MADAGASCAR

Area: 226,756 sq. miles
Population: 31.7 million (2025).
Capital city: Antananarivo
Ethnic Groups: About 18 Malagasy groups (including Merina, Betsileo, Sihanaka, Betsimisaraka, Sakalava, Bara, and Antandroy), with mostly Austronesian and East African origins.
Languages: Malagasy and French (official).
Religion: 49.7% Christianity, 42.6% traditional (animism)and other indigenous beliefs; 7% Islam, 0.1% Hindu.
Life Expectancy: 63.6 years (2023).
Literacy: 77.48% (2022)
Economy: small agriculture, fishing, and mining; exports include vanilla, coffee, lychees, shrimp, and minerals (sapphires).
GDP: $15.3 Billion (2022); per capita around $517.
Gini (Income Inequality) Index: 42.6% (2012) to 36.7 (2022), suggesting rise in urban poverty.
Gender Inequality Index: 0.556 (high; ranked 143 out of 191).

A Meeting Place of Differences

Tsihy be lambanana ny ambanilantra.
"All who live under the sky are woven together like one big mat."

Madagascar is located nearly 500 km off the eastern coast of Africa in the Indian Ocean and was uninhabited until about 2,000 years ago. The world's fourth largest island and the second largest island nation, Madagascar was formed after the breakup of the supercontinent Gondwana 165 to 80 million years ago during the separation from Africa and then India, followed by volcanic activity and other geological processes. Beginning in the early first millennium CE, waves of settlers created the island's diverse human origins, reflected in the Malagasy language, an Austronesian language (via Indonesia) with later Bantu, French, and Arabic influences. Not only people and languages suggest the role of Madagascar as a meeting place of differences. The island's flora and fauna include both unique and endemic species (90% of its wildlife, including megafauna, giant lemurs and the flightless elephant bird) and the introduction and transfer of foreign crops and herds from South Asia, East Africa, and Indonesia. The island is believed to have been a critical point of introduction for bananas, the Asian yam, and other crops (Asian rice, mung beans, and cotton) eventually reaching the mainland continent of Africa. Madagascar became part of the Swahili-Arab-Indian trading network by 1000 CE.

The cultures and the ecologies of Madagascar are unique. The ritual known as Famadihana ("the turning of the bones") is a sacred and joyful ceremony in which relatives gather to exhume the remains of family ancestors, rewrapping them in new burial cloth, and dancing with them every five to seven years. The ritual recreates the shared bonds of family among the living and ensures the memory and lingering spirits of the dead whose fully decomposed remains will one day be released to become ancestors.

Political Memories and Manipulations

Ny teny toy ny atody: raha foy manan'elatra.
"Words are like eggs: when they are hatched they have wings."

Oral histories record the early political communities established by Malagasy people, descended from the Maanyan speakers of Borneo, other Indonesians, and East Africans, who participated in a significant long-distance trade In the Indian Ocean beginning between about 600 CE and 1000 CE. State formation culminated with the Kingdom of Imerina (c.1540-1897) in the Central Highlands of the island, where a succession of royal monarchs ruled over smaller groups and the international trade that brought firearms and skilled blacksmiths, as well as domesticated cattle during the reign of Ralambo (r.1575-1612). While early Portuguese efforts to establish a settlement had failed, later treaties increased European influence and a robust slave and provisioning trade that included Southern Africa in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. The Merina empire industrialized, using forced labor and water-powered manufacturing of military hardware in the late 18th and 19th centuries. The French eventually overthrew the monarchy, sending the queen into exile, and formally colonizing the island in 1896. The Menalamba Revolt (1895-7), once thought of as an early nationalist rebellion, is now understood by historians to have been a revolt against the indigenous Merina administrative structure and forced labor system, which the French proposed to reinstall in the colony.

Secret societies kept resistance to French oppression alive during the colonial era, which also witnessed a handful of Malagasy benefitting from assimilationist opportunities. Nationalists gained ground when the colonial administration supported the French Vichy (pro-German Nazi) government in 1940. During World War II, wartime food shortages and famine (1943-4) also led to armed resistance and a nationalist-backed “Great Rebellion” in 1947. French forces brutally suppressed the nationalists and at least 90,000 were killed. Despite this initial failure, the French moved forward towards self-government for their African colonies in the following decade. Led by politician Philibert Tsiranana (1912-1978), who had protested colonial rule while a student in France, the country won independence in 1960. Later toppled by an era of student strikes and protests in his own country that demanded an educational system that served the underprivileged and was based on Malagasy rather than French culture, Tsiranana was removed from office in 1972, the beginning of decades of political instability and uncertainty. Finally, after a Fourth Republic and stymied national elections, constitutional order was restored and a coalition government took power under Andry Rajoelina (b.1974), in 2018 and again in 2023.

Today, after many extinctions, the economy has swung towards ecotourism that favors a recognition of the unique biodiversity of Madagascar. In a society of differences, there are also multiple versions of everything that are not unlike magical manipulations of past and present. As the filmmaker Raymond Rajaonarivelo, noted “Everyone told me a story, but never the same one. That gave rise to a rumour, Tabataba, which seemed to me to reflect what I had heard there.”[1]

----Candice Goucher, September 2025

Suggested Readings and Viewings

Cesar Paes, *Angano…Angano…Tales of Madagascar* (1989, 64 min.) Documentary film.
Raymond Rajaonarivelo, director, *Tabataba* (debut Feature Film, France/Madagascar, 1988).
About

[1] Raymond Rajaonariveto quoted by the MUBI website: https://mubi.com/en/cast/raymond-rajaonarivelo

the 1947 Uprising, the film won the Audience Award in Cannes.
Kevin Shillington, *History of Africa* [Third Edition] (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
Genese Marie Sodikoff, *Forest and Labor in Madagascar: From Colonial Concession to Global Biosphere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).