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Reclaiming islandness through cloth circulation in Madagascar

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ABSTRACT: Perceived as neither Asian nor completely African, often also neglected by island studies, Madagascar long remained the preserve of Francophone scholarship, absent from Anglo-American historical accounts of an Indian Ocean world. This paper examines the place of Madagascar in the literature at the intersection between Indian Ocean studies and textile studies to argue for its relevance in island studies. While decades of historical research have struggled to create a space for the island state and have not made its ‘islandness’ relevant, the paper shows that scholarship focused on Malagasy cloth has successfully re-placed the ‘Great Island’ in an Indian Ocean world and the larger global order, also making it easier to integrate it into a field of island studies that evolved to lend more attention to spatial and relational forces.

Keywords: cloth, Indian Ocean world, islandness, islands, Madagascar, textile

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Introduction

‘La Grande Île’ (the Great Island), Madagascar, is a massive, elongated block (590,000 km²) lying in the most southern waters of the Indian Ocean—part of an area sometimes dubbed its “southern complex” (Campbell, 1989)—between the 12th and 24th parallels south, far from the ocean’s fulcrum. At its centre, north-south mountainous highlands with peaks over 2,500 m dominate its narrow littoral, facing 6,000 km of ocean to its east to reach Indonesia and 400 km to reach Africa to its west at the Mozambique Channel’s narrowest point. Madagascar is a biodiversity hotspot enjoying one of the highest rates of fauna and flora endemism in the world, of which lemurs have become emblematic, and its history of original human migratory settlement remains subject to hypothesis, with recent studies confirming Austronesian and Bantu contributions (Pierron et al., 2017), yielding 18 cultural groups with diverse customs, beliefs, and agricultural techniques, yet one unified language with Malayo-Polynesian roots. Such is the paradox of the “continent-island” (Vérin, 1990). Madagascar has challenged scholars because of its diversity amidst unity (Middleton, 1999) and its cultural and geographic ambiguity between Africa and Indian Ocean Rim. In historical studies, this “world apart” (Brown 1994, 1978), “paradise of ecologists” (Dahl, 1999), and “living museum” (Brown, 1994; Murphy, 1985) has been annexed to either Indonesian or African worlds, but often forgotten in between. Madagascar’s liminality has hindered its regional and global representation, leading scholars to give it irregular and incomplete attention, which has fostered an inward focus and often failed to integrate the island into global perspectives.

When Madagascar was ‘rediscovered’ in the Anglophone literature (Brown, 1978), explanations about this disregard were evoked. Various internal and external factors contributing to the gap have been debated among scholars of the Anglo tradition but also across traditions, in a dialogue between Francophone and Anglophone scholars. Pointing to the legacy of French colonialism in keeping the island “a well-guarded Gallic secret” and Malagasy Austronesian origins as “an anomaly in the western Indian Ocean-Africa region,” historian Gwyn Campbell (2005, p. 1) concluded that “most historians have considered Madagascar in historical isolation,

an island museum largely unrelated to its immediate region.” This quote encapsulates the dilemma of Madagascar’s separateness in past historical scholarship and historians’ difficulty at placing Madagascar in a wider field of inquiry. The island faces a conundrum in its scholarly representation stemming from its topography, political geography as a large island state, unique cultural and linguistic origins, and historical trajectory, none of which can be neatly categorized as they overlap across various classical scholarly divisions of spaces and cultures.

One fundamental factor in crafting a place in the world for Madagascar is, of course, the fact that it is an island—the fourth largest in the world in size—a condition which accentuates the imagery of in-betweenness and mystery that it often elicits in popular culture. The islands of the southern Indian Ocean have been the focus of a rich literature, whether La Réunion, Mauritius, Zanzibar, or the Seychelles. However, in turn envisaged as an island, an archipelago (Covell, 1987), a little continent (Middleton, 1999), or even an eighth continent (Tyson, 2000), Madagascar is not easily labeled by scholars as part of a clear geographical system. The result is a confusing configuration which excludes Madagascar from relevant fields of research, including island studies, which has largely ignored it, as if the island state’s ‘islandness’ was uncertain. Indicative of this neglect is that, as of August 2018, the three largest journals devoted to island studies (*Island Studies Journal*, *Shima*, and the *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures*) have yet to feature a dedicated paper on Madagascar. Like for other islands, language barriers between various island studies communities (Grydehøj, 2017), as well as colonial, postcolonial, or indigenous positionality (Luo & Grydehøj, 2017), have likely also played a role.

In the face of this indifference from Anglophone island studies, this paper reviews the ways in which historians have contributed to Madagascar’s exclusion from or inclusion within an Indian Ocean region and proposes that textile studies research in fact allows for its repositioning not only in the region but as an ‘island’ part of an oceanic world. This historiography focuses on the history of trading networks and the circulation of commodities as a way to apprehend the interrelation between a place and its outside, especially useful in an island context where locality and externality are in constant tension with each other (Baldacchino, 2004; Moles, 1982), where ‘routes’ take precedence over ‘roots’ (Dodds & Royle, 2003), where the meanings of lived experience diverge or converge (Hay, 2006), and dynamic form prevails over static binaries of mainland/island and core/periphery (Pugh, 2013).

