



# Teaching history and geography in Madagascar: Between colonial legacies and paths to decolonization

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## Abstract

History and geography education still hold a prominent place in Madagascar's school curricula. However, current geography programs in Malagasy schools place greater emphasis on France's geography than on Madagascar's own. This situation reflects an incomplete decolonization of Madagascar's educational system, hindering the development of a contextualized and locally relevant geographical knowledge base. Failing to incorporate a deeper understanding of the country into school curricula directly disadvantages Malagasy communities and residents. To address this issue, this study adopts a reflexive approach to the intersections between colonialism and education, drawing on pedagogical experiences ranging from preschool to university. The methodology is based on an extensive documentary analysis, complemented by an examination of educational discourses and teacher representations to assess the ideological and structural implications of educational policies. Given this situation, urgent changes are needed to ensure that school programs address Madagascar's own geographical issues. In other words, the decolonization of curricula – particularly in geography – is a crucial and contemporary challenge for Malagasy society. This research highlights the urgent need to decolonize school curricula, especially geography programs, to respond to Madagascar's contemporary identity and societal challenges.

**Keywords:** Education, History, Geography, Colonization, Decolonization, Malgachisation, Madagascar

## 1. Introduction

In 1960, when Madagascar became independent, the Malagasy authorities had to face two major challenges: on the one hand, the training of Malagasy executive replacements to take over from French Technical Assistance in all sectors (Koerner, 1969), and on the other, educating future

citizens capable of shouldering the responsibility for this independence.

In its first Constitution at the time of Madagascar's independence, it was stipulated that every child was entitled to education and instruction. In Article 32, it is also specified that the law establishes the fundamental principles of education and vocational training

(Zeny, 1983). Given the situation at the time, the Malagasy government was content to imitate the French teaching syllabus by simply integrating the Malagasy language as a second language of instruction. The Constitution also said clearly that Malagasy and French were the two official languages of the country.

Thus, the choice was made to maintain the selective education system inherited from the colonial era, considered at the time as a model (Zeny, 1983), and at the same time to adapt education to the needs of the country, depending on existing resources (Randrianja, 2007). At the time of the decolonization of Madagascar, one could have expected dynamic action on the part of the State towards National Education (Zeny, 1983). But in reality, the resumption in 1960 of the neo-colonial school system put in place in 1951 clearly demonstrated that the leaders wanted to establish an educational system modeled on that of France, more focused on the pursuit of secondary studies than on the preparation of children to exercise a profession. France, for its part, gradually disengaged from the country's matters while at the same time retaining a form of influence as well as the monopoly of cultural domination vis-à-vis the Malagasy population (Zeny, 1983). It was through education that France retained a major influence on the country. But it was also a request from the then President of the Republic of Madagascar who stated: "France had been responsible for managing our education system, hence the emphasis placed on mastery of French upon entry into first year of secondary education" (Zeny, 1983). Therefore, it seemed obvious that the selection of students required demonstration of this good knowledge of the French language. For the case of the University of Toliara, the entrance exams to access higher education only consisted of a series of tests assessing the students' knowledge of French without any indication of any mastery of the Malagasy language. Under these conditions, secondary school teachers, concerned about their students' success in exams, felt compelled to provide instruction only in French in class. Some schools were also preferred by parents over others, because there the teachers taught lessons exclusively in this language. Despite this situation,

bilingualism was still omnipresent, in schools as well as in public middle and high schools, and even in universities, unlike private schools which put a lot of emphasis on learning and using French. Confronted with the omnipresence of the French language in the Malagasy educational system since decolonization, this article will mainly focus on the following objectives:

1. to trace the history of geography teaching in Madagascar;
2. to examine the contribution of this subject to the process of decolonization of education and;
3. to define desirable objectives for today and tomorrow for the teaching of this discipline in the school syllabuses of Malagasy students.

Our reflections will underline the fundamental importance of decolonizing the geography learning system in order to promote the development of a strong Malagasy national identity, rooted in the realities of its geography, its territory, its history, the problems encountered by the populations of the country. Indeed, as in many other formerly colonized countries, teaching of geography in Madagascar had largely been shaped by the perspectives and approaches inherited from the French colonial administration.

