Flux du sang et sauterelles: How the People and Environment of Madagascar Thwarted French Commercial Expansion

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In 1759, the governor of Île de France (now Mauritius) wrote a letter complaining of famine on the island. Although he had sent ship after ship to Madagascar in search of rice to feed the island's colonists, soldiers, and slaves, his ships had returned with little rice because of wars interrupting trade on the coast of Madagascar. The Malagasy wars, combined with a devastating hurricane and epidemic sickness on the east coast, greatly diminished the available grain in Madagascar. Once again, the settlers in the Mascarene Islands found themselves close to starvation. Many of the slaves, comprising as much as 10 percent of the population, died of starvation and disease, forcing the governor to send even more ships to the already depleted shores of Madagascar in search of replacement laborers and yet more food. The agricultural production of the two French islands of

1 This essay is based on research conducted in the Archives Nationales, Paris (hereafter AN). The archives holds colonial correspondence of Île de France and Île de Bourbon, series Col C/3 and Col C/4, as well as the Compagnie des Indes, Col C/2, and Madagascar, Col C/5A. These sources are microfilm; the originals are located at the Centre des Archives d'Outre Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France. The Archives Nationales also has the records of trading ships in the Indian Ocean in the series Mar 4 JJ. The notes here give the shelfmark for finding the sources in the French National Archives in Paris with series followed by the volume number. Similar sources from the English East India Company's ships are found at the British Library, African and Asian Studies Reading Room, India Office Records, IOR. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

2 AN, COL C/4/12, 1759.
Île de France and Île de Bourbon (now Réunion) barely supported their populations; imports from Madagascar provided the only hope for the survival of the French colonies.  

The threat of famine to the Mascarene Islands was not only a local event. The famine indirectly handicapped French attempts to dominate commerce from the Indian Ocean during the eighteenth century. When the famine of 1759 struck, it came during wartime, in the middle of the Seven Years' War, also referred to as the Third Carnatic War in the Indian Ocean. At the end of the war, the British had defeated French forces and began a concerted campaign to gradually seize control of the Indian subcontinent. Despite continued French interference in wars on the sub-continent, the French had to regroup and reduce their ambitions for the control of valuable commerce from India.

During all three Carnatic wars, the British and French relied upon the shores of Madagascar for supplies to fuel their military campaigns off the coast of India. Over a period of roughly twenty years, between 1744 and 1763, the French and British governments sent squadrons of up to ten ships at a time into the Indian Ocean annually. These ships required large amounts of food, as well as slave labor, and their captains turned to the

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3 The term Mascarene Islands also includes the French-controlled Île de Rodrigues, a small island inhabited by tortoises, dogs and chickens, both of which had been introduced by Europeans, and a small population of French soldiers, prisoners, and slaves. On Rodrigues' early history, see "Une note pour l'île Rodrique," AN, COL C/3/1, 1692.


5 On the French navy, see Jonathan R. Dull, The French Navy and the Seven Years' War (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005). For the records of the British navy during these wars, see the letters of the admiralty, ADM, kept in the British National Archives, Kew, especially ADM 1/160, ADM 1/161, ADM 1/162, ADM 1/163.
islands in the southwestern Indian Ocean, chiefly Madagascar, Anjouan, and the French Mascarene Islands, to fuel the military campaigns. When there were no supplies at the Mascarene Islands, the French lost sailors, ships, and battles.

This is an example of how geographical and environmental obstacles to supplies constrained European commercial and colonial expansion into the Indian Ocean during the early modern period. The defeat of the French in India due to a lack of resources echoed the broader failures of the French to participate extensively in Indian Ocean trade networks during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Histories of French commerce, particularly of the French monopoly trading companies, focus on the political and economic workings that hampered the success of French commercial ventures in the Indian Ocean. Their plans to acquire cheap imports were hurt by French protectionism and mismanagement. Yet a third factor contributed to the failure of the French to profit from Indian Ocean trade: what one scholar has described as the French fascination with painting a "rosy picture" of Madagascar. The French company relied upon the island of Madagascar for supplies of food and labor and used these supplies to establish trading posts throughout the Indian Ocean. This reliance has been overlooked by most historians.