In Madagascar, cloth has been traded since precolonial times. Considered the “object of trade *par excellence*” in the Indian Ocean (Rajaonarimanana, 2010), whether imported or woven locally with cotton, silk, or other natural fibers, textile is revealing as an entry point into the question of trade and globalization in Madagascar because it accounts for both local production ‘*vita gasy*’ factors and the symbolism of cloth in local cultures. At the same time as cloth production and everyday uses express identities in the local context, the trading and exchanging of cloth participate in the construction of Malagasy identities on the island as well as within a wider Indian Ocean region and beyond. Thus, examining the historical representation of textile traditions and the mobility of cloth in and out of Madagascar helps us better understand the island’s historical position globally.

As a method, historiography constitutes a review of the “way history has been and is written—the history of historical writing” (Salevouris & Furay, 2015, p. 255). Historiographies seek to unveil “how individual historians have, over time, interpreted and presented specific subjects” (Salevouris & Furay, 2015, p. 255), even as their writings have been complemented or superseded by others. The purpose here is to identify patterns in the way the history of the Indian Ocean has been told, engaging the literature from the past to better understand the present. Hence, this article first briefly surveys how Madagascar has been envisaged in a selection of major historical works focusing on the region. A more interdisciplinary literature on Malagasy textiles is then explored to question whether it might fill gaps. The paper seeks to demonstrate that textile studies have successfully made a place for the Great Island in both regional and global history, and that the history of Malagasy cloth is influential in lending Madagascar its place in island studies.

Is Madagascar ‘island’? Is it an ‘African’ island?

Islophiles agree that in the collective imaginary islands often embody the ultimate voyage: remote, inaccessible and mysterious lands of exile, banishment, and isolation, but also exclusive sites of life experiences and auspicious paradisiacal return to simpler ways à la Gauguin. Geographic inaccessibility and boundedness is surely what prompted Germans during the Second World War to devise the unrealized plan of sending Jews to Madagascar. This projected forced exile was described as a “death sentence,” “super-ghettoization,” or “murderous decimation,” and a precursor to genocide (Jennings, 2018). Meanwhile certain Jews had contemplated Madagascar as an alternative Jewish homeland (Jennings, 2018), reminding us that, as prison or exile destinations (Luo & Grydehøj, 2017), islands have often ambiguously served to exclude people as well as provide safe havens. As an “absolute place” of sensations or “endless voyage of initiation” (Bock-Digne, 2003), the island persists as a hybridized and microcosmic space in which myth and reality meet. Across cultures, islands fascinate, cast an “island lure” (Baldacchino, 2012). Beyond this emotional appeal, further theorization explains how islands inform global considerations. François Pelletier (2005) advances a series of reasons, including spatial and relational factors: islands are at the heart of the finitude debate and central to capitalistic flows; they have been revalued geopolitically by postcolonial nation-states; their maritime authority supersedes territorial reality, challenging continental approaches to the world as transport technology has brought them out of isolation; and metropolises prize their human scale and multiculturalism as places of *métissage*. Interdisciplinary ‘nissonologists’ (a neologism from the Greek νῆσος, “island”, first advanced by Moles in 1982), i.e., island researchers, have attempted to characterize islandness and grasp islands’ representations, symbols, cultures, practices, and significance as well as develop conceptual tools to apprehend islands’ social organizations and territorial dialectic. Although the scope of island studies has widened to include more types of islands, much of the island literature has focused on small developing islands in selected parts of the world (Grydehøj, 2017). At work as well is the fact that, as a relatively young theoretical framework, island studies has been driven and shaped by individuals embedded in their own island-related backgrounds and geographies of predilection, with associated pertinent foci.

Although Madagascar is an island state, its size precludes its participation in the global network for Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), to which relatively close neighbours the Comoros, Mauritius, and the Seychelles belong. Together, though, the islands of the southwestern Indian Ocean might be envisaged as parts of an Indian Ocean ‘archipelago’, thereby doing away with expected island dichotomies (Pugh, 2013), as an ‘aquapelago’, a space of interaction between societies, land, and oceans (Hayward, 2012), or an ‘Indianoecania’ shaping a community of destinies (Jauze, 2016). Indeed patterns of island-to-island circulations have existed there historically, highlighting dynamic, fluid, and multiple processes of cultural and political relationality at the heart of the recent ‘spatial turn’ in island studies, which focuses on interconnectedness and mobilities (Pugh, 2013) and the correlated ‘relational turn’ (Hong, 2017), which focuses on circulations in island studies. However, some question whether Madagascar should be treated as an island at all, its area exceeding that of many continental states (Pearson, 2003), rendering an outward gaze unnecessary. Sarah Fee (2005, p. 88) goes as far as to conclude that islandness is irrelevant to Malagasy identity because most Malagasy “live quite literally with their backs to the sea, largely unaware of what an island is, or the fact that Madagascar happens to be one,” echoing Françoise Péron’s (1993) explanation that on large islands the general population may be conscious of living on an island but individuals ignore or forget it. A “continental island” (Vérin, 1990), of which the island character is merely accidental (Germanaz, 2005), Madagascar is thus challenged in its islandness.