This study is based on a reflective and contemporary analysis of the interactions between colonialism and educational systems, drawing on our pedagogical experiences from preschool to university education. It incorporates a case study of several public institutions, particularly the University of Toliara, to contextualize institutional and curricular dynamics.

The methodological approach relies on an in-depth documentary analysis, including foundational texts such as Zeny C. and *Le Boky Mena* (Ratsiraka, 1975). Additionally, an analysis of educational discourse and teacher representations is conducted to examine the ideological and structural implications of educational policies.

## 2. History of education in Madagascar

The educational policies established by the French authorities during colonization have had a profound impact on the history of education in Madagascar. The French colonial policy was characterized by a will to assimilate the Malagasy population, where the authorities endeavored to impose the French language, the French culture and the French standards on colonized populations; For Randrianja (2007), it was in fact a “cultural colonization”. Schools were created during colonial times to provide academic training for the Malagasy elite, with an emphasis on teaching the French language and promoting French values and ideals (Engelvin, 1937; Randrianja, 2007). But during the colonial period, education was mainly reserved for the children of Antananarivo's wealthy and educated families. Be that as it may, the educational initiatives undertaken by the French authorities had a major impact on the development of education in Madagascar, the consequences of which are still visible today in the Malagasy way of life (Zeny, 1983). After independence, President Tsiranana chose to maintain the education system inherited from the colonial period, retaining French as the language of instruction (Saura, 2006).

### 2.1. Historical overview of colonial education

During the French colonization, the first generations of Malagasy people who adopted Western way of life had been trained in French schools.

There are two closely related aspects to this period. On the one hand, the complex question of the language and content of teaching, and on the other, the subtler challenge of the objectives of those teachings. When Gallieni, the first General Governor of Madagascar, decided to create the Tananarive Medical School on December 16, 1896, the beginnings were difficult, as the students didn't speak French and interpreters were needed to teach the classes. In terms of educational orientation, the government's objectives were ambitious, as public schools were to play a pre-eminent role in France's “civilizing mission” (Zeny, 1983).

However, unavoidable budgetary constraints forced decision-makers to be pragmatic and adapt to the situation (Randrianja, 2007).

During the 1920s, the educational department was marked by its poverty, a consequence of the colonial policy imposed by the Finance Act of 1900. Despite official statements attaching importance to this issue, it was not really a priority until 1905, when Augagneur, the first civilian General Governor, took office, the education department, although created at the end of 1896 and dependent on the General Government, remained an “empty shell” (Zeny, 1983). Gallieni, a fervent republican of the Third Republic, nevertheless considered that assimilation could be achieved through schools (Randrianja, 2007).

For him, Madagascar had become in fact a French territory. It was essential for him that the French language be the basis of teaching in all of the island's schools. Consequently, it was crucial to always remember that the spread of the French language in this new colony, by every conceivable means, was one of the strongest assimilation tools France had at its disposal (Randrianja, 2007). All efforts had to be concentrated in this department. Therefore, Catholic missionaries embodied the organized teaching of French in Madagascar, and worked closely with the colonial authorities to spread the French language (Zeny, 1983). The spread of the language had been supported by various organizations, in particular the Alliance Française, which is still active in the country today. During that period, the majority of teachers were French development workers seconded to university centers. As a result, educational programs did not take sufficient account of the values and realities of the Malagasy society. Existing geography curricula did not match the concrete conditions encountered by the people of Madagascar. Transposing this knowledge into skills to be taught in geography produced a discourse of contemplation and identity, in contradiction with the practical and technical training so sought-after. It had to be said that the recurring problems of education in Madagascar, which had already been identified in the aftermath of independence (Deleris, 1986), led us to question the political and pedagogical

decisions that were to give substance to Madagascar's renewal. To what extent had it been appropriate to choose an approach that imitated the French model?

## **2.2. Bilingualism, a transition to Malgachisation**

In January 1951, François Mitterrand, then Minister of Colonies, declared that "Madagascar's future lay in the French Republic" (Zeny, 1983). This speech was reproduced by the Malagasy President Tsiranana the day after independence, when he said that Madagascar could not do without France to accompany it. He reassured the working masses that "We Malagasy will never want to separate ourselves from France. We are French by culture, and we want to remain French" (Saura, 2006).

