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### 3 The French Revolution as a Period of Territorialization of the Colonial Empire? A Southern Indian Ocean Perspective

Usually, the French Revolution is described as the beginning of something: of modern France, of human rights, and of French centralization. The French Revolution is supposed to have created the French nation and the French territorial state. According to the old story, the Ancien Régime experienced numerous contradictions, which were solved by the French Revolution. The French Revolution is considered to have unified Frenchmen and homogenized its territory.

There is some truth to this story. The territories ruled by the French king were far from being homogeneous before 1789, and centralization and homogenization were critical aims during the French Revolution.<sup>1</sup> The overseas “establishments” – as they were mostly called – had a very different character. Some were only trading posts, others were plantation colonies with a large slave and freemen population, and still others comprised vast territories with substantial Native population. The southern Indian Ocean encompassed two plantation colonies on rather small islands: the Mascarene Islands, that is the Île Bourbon (now Île de La Réunion) and the Île de France (now Mauritius). It also comprised the vast island of Madagascar, where the French had trading posts on the east coast and where they repeatedly tried to build colonies with a Native and imported slave population.

It can also hardly be denied that the first French Empire was familiar with a series of inconsistencies and contradictions. Overseas possessions were considered a part of France and, at the same time, mere instruments of the mother country, subjugated to its interests and not equal to other provinces. These territories were governed by governors and *intendants* like any part of France; they had no autonomous rights and French laws simply applied. But, on the other hand, the Code noir (the code governing the treatment of the black population) was not compatible with French law, which provoked a series of conflicts. Last but not least, there was a gap between the pretension of the crown to govern

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<sup>1</sup> M. Ozouf, “La Révolution française et la perception de l’espace national: fédérations, fédéralisme et stéréotypes régionaux,” in: J.C. Boogman and G.N. van der Plaat (eds.), *Federalism*, Den Haag: Nijhof, 1980, pp. 217–241.

these territories like any other and the great autonomy of local actors who lived in countries so distant from Versailles and Paris that the power of the king and his ministers was in fact much more limited than would first appear.<sup>2</sup>

Did the French Revolution, however, solve these contradictions and territorialize the French Empire? The abolition of slavery in 1794, arguably the most important innovation of the revolutionary area in the realm of overseas history, points in this direction. As Matthias Middell shows, this law and the Constitution of 1795 suppressed legal peculiarities and “completed the process of territorialization by making the colonies an integrated part of the nation”.<sup>3</sup> However, this is only one half of the story. In fact, the abolition of slavery in 1794 and the integration of colonies into the French nation in 1795 were largely legal fictions for three reasons. First, some territories were conquered by the British by that time; so the new laws never applied. For example, Martinique, one of the most important plantation colonies, came under British rule in February 1794. Second, the control of overseas territories was virtually non-existent in the revolutionary era. In Saint-Domingue, it was men like Toussaint, Rigaud, and Pétion who exercised political power. On the Mascarenes, the commissioners of the National Convention were expelled and the law abolishing slavery was never applied; and, in 1810, these islands were conquered by the British. Third, even in the territories where slavery was abolished, a kind of serfdom was introduced.<sup>4</sup>

Exploring the history of the French colonial empire in the revolutionary era, we have to ask was this period the dissolution, rather than the territorialization, of the French colonial empire? The French revolutionaries surely endeavoured to create a unified space comprising the motherland and the

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview on the organization of the French colonial empire and its history, see P. Haudrère, *L'Empire des rois: 1500–1789*, Paris: Denoël, 1997. For insights into the way royal power was challenged, see C. Frostin, *Les Révoltes blanches à Saint-Domingue aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles: Haïti avant 1789*, Paris: L'École, 1975. For the tensions between the Code noir and French law in the motherland, see S. Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> M. Middell, “France, the Abolition of Slavery, and Abolitionisms in the Eighteenth Century”, in: D. Tricoire (ed.), *Enlightened Colonialism: Civilization Narratives and Imperial Politics in the Age of Reason*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 247–268.

