

Review Philippe Beaujard. 2017. *Histoire et voyages des plantes cultivées à Madagascar*. 415 pp, maps, illustrations, indexes, reference list, table of contents. Paris: Karthala. ISBN 978-2-8111-1787-0.

This book is written by one of the most prolific and versatile scholars of Malagasy culture and language of our era. Its French title translates as “the history and travels of the cultivated plants in Madagascar”, which is an understatement of the wealth of information it provides. It consists of a 30-page long historical introduction, three actual “chapters” focusing on cultivated plants of Madagascar, a conclusion, and various indexes and lists. The chapters respectively deal with edible plants cultivated on cleared land and rice fields (chapter 1); edible and medicinal plants cultivated in home gardens (chapter 2); useful plants cultivated in other ways (chapter 3).

In the Introduction, Beaujard gives a splendid overview of the origins of agriculture in the world, early maritime and trade history of Eurasia and Africa, and the history of Madagascar in pre-colonial times. His theoretical framework is informed by the ideas of the historians Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein (among others), using the concept of a world-system with the Indian Ocean as its stage, and empires such as China and the Rome in the Mediterranean world as centres of political and economic gravity in respectively its westernmost and easternmost peripheries.

Beaujard first presents an overview of the history of agriculture. Recent research shows that it originated independently in more than ten places all over the world.

He also discusses contacts between East Africa and Insular South East Asia (henceforth Indonesia), which go back to ancient times (possibly 25 centuries ago) and are much older than the actual settlement of Madagascar by speakers of Austronesian and Bantu languages (8th century CE). As it turns out, many of the twelve edible foodstuffs that reached Africa from Indonesia and New Guinea listed by G. P. Murdock (1959) had already been introduced to Africa long before the actual settlement of Madagascar, and the early Indonesian migrants to the island did not always play an important role in this. While the big yam (*Dioscorea alata* L. or Malagasy *ovy*), rice (*Oryza sativa* L. or *vary*), the coconut tree ([*voa*]nio) and Indian saffron (*tamotamo*), were introduced by these migrants, plants and animals such as taro (*Colocasia esculenta* [L.] Schott, or *saonjo*), bananas (*Musa* sp. or *akondro*) and chickens (*akuhu*) had already been introduced from South East Asia and New Guinea to Africa in pre-migratory times. From there found their way to Madagascar only later on, rather than directly from their ultimate source. The author holds it for possible that rice was also introduced directly from the African mainland.

This is followed with a very detailed account of the precolonial economic and maritime histories of the Indian Ocean and the regions surrounding it, drawing in such diverse factors as social stratification and religions of the peoples involved as well as climatological fluctuations and the effects of slave trade. Many ethnic groups living in these regions are discussed, although the main emphasis is on the groups that had a more direct relation to Madagascar’s history, namely “Austronesians” (read: Indonesians), Bantus, Indians and Muslims (Arabs, Persians, Comorians, Zanzibarese). I find this almost global approach entirely justified. While Madagascar may not have played a central role in the history of the Indian Ocean world, it was certainly in touch with most ethnic groups and regions pertaining to it. (It was much more globally linked in than, say, most parts of the Americas, Oceania and central and west Africa in precolonial times). The inclusion of the Roman empire makes sense considering that Egypt, which was more directly involved in East African trade, became a Roman province in 31 BC. As to connections with China, this is not only a consequence of the economic and political role of the Chinese in Indonesia, but also in

East Africa itself, evidenced, among others, by the arrival of a Chinese fleet under admiral Zheng He to East Africa in the early 15th century CE.

Beaujard then zooms in on the history of Madagascar itself, discussing the first human inhabitants of the island (who were pre-Austronesian and pre-Bantu hunter-gatherers and came to Madagascar in the first millennium BCE if not earlier), the arrival of speakers of Austronesian and Bantu languages to Madagascar and the Comoros (8th century CE), the agricultural practices and plants they brought along, state formation, social stratification, relations with other parts of the world (especially Indonesia), the slave trade, and the role of Islam. As mentioned above, the Austronesian speakers introduced rice, yam, coconut and saffron. Beaujard also makes use of linguistic and human genetic information. Modern Malagasy is a clear witness of the fact that the language of the early migrants was Austronesian. It belonged to the South East Barito subgroup in South Borneo and had already undergone significant influence from Malay, Javanese and South Sulawesi. However, recent human genetic research has made it clear that the Asian roots of the Malagasy not only lead to South Borneo. Mitochondrial DNA bears an undeniable eastern Indonesian signal, showing that there must have been eastern Indonesian women among the first migrants from Indonesia. This seems to corroborate with the importance of yam cultivation in both eastern Indonesia and Madagascar. Finally, Beaujard gives due attention to the current diverse ethnic and ecological groups in Madagascar and how their modes of subsistence came about: today there are distinct groups concentrating on fishing (Vezo), rice cultivation (Merina, Betsileo, others), hunter-gathering (Mikea) and cattle breeding (Bara, Antandroy, among others), sailing and trading (Antalaotra).

The actual “chapters” dealing with cultivated plants are richly documented. They contain handsome illustrations and clear maps showing the spread and local names of these plants. There is ample information on their source, place of domestication, mode of cultivation, and practical use. We also learn exhaustively about their cultural associations and possible etymologies of their names.