The Tsiranana period can be described as a "transitional phase", an expression used by Althabe (1969), as it appeared to be a "phase of conservative decolonization". The result was twelve years of conservative decolonization (1960-1972), with independence perceived by some as artificial, due to the Accords de Cooperation, which prevented the country from separating completely from France, even though it was no longer a member of the French Community. These agreements were perceived to be questionable during the claims formulated in 1972 (Deleris, 1986). So much so that they were considered "slave agreements" (Rafidinarivo Rakotolahy, 2000).

During that period, France maintained its status as Madagascar's indispensable ally. If the majority of citizens, even if they did not express an opinion, were able to observe the smooth running of things during this period, it was thanks to France's constant presence and involvement. During the First Republic, Malagasy political leaders managed the economy and foreign affairs in concert with French "personalities of renown", as President Tsiranana put it. The administration was run with the support of French aid workers (Deleris, 1986). Every ministry had at least one foreigner (*vazaha*), and those foreigners occupied the majority of the country's strategic positions (Rajoelina, 1988). By ensuring the presence of key personnel in administrations,

economic structures and universities, the former colonial empire succeeded in maintaining its hold on newly independent countries like Madagascar.

After independence, the renovation of Madagascar's education system was a process carried out at different levels by different stakeholders. The hierarchical organization of the levels of enunciation and the variety of actors involved were explained by the need to reconcile different requirements. Firstly, as an independent country, Madagascar had to take responsibility for its education system, while allowing its former colonizer to provide assistance and support during the transition period. This partnership suggested the possibility of creating a certain identity for the new system, while retaining links with the existing system, but also reflected divergent positions on the nature of this renewal.

Since the missionary period, Madagascar's openness to the outside world and the ensuing cultural exchanges, reinforced by colonization and independence, have favored the teaching of French. Instead of giving pride of place to the Malagasy language and culture, bilingualism, in place since 1820 and reaffirmed by the 1959 Constitution, was perceived as the main issue of the French policy (Zeny, 1983). This bilingualism, although enshrined in the law, was nonetheless subject to two different interpretations: it could be understood as the promotion of two languages on an equal footing (French and Malagasy), or the promotion of one main language (French) alongside another (Malagasy) which became *de facto* less important.

In most situations, French actually became predominant over Malagasy. This bilingual policy in favor of French was in fact part of the Accords de Cooperation at the start of independence, and this situation persists to this day. In this respect, it can be said that it was an opportunity for France to promote its language and culture through the Cooperation Agreements between the two countries. In this respect, even today, it can be argued that Malagasy people tend to use French not only as a language of instruction, but also as a social marker, as recognition of a certain social status in their day-to-day lives.

President Tsiranana's policy was not unanimously endorsed, however, and was criticized by the opposition AKFM (Parti du congrès pour l'indépendance de Madagascar) and the former MDRM (Mouvement Démocratique de la Rénovation Malgache). This policy led to neo-colonialism (Rabearimanana, 1986). Later, in 1975, Ratsiraka retorted that Madagascar had to break this relationship with France in order to enjoy "formal and correct independence". This internal divergence and rivalry may well have been one of the reasons behind the country's repeated crises, both for and against French intervention in Madagascar (Saura, 2006).

President Tsiranana was deposed in May 1972. This removal of President Tsiranana was considered as Madagascar's second independence. After this second independence, under President Ratsiraka, the government chose to devote itself exclusively to Malagasy education. This marked a departure from the colonial system inherited from the Tsiranana presidency (Delval, 1986). This break was marked by the decolonization of the education system. This break can be summed up by the concept of "Malgachisation".

This "Malgachisation" meant that the government had taken over the management of education, defining the objectives to be achieved (and therefore the profile of the individuals to be trained) as well as determining programs more in line with Malagasy values and context.

The transfer of the management of education to the Malagasy thus marked the beginning of the "Malgachisation" of teaching, particularly in the field of school geography. In this case, the fundamental ambition of education was to develop the analytical skills of Malagasy youth. According to one of our teachers, the Malagasy education system was at that time conceived with a view to offer education that would have its roots in Malagasy cultural foundations, based on local realities and aimed at promoting Madagascar's own values.

### 3. Malgachisation of education

Between 1978 and 1985, the official Malagasy language was adopted as the medium of instruction. During this period, the Malagasy language was effectively used as the language of instruction in the country's secondary schools.