The islandness uncertainty is further complicated by concerns of continental referents. In spite of the recent focus on archipelagic forms doing away with mainland/island binaries

(Pugh, 2013), islands often remain defined by alterity with reference to continental or external gazes (Bernardie & Taglioni, 2005), especially when finding their place in regional scholarship. Early French writings depict Madagascar as “the great African island” (Locamus, 1896) or “the queen of African islands” (Buet, 1883), thus dependent on Africa geographically and geologically. Since then, Francophone scholars have often studied Malagasy issues in terms of their connection to Francophone African ex-colonial possessions in a postcolonial political and historical regional logic (“l’Afrique et Madagascar”). Certain Anglophone scholars also see Madagascar as an African island; for example, art historians “firmly position [...] Madagascar within the dialogue of African arts and culture” (Green, 2003a, p. 82). Yet others have not included it in their analysis even when focusing on the East African littoral. For example, Jonathon Glassman (1995) succinctly links the Swahili Coast to the Mascarenes through trade, but skips over Madagascar. Some avoid the question by not discussing Madagascar specifically, but placing its island neighbours—the Mascarenes—in Africa, based on historical continuity (Northrup, 1995), while others explicitly uphold that all western Indian Ocean islands are African, including Madagascar (Sellström, 2015), with the Comoros sometimes constituting a hyphen with the African continent (Newitt, 2003). Nevertheless, the French colonial experience and the island’s post-independence political engagement placed Madagascar in an equivocal position where the African and Indian Ocean spheres overlap but also separate. Is Madagascar a “world apart” (Brown, 1978) because it is neither here nor there, neither African nor Asian (Campbell, 2005; Deschamps, 1961)? Or is Madagascar a hybrid geographical anomaly, weaving in and out of the boundaries of Asia and Africa? “Geographically it is in the vicinity of the African continent, but culturally and linguistically it is part of Asia” (Dahl, 1999 p. 2).

Madagascar in the economic, political, and cultural history of an Indian Ocean world

Sometimes completely overlooked, at other times recognized as African, it has been noted that “in many classical historical overviews on the Indian Ocean, the island of Madagascar literally does not figure on the map” (Fee, 2005, p. 85). Classical cartography also often excludes Madagascar from an Indian Ocean world by annexing it to the African continental plate as a southern appendage. Similarly, in Mervyn Brown’s (1978) key Anglophone text in Malagasy studies, he refers to Madagascar as “a world apart” within the oceanic region. While in appearance conforming with the theory of insular hard-edgedness (Hay, 2006), Brown’s comment may be less based on Madagascar as an island than on other characteristics (distant geographic location and cultural uniqueness). Indeed, although distance alone does not explain separateness (Pungetti, 2012), until the 19th century, four to nine months of travel were necessary to reach Madagascar from Europe, and regional inter-island passages were difficult due to unfavourable winds (Bock-Digne, 2003), making it rather inaccessible from far or near points of origin. Even in works entirely dedicated to the Indian Ocean, it is not rare, as Sarah Fee (2005) observed, for Madagascar to be completely excluded or be merely mentioned in a list. However, Gwyn Campbell (2005) provided one successful attempt at reconciling the African and Indian Ocean overlap by arguing for an “African Indian Ocean region,” precisely including places previously discounted in the literature (Madagascar, but also Mauritius, La Réunion, and the Comoros). Nonetheless, the characterization of the Indian Ocean as a unified thalassological region has not met with universal acceptance (Vink, 2007).

The gap in scholarship was perceived as early as 1938 by Sonia Howe in a pioneering English-language history of Madagascar (before that, the only texts in English had been 19th-century accounts by missionaries). Howe’s (1938) *Drama of Madagascar* highlighted the island’s significant role in global history, albeit decrying the relation between Madagascar and Europe as the very source of its ‘drama’. Convinced of the power of trade for Madagascar to build its place in the world, Howe asserted that rather than politics, it is the island’s position on the

route to India, regional trade, and the circular movement of commodities to and from Europe that granted it importance in the region and beyond it. She was ahead of her time as scholars have continued to study trading relays to apprehend island spaces and interior-exterior relationships (for example, Germanaz, 2005; Sellström, 2015). In the first part of the 20th century, Howe's work is not only unique in its approach but also represents the sole Anglophone voice in the scholarship on Madagascar in the era following the French conquest (Deschamps, 1965, p. iv). In the early 1960s, at the time of Malagasy independence, Hubert Deschamps (1965, p. 8; translation my own) explains this neglect:

Situated at the crossroads of the influences of Oceania and Africa, Madagascar is precisely at the centre of the planetary zone that has been disdained by classical history. No general history of it exists but only detailed works based on European enterprises or the Merina kingdom during the 19th century.