<sup>4</sup> O. Glied, *Saint-Domingue und die Französische Revolution: Das Ende der weißen Herrschaft in einer karibischen Plantagenwirtschaft*, Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2011, pp. 468–508; F. Régent, *La France et ses esclaves: de la colonisation aux abolitions (1620–1848)*, Paris: Grasset, 2007, pp. 213–262; C. Wanquet, *La France et la première abolition de l'esclavage, 1794–1802: le cas des colonies orientales, Ile de France (Maurice) et La Réunion*, Paris: Karthala, 1998.

colonies, but did they succeed? In historiography, it has long been recognized that the overseas dominions were largely torn apart in the late eighteenth century, and the distinction between a “first” and a “second” French colonial empire is very common.<sup>5</sup> These dissolution tendencies in the empire, stemming both from revolts and British conquests, highlight central features in the history of the French Revolution overseas: conflicts over legitimacy of political power and the disparity between projects and realizations. In the overseas colonies, political power largely collapsed in the late 1780s and the 1790s. For this reason, the projects formulated by French imperial elites were usually very hard to realize.<sup>6</sup>

This chapter briefly explores two topics. First, it casts light on the policies and political projects towards Madagascar in the revolutionary era. It highlights the lack of consensus in political discussions and of coherency in political planning during this period. For the French in the Indian Ocean and in France, it was not clear what kind of space the French establishments on Madagascar did and should constitute. Second, it describes very briefly processes of respatialization that actually did take place on Madagascar in the early nineteenth century. It shows that these were only loosely connected with French imperial policy.

## The Malagasy Kingdoms and the French Assimilationist Dream

In order to understand respatialization processes around 1800, it is necessary to bear in mind that the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries experienced the formation of large kingdoms on Madagascar. On the west coast, Sakalava princes founded kingdoms that were often integrated into Muslim and European trade, especially that of Boina. On the north-east coast, partly in reaction to Sakalava expansion, a prince named Ratsimilaho, son of English pirate Tom Tew and a Malagasy princess, created the Betsimisaraka Kingdom (*betsimisaraka* meaning “the many unified”). Ratsimilaho had

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<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., the *Encyclopedia Universalis*: J. Bruhat, s.v. “Français, empire colonial”, *Encyclopedia Universalis*, <http://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/empire-colonial-francais/> (last modified 1 August 2018) or the two separate articles on Wikipedia: *Wikipedia*, “Premier empire colonial français”, [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Premier\\_empire\\_colonial\\_fran%C3%A7ais](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Premier_empire_colonial_fran%C3%A7ais) (last modified 26 July 2018) and *Wikipedia*, “Second empire colonial français”, [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second\\_empire\\_colonial\\_fran%C3%A7ais](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_empire_colonial_fran%C3%A7ais) (last modified 23 July 2018).

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., the numerous projects under Napoleon: Y. Benot, *La Démence coloniale sous Napoléon*, Paris: La Découverte, 2006.

served under the king of Boina, but then he unified local princes of the east coast with the Zana-Malata (Malagasy-European mestizos) in order to offer protection against the Sakalava. His success was partly due to a synthesis of Malagasy and foreign military techniques. The Betsimisaraka Kingdom also gained significance because it became the main trading partner of the French colonies of the Mascarenes.<sup>7</sup> Although these kingdoms were significant in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they did not last until modern times. Some were conquered by the Merina Kingdom in the early nineteenth century, while others – like the Betsimisaraka Kingdom – had already disappeared by that time, destroyed by internal conflicts. Eventually, their capital cities lost significance or even disappeared.

In the late Ancien Régime, the French had diverse and contradictory policies towards Madagascar. They were present in two parts of the Malagasy east coast: the Anosy region in the south-east and the Betsimisaraka region from Mahavelona to Angontsy, along the entire north-east coast. The Versailles governments ordered the creation of several establishments in these regions. They expected the French officials on Madagascar to have peaceful relations with the Malagasy princes and to develop commerce rather than trying to conquer the island. This policy was often linked with the expectation that the contact between the French and the Malagasy would lead to an acculturation – a “civilization” – and even to an assimilation of the latter – a “francization”. This project was officially endorsed by Governor Maudave during his colonization attempt of Anosy around 1770.

According to Maudave, the colonization of Madagascar with “soft means” was an easy undertaking. All was needed was the offering of protection to a local king, and the “chiefs” would compete to gain the French’s favours. News of commercial opportunity as well as French justice and superior society would propagate quickly throughout Madagascar, and many Malagasy would join the French colony. These Malagasy would live in peace and become Frenchmen.<sup>8</sup> According to the governor, the reason why this project was so easy to achieve was the superiority of European civilization, which the Malagasy would naturally acknowledge:

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7 H. Deschamps, *Histoire de Madagascar*, Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1960, pp. 92–127; R. Kent, *Early Kingdoms in Madagascar 1500–1700*, New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970; S. Randrianja and S. Ellis, *Madagascar: A Short History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009, pp. 77–98; G.M. Berg, “The Sacred Musket: Tactics, Technology and Power in Eighteenth-Century Madagascar”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 27 (1985) 2, pp. 261–279.