The arrival of Didier Ratsiraka at the head of the country in 1975 was in fact accompanied by a Malgachisation of education. According to the guidelines of the Red Book: "to malagasise means, to harmonize the content of methods of education with the imperatives of the Revolution" (Ratsiraka, 1975). A 1978 law, establishing the general framework of the country's education and training system, set up commissions to elaborate and codify the "common Malagasy", largely inspired by the Merina language. The same law stipulated that the French language should henceforth be considered a foreign language.

#### 3.1. Malgachisation et/or merinisation of education?

The adoption of Malagasy as the language of instruction was still a bone of contention in Madagascar. When the promotion of Malagasy seemed to compromise the "Francophonie", its proponents found arguments to demonstrate that the Malagasy language was not unified and complete (Zeny, 1983). In the end, Malgachisation in education consisted of translating the existing curriculum into Malagasy, without making any significant changes to the curriculum, as would have been the case if Malagasy and regional culture had been integrated into every subject. People of the coastal regions felt that Malgachisation would re-establish the pre-colonial Merina predominance. For them, the term malgachisation became synonymous with the merinisation of teaching in a country where several languages exist (Zeny, 1983). Indeed, Merina teachers, who were the first to be assigned to coastal schools, sought to demonstrate the superiority of the Merina language over other Malagasy languages. When pupils from the coastal regions spoke in their own dialect, teachers in the High Plateaux jeered them, telling them it wasn't Malagasy.

Yet official guidelines recommended the use of all Malagasy languages present in the country. It should be remembered that the expression Malagasy language refers to all the language variants used in the different regions of the island. It is also recognized that teachers need to use the regional Malagasy language in their lessons to be understood more easily (Rajaonarimanana, 1994). This is because the Malagasy language stems from the many dialects present on the island. However, the “common” Malagasy language remains a unifying element between populations of diverse origins, who manage to understand one another despite the diversity of regional languages (Rabenilaina, 1993). It is by emphasizing these local dialects and integrating them into the official language that the Malagasy have succeeded in preserving part of their identity in the face of cultural and linguistic globalization. Nevertheless, these dialectal variations are often ignored, as some thirty dialects coexist with the official language (Rajaonarimanana, 1994), thus hampering teaching in standard Malagasy.

At secondary school, during the period of Malgachisation, teachers from Antananarivo believed they could make themselves understood by their pupils simply by expressing themselves in official Malagasy (Merina), whereas they should have adapted to the intonations and basic vocabulary of the regions where they worked. The textbooks used in schools were written in the Merina dialect. The rejection of the idea of considering coastal dialects as primary sources for expanding Malagasy language vocabularies led to problems in defining official Malagasy and implementing Malgachisation.

Some have considered that official Malagasy is in fact the Merina dialect (Zeny, 1983; Rajaoarimanana, 1994), which was used to translate the Malagasy Constitution. According to Malagasy linguists, all dialects, including Merina, have the same roots, which could be called common Malagasy.

To overcome these tensions between speakers of different dialects, it would be desirable for official Malagasy to be defined as all the country's different languages.

Since the majority of Malagasy executives were of Merina origin, it was common practice for them to use their own language when expressing themselves in Malagasy. As the coastal populations were the largest in number, however, they sought to slow the advance of the Merina by resorting to the French language.

In fact, this is why President Tsiranana maintained French-language education.

Faced with this situation, the education system became a battleground for the various political currents. The majority of Tsiranana's collaborators were elected representatives from the coastal areas. At the time, Malagasy who rose to senior management positions were seen as dark-skinned Frenchmen. To be an advanced Malagasy was to be able to express oneself fluently in French and to live the French way. At the time, Laurent Botokeky was in charge of this educational policy. The slogan he repeated at the time was: “one village, one public elementary school”. The aim of this educational policy was to help coastal populations catch up with the Merina, who were completely bilingual. The aim of the education policy at the time, which promoted bilingualism in education, was to enable coastal people to catch up with the Merina in terms of schooling.

The Malgachisation has also had an impact on the restructuration of educational curricula. It has been an object of many scientific analyses and syndicate speeches.