In spite of sporadic and specialized works, such as Kent's (1970) on 16th- and 17th-century kingdoms (overall ill-received by French specialists of the region for its problematic way of dealing with the African-Indonesian question), few works made their mark until Mervyn Brown (1978), who took Madagascar out of oblivion in the Anglophone literature with *Madagascar Rediscovered*, a title indicative of where Madagascar had been relegated to prior scholarship. Deschamps' (in Brown, 1978, p. iv) foreword blames French colonization for this neglect.

The great tradition of English writing on Madagascar [...] was to a large extent abandoned by British writers and historians after the French conquest. They consciously withdrew from the cultural scene as they had withdrawn from the political scene by the treaty of 1890.

Later, Campbell (2005, p. 1) would agree that "historians of mainland Africa and of other Indian Ocean countries have largely respected the Gallic tradition. Consequently, they have excluded Madagascar from the scope of their research and publications." Campbell condemns how Anglophone scholars partitioned Africa into regions of study, excluding or only marginally including Madagascar, while also not demarcating their studies enough from the French tradition.

The new edition of Brown's (1995) book, published as *A History of Madagascar*, implied an evolution in the scholarly landscape in Anglophone literature since his 1978 opus. The 'rediscovery' of Madagascar had been completed. Starting in the 1990s, the literature on the region would indeed gather some level of momentum. During that time, not only did an increasing number of Anglophone works come to complement the larger volume of Francophone studies, but scholarship in Malagasy also emerged (Schraeder, 1995). However, Madagascar still did not appear in significant ways in works by Anglophone historians that focused on the greater Indian Ocean region. *The Indian Ocean in World History* (Kearney, 2004) mentions Madagascar only three times in passing. In Pearson's (2005) *The World of the Indian Ocean, 1500-1800*, Madagascar is barely mentioned at all, although Pearson (2003) had earlier included it when framing a new historical geography of the Indian Ocean with a definition of a unified region that included littoral and island societies and focused on circulation as a basis for unity. In highlighting the history *in* the ocean (over an outsider's perspective on history *of* the ocean), Pearson returned agency to local communities and created a more fluid and dynamic space of inquiry. Like Kearney, Pearson discussed Madagascar when addressing the southern Indian Ocean, especially issues of settlement and cargo trade routes, noting the island's role as supplier of slaves to French plantations in the oceanic region. Indeed, discussions on slavery in the region is often where Madagascar does appear, notably in accounts of island-island slave and related commodity trading (Allen, 1999; Alpers et al., 2007; Fee, 2011). However, none of these works gave Madagascar a significant role in the Indian Ocean world.

Focusing on geopolitical history, Bowman and Clark (1981) highlighted Madagascar's involvement within networks of France's former colonial territories (policy, trade, cultural influence, research, military bases) with close ties to other Francophone islands in the region (Mayotte, La Réunion, Mauritius, and the Scattered Islands [*Îles Éparses de l'océan Indien*]). It is within this *Franconésie* (Toussaint, 1981) that Francophone scholars (mostly French at the time) envisaged Madagascar as an object of inquiry. In the late 1980s, Maureen Covell (1987) placed Madagascar in the wider context of Cold War ideological rivalries and global socialist development paths. She suggested that Madagascar lost political significance because of its non-alignment and a foreign policy entangled in ambiguous diplomacies, from refusing access to its ports for warships, to relying on both the West and Russia for aid. Despite increased commitment to the OAU and non-aligned movement, Madagascar failed to influence the South-South diplomacy network, even though it promoted inter-island cooperation. Whereas Howe had advanced the idea that it was trading routes that put Madagascar on the world map, 50 years later trade seems less significant, only summarily included in Covell's (1987) discussion when she accounts for failed efforts of successive governments to assert the island's global role by capitalizing on its geographical location on the oil shipping routes from the Persian Gulf to Europe (via the Mozambique Channel) since alternative routes had emerged. Nevertheless, spanning several decades, the historians Howe, Covell, Kearney, and Pearson all mention trade and trading networks as one essential way to place Madagascar in the history of the region. Whether a passage, a relay post, a partner in trade for various commodities from slaves (Campbell, 2007; Worden, 2007) and bonded labour (Alpers, 2007) to cloves or cotton, Madagascar is a force in regional commodity exchanges from the 18th century onward.