8 Archive nationales d’Outre-Mer (hereafter cited as: ANOM), C 5<sup>A</sup> 2, No. 25, [Maudave] to Dumas and Poivre, undated; ANOM, C 5<sup>A</sup> 2, no. 48, Report of a Clerk of the Minister of the Navy about Maudave’s Project, 19 March 1768; ANOM, C 5<sup>A</sup> 2, no. 63, Maudave to Praslin, 30 August 1768; ANOM, C 5<sup>A</sup> 2, no. 66, fol. 10, Excerpts from Maudave’s diary, undated.

Although the Malagasy have in almost all respects a high opinion of themselves, they have a surprising tendency to think of themselves as naturally submitted to the white men. This superstition comes from our real superiority, which they cannot fail to notice when they compare their miserable social organization [*police*], their unhappy and restless lives and the rudeness of their arts with that what they have seen from our mores, our industry, and our way of life. They admire us and say that they are animals in comparison to us.<sup>9</sup>

Maudave's strategy was thus to demonstrate the moral and technical superiority of the French in order to foster imperial expansion. Because of that, he bought cattle that the princes wanted to donate him in order to demonstrate his munificence. He stated that all Malagasy were deeply impressed by the bust of Louis XV that sat in the governor's house. Maudave continually thought of new ways to gain the Malagasy's respect and admiration. He proposed creating a cavalry corps, building a new grand governor's house and new fortifications, and using cattle to plough the fields.<sup>10</sup>

Maudave was not alone in propagating assimilationist ideas. During the creation of an establishment in the Bay of Antongila in the early 1770s, commander Móric Beňovský also referred to the project of a "soft" imperial expansion owing to the demonstration of civilizational superiority and the resulting civilization and assimilation of Malagasy people. Beňovský told his superiors and the European reading public the story of successful and humane colonization. He gave very little information about real events in the French-Malagasy encounter. Instead, he created a largely fictional narrative in several steps. In his reports to the minister of the navy, he claimed to have soon realized what Maudave had only projected, that is to say to have submitted significant parts of Madagascar to French rule, civilized its inhabitants, and built towns and roads. On 22 March 1774, only five weeks after his arrival in the Bay of Antongila in north-east Madagascar, Beňovský announced to the minister of the navy that he had dried the swamps around the colony he had founded, Louisbourg, and built a great range of facilities. Impressed by this, the "chiefs

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<sup>9</sup> Muséum d'histoire naturelle (hereafter cited as: MHN), Ms. 3001, 27, excerpts from Maudave's diary: "Ce qui est étonnant, c'est que quoiqu'en général, ils aient presque sur tous les points assez bonne opinion d'eux mêmes ils se condamnent à une soumission naturelle envers les blancs. Ce préjugé est fondé sur la supériorité réelle que nous avons sur eux et qui n'a pas pu leur échapper quand ils comparent leur misérable police, leur vie errante, malheureuse et agitée, la grossièreté de leurs arts avec ce qu'ils ont pu voir jusqu'à présent de nos moeurs, de notre industrie et de notre manière de vivre en tombant dans l'admiration et ils disent qu'en effet ils ne sont que des bêtes comparés à nous."

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., fol. 11, 29, 39, 43, 63.

of this part of the island” had sworn allegiance to the king of France.<sup>11</sup> Five months later, in September, he claimed to have built a new colony on a healthy inland plain.<sup>12</sup> The “submitted chiefs” were all enthusiastic about the *douceur* (softness) of French rule, and they voluntarily placed troops under the governor’s command. According to Beňovský, the manners and customs of the Natives had already changed for the better. They had stopped betraying and poisoning each other and no longer killed small children born on “unlucky days”. The other Malagasy begged to live under such a good government.<sup>13</sup> A few months later, he reported that all the chiefs of northern Madagascar had recognized his authority<sup>14</sup> and that the Natives now paid great tributes.<sup>15</sup> In May 1775, Beňovský asserted that he had subdued the mighty Boina Kingdom in north-west Madagascar without having led a war. The Malagasy, who loved the French, had exerted pressure on the king, who had accepted to pay a huge tribute.<sup>16</sup>

Beňovský claimed to have established French rule on the whole northern half of Madagascar only with the “soft means” of persuasion and good example. According to him, the Malagasy came from all the parts of the island in order to enjoy a happy existence under such a just government.<sup>17</sup> Even when he acknowledged that he had waged war on a local population, Beňovský always underlined his humane and just behaviour. For example, he wrote that while besieging the Sakalava, he had provided them with food and drink.<sup>18</sup>