Much of the scholarly work on the French East India companies fixates on the failures of the French traders and administrators in comparison to their far more successful Portuguese, Dutch, and English counterparts. It is held that, unlike their rivals, the French did not send enough ships, make coherent plans, or invest adequate financial resources in these endeavors. Scholars tend to isolate the decisions of the

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7 Several French monopoly companies were formed between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, including the Compagnie d'Orient, dissolved in 1654, the Compagnie royale des Indes Orientales, operating between 1664 and 1668, and the Companie des Indes. Ibid., 9-28.
companies' directors in the metropole from events on the ground. Therefore, historians describe the economic basis for the foundation of the early French companies by focusing, for example, on the goals of Colbert or royal financial imperatives without reflecting on how actual events and circumstances in the Indian Ocean might affect these plans. In contrast, histories of the relatively more successful Dutch and English East India Companies emphasize their superior organization and resources which enabled them to profit from Indian Ocean trade. As a result, historians usually blame constant funding struggles for hampering French access to prime markets in the Indian Ocean.

Likewise, when scholars have presented a general history of the French East India Company, they have tended to focus on the execution of French plans, not their feasibility. Port Louis of Île de France, for instance, has been seen as a crucial link in French progress because it provided the French with a large and safe port near the center of the ocean—as if possession of this port guaranteed naval success to France. The functionality of this port, in fact, proved less than expected, in light of frequent cyclones and the dearth of food and labor supplies on the island. When the plantations of Île de France could not provide passing ships with sufficient food to feed their cargoes of slaves, the sure anchorage of Port Louis provided little benefit. Similarly, scholars have attributed colonial failures in Madagascar more to hostile local communities or a lack of appropriately trained personnel than to the influence of diseases, such as dysentery, malaria, or flux du sang, and natural disasters, such as sauterelle

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8 For a fuller story, see Ames, Colbert; Philippe Haudrère, La Compagnie française des Indes au XVIIIe siècle (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2005), 1:13-40.

9 This is because the eighteenth-century sea wars have been described as "struggles of endurance" when banking and credit became crucial to success. See Paul Kennedy, The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000 (New York: Random House, 1987), 76.

infestations. At times, scholars have ignored the impact of the environment on the success of European commerce and colonial ventures.

Recent literature on the impact of the environment on the formation of states, empires, and civilizations points to a new understanding of the interaction between European colonial endeavors and their local environments. Studies of imperial environmental history have come to stress the impact of natural restrictions on European attempts to conquer both the land and the peoples of regions such as Africa or Asia. New work in environmental history suggests that even if company officials were unaware of the influence of the environment on their activities in the Indian Ocean, the officials faced practical limitations on the types of communities they could form, the

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11 In ship journals, French captains complained continually about the presence of various sicknesses, or "flux" among their crews and slaves. For one example of the use of the term "flux du sang," see the ship journal of the Vierge de Grace, recorded in 1733, in AN MAR 4 JJ/86. During this voyage, over a hundred slaves died of the "flux du sang" and "flux blanc" during a period of about three months. These terms likely referred to symptoms, not diseases, thus it remains difficult to interpret these words with any certainty. The term "sauterelle" was used in reference to various locust infestations on the Mascarene Islands, likely grasshoppers. On the impact of these infestations on crops, see "Notes historiques sur l'île de Bourbon," n.d., AN COL F/3/1.


crops that could be harvested, and the number of traders who could visit annually. Rather than considering events within the southwest Indian Ocean as isolated from the decisions of the metropole, this essay brings the two into conversation. It uses environmental history to understand the failures of the French East India Company and connects local events in Madagascar and the Mascarene Islands with the overall history of French commercial and colonial expansion.