The introduction of contents in Malagasy language aimed to help pupils to put in order his geographical environment and historical facts which took place there. The objective was to make young people and the Malagasy population in general, discover what they share in terms of common cultural and social characteristics. On the one hand, educational subjects ought to be composed of scientific and technical disciplines matching the local contexts to train the executives that the country needs. On the other hand, arts and humanities such as philosophy, geography, arts history, identity carrying disciplines should aim to help develop a new mindset, a territorial and national consciousness.

Despite the awareness of Malagasy language specialists of the importance for pupils to know the culture and language of their country, the context of independence was not sufficiently favourable to achieve this. All eyes were still focused on the “European model” (Zeny, 1983). The government was criticized for its will to maintain what Zeny (1983) described as a “hybrid sort of school”, which was already suspected at the time of remaining at a derisory level. European schools were the models to be reproduced (Ratsiraka, 1975; Zeny, 1983). At the end of the day, it can be argued that efforts to adapt school textbooks highlighted political disagreements over the interpretation of bilingualism and independence (Zeny, 1983).

### **3.2. The Malgachisation of education under Ratsiraka**

It was not until President Tsiranana was deposed in 1972 that the Malagasy language became a fully-fledged language of instruction in all state schools in Madagascar. This Malgachisation played an essential role in enabling Malagasy people to promote and enhance their language and cultural heritage. Even though languages, like civilizations, are rarely completely self-sufficient (Zeny, 1983). The curriculum was not translated into Malagasy until President Ratsiraka came to power in 1975. He thus implemented the Malgachisation of education in all its forms (Ratsiraka, 1975).

The education policy of the Second Republic, defined by law no. 78-040 of 17 July 1978, was based on three pillars: democratization, decentralization and Malgachisation. (1) The aim of democratization was to guarantee that all Malagasy, without exception, have access to basic education, which would enable them to integrate society; (2) The decentralization of educational structures resulted in the creation of a public primary school by fokontany (county), a general secondary school by firaisana (Municipality), a secondary school by fivondronana (District) and a university by faritany (Province); and (3) Malgachisation mainly took the form of the adoption of Malagasy as the language of instruction, with the

exception of higher education, which remained in French.

The Malagasy language has always been used by the country's populations to pass their cultures, values, philosophical concepts and know-how on to their descendants, even though the country has been colonized. English missionaries used it to teach children to write and read. The fact that the Bible could be translated into Malagasy shows that this language has the same potential and the same cultural value as all the other languages into which it has been translated. At the time, Raison-Jourde (1977) argued that the most elementary pedagogical wisdom dictates using the child's own language to help him or her acquire any knowledge that is deemed relevant.

Ratsiraka's Charter of the Revolution unequivocally denounced France's former relationship with Madagascar, which he described as based on “colonial aggression and the imperialist exploitation of its human and material resources” (Ratsiraka, 1975). These criticisms led to the dismissal of President Philibert Tsiranana and the emergence of a rupture from France. According to Deleris (1986), it brought the winds of poverty into the country.

President Ratsiraka's agenda called into question the colonial school, which was presented as benevolent, accusing it of being a factor of division within the Malagasy culture or of destroying traditional society. The school, modelled on the Western model, did in fact seem to maintain the objective attributed to it by its initiators (Zeny, 1983). Even if it was used as a tool for cultural dissemination in a different society, it remained essentially an activity reserved for an elite. It broke up society into sub-groups that were inevitably hostile and rival. According to Ader, the school was perceived by the population as a means of gaining access to a more enviable lifestyle and income (Zeny, 1983).

However, the new ethic and civic education program did not deviate significantly from the old one. It should be noted that the submission of children to their parents is a cultural norm among the Malagasy, whatever their age or

living situation. The family hierarchy is respected by all.