According to the texts penned by officers like Maudave and Beňovský, the Malagasy would voluntarily become Frenchmen in the long run, French laws would be applied, and violence would be unnecessary.<sup>19</sup> These officials, and the employees and ministers supporting them, dreamed of a territorialized French Empire. However, there was often a disparity between the official policy endorsed by Versailles and the policy of French actors living on the ground. The commander of the Anosy colony, Maudave, tried first to apply the civilizing programme, but soon realized that he was politically impotent and was barely tolerated by the king of Anosy. For that reason, he did not manage to impress

11 ANOM, C 5<sup>A</sup> 4, no. 55, fol. 1–2.

12 ANOM, C 5<sup>A</sup> 4, no. 35, fol. 105.

13 ANOM, C 5<sup>A</sup> 4, no. 36, fol. 47, 48, 49.

14 ANOM, C 5<sup>A</sup> 5, no. 26.

15 ANOM, C 5<sup>A</sup> 5, no. 28.

16 ANOM, C 5<sup>A</sup> 5, no. 41; AMAE, Asie 4, no. 57, fol. 131–132.

17 ANOM, C 5<sup>A</sup> 5, no. 96, fol. 1.

18 ANOM, C 5<sup>A</sup> 3, no. 14, fol. 86.

19 D. Tricoire, *Der koloniale Traum. Imperiales Wissen und die französisch-madagassischen Begegnungen im Zeitalter der Aufklärung*, Köln: Böhlau-Verlag, 2018, pp. 107–114, 137–140, 155–163.

and influence Anosy society. In view of such meagre results, he considered other, less peaceful means: he announced his intention “to keep a tight rein on [the Malagasy] through terror and animate them through brandy”.<sup>20</sup> For his part, Beňovský apparently never endeavoured to “civilize” or “assimilate” the inhabitants of north-east Madagascar. He simply tried to conquer the region, in which he failed. His narratives had thus little to do with his activities and experiences on the spot.<sup>21</sup>

With regard to the core of the Betsimisaraka Kingdom, the region of Mahavelona (Foulpointe), French imperial elites had a somewhat different policy. Some imperial agents in the southern Indian Ocean – both on the Mascarenes and Madagascar – tried to exercise political influence by supporting certain Betsimisaraka factions against others in the numerous wars of succession. In the early 1770s, the governor of the Île de France (present-day Mauritius) allied, without informing his superiors in Versailles, with Malagasy noblemen and a French adventurer called La Bigorne (who was married to a Malagasy woman) in order to install a client on the throne of the Betsimisaraka Kingdom, Queen Betia.<sup>22</sup> In 1780, the administrators of the Madagascar establishment again supported noblemen opposed to the reigning king of the Betsimisaraka, with the help of a French-Malagasy adventurer called Diard, who was La Bigorne’s foster (or perhaps biological) son. They helped these noblemen to create their own “republic” (as it is called in French sources) while Diard soon tried to seize power in the Betsimisaraka Kingdom.<sup>23</sup> In this way, some colonial officials and French-Malagasy actors tried to control the east coast. Their aim was not to establish an official colony of the French crown like the plantation islands were since the seventeenth century, or the trading post in India had become after the Seven Years’ War (1756–1763), but instead an informal domination.

Undoubtedly, not only this policy was never official, but it was unknown in Versailles and Paris that the governors of the Mascarene Islands tried to gain influence over the Betsimisaraka Kingdom by such means. According to the instructions of the minister of the navy, the administrators of the Mascarene were supposed to have good relations with the king of the Betsimisaraka and

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<sup>20</sup> ANOM, C 5<sup>A</sup> 2, no. 66, fol. 2, 9, excerpts from Maudave’s diary: “Nous les contiendrons par la terreur et nous les exciterons par l’eau de vie.”

<sup>21</sup> Tricoire, *Der koloniale Traum*, pp. 122–126, 140–151.

<sup>22</sup> These facts are only known through a letter by *intendant* Pierre Poivre to the minister of the navy: ANOM, E 184, personnel file of Filet, called La Bigorne, Poivre to the minister of the navy Boynes, 12 February 1772.