In 1664, Louis XIV granted the "island of Madagascar and its dependences" to the *Compagnie des Indes Orientales*. After more than a century of French merchants periodically visiting the coast of the island on their way to Indonesia and India, private traders had tried to establish a colony with a few hundred men in southern Madagascar near Fort Dauphin. Meant to be a refueling base for French merchants, the colony was located far from Portuguese-controlled East Africa and was to provide the French with the means to expand their trade within the Indian Ocean. The colony was a disaster: Out of the almost five hundred colonists, only one hundred remained alive in 1665. In addition to dealing with this high mortality rate, the colonial leaders also faced frequent attacks from the Malagasy groups, prompted largely by the French sale of Malagasy slaves to visiting Dutch ships, and revolts by the colonists themselves. In 1665, the French *Compagnie royale des Indes Orientales* assumed control of the colony and the trade of the Indian Ocean. Formed under Colbert, the company had an explicitly mercantilist purpose and was only nominally private, as the title of the company makes clear. Unlike the previous attempt, this colony was to be overseen closely by the French government and operated under a royal charter.

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14 For an overview of this early complicated history, see Wellington, *French East India Companies*, 3-10.
15 Ibid., 10.
16 Ibid., 22-28.
The cornerstone of this company's plans for trade was to establish a royal trading base in Madagascar, just as the Dutch had in Batavia and the Portuguese in Goa. French officials had a vision of Madagascar as a paradise, perfectly suited for their commercial and political goals. Geographically, the location of the colony was ideal for quick stopovers of ships traveling from Europe to Asia. In addition, the land appeared fruitful. The 1670 governor of the Madagascar colony described the land as "fertile" and naturally growing a number of crops. The official stated that any food shortages were caused by the failures of the Malagasy to cultivate the land correctly. He complained that the Malagasy people did not take advantage of the land due to their laziness and that hardworking French farmers could quickly make the land productive. Several times a year, locusts ate all the plants to the roots, but with French control, this scourge could be wiped out.

Within a decade in 1673, this venture failed disastrously. The French moved their commercial focus to the Mascarene Islands, gaining control of Île de France, and formed another trading emporium at the port of Surat on the coast of India. French attempts to colonize Madagascar almost ruined the company financially and diverted much of its commercial energies from any other Indian Ocean ventures during the seventeenth century. In the metropole, company officials and French ministers did not consider the role of the environment and the local people in their failures. Disease meant the mortality rate of European colonists was shockingly high, especially as the colonists could not procure enough food to remain healthy. The land they chose for the settlement, situated perfectly as a stopover for their ships sailing towards Java, turned out to be arid, and the native people were pastoralists who rarely accumulated excess goods to sell to Europeans or exported slaves in large numbers. Despite these problems, French

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17 Ibid., 11-30; Haudrère, *La Compagnie française des Indes*, 1:13-29; see also AN, COL C/5A/1 and COL C/3/1.
18 De la Haye's description of the island, 1670, in AN, COL C/5A/1.
contemporaries attributed the collapse of the settlement to the incompetence of the colonial officials.  

Even as the French turned to investing in the Mascarene Islands as refueling bases for their maritime ventures, which would provide food, water, wood, and labor to the dozens of ships passing through the ocean, they still had to rely on Madagascar to support both the colonial populations on the islands as well as Indian Ocean trade. French commercial strategists and financiers misjudged the fertility of lands in the southwestern Indian Ocean, and the Mascarene colonies never became self-sufficient. This problem became abundantly clear around 1720 when the governors of the island embarked on a new scheme for developing Île de France and Île de Bourbon. The islands' ambitious leaders were not satisfied with growing wheat and raising cattle for passing ships. They attempted to transform both of the islands into coffee plantations, supplemented by other cash-crops such as indigo, sugarcane, and cotton. The governors envisioned the islands becoming even more profitable than Saint-Domingue, France's sugar plantation island in the Caribbean.

