

# Malagasy Volunteers and Conscripts in the French Army during World War I. between Attachment to Francophilia and Embryonic Francophobia

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**Abstract** This paper attempts to elucidate the nuanced and complex experience of Malagasy volunteers and conscripts in the French Army during World War I. This experience proved to be different from what Malagasy fighters used to go through during the royal times, when kings were surrounded by troops constituted by their relatives and friends, as they went to war against rival kingdoms. It was not even comparable to the defensive fights which opposed the colonial troops to Malagasy nationalist factions. Drawing mainly from documents dealing with colonial and military policies in Africa and Madagascar, and the testimony of the President of the National Association of War Veteran of Madagascar war veterans, this sociological study brings to light firstly the colonial racial policies at work in the military circle, and secondly how members of the Malagasy contingent engaged in World War I were confronted by “interculturality” while fighting in the ranks of the metropolitan army. An incipient Francophobia set the backdrop for a nationalist sentiment among the Malagasy immigrant soldiers, in spite of compensatory heroism and attachment to the ‘mother country’.

**Keywords** Bravery, Amaze ment, Military Colonial System, Nationalism

## 1. Introduction

“The First World War constituted a decisive step in the history of the African continent. For the first time, Africans saw colonising states fighting against one another and resorting to their help.”[4]. Yet, bringing their contribution to the World War “to fight the enemies of France” was an indescribable joy for the Malagasy infantrymen according to French Governor Garbit cited in[6]. The extent to which such an assumption could be justified will be the main subject of this paper which attempts to elucidate the ambiguous or even complex perceptions of Malagasy volunteers and conscripts in the ranks of the Allies, notably the French troops during World War I. The question of how to qualify the representations of their family members or their ethnic groups will also be addressed.

The paper comprises three parts: firstly the methodological and theoretical frameworks based essentially on military sociology, historical sociology, colonial sociology and representations. A brief historical overview of the Malagasy army before and during World War I is presented in part two. The last part examines the paradox between what is said and what is actually done,

among the immigrant soldiers, as well as among the governors of the colonial state.

## 2. Methodological and Theoretical Frameworks

The study is based on classical documentations, (archives, scientific journals, newspapers), electronic sources, and semi-directed live interview with the President of the National Association of War Veteran of Madagascar *or Association Nationale des Anciens Combattant de Madagascar* (ACOM) - Mathieu Ramarason. The interview probed his personal views as a field actor and his and other veterans’ military commitment to actions while they were serving Metropolitan France.

From a sociological vantage point, one can note that, “Military sociology does not consider only the question of balance between job offer and demand.” It addresses also many other problems: legitimacy, qualitative and quantitative objectives of recruitment, efficiency in the battle, cohesion and moral. If economists often consider a priori that an army of professionals would be more efficient because it is more motivated than an army of conscripts, sociologists are more concerned with the conditions under which higher efficiency can be attained. For Janowitz, cited in[13] three conditions ought to be fulfilled for an army to be considered efficient: (1) a “raison d’être” other than the economic

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justification, (2) some operating standards, and (3) a social cohesion.

By grounding our arguments on sociology, this time, colonial, it is also worth mentioning with Maunier[8], that “the colony (here Madagascar) implied the existence of the metropolitan country (here France) which ruled its destiny. The term metropolis is a Greek word which expresses the idea that the city (*polis*) imposed its *metron*, “measure”, rule, law on its new colony”. Additionally, we are in complete agreement with Balandier[3] when he stated that: “the doctrines founded on the notions of “civilizing mission”, predominant influence, trusteeship function, or on leadership, etc. are all ideologies in one of the meanings propounded by Marx – false presentation of reality or mystification.

This observation cannot constitute an argument in favor of theorists who assimilate the relation metropolis-colony to the relation capital - work, but it suggests the important role that the phenomenon of realization can play in both situations”. In the same way, colonial leadership before and during World War I can be assimilated to a transformational leadership[9] in so far as the colonists and the colonialist military chiefs - through their acts and capacity to communicate - managed, to share a *vision* and a *point of view*, accepted by the non-leaders and inspiring the latter to develop in themselves an intrinsic motivation to excel, so as to ensure the success of the organisation (here the defeat of the German).

### 3. Military Dynamics during the Pre-colonial and Colonial Periods

Oral traditions assumed the existence of continual confrontations between small factions armed with stones and clay javelins. For their part, kings surrounded themselves with troops composed of their parents and companions among whom the most deserving became founder of noble lineages or awarded positions of authority. This privilege was equally granted to free men, descents of landlords (*tompon-tany*); the medicine man (*ombiasy*) who provided counsels related to lawful days and ill-fated days. Equipped with distinctive assegai, the so-called *tsinandoa* were entrusted with the transmission of the royal orders and were assigned to become executioners.

Such was the case of military corps, but what about the weapons and accessories? Defensive weapons, shields and offensive arms were mainly made of wood, clay, and stone, and then of iron. There were also tomahawks, war badges, called *felana*, slices cut out of a shell, cassava or a coin, and especially the assegais which permitted to distinguish skilled warriors from ordinary ones.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, during the times of King Andrianampoinimerina, the above mentioned weapons were generally used. Thereafter, pirates who travelled to the region of Menabe bought some guns there[called *angalisy*, old English musket and *basy*]. English traders largely

proceeded to the barter of war materials for marketable products. There were, strictly speaking, no professional soldiers; the purchase of guns was a privilege of a few rich people, due to their exorbitant cost. In case of inter-groups attacks, sturdy young men and carriers (*mpitondra entana*) were called in. With the intensification of the network of Arab and European traders, barter changed: slaves from raids were exchanged for guns and gunpowder from the slave traders.