<sup>23</sup> ANOM, C 5<sup>A</sup> 7, no. 8, fol. 12, 16–17, Diary of Bellecombe and Chevreau, 177; ANOM, E 133, personal file of Diard, fol. 3, “Copie du mémoire justificatif de la conduite de Diard”.

develop commercial ties. For this reason, the governors of the Mascarene never mentioned their policy of indirect rule in official reports. Rather, they tried to give the impression that they fostered peaceful relations between France and the Betsimisaraka king. The stories involving French-Malagasy adventurers show that through intermarriage and other kinds of personal ties a French-Malagasy milieu had emerged during the eighteenth century. This milieu had its own dynamics and could inspire policies on the ground, diverging markedly from the concepts and projects of the ministry of the navy. The autonomy of imperial agents, even of the official representatives of the crown, was *de facto* substantial.

In the 1790s, there was a further gap between the official policy and violent complex conflicts on the ground involving as well Malagasy as French actors. In 1791, the National Legislative Assembly named commissioners for the East Indies. One of them was Daniel Lescallier, who arrived in August 1792 on the Île de France and visited Madagascar's north-east coast for a week. On the Île de France, Lescallier received information on Madagascar from Cossigny, a neighbour and friend of former Governor Maudave. Cossigny was a famous plantation owner and scholar who held very similar views on Madagascar as Maudave. As a result, Lescallier took over the assimilationist dream. He became convinced that white men had a natural authority and should "civilize" the Malagasy. The French could make a colony out of Madagascar and turn the Malagasy into Frenchmen only on the basis of the prestige that their civilizational superiority allegedly conferred on them instead of resorting to violence.<sup>24</sup> Lescallier was convinced that white men had an *ascendant naturel* (natural authority) over the simple-minded Malagasy people.<sup>25</sup> For this reason, he believed it was possible to "conquer all the island through friendship and affection".<sup>26</sup>

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24 ANOM, C 4 107, fol. 118–120, Lescallier to the minister of the navy, August 13, 1792; ANOM, Séries géographiques, MAD 233 512, copies of letters and documents by Lescallier, 24–26: "Instructions pour M. Gosse", undated, 25; Y. Sylla, "La côte orientale de Madagascar et la Révolution française: une situation paradoxale et imaginaire", in: C. Wanquet and B. Jullien (eds.), *Révolution française et Océan indien*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996, pp. 181–188; Y. Sylla, "Un envoyé de l'Assemblée nationale à Madagascar en 1792: La mission de Daniel Lescallier", in: G. Jacob (ed.), *Regards sur Madagascar et la Révolution française*, Antananarivo: Édition CNAPMAD, 1990, pp. 63–69.

25 ANOM, Séries géographiques, MAD 233 512, copies of letters and documents by Lescallier, pp. 24–26: "Instructions pour M. Gosse", undated, p. 25.

26 Copy of a letter by Lescallier to the minister of the navy: ANOM, Séries géographiques, MAD 233 512, copies of letters and documents by Lescallier, p. 29, Lescallier to the minister of



While on Madagascar, Lescallier interpreted the audience he had with the king of the Betsimisaraka, Zakavola, according to this theory. Lescallier asserted to have turned the Betsimisaraka Kingdom into a French protectorate, which was in his eyes the first step towards colonization, civilization, and francization of Madagascar. According to him, King Zakavola had recognized the authority of France and the Betsimisaraka Kingdom had become part of the French Empire, which he wrote to the minister of the navy and the National Legislative Assembly. However, the result of the audience was quite different. Zakavola had only expressed his willingness not to judge the Frenchmen committing crimes but to deliver them to the French authorities instead. Each group was to be judged according to its country's laws. This was already customary and had nothing to do with an alleged recognition of French authority. Furthermore, Zakavola did not even attend the ceremony renewing the alliance with the French and did not take any oath.<sup>27</sup>

In fact, Zakavola did not recognize any French superiority. But he needed the alliance, or at least the neutrality, of the French because his own authority was contested. Indeed, the Betsimisaraka Kingdom was at the eve of a civil war. In the next years, French merchants were regularly robbed or even killed. In the 1790s, the Betsimisaraka Kingdom collapsed.<sup>28</sup> Things had not developed as Lescallier had expected. Accordingly, there was a substantial divergence between Lescallier's dream of expansion and authority of the French colonial empire, on the one hand, and the complex political circumstances on Madagascar's east coast, on the other hand.

## Francization or Creation of Places of Relegations?

During these years, the political situation had also changed radically in France. Lescallier's friends had lost power. The new National Convention was dominated by other men than the Législative. It adopted a new plan for Madagascar: convinced by the member of parliament of the Île de France, the physician and Montagnard (a member of the political group *La Montagne*) Benoît Gouly, it

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the navy, St. Anne, Seychelles, 7 September 1792: "le plan de conduite, qui peut nous faire conquérir pour ainsi dire par amitié et affection toute cette Isle".