Unfortunately, these development schemes proved unfeasible without the imports of food and labor from Madagascar. In addition to occupying land typically cultivated for food items, the most profitable crops, chiefly coffee and sugar, were also the most labor intensive and the most demanding on the soil. As a result, the French colonists required frequent influxes of slaves from Madagascar to help with clearing the land and establishing agriculture on the volcanic islands. The colonists were so desperate for slaves that they traded with European pirates for Malagasy slaves during the

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19 See, for example, various seventeenth- and eighteenth-century memoirs in AN, Fonds des Colonies, Divers, Collection Moreau de St Méry, COL F/3, especially those in COL F/3/49.
20 For example, De Brasseur's memoir, AN, COL F/3/49.
21 AN, Fonds de la Marine, Séries anciennes, Service Général, MAR B/3/98.
early part of the eighteenth century. This reliance on Madagascar for slaves worried the French governors, although they had little choice, as the islands were only marginally fertile and required a great deal of labor to grow crops. The danger of bringing large numbers of slaves with a common culture and language to a relatively uninhabited island rapidly became clear. Runaway slaves, marons, robbed French colonial farms and encouraged rebellion among the other slaves, much as had occurred in Saint-Domingue. The French colonists blamed slaves from Madagascar for disorder in the islands' interiors. Despite the fears about Malagasy slaves, eighteenth-century ships would return from their annual trading voyages to Madagascar with a small number of slaves as well as necessary food items.

The company's plans to turn the land of the Mascarene Islands into profitable plantations turned out to be completely unworkable, even without the constant problem of runaway slaves. The islands' crops failed repeatedly following a series of natural disasters, primarily drought and cyclones, in 1725, 1728, 1730, and 1737. The colonists and their slaves struggled to grow wheat, maize, and rice, and to raise cattle on the islands. Coffee growing proved even more difficult. Locusts and rats consumed crops, especially the prized wheat. Droughts dried up rice fields, and diseases struck both cattle and slaves. In one year, mortality among the company's slaves exceeded 10 percent. Frequent cyclones wiped out crops and destroyed the recently constructed ports. The governors began investing more energy in acquiring live cattle and rice from Madagascar, although these

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22 See documents from 1723 in AN, COL C/3/3-4.
23 For this reason, Allen concludes that slave cargoes from Madagascar were "usually substantially smaller than those arriving from eastern Africa." Richard Allen, "The Constant Demand of the French: The Mascarene Slave Trade and the Worlds of the Indian Ocean and Atlantic During the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," Journal of African History 49, no. 1 (2008), 54. In addition, French traders complained that the eastern ports of Madagascar, Foulpointe in Antongil Bay and Fort Dauphin, never supplied many slaves; in part due to the agricultural practices of the regions, slaves were retained for use locally.
24 AN, COL F/3/1.
trading ventures were both costly and difficult. The governors also decided to attempt several colonial ventures on the coast of Madagascar, but these failed within a few months or years, wasting company money, soldiers, and trade goods. Environmental problems, combined with failures in Madagascar, meant that the Mascarene Islands never became as prosperous as their leaders had envisioned.

Despite their difficulties in the Mascarenes, French officials became increasingly ambitious in their plans for dominating trade in the Indian Ocean, focusing their attention on India. By the mid-eighteenth century, they attempted to seize trading ports to achieve commercial supremacy in the region. At first glance, the French and British navies appeared about equally matched in their abilities to supply soldiers and food to troops on the Indian subcontinent. The French even had the supposed advantage of possessing the Mascarene Islands. English squadrons relied upon the western coast of Madagascar and the Comoro islands for supplies. Luckily for them, traders in both of these locations proved well-supplied and eager to trade. The French, relying solely upon the east coast of Madagascar to support their islands, always had trouble getting enough food to supply their fleets. The British and French, visiting the opposite coasts of Madagascar, faced very different environmental conditions; consequently, the French failed to purchase the goods that the British easily obtained. The failure of supplies doomed the French military campaigns in India. On one occasion, the French navy sailed from the Indian coast to purchase food at the

