

Histoire et Voyages des Plantes Cultivées à Madagascar avant le XVI^e Siècle. By Philippe Beaujard. 2017. Karthala, Paris. 415 pp.

Eugene N. Anderson^{1*}

¹Department of Anthropology, University of California, Riverside, USA.

*gene@ucr.edu

Received July 2, 2018

Accepted September 16, 2018

OPEN ACCESS

DOI 10.14237/ebl.9.2.2018.1357

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Philippe Beaujard has recently brought Madagascar into the world. The media, from sober biology journals to movie cartoons, tend to portray this huge island (the “eighth continent” to some) as the ultimate periphery—a remote and exotic other world. Dr. Beaujard has shown that Madagascar was in the past a crossroads in the Indian Ocean, a place whose history is tightly linked with the rest of the planet. This in turn is part of our resurgent attention to the “maritime silk roads,” the historic trade routes of the Indian Ocean. Dr. Beaujard has recently written a monumental two-volume monograph on this subject (Beaujard 2009, 2012; also see Anderson 2018) and is planning to translate it into English.

In the present work, Dr. Beaujard has presented a comprehensive and thorough historical study of plant genetics, plant origins, and plant names for the crops that came to Madagascar from Asia and Africa. The island was settled from Indonesia at some point shortly before the modern era, but more settlement from both Indonesia and Africa followed, with a steady stream of migrants in the early medieval centuries. Indonesian voyagers reached the mainland African coast even earlier, perhaps by 1000 BCE, bringing the standard southeast Asian crops, many of which reached Madagascar from Africa rather than directly from Indonesia.

The Malagasy language is basically a south Kalimantan (Borneo) language, but it has acquired countless loanwords from other Indonesian languages and from East African Bantu, Arabic, and other trade languages of the Indian Ocean world. Though it is one language, it has many dialects, and these have their own histories. Those on the coasts are especially influenced by African and Arabic terms.

Plants and plant names reflect this history. Bananas, for instance, are generally called by the East African name *akondro* (from Bantu *kondo* and variants), but also by the Malayo-Polynesian word *fotsy*, including a variant *ontsy* that comes from a south Sulawesi language (see p. 164 and the map on p. 158). Sometimes the latter names are used as modifiers of *akondro*, to name varieties. The term *kida*, from India, is found in Madagascar; the Bahasa Indonesia word *pisang* gives rise to a couple of local descendants, and Arabic terms have also gotten into the banana vocabulary.

Rice, the staple food, has an even more complicated linguistic history. The standard word *vary* for rice (plant and grain) comes from south Kalimantan, but may be Dravidian originally. Other words associated with rice come from other Indonesian languages. *Fary*, a local word, looks like a form of *vary*, but is actually a derivative of the Proto-Austronesian word *pajey* for the rice plant (p. 89). Various African sources provide terms for rice varieties, cultivation practices, and other rice-related matters. *Trematrema* for a swidden field (in northeast Madagascar), for instance, is Swahili *tematema*, “to cut down, clear.” Conversely, the Swahili word *wari* for cooked rice is Indonesian, possibly via Madagascar (p. 92).

Sugarcane is also generally called *fary*, “rice (plant),” for obscure reasons. It provides us this beautiful bit of folk poetry—just enjoy the sounds (Fox 1990:318–319):

Hianao fary manga filalaon-jaza

Izabo fary fotsy fanala betabeta

You are the blue sugarcane, plaything



of children;

I am the white sugarcane, the slaker
of thirst.

Yams, especially *Dioscorea alata*, are *ovy*, the reflex of the standard Indonesian *ubi* ("o" represents /u/ in Malagasy). An apparently mysterious word *kambary* is used for some yams and locally for sweet potatoes. Garlic has an African name, *tongolo*, from a Bantu word for a root or bulb (p. 187–188). It is now sometimes *tongologasy* "Malagasy bulb" to distinguish it from the *tongolovazaha*, "bulb brought by the white people," the ball onion. These are only a few names from the dozens of names and 55 plant species covered in the book. Garden domesticates include obscurities such as *Plectranthus rotundifolius* (an African root crop known as country potato) and *Calophyllum inophyllum* (a widespread timber tree known as the Alexandrian laurel balltree with medicinal uses).

Dr. Beaujard provides thorough and up-to-date accounts of the origins, genetics, and uses of these plants, making this book often the most current general work on the botany of African and south Asian crops. Thorough details on local medical uses make an otherwise almost unretrievable local lore available to the world. Dr. Beaujard's ability to command an incredible amount of detail is excelled only by his ability to synthesize the material with style and brilliance.

Madagascar is currently suffering an ecocatastrophe as bad as any in the world. A rapidly expanding population, a weak government, and a worldwide market for precious woods, vanilla, and other commodities is reducing the country to ruin. Lemurs are endemic to Madagascar; there are over 80 species; all are threatened or endangered. Similar diversity and threat characterize the chameleons. The unique dry-forests of the southwest, rich in endemic species, are disappearing. Madagascar's population only recently became dense, so intensive land use has not been the rule. Roving cattle-herding dominates

much of the island. Swiddening is rarely as carefully controlled and managed as it is in Mexico or Southeast Asia. Dooryard gardens, though they are the home to many domesticates, are spottily developed. For further thoughts see "Madagascar on My Mind" and "The Tropical Food Security Garden" on my website (www.krazykioti.com). These and Dr. Beaujard's book reference much of the relevant literature. Indonesia's intensive dooryard garden culture, with its layered tree canopies and highly diverse crops, has taken root in Africa only in Zanzibar, where one can imagine oneself in Java or Sumatra. It could easily be developed in Madagascar.

Dr. Beaujard's book could be an important resource for future improvement. It would allow Madagascar to develop an intensive horticulture that would greatly increase food production while releasing land for nature reserves. The book is so good that readers are advised to dust off their high-school French and dig in.

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