen Isaacman, eds., *Slave Routes and Oral Tradition in Southeastern Africa* (Maputo: Filsom Entertainment, 2005), 39–61; Patrick Harries, "Making Mozbiekers: History, Memory, and the African Diaspora at the Cape," in Zimba, Alpers, and Isaacman, eds., *Slave Routes*, 91–123.