25 Cattle mortality rates on the voyages between Madagascar and the islands were as high as 50 percent. For examples, see the trading expedition of 1749 in AN, COL C/4/9. On French failures, see the report of the East India Company ship Harrington in 1735, which observed a French ship that had trouble finding Fort Dauphin; the traders arrived starving with many of their men dead. BL, IOR/L/MAR/B/654 B, the log of the ship Harrington, 1735–37. The ships could purchase hundreds of live cattle, required to "populate" the islands, at a time. AN, COL C/4/1. In 1734, the company decided it needed six hundred cows and bulls to be purchased for Île de France. AN, COL C/4/2. See similar descriptions in AN, COL C/2/27, COL C/2/31, and COL C/3/5.

26 Mahan, The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 227.
Mascarenes, leaving the French forces on land unprotected. Upon arrival, they found that the islands lacked food supplies, and they had to return to India with the starved sailors and soldiers.\textsuperscript{27} The execution of French plans failed to match their ambitions, and the English faced little European rivalry on the Indian subcontinent by the 1770s.

It would be a mistake to believe that these failures to monopolize commerce, to establish strong footholds in the Indian Ocean, and to eliminate commercial rivals resulted from a lack of investment or poor planning in the metropole. French company officials conceived of the Mascarene island colonies as functioning much like their colonies in the Atlantic. To them, it was reasonable to expect that implementing strategies that had already succeeded in Saint-Domingue would result in the Indian Ocean colonies prospering and flourishing. The islands were perfectly located for the importation of food, supplies, and slaves not just from Madagascar, but also East Africa and India. The Mascarene Islands, however, proved to be unprofitable. Frequent natural disasters prevented large harvests. These problems could have been rectified through trade with Madagascar. Yet repeatedly the harsh weather of the Mascarenes also afflicted the neighboring east coast of Madagascar. When French fleets could not procure rice from the Mascarenes in the 1750s, they sailed to Madagascar, only to discover that intermittent war had disrupted rice harvests and that the resulting famine produced even more warfare.\textsuperscript{28} The cost of food and slaves on Madagascar's east coast increased, compelling the French commanders to go into debt in order to supply their warships.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{27} This was despite imports of cattle numbering upwards of five hundred a year from Madagascar. AN, COL C/4/5 and COL C/4/6.
\textsuperscript{28} AN, COL C/4/153.
\textsuperscript{29} AN, COL C/4/11, COL C/2/35-36, COL C/3/11, COL C/4/11. See problems getting food in 1761, AN, COL C/4/13, MAR 4 JJ/79. On French ships visiting Madagascar in 1763, see AN, MAR 4 JJ/80, MAR 4 JJ/81. On further disruptions at Foulpointe, see AN, MAR 4 JJ/92. On trade being ruined, see AN, COL C/4/22, COL C/4/9, MAR 4 JJ/104.
The experiences of the French colonialists in the Indian Ocean during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries inform us about the unforeseen consequences of commercial expansion. Scholars tend to emphasize the deleterious effect of European imperialism on local communities and the environment. The French eliminated species of animals such as the dodo bird and large tortoises in the Mascarene Islands, but the local environment in turn ruined French farms, plantations, and settlements. Plans for the development of the islands looked good on paper in the metropole, but they never came to fruition in the Indian Ocean. Reliance on trade within Madagascar likewise created new costs and hobbled commercial expansion into the Indian Ocean. Scholars studying the history of Madagascar have to understand the impact of the French intervention in local trade, wars, and communities on the island. Yet they should also remember the impact of events within seemingly remote locales such as Madagascar upon European plans for commercial and colonial expansion.

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30 For a description of this trend, see John M. MacKenzie "Empire and the ecological apocalypse: the historiography of the imperial environment," in Griffiths and Robin, eds., *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies*, 222.