This structure and military mode of functioning were found in nearly the quasi totality of all the political units of the big island. The *Zana-Malata* of the Betsimisaraka kingdom of the East, just like the *Maroseranana* of the Sakalava kingdom of the West confirmed their well established military, economic and political positions thanks to their superiority in matters of armament. This fact led the *Zana-Malata* to conduct expeditions in the Comoros and in Eastern Africa. This situation had a snowball effect well into the highlands of the *Merina* kingdom. It should be pointed out that the alliance with the slave traders and the progressive assimilation of slaves with African origin (the *Makoa*) acted as a catalyst of local military formations. Consequently, chiefs could impose themselves among the royal entourage[17].

Furthermore, spurred on by King Radama I, the pluri-castes military integration led to the cohesion of battle formations into squads. Thanks to the Treaty of October 23, 1817, slave trade stopped and favorable conditions to commercial exchanges between the big Island and Mauritius were concluded under Farquhar. The formation of the “regiment of Brandy” named after its instructor and composed of 256 dominantly nobiliary men (The *Voromahery* and the *Manisotra* with warlike temperament) increased the royal prestige of King Radama. Three years later, the emergence of the *foloalindahy* was noticed, that is to say the one hundred thousand men, a generic name of the army[1],[5],[17]. Recruited at the beginning on a voluntary basis, then by summary enlistment, well and strong men from diverse localities of Imerina, except those from Vakinankaratra had to participate in the enrolment of men into the military service and to periodic trainings.[11] This modernization of the army involved also the institution of a military hierarchy stretching from simple soldier (one honor or *iray voninahitra*) to marshal (twelve honors) <sup>1</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> In fact, this local military hierarchy did not go beyond the rank of a non-commissioned officer. Nevertheless, according to King Radama's concept, only the military could benefit by these honors (that was not the case with Queen Ranavalona the first): 1 honor to simple soldier; 2 honors : the one who has 10 men under his command (Corporal); 3 honors: chief of a squad or *sokajy* in Malagasy; with 20 to 25 men under his command (sergeant); 4 honors: leading a team of 40 men (sergeant major); 5 honors: pennant guard equivalent of lieutenant; 6 honors: leading a team of 50 men and in charge of the army drum, equivalent of a captain; 7 honors: with 100 men under his command, also called *Amboninjato* (chief of a battalion); 8 honors: commanding a troop of 500 men; 9 honors: commanding a troop of 1000 men, also called *Beholafintompom-boridedry* (brigadier general); 10 honors: general quartermaster with 2000 men under his command, in a parallel to a major general; 11 honors: general officer with 5000 men under his command,

military superiority and conquests covered up, in fact, important stakes, both economical (hence the flourishing oligarchy) and territorial (hence the corroboration of the territorial basis of the *Komandy*) who had the stranglehold on the supply of armament[17]. Frequent expeditions to the Menabe region and all over the island revealed an allegiance to the macro project of King Andrianampoinimerina (“*The sea is the boundary of my kingdom*”) and a will to perpetuate the *Hova* hegemony. If at the beginning of the reign of King Radama I, the strength of the royal troops was 10 000, toward the end of his reign, it had tripled.

There was an amalgam between the military service and the civil service (all ensured night guards, were involved in the sharing out of arms, timber and so on.). This fusion of actions translated in reality the solidarity, the consubstantial order of the royalty, the divinity and the ancestors. A third power came to be grafted onto the above-mentioned groups, the *fahavalo* or enemies who were real bandits or shadow armies the French had to clash with. They were sometimes called *mpikomy*, that is to say, rebels but these types of troops had one common objective: that of defying or rejecting the authority of the State. It was suspected that the kingdom of Madagascar was instituted by the English rival supported by the presence of the missionaries of the London Missionary Society (L.M.S.).

With Queen Ranavalona I, the army was more defensive than conquering. Nevertheless, she sent several successive expeditions from 1829 to 1832; each expedition involved approximately 2000 men. After the defeat at Ikongo, the Prime Minister Rainiharo made Ivohibe and its surrounding villages capitulate, and changed the garrison of Fianarantsoa on his way back. The Commander-in-Chief Rainivoninahitriniony crushed the main localities of the south eastern region with an army of 9000 men.

It was only during the reign of Queen Ranavalona II that pertinent socio-military events occurred. A certain rigor showed through the decrees of September 13 and March 25, 1876: reduction of the aide-de-camps of the field officers (from 5000 to 25), cancellation of the purchase of rank promotions, compulsory military service from the age of 18. Compared to the strength of the army under the reign of King Radama I, that of the Queen doubled (30, 000 men) during the war which opposed the French and the *Hova* in 1883 and the Franco-Malagasy war of 1895; there were exceptional enlistments then. The *sakaizamb-bohitra*, or friends of the village with administrative and police functions were recruited among the former soldiers.[11]

During the reign of Ranavalona II (1883 -1896), the fall of Tananarive triggered the awakening of the nationalist feeling and insurrections within the community (the destruction of the village of Raminandro by fire, in the west of Ankaratra, etc.) and between communities (the massacre of the family of the missionary, Johnson, and the

burning down of the houses of the mission at Imamo, etc.). In spite of the calls to order and peace launched by the resident General Laroche and the Queen, insurrections spread