This short historiography has unveiled historians' struggles to position Madagascar in a global historical context, culturally, politically, and economically in the Anglophone tradition, causing Madagascar to often remain a liminal space in the Indian Ocean. Excluded from this historiography of Anglophone texts have been those historians who occasionally published in English but clearly emanate from the Gallic tradition, such as Philippe Beaujard, who, like other French historians and anthropologists, has explicitly interrogated Madagascar's position in macro-history. Campbell's African Indian Ocean context captures the hybridity of this geographical and historical space. The construction of this oceanic space serves the investigation of economic exchanges to highlight the relational flows that make Madagascar an 'island'. Via trade and markets, Madagascar has been deeply implicated in the Indian Ocean world for centuries (Campbell, 1989; Campbell, 2018; Fee, 2010; Sanchez, 2017). In particular, as early as the slave trade, cloth became a traditional staple of foreign trade in the Indian Ocean African region (Campbell, 2005; Fee, 2011). The history of cloth mobility within the Indian Ocean emphasizes an intricate web of actors along complex routes, and that, in Madagascar, textiles are central to multi-centred movements of people, objects, practices, and financial capital.

Telling the history in Malagasy cloth

Kanga: The Cloth that Speaks (Zawawi, 2005) exposes the way cloth accompanies women throughout life on the Swahili Coast. Focusing on the arrival of the *kanga* (a rectangular piece of printed cotton usually worn by women and sometimes men) in the Indian Ocean in the 20th century and the relationship between material culture and history, Zawawi documents regional cloth exchanges along the Swahili Coast and its expansion to the Comoros and Oman. The presence of the *kanga* in the region is already evidence of cultural flows through Arab and Indian merchants' mobilities since the 12th century. In fact, "textiles were a major commodity transmitted between Indian Ocean societies" (Barnes, 2005, p.1). It will be shown now that textile studies scholars have been efficient at granting Madagascar visibility in the Indian Ocean region, within which the island has been at times importer or exporter of cloth, and sometimes both simultaneously (Fee, 2011; Sanchez, 2017). Given its portability,

divisibility, and function in identity making, cloth is useful for underscoring processes of local-global integration. It links to land, agrarian concerns, and labour, while also straddling the intangible world of signs since it constitutes a highly symbolic cultural medium. Apprehending material culture in the legacy of the “social life of things” (Appadurai, 1986), textile studies bridge many disciplines to investigate the role of textile production, consumption, and circulation. Malagasy textile traditions deserve attention to illuminate how the interweaving of material and intangible culture on the island has created regional ties historically since “the changing networks of the Indian Ocean textile trade have served as circuits of material communication, transmitting cultural values embodied in cloth, defining and redefining identities and relationships” (Davidson, 2012). Borrowing Pearson’s (2005) concept of “history *in*”, over “history *of*”, this paper now seeks to unveil the history *in* this special commodity to ask what social and historical processes are entrapped in Malagasy cloth through which the island may be integrated into spatial and relational flows in the region.

In 1983, the interdisciplinary conference *Cloth and the Organization of Human Experience* examined the social life of cloth and apprehended it as symbol, communication, exchange means, political instrument, genderization tool, and commodity (Weiner & Schneider, 1989). The temporal dimension of cloth and labour required in production were also addressed to conclude that “the language of cloth speaks not only to the creation and dissolution of personal and social identities but to wider issues of long-distance trade, colonialism, revolution, and nationalism” (Schneider & Weiner, 1986, p. 179). Production, use, and mobility of cloth across geographical and social spaces over time allows access to regional history through Maurice Bloch’s (1971) concept of semi-durability, which connects the lifespan of cloth with human activity. People have produced cloth from the earth and have agency in the decision to retire it from circulation (e.g., burial shrouds in Malagasy highlands). Cloth intersects with life stages in its ceremonial and symbolic uses as well as everyday intimate utilization (Allerton, 2007), and carries histories and traditions across generations and landscapes. Looking at cloth through this lens reveals the history *in* cloth, i.e., historical processes that are ‘interwoven’ into its production, exchange, and consumption: processes that transcend the mere materiality of, for example, the *kanga* (on the Swahili Coast) or the *lamba*, its equivalent in Madagascar.

Since John Mack’s (1989) well-documented overview of Malagasy textile techniques, the Anglophone literature on Malagasy textiles has remained the preserve of a few specialized scholars. Fee’s research is among the most comprehensive works dedicated to the history and circulation of Malagasy textiles. She shows that the movement of cloth made a significant imprint on the history of the African Indian Ocean region through complex interactions between imported and locally produced cloth and consequent cultural appropriations and transformations occurring in local societies, for example, through her accounts (Fee, 2011, 2010) of the Malagasy *akotifahana* (fancy figured silk cloth) and *soga* (imported factory-made cloth). In Madagascar’s highlands, the *lamba* refers to the cloth traditionally worn as the primary article of women’s clothing, with wide ranges of daily use, from protection against the weather to an indication of mourning (Fee, 2002). Both Fee and Rebecca Green (2003a, 2003b) are interested in the versatility of *lamba* uses. However, Green focuses on uses and meanings of expressions of identity encapsulated in inscriptions appearing on *lamba hoany* (‘proverb cloth’) and the messages communicated through motifs, with less explicit concern with a wider regional or global context, aside from allusions to imported cloth from India and the outsider-insider dichotomy embedded in cloth.