The school's influence cannot really aspire to change this structure, which is firmly established in the traditional education system. For example, moral and civic education should have been based on Malagasy practices, customs and traditions, gradually moving towards social and civic laws, rather than being inspired by European educational curricula. Whatever the case, the Malgachisation of the curriculum content and the language of instruction inevitably involved redefining the place accorded to French in primary education in Madagascar. French, which had previously been the "official" language of the school, suddenly found itself in the position of a "foreign language". This new status required the introduction of a teaching method adapted to this new situation. It soon became apparent that the school textbooks, which had been produced during the neo-colonial era, were no longer suitable for the Malagasy primary education system as a whole (Zeny, 1983). Nonetheless, the French language maintained a predominant position in relation to the Malagasy language, if we consider the Malagasy expression "teny baiko". In Malagasy, teny refers to the word or language, and baiko means order. This Malagasy expression therefore refers to the French language and reflects the hierarchical status of the person using it (Rakoto Ramiarantsoa et al., 2015). Madagascar was a member of the Francophonie from March 1970 to December 1977, then became a member again in December 1989, after a period of absence from 1977 to 1989. From 1976 to 1993, a period of seventeen consecutive years, President Ratsiraka was unable to resolve the country's economic difficulties, while claiming to want to build a renewed state. After unsuccessfully attempting to "Malagasise" education, he re-established ties with France in 1989 within the context of La Francophonie (Deleris, 1986). Given this failure, the Malagasy have tended to draw a parallel between this period and that of Tsiranana. Tsiranana's presidency remains a defining period for the older generation. Ratsiraka's tenure, on the other hand, epitomised the malfunctioning of the education system. In this respect, Deleris (1986) asserted

that the regression of education in Madagascar was caused by the Malgachisation of teaching.

Even today, our elders still refer to Tsiranana's presidency when assessing the difficulties they encounter in their daily lives. For them, the options taken by President Tsiranana were the most beneficial for the country and its people.

Stories told by older people indicate that people's living conditions have only worsened since that time. Their reflections today are based on the comfort of life they had and the protection afforded to them by the society of the time compared with today.

According to Roubaud's study (1999), parents are not particularly motivated to enrol their children in school. Once they have completed their studies, pupils return to their home villages because they could not find a job. In the absence of follow-up and job opportunities, the education system in Madagascar has continuously deteriorated. Once again, the revolutionaries disappointed the Malagasy by imposing the Malgachisation of education, while their own relatives had gone off to study at renowned schools in Europe (Deleris, 1986). To this day, moreover, France remains the preferred destination for Malagasy students to pursue their post-bac studies.

In this situation, Malgachisation has become the scapegoat for the regression of Madagascar's education system.

#### 4. Attempt of decolonization of education

*"Yet it is quite clear that no discipline, better than geography, can reveal to our children the complexity and changing face of today's world while instilling a deep sense of human unity and exalting the richness of humanity"* (Grenier, 1958).

It is undeniable that colonization profoundly transformed the social and economic structures of the Malagasy society, and that the school was one of the main tools that contributed to this upheaval.



Whatever the consequences of this colonial past, the role of the new Malagasy school should be to bridge the gap, to rediscover the Malagasy past and traditions in order to use them as the building blocks of Malagasy identity. It is vital that education in Madagascar focuses first and foremost on the revival of Malagasy values and culture. The pedagogical approach underlying the acquisition of this culture must therefore naturally focus on learning Malagasy cultural values and the search for a purely Malagasy filiation. With this in mind, using the expression “Our ancestors, the Gauls” should no longer be the way we relate to our history.

However, many observers have expressed reservations about this option and have pleaded Madagascar and its people to open up to the world around them.

But these two options are not mutually exclusive. They can be complementary. In the field of education, the objective of training Malagasy citizens rooted in the values and realities of Madagascar can be accompanied by the need to raise awareness and open up the Malagasy Youth to other cultures and to the world around them.

Madagascar has made this dynamic between rootedness and openness the pedagogical foundation on which all educational action is supposed to be based (Zeny, 1983). The teachers interviewed emphasized that the importance attached to the Malagasy language in the education system should not be interpreted as a desire to close down or isolate it.

Today, Geography courses currently attract the largest number of students to Malagasy universities. This situation provides an opportunity to re-examine the content of the geography syllabus.

It is essential for academics to look at the realities of the South, the countries of the South, and more specifically Madagascar, in order to decode them. Moreover, it is important that experienced geographers and historians continue to study these realities, with the aim of reflecting them back to them, like a mirror.

The process of decolonizing education involved questioning the transposed school system, its spirit, curricula and aims, in the former colonized territories. It was also a process of developing a new educational model, supposedly imagined and shaped by the Malagasy people and for their own needs. Nonetheless, this post-colonial renaissance took place within a variety of frameworks, as countries faced a number of challenges at the same time. One of the main challenges was to reconcile the promotion of local cultural identities with openness to global cultural diversity. It was also a question of meeting the national challenges of building and affirming national identity simultaneously.