<sup>27</sup> ANOM, Séries géographiques, MAD 233 512, copies of letters and documents by Lescallier, Procès verbal des opérations faites à Madagascar par Mr. Lescallier.

<sup>28</sup> J.-C. Hébert, "Les remous du bouillonnement révolutionnaire sur nos postes de traite à Madagascar (1792–1803)", in: Wanquet and Jullien (eds.), *Révolution française et Océan indien*, pp. 167–180, at pp. 167–172.

decided in November 1793 to make a convict colony out of Madagascar's south-east. Establishing a completely different idea for this part of the colonial empire, this region was to be a place of relegation for beggars and criminals. Of significance is the fact that the local population was totally absent from the reflexions of the author of the law – he simply did as if the region were empty. When an employee of the Ministry of the Navy raised the question of how the Natives would react, Gouly simply asserted that he could not imagine that they would have any problems. In his view, south-east Madagascar belonged to the French since the seventeenth century and the Natives would acknowledge this fact.<sup>29</sup> Gouly's aim was not an integration of Madagascar into a territorialized French colonial empire. Following his ideas, in the law creating a convict colony, Madagascar was not considered a part of France *in spe*; there was no aim of territorialization, civilization, or assimilation. Gouly's inspiration was not the French Enlightenment, but instead likely the British convict colony in Botany Bay in Australia. Like in Gouly's project, in south-east Australia, prisoners were settled and a colony was created with no idea of civilizing or in any way incorporating the Natives.<sup>30</sup>

Although the National Convention voted the law into effect, the convict colony was never established. However, other plans were also inspired by British policies at that time. After the abolition of slavery in 1794, the French elites discussed the idea of turning Madagascar into a kind of French Sierra Leone: Madagascar would be a colony for freed slaves. This project was appealing to both the proponents and the opponents of the abolition of slavery because nobody wanted a significant population of free "coloured" people in the French colonies. Not only Étienne Burnel, the commissioner of the National Convention who had been tasked with the application of the abolition law on the Mascarenes, endorsed it, but also Gouly, the representative of the planters. Depending on the authors, the new colony was conceived either as a place where "people of colour" would be wholly free or as a place of relegation. This diversity of projects demonstrates that the idea of francizing Madagascar was not totally abandoned in the late eighteenth century. Some authors linked the project of a Malagasy Sierra Leone with the old idea of an assimilationist policy. Whereas anti-abolitionist Gouly imagined Madagascar as a place of relegation for freed slaves, not as a part of a territorialized French Empire, Burnel had

<sup>29</sup> ANOM, C 4 108, fol. 163, "Paris, le 14 frimaire, an 2e de la republique. Le représentant du peuple Gouly au citoyen adjoint de la 5e division de la marine", 4 December 1793.

<sup>30</sup> Wanquet, *La première abolition de l'esclavage*; *Gazette nationale*, Sunday, 3 November 1793, 386; ANOM, C 4 108, fol. 344–345. For more details see Tricoire, *Der koloniale Traum*, pp. 191–193.

a very different vision of the French Sierra Leone *in spe*. For him, the immigration of freed and already francized slaves to Madagascar would help to civilize and assimilate the indigenous population. Burnel pursued an ideal that, like Lescallier's, maintained continuity with the Ancien Régime Enlightened ideas that had been so influential in Versailles.<sup>31</sup>

Lescallier, for his part, continued to promote the idea of an assimilation policy on Madagascar after his return to France under the Directory. Significantly, Lescallier had not gathered any new intelligence about Madagascar after this week-stay on the island in 1792. In the late 1790s and at the beginning of the nineteenth century, he still asserted that he had created a protectorate on Madagascar's east coast.<sup>32</sup> This is astonishing since not only the Betsimisaraka Kingdom (which the French allegedly protected) had collapsed in the 1790s, but also the French trading post in Mahavelona had been destroyed by the British in 1796, which the Ministry of the Navy had been informed of.<sup>33</sup> This surprisingly wide gap between political planning and realities on the ground shows how poorly the French elite designing the colonial policy was informed about the Indian Ocean world. Indeed, Lescallier was far from having a marginal position. Lescallier was, as director of the Bureau des Colonies, one of the most influential figures in colonial policy around 1800. Furthermore, although the main project of colonial policy was the "reconquest" of Saint-Domingue, the Indian Ocean in general and Madagascar in particular were viewed as important regions for world politics. For this reason, Lescallier convinced several ministers of the navy to send agents to Madagascar in order to realize his assimilationist plans. As a result of his projects, the French government planned to build on a colony and a kingdom that both did not exist anymore.<sup>34</sup> Rather than a lack of attention to Madagascar, the problem seems to have been the way the French government received information about the "Great Island", relying to a great extent on the alleged expertise of a few men like Lescallier, with few contacts to the French living or having lived on the island – not to speak of Natives.