Also standing out are two major books published in the early 2000s in art and cultural history. The first, *Objects as Envoys: Cloth, Imagery, and Diplomacy in Madagascar* (Kreamer, 2002), accompanied the Smithsonian exhibition, *Gifts and Blessings: The Textile Arts of Madagascar*, which examined the relationship between Madagascar and the West since the 19th century, based on Queen Ranavalona III’s gift of cloth to American President Grover Cleveland. The book seeks to “contextualize and explain the significance of this exchange, deftly interweaving

discussions of cloth production, international diplomacy, and popular representations of Madagascar and the Malagasy people in Europe and the United States” (Kreamer, 2002). The second volume, *Unwrapping the Textiles Traditions of Madagascar*, published under the aegis of the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History (Kusimba et al., 2004), aimed at reviving the interest in Malagasy textile traditions by introducing the island’s local cloth cultures. Although the book accounts for local commercial relationships and cultural influences with the outside world, whether an African, Indian Ocean, or Western world, it does not underscore the presence of significant networks between the island and other places in the way attempted by *Objects as Envoys*. The remaining literature on Malagasy cloth can be organized according to the time periods covered, distinguishing between precolonial and colonial networks.

Chapurukha Kusimba (2004) contends that there exists little knowledge of precolonial production and use of textiles in Madagascar because Western travelers and missionaries were uninterested in local technology. However, Etienne de Flacourt (1658) did provide an invaluable source of information through his detailed description of textile production and uses in the 17th century. Clarence-Smith (2005) provided a modern detailed account of precolonial textile production and trading in the Indian Ocean region, including Madagascar, assessing that, compared to other places, Madagascar had possessed a vibrant and diversified textile economy as early as the 17th century, one that included diverse fibers, looming techniques, and colours, even fostering competition among Europeans over high-quality Malagasy cottons. In the following centuries, domestic cotton constituted a thread tying together the various regions of the island, as cotton was grown in the northwest, woven in the highlands, then sold as cloth in the coastal areas. Through one common economic enterprise, different local geographies and cultures found themselves vertically integrated. Clarence-Smith (2005) notes that, starting in the 18th century, specialization took place in the highlands where many women of all social ranks became full-time weavers, especially as techniques used in the early 1800s (e.g., the treadle loom) contributed to the development of textile industries in the region. Clarence-Smith’s description suggests that before the arrival of industrially produced textiles in the 1840s, local textile production in the Indian Ocean, and notably in Madagascar, was thriving. Textile markets benefitted from established shipping and financial networks, and Asian and European merchants were instrumental in diffusing technologies and savoir-faire throughout the region. Thus, precolonial Madagascar was already integrated into regional and global textile markets.

Campbell’s (2005) economic history provides another account of cloth mobility (between 1750 and 1895), covering cloth production from agriculture and looming to the confection of natural dyes. His is a history of cloth centred on the Merina kingdom, while Kreamer and Kusimba decentralized Malagasy textile studies to include other populations. Cloth was imported from Indian and British manufacturers via Mauritius until the 1830s when US cotton imports arrived in Madagascar. American cotton producers adapted to the sophisticated preferences of elite Malagasy clients in the imperial Merina market and customized their designs accordingly (Campbell, 2005). Cotton trade from South Africa to Southwest Madagascar also boomed during those years. British cotton cloth and clothing constituted the main exports from Natal to Madagascar during 1877–1894 as Madagascar consumed at least 23% of all Natal’s cotton exports, and up to 60% in the period 1885–1888. In quantifying cotton cloth imports of different origins in 1864–1890, Campbell shows an active cloth market linking Madagascar and Western trading partners (American and British). However, figures do not account for local production during the period. In fact, local cotton was coarser and often mixed with other fibers. Cheaper and more durable, this cotton was exported to the Mascarenes’ plantations for labourers’ garments (Campbell, 2005).

