chapter 2

Madagascar: Old Cultures, Contemporary Crises

Puzzles and Potential

Madagascar is the fourth largest island in the world after Greenland, New Guinea and Borneo and a giant in the African part of the Indian Ocean. The country has been portrayed as "peculiar" and "enigmatic." Indeed, in several respects the Great Island is out of the ordinary, often defying scholarly consensus. Not only is the history of human settlement in Madagascar shrouded in mystery, but to many observers Malagasy post-independence economics constitute a conundrum and contemporary politics a maze. Discussing the peopling of Madagascar, Randrianja and Ellis describe the settlement process as "a giant puzzle," while Deschamps has called it "the world's most pleasing enigma." Similarly, the island's economic trajectory is depicted by Razafindrakoto, Roubaud and Wachsberger as a "true mystery," characterized by "paradox," whereas Jütersonke and Kartas present Malagasy socio-political life as a "complex brew."

Since independence in 1960, Madagascar has been the scene of political instability, economic decline and regional marginalization. The country has seen four presidents ousted from power, one impeached by parliament and one assassinated. It is one of the poorest in the world and has the lowest per capita income in the Indian Ocean. At the same time African, Asian and – above all – *sui generis*, as well as endowed with considerable natural resources, the 'Red Island,' however, has the potential to play a prominent role in southern Africa and in the indian-oceanic world.

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2 Randrianja and Ellis op. cit., p. 28.
3 Hubert Deschamps quoted in ibid.
6 Due to its laterite soils and the royal red color of the Imerina kingdom.
The ‘Eighth Continent’

The official name ‘Republic of Madagascar’ (Repoblikan'i Madagasikara) – which has no particular meaning in the Malagasy language – derives from indirect descriptions by Marco Polo in his Marvels of the World, written at the close of the 13th century. Together with the Comorian archipelago, the Arabs called the land Al-Qamar (‘The moon’) and the Portuguese later knew it as Saint Lawrence (São Lourenço). In 1817, the British recognized Radama I of Imerina as ‘King of Madagascar’, giving the entire island the name first used by the Venetian explorer.

Situated between 500 and 800 kilometers east of the African continent (Mozambique), the geological origins of Madagascar lie in the southern Gondwana supercontinent, which more than a hundred million years ago as a result of a tectonic shift disintegrated and gave rise to South America, Africa,

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7 On the Koranic origin of Al-Qamar, see below on Comoros.
8 Traveling overland along the Silk Road to China in the 13th century, Marco Polo (1254–1324) never visited the Indian Ocean islands. His descriptions of the islands were based on Arab sources.