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31 A. N., D/XXV/130, dossier 1019, no. 5, "Projet d'un mode d'exécution du décret du 16 pluviôse an deuxième, envoyé par les citoyens Besnard, Serres et Gouly, membres de la Convention le 14 fructidor an troisième aux assemblées coloniales des isles de France et de la Réunion", 31 August 1795, see articles 12 and 13; É. Burnel, *Essai sur les colonies orientales*, Paris, undated [1797], pp. 19–20; Wanquet, *La première abolition de l'esclavage*, pp. 83–91.

32 D. Lescallier, "Mémoire relatif à l'île de Madagascar, 1801", in: J. Valette, *Lescallier et Madagascar*, *Bulletin de Madagascar* 243 (1966), pp. 877–897.

33 Hébert, "Les remous du bouillonnement révolutionnaire", pp. 167–172.

34 ANOM, C 4 113, fol. 124.

Around 1800, the French elite did not share a common vision of Madagascar; imperial concepts were no more coherent than a few years before. Premier Consul Napoléon Bonaparte had a different vision of Madagascar than Lescallier: like Gouly, he saw the island as a future place of relegation, both for convicts, who were to be brought to southern Madagascar, and for freed slaves, who were to be brought to northern Madagascar. Bonaparte wanted to forbid racial “miscegenation”. He did not think at all about civilizing and assimilating the indigenous population. Like in the law of the National Convention, these were totally absent from his project. Bonaparte planned to send 300 “white” and 100 “black” soldiers as well as 400 convicts to Anosy. He envisioned deporting all the criminals of southern France to this region. In the north of Madagascar (i.e. in the Bay of Antongila and the Mahavelona regions), Bonaparte thought to deport “all black and coloured people from Saint-Domingue, Martinique, Guadeloupe, the Île de France and the Île de la Réunion whom we do not know what to do with them”, which would be controlled by sending some 400 French and 200 Polish soldiers.<sup>35</sup>

## Respatialization on Madagascar in the Early Nineteenth Century

Like many others, Lescallier’s, Gouly’s, and Bonaparte’s projects remained a dead letter. Again, there was a substantial divergence between French political plans and the reality on the ground. Lescallier, Bonaparte, and the Frenchmen drawing up imperial projects in the motherland seem to have largely ignored the new political situation on Madagascar. The early nineteenth century was undoubtedly a period of radical respatialization on Madagascar, and every French political project could not avoid these facts if it was to have chances to be realized.

The first major political change occurred among the Betsimisaraka: on the ruins of the Betsimisaraka Kingdom, new political actors seized power. Around 1800, Jean René became king of Toamasina (Tamatave), the most important commercial port on the east coast. Jean René had a French father and a Malagasy

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<sup>35</sup> Napoléon Bonaparte, “Notes sur l’expédition de Madagascar, par Bonaparte, premier consul: Pièce inédite tirée des minutes des Archives nationales, carton 3325–1173”, *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie de l’Est* 5 (1883), p. 499: “déporter de Saint-Domingue, de la Martinique, de la Guadeloupe, des îles de France, de la Réunion tous les noirs et hommes de couleur dont on ne saurait que faire”.

mother. Nonetheless, he first allied with the British (who had conquered the Mascarenes), not with the French.<sup>36</sup> This contributed to making all French expansion projects of the past years unrealistic.