In order to progress on the chosen road, to taking control of our history, our geography and the issues that affect the people of our society on a daily basis, we thought it would be a good idea to take a closer look at the historical path taken by the Malagasy education system after the country's decolonization. How did this superimposition or interaction between these different levels and dimensions unfold? Wasn't the variety of players the harbinger of a discourse with multiple and discordant sounds?

We believe that any forward-looking analysis must take account of the historical context in which it is set. After independence, Madagascar went through a period that showed the failure of geography teaching among the country's ruling elites, with a few exceptions, as well as among citizens who, on the whole, failed to mobilize to affirm the importance of territorial belonging and identity, which are essential to the common good of the regions.

It is all the more important to stress this obvious fact as it has a direct link with the teaching of geography. The contemporary geography of the countries of the South has largely freed itself from these traditional denominations, emphasizing the major mechanisms and the role of the various players. This does not prevent it from taking a close look at the interactions between people and their environment, and the extent to which the environment and development can be interconnected.

Over the last few decades, Madagascar has shifted from a division into six provinces to a division into twenty-three regions, based on a hierarchical system where decisions are taken from the top down. In this situation, we have to admit that Malagasy geographers are marginalized in this regional division policy. This situation is still based on the distribution inherited from the colonial period. However, to be effective, territorial organization should be based on a map drawn up locally, taking into account all the socio-political and economic aspects specific to each region. To serve the collective interest effectively, we believe that the initiative must come from the ground, with those who know the territories defining the contours, and not the other way around.

However, reality often reminds decision-makers that it is the territory that determines the map. The responsibility for producing these maps therefore lies with Malagasy geographers.

Unfortunately, Madagascar's geography has almost always been understood in terms of the exploitation of its natural resources in all their forms, to the detriment of the island's cultural dimension and social values. As a result, some researchers have begun to favour regional delimitations based on natural and/or historical boundaries, which has enabled many delimitations inherited from the colonial era to be maintained, despite changes in denomination.

All these factors combined to provide ample justification for examining the teaching of geography in Madagascar today.

The situation of the University of Toliara seems to us to be a good example of an attempt to decolonize the teaching of geography in Madagascar.

The University of Toliara is unique in that it welcomes students from public secondary schools who continue to practice bilingualism, as well as a minority of students from private secondary schools where French remains the main language of instruction. In this context, the bilingualism policy benefits the French language as well as students from French-speaking private schools.

For a long time, university lecturers were trained to transmit the values associated with the hegemony of French culture and civilization. Half of the modules taught in the geography department concerned the geography and history of France. It was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s that the intellectuals of Toliara were able in turn to write the geography and regional and local history of their region through the publication of their doctoral theses. In this regard, we can cite the works of Mansaré Marikandia (†), Dina Jeanne, Rejela Michel (†), Charles Clément Sévérin, Dimby Vaovolo, Napetoke Marcel (†), Bernard Koto... It should be noted, however, that without the agreements established with French universities and the financial support of the French government, these professors would not have been able to carry out their research. Today, the French government continues to attach great importance to supporting and funding Malagasy students wishing to study abroad, particularly in France, with the help of organizations such as CIRAD, IRD, AUF, SCAC and Campus France. When universities were first set up in Madagascar, particularly in Toliara, the teaching staff were exclusively cooperants who passed on their knowledge to the town's intellectuals, a phenomenon that continues to this day. The return of these young teacher-researchers to their home countries in the 1990s made it possible to incorporate the geography and regional history of Madagascar into the curriculum.

## **5. Towards curricula that take account of the country's geographical realities**

To break this deadlock, we (myself and my fellow historians and geographers) began to develop a syllabus better suited to the region, incorporating modules on Madagascar in general and the region specifically. Instead of dealing with the history of the French Revolution, which was already well documented on the web, we opted to explore regional histories, trying to link them to national history. It's an approach that reverses the way we educate our young people and guides them more effectively towards a better

knowledge of the history, geography and issues of their own country.

The aim is to introduce young people to Madagascar by focusing on the unique physical and cultural characteristics of each region, emphasizing the connections and similarities between those different geographical areas. This regional presentation focuses on identifying the physical and human characteristics of the regions as a whole. It offers a more or less detailed monographic study of each of those regions. Our aim is to equip future Malagasy executives with in-depth knowledge of the natural, economic and human resources and administrative organization of Madagascar's different regions. Previously, this geography focused exclusively on the political dimension of the various regions.