Fee (2005) confirms that the 19th century witnessed a shift in the trading flows of cloth in the Indian Ocean region. Until then, Arab and Portuguese merchants had exported raffia cloth to Iraq, Yemen, East Africa, and Mauritius, while Arab and Indian merchants imported

luxury cloth into the island. This changed as Malagasy cloth became more prestigious. Cheap cloth would be imported henceforth (Fee, 2005). By 1920, cloth manufacturing was common and local “cloth was woven from tree bark, leaves, raffia, hemp, cotton, and silk, all of which grew wild and required little human attention” (Campbell, 2005, p. 31). While these types of textiles were more commonly traded locally, a market for silk also existed. Although one variety of wild silk is endemic to the island, it is the British who introduced the Chinese mulberry silk in the 1820s (Fee, 2005), and silk quickly acquired an enduring symbolic value because it was sought after by local elites. In late 19th century, the cloth market became further integrated into global financial networks as “foreign traders competed to extend credit to Malagasy merchants to stimulate purchases, notably of imported cloth” (Campbell, 2005, p. 301). Cloth trade thus gave rise to complex relationships reaching in and outside of the region and had significant ramifications for the Merina kingdom’s economy as a whole, but also for foreign capital circulating in the African Indian Ocean region. However, the French colonial intervention at the end of the 19th century, along with other local, regional, and global factors, would create an imbalance in local cotton markets (Campbell, 2005).

In the transition period to colonial times, Deslandes’ (1906) *précis* on raffia explains that the fiber had been exported to the Mascarenes since 1860 as coarse cloth used to dry sugar and craft bags for green coffee, sugar, or arrowroot flour exports, while raffia rabanes (matting) were also exported to Europe as early as 1875. Local weavers created designs to please European clients, showing raffia to be at the centre of trading networks that connected Europe with the Indian Ocean region. Surprisingly, although Locamus’s (1896) book was meant as a state-of-the-island on agricultural and industrial matters, he did not account for cloth in his discussion of either agricultural products or industrial products, aside from one short allusion to raffia and silk worms. Stating that “agriculture does not exist in Madagascar” (Locamus, 1896, p. 115), he delved into meat products, fisheries, railroads, minerals, and taxation. Nonetheless, French administrators considered cloth trading in policies when they imposed tariffs on US cloth to protect markets. *Soga*, an unbleached inferior-quality, factory-made cloth, then became the main cloth import in the southern region (Fee, 2004).

The historiography of textile trade during the colonial period is scarcer than that of the precolonial period because of a lack of primary sources. At the time, French chroniclers seemed more interested in documenting agricultural production and spinning/weaving, rather than trading. Textiles elicited less interest from the colonial administration than did rice, cloves, sugar, tapioca, tobacco, the building of infrastructure, and the provision of utilities. While records show a 9000-tonne sisal production in 1953 (all by European farmers), cotton fiber records no output. By 1954, the only licensed cotton-weaving company produced 640 tonnes of cotton cloth. By 1955, there are two, both European-owned (Boiteau, 1958). By 1960, cotton production is entirely absorbed by local textile industries and does not constitute an export crop (Brown, 1994). But twenty-five years after independence, cotton products would constitute a main export (Covell, 1987). The economic accounts for textiles in Madagascar, while limited, reveal nonetheless that the island, through complex trading networks and capital markets, is indeed a significant part of not only an Indian Ocean world but also a global economy.

Economies and markets constitute only one aspect of cloth’s significance and circulation in Madagascar. Evidence shows that Malagasy people culturally appropriated imported foreign cloth and imbued it with their own meanings and interpretations, linguistically via renaming, and socially via the selection of particular cloths for specific rituals and everyday uses (Fee, 2011, 2004). In Malagasy society today, textiles take on symbolic value with social and political meanings. “Textiles are important goods that, through circulation, are transformed into valued symbols of relationships forged between individuals and among families and communities” (Kreamer, 2002, p. 18). Furthermore, the channel through which cloth circulates is often the act of gifting since “the ultimate gift, from a Malagasy perspective, is cloth” (Kreamer, 2002, p. 18).

The gift of cloth to outsiders takes on critical social and political dimensions and must be understood on several levels. The most visible level is that of the physical gift. But the invisible aspects of gifting may be more crucial because, for centuries, Madagascar has used objects “to create and maintain relationships and to represent, both internally and externally, something of the complex identities of the island’s diverse peoples” (Kreamer, 2002, p. 17). Cloth represents the ultimate diplomatic conduit, sometimes even containing tacit messages of political and social resistance. For example, the 1886 gifting by Queen Ranavalona III of two pieces of silk cloth to President Cleveland acquired diplomatic functions for its timing, which was not accidental but part of an effort to position Madagascar vis-à-vis the influence of looming French colonial rule (effective from 1896) (Arnoldi, 2002). This signified not only respect and engagement toward the USA, but also political resistance against French and other European colonial aspirations, which the Merina kingdom had defied earlier when it switched from European to Arabic dress, although this has been interpreted more as a demonstration of rejection of European influence than an embracing of a wider Indian Ocean identity (Feeley-Harnik, 1984, ctd. in Fee, 2005).