Second, Andrianampoinimerina, the king of the modest principality of Ambohimanga, unified parts of the highlands in the late eighteenth century, creating the Merina Kingdom. He moved his residence to Antananarivo. This kingdom became more and more powerful in the early nineteenth century, and Radama I, who became the king of the Merina in 1810, subsequently conquered the east coast in the late 1810s and early 1820s, and then around two-thirds of Madagascar. He created the Kingdom of Madagascar, which existed until the French invasion at the end of the nineteenth century. This huge success partly had to do with European politics: like Jean René, Radama allied with the British, who helped him to equip his army. He created new forts on the coast, like Fort Manda in Mahavelona, the former residence of the Betsimisaraka kings. The alliance with the British, however, led to economic crisis and was abandoned in the second half of the 1820s. The creation of the Kingdom of Madagascar, nevertheless, went hand in hand with major political, demographic, and economic respatialization. It contributed to a further centralization of trade and crafts in the Merina lands, with urban centres growing and important industrial centres appearing in the highlands.<sup>37</sup>

In this context, the French during the Bourbon Restoration period (1814–1830) gave up any project of expansion on the Malagasy mainland and retreated instead to the small island of Nosy Boraha (Sainte-Marie). The founding father of the Nosy Boraha colony, commercial agent Sylvain Roux, had a very different concept than the Enlightenment assimilationism that had been influential during the French Revolution. He thought the Malagasy were not able to learn. According to him,

contrary to the assertions of journalists and modern philosophers, it is useless to endeavour to teach to the Malagasy to do anything useful for us. If they watch us working and being successful for a very long period of time, then perhaps will some of them try to imitate us. But only time can make such a miracle. [...] I have tried to convince them to take

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<sup>36</sup> Jean René played the French and British against each other and received support from both sides: MHN, Ms. 3001, Jean-René to Lord Farquhar, 1813; Randrianja and Ellis, *Madagascar*, pp. 121, 123, 275; G. Campbell, *An Economic History of Imperial Madagascar, 1750–1895: The Rise and Fall of an Island Empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 69.

<sup>37</sup> Campbell, *Economic History*, pp. 59–111.

over some of our most simple techniques [*arts*], but I have not succeeded in convincing them that they would have some advantages if they did it.<sup>38</sup>

Roux depicts the Malagasy as one of the people of the world with the most blind attachment to traditions. He strongly doubted that they were capable of any innovations. He also believed that the “white” and the “black” “races” were incompatible and would always fight each other. In his view, this explained the failure of previous French establishments on Madagascar. Not the “putative tyranny” of the Frenchmen but the “eternal hatred of the ‘whites’ by the ‘blacks’” was the real cause of the massacres that the Malagasy perpetrated against French people in Anosy or the Betsimisaraka Kingdom. Accordingly, the only way to establish colonies on Madagascar was to buy land from Native princes and to expel the inhabitants, with violence if necessary.<sup>39</sup> Roux thus put directly into question the project of an imperial expansion through civilization and assimilation of the Natives. With him, racist concepts replaced Enlightenment colonialism.

As a matter of conclusion, if it is in my view doubtful whether the French Revolution was a period of territorialization in the Caribbean, it surely was not in the southern Indian Ocean. First, the revolutionary era brought rather a dissolution of the colonial empire in this region. Second, in those years, French elites had no coherent vision or policy towards this island. Some members of the French imperial elites perceived the Malagasy peoples of having a future part in the French nation and Madagascar of being a part of France *in spe*. They believed in an assimilation of foreign lands and their inhabitants. Others, however, saw in Madagascar rather a place of relegation for unwanted persons, such as beggars and freed slaves. For them, Madagascar was to remain a world apart even if the French succeeded in dominating this island. These were clearly diverse and partly contradictory projects, and this heterogeneity of French political planning came partly from the fact that French elites were

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38 ANOM, Séries géographiques, MAD 6 14, “Observations faites par l’agent commercial de Madagascar dans l’exploration de la côte orientale de cette île, ordonnée par son excellence le ministre de la marine, et exécutée à bord des flutes de Sa majesté Le Golo et le Lys en septembre, octobre, novembre et décembre 1818” pp. 30–31: “Il est inutile, malgré tout ce qu’en disent nos publicistes et nos philosophes modernes, de rien gagner sur ces peuples, pour les faire servir à notre besoin. Peut-être qu’à force de nous voir travailler et réussir dans nos entreprises quelqu’uns deux [sic] chercheront à nous imiter; mais c’est au tems seul à opérer cette merveille: j’ai eu l’occasion de beaucoup fréquenter les malgaches, j’ai cherché à leur faire adopter quelqu’uns de nos arts les plus communs, jamais je n’ai pu parvenir à leur faire même convenir, qu’ils y trouvaient de l’avantage.”

39 ANOM, Séries géographiques, MAD 715, Roux to the minister of the navy, 20 August 1810.

influenced by ideas from across the Channel. Undoubtedly, many imperial projects of the French Revolution towards Madagascar were very British. Third, all these projects brought little concrete results. Respatialization came not from ideas of the French elite, but instead from British and Merina conquests.