In the Conclusion, Beaujard gives a summary of where the plants in question originate from, the trajectories they had followed (directly from the source or via East Africa etc.), by whom they were introduced, and when they were introduced (before the migrations, by the migrants, or during later contacts with Indonesia between the 12th and 16th centuries).

The book also has indexes of cultivated plants according to their Latin and Malagasy names, lists of names of banana trees and rice varieties, and 64 pages of references. It also contains 34 maps. Some of these indicate the many independent sources of agriculture in the world; most others detail the spread and regional names of individual plants.

This erudite and thought-provoking work is a major contribution to our understanding of the ethno-botanic history of Madagascar. Considering the crucial importance of edible plants and spices in trade history, it is also a major contribution to the general history of Madagascar and the western reaches of the Indian Ocean.

The only concerns that I have with it are the etymological explanations of Malagasy plants names and some views on Indonesian ethnohistory. While Beaujard has a profound knowledge of the plants in question, some of the historical explanations he proposes for their names are problematic, and this appears to be an area where he is overreaching himself. For instance, the assumption that *b* in source words often becomes *k* in adopted words (page 66, including footnote 28) is ad hoc and phonetically counterintuitive. It is hard to see how Malagasy *akanju* ‘robe with long sleeves’ could have been borrowed from Malay *baju* ‘shirt’ (or ‘shoulder garment’) (< Persian) (especially against the evidence of Swahili *k’anzu* or Ngazije Comorian *nkanzu* (same meaning) as more likely direct sources). Or how Malay *cabai* ‘red pepper’ would have yielded Malagasy *sakai* ‘ginger’. The supposition that *l* can become *r* and the other way around (*r* can become *l*) between source words and adopted

words is random, especially bearing in mind that word-initial and intervocalic *l* and *r* are stable consonants in the inherited vocabulary of post-migratory Malagasy. Instances are often compounded with additional problems. The word *horaka* ‘rice field’ (page 99) is an interesting case in point, as its alleged source word is also obscure: Malay *kulak* ‘pond’ is not mentioned in any Malay or Indonesian dictionary I am aware of except in Favre (1875). The word is probably due to an erroneous notation. There are Malagasy loanwords borrowed from Malay or Javanese which generally underwent semantic change but kept their original meanings in certain contexts. In this way, Proto South East Barito **pari* ‘rice-plant’ became Malagasy *fary* ‘sugarcane’ although it kept its original meaning in certain collocations and derivations (pages 89-90). Banjarese Malay *lambu* ‘buffalo’ generally became Malagasy *lambu* ‘pig’, but meaning ‘buffalo’ was maintained in some expressions and names (pages 28, 33). Beaujard explains these original meanings as the result of borrowing of the same source word for a second time (borrowing from Javanese or Banjar Malay that must have taken place during post-migratory contacts in the period between the 12th and 15th century CE). There are various phonetic, semantic and pragmatic factors militating against this explanation, and the original meanings are better explained as semantic retentions in embedded (protected) contexts. Some explanations are unnecessarily far-fetched, such as tracing *meso* ‘knife’ to Dutch *mes* ‘(any) knife’, whereas there is also Swahili *msu* (plural *misu*) ‘large knife, dagger’ (p.84). Finally, there is a bias towards tracing words to various source languages in Sulawesi.

Some ethnological observations about Indonesia are inaccurate. Certain ethnic groups in Madagascar tend to deify rice and prefer it over tubers (especially yam) and bananas. They associate the former with the colour white, and the latter with the colour black. (This colour symbolism plays an important role in social stratification). Beaujard sees the legacy of Javanese and Malays in this preference and colour association (pages 49-54). However, while among the Javanese and some Malays there does exist an almost religious preference for rice, the associated colour symbolism does not. Another assumption by Beaujard (and archaeologists researching in Madagascar) is that arca shells and arca-impressed pottery are part of the “Austronesian” heritage (pages 27-28), but in the context of Indonesian archaeology this does not ring a bell.

Most of the etymological explanations in this volume already appeared in previous publications by the author. They were given a critical evaluation in Adelaar (2016), and there is no need to discuss them again in detail. However, what needs pointing out here is that Beaujard uses these explanations to support his view that Malays and Javanese had a substantial socio-political influence on East and Central Madagascar from the 12th to the 16th century CE, that is, until long after the early migrations of South East Barito speakers to East Africa. The claim is a rather ambitious one in proportion to the available evidence. To be sure, such continued contacts did exist (see also Adelaar 1995), but one feels that Beaujard makes more out of them than is warranted by the historical facts. Local groups such as the Zavaka and Zafiraminia are readily identified with Javanese and Malays respectively, and their names are etymologically traced to ethnonyms and toponyms in Indonesia (page 32). Meanwhile, no mention is made of the significant fact that South East Asia receives no mention in precolonial Malagasy historiography, and there are no references to Madagascar in precolonial Indonesian historiography.

A few titles (Thomaz [2009], Favre [1875]) are missing in the reference list, which is 63 pages long and remains an extremely rich and useful tool for further study.

These critical remarks notwithstanding, Beaujard’s book is a magnificent contribution to the general history and ethnobotany of Madagascar. It is also a great read, and I unreservedly recommend it to anyone with a keen interest in the island.

References

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