Cloth is thus deeply significant socially and culturally in Madagascar. Many rituals, notably those associated with the cult of the ancestors and re-burial ceremonial practices such as the *fahamadina* among certain groups, incorporate cloth (*lamba mena*) as a central source of symbolism. Cloth weaving patterns and colour palettes acquire an array of meanings and social functions (Fee, 2011), which often constitute signs of recognition across regional identities (Bloch, 1971). *Unwrapping the Textile Traditions of Madagascar* (Kusimba et al., 2004) covers unique local traditions, textile techniques, and technologies as well as the intangible functions of cloth, highlighting its social and political power. It offers a remarkable overview of the various ways in which Malagasy populations include cloth in local symbolic rituals, from highlander Betsileo and Merina, to the people of the Southwestern region (Bara, Mahafaly, and Tandroy), those of the Southeastern region (Antambahoaka, Temoro, Tefasy, Tesaka, and Tanosy), and the Sakalava in the West. Genderization has also occurred in cloth (Fee, 2011) as its precolonial production had altered the division of labour in households, as when women started weaving exclusively, to the detriment of other social and economic activities (Clarence-Smith, 2011), which may not indicate diminished status historically since control over wealth-producing weaving in precolonial times had already positioned women in prominent roles politically (Kusimba, 2002, p.19). Through cloth, Malagasy women had exerted economic and political power over the region and were early global actors, although it is also suggested that, post-1820, women diversified their activities as a consequence of Merina laws that placed economic pressure on populations (Campbell, 2018).

Proving long-lasting regional interconnectedness, the techniques associated with textile production and patterns reproduced in cloth have taken Madagascar out of isolation (Fee, 2011). Highlanders’ spinning techniques have been adapted from East African practices (Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, Zimbabwe); uses for raffia recall those in continental Africa (Fee, 2005); and Malagasy weavers have also incorporated, modified, and renamed striping styles borrowed from India, Oman, and Zanzibar, as well as Middle Eastern carpet motifs. Fee (2005) also suggests that the use of natural dyes could have been adapted from Yemenite, Filipino, and Indonesian *ikat* customs. In the historical context of this multi-directional, multi-layered, and multi-sited movement of cloth in and out of Madagascar—a flow in which many regional actors find a place—Madagascar is not only very present but well integrated into complex circulatory networks, whether material or intangible.

Conclusion

The Anglophone historiography of the Indian Ocean, i.e., the way its history has been told, shows decades of historians overall struggling to place the island of Madagascar within that oceanic space, thus keeping it on the margins of the history of mobile flows in the region,

and consequently outside of island studies by the same token. Meanwhile, in contrast, scholars in textile studies have had no difficulty placing the island at the centre of intricate centuries-old networks of commodity trading, power production, and cultural and symbolic exchange, linking the local with the global, and thus validating Madagascar's significance in participating in an oceanic space where land-ocean-society relationships are key operators in co-crafting and sustaining an Indian Ocean space. In spite of the island's distant location from the ocean's fulcrum, cloth has indeed embedded Madagascar within this 'aquapelago' through global-scale commodity and financial markets long before European control. Cloth not only challenges the argument that it is the colonial period that signified Madagascar's switch from the local to the global scale (Jarosz, 2003), but it also helps the large island reclaim its relevance in Anglophone island studies, especially since that field has experienced a relational turn and allowed relationality to be practiced across disciplinary currents. The history of Malagasy cloth trade and textile-based cultural exchanges provides strong evidence that Madagascar has been dynamically implicated in local, regional, and global histories in significant ways. Today, to see the most important collection of 18th-, 19th-, and early 20th-century Malagasy cloth, it is not to Antananarivo that one must fly but to Chicago, where the Field Museum possesses a generous inventory of textiles collected in Madagascar by Ralph Linton in 1927. Indeed, cloth has been at the centre of not only commercial systems but also cultural and political networks, sometimes quite distant on the map. Cloth is one way for Madagascar to reclaim its islandness as it triggers closer examination of the island's relationships with other islands in the region and places beyond, and invites cross-pollination with other 'studies' fields.

The textile sector continues to be relevant in Madagascar and has taken the most globalized form of all. The Malagasy textile industry must be considered in the context of the African apparel industry, the quest for cheap labour, and the AGOA agreements (renewed until 2025), which trigger large foreign investments to the sector. Here, too, regional interconnection is tangible as investments once directed to Mauritian export processing zones have been redirected toward Madagascar. Today, the drawbacks of the textile sector's dependency on these zones have led to more vertical integration in the sector so as to include cotton agriculture, transformation activities (spinning, weaving, and embellishment), and apparel production. Moreover, COTONA, the main Malagasy cotton-weaving company based in Antsirabe, now maintains textile and apparel operations in Mauritius as part of the multifaceted Socota group that is headed by one of the most economically powerful families in Madagascar—a family whose ancestors came from India to settle on the island in the 19th century, here again validating an Indian Ocean sphere historically. Recently, it is with Socota that the French Embassy signed a convention to co-finance scholarships for Malagasy university students to study in France. Once more, although indirectly, textiles accentuate systems of oceanic and global relationalities, circulations, and diplomacies that go beyond cloth itself.

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