This means that education in Madagascar remains deeply influenced by its colonial legacy, limiting its evolution and adaptation to contemporary demands. In the absence of substantial reforms, the educational curriculum continues to rely largely on frameworks dating back to the 1980s, highlighting the urgent need for a structural update of the system.

Regarding history education, a recurring issue is the predominance of a historical narrative centered on Imerina, to the detriment of a broader approach that integrates the diversity of sociopolitical dynamics across other regions of the country. However, Madagascar cannot be reduced to Imerina; each territory has its own historical trajectory, shaped by distinct political and social structures.

Thus, a curriculum reform would allow students to gain a deeper understanding of their regional historical environment by incorporating the study of the various *fanjakana* that have existed. Such an approach would not only enhance comprehension of the national past but also contribute to the development of an identity framework rooted in the country's historical plurality, fostering a more balanced and inclusive perspective on Malagasy heritage.

## 6. Conclusion: to adapt and to contextualize

As Madagascar seeks to assert itself and flourish internationally, it is crucial to reassess the approaches currently used by teachers so that they are more in line with the country's realities, needs and ambitions. Adopting a decolonized approach to teaching geography would enable Madagascar to take up a number of challenges, including the need to challenge the colonial and European-centered narratives that have long dominated school textbooks and curricula. It is vital to promote a more inclusive and diversified approach to the subject of Malagasy geography, incorporating the views of the local population, traditional knowledge and the realities on the ground. The Malagasy Young people must first understand their immediate environment and the history-geography of their region before exploring the rest of the world. Until now, the geography and history of Madagascar have been systematically reported and analyzed by people from outside the country. It is now essential for Malagasy researchers to take charge of these issues, ensuring that the voices of the indigenous people are included in the implementation of sustainable development and the sustainable management of natural resources.

By rethinking and decolonizing the teaching of geography, Madagascar will enable its citizens to understand the world around them, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally, and to better grasp and analyze today's geopolitical, environmental, social and economic issues.

Geography education in Madagascar, inherited from the French educational model, prioritizes a theoretical and universalist approach that tends to marginalize vernacular geographical knowledge. This curriculum structure limits the grounding of knowledge in local territorial dynamics and hinders the recognition of interactions between populations and their environment.

In other former French colonies, reforms have progressively integrated regional ecosystems and indigenous knowledge, as seen in curricular developments in Senegal and Vietnam. However, Madagascar has struggled

to adopt such an approach, which hampers the development of applied and contextual geography (essential for understanding the island's environmental and socio-economic challenges).

Such education would also help to revive the sense of belonging to the nation and encourage more active involvement by local people in building a sustainable future for their country. The establishment of protected areas in Madagascar, for example, absolutely must take into account local know-how and traditional knowledge, so that local people become more involved in the process of managing and taking care of their natural heritage and its habitats. We have regularly advocated this method and proposed it to the decision-making bodies with the aim of achieving better results.

The study highlights the need for a pedagogical reform that bridges international scientific frameworks with local knowledge. An integrative approach, fostering interaction between academic knowledge and territorial practices, would enhance the relevance of teaching and improve students' understanding of geographical realities.

This curriculum transformation could facilitate a deeper engagement with Madagascar's ecological and socio-spatial challenges while contributing to a broader global movement toward the decolonization of geographical knowledge.

It seems to us that integrating traditional and local knowledge into the teaching of geography in Toliara can be an effective approach to making the content taught more relevant and, above all, more meaningful to students. Oral histories and stories handed down from generation to generation can also be used to illustrate the interactions between the local population and their geographical environment. For example, the analysis of climate change must take account of local perceptions and realities, giving students the opportunity to get closer to the perspective of the inhabitants of Toliara and to deepen their knowledge of this region.

In addition, a more critical view of the implementation of conservation and development projects in this region has been developed, contributing to the growth of

students' critical thinking skills and their ability to analyze local issues and potential interventions implemented or to be implemented in a thoughtful manner.

By adopting a participative and interactive teaching approach, teachers can help students to develop the skills and attitudes needed to become active, committed citizens capable of making a significant contribution to solving the problems of their local community and their country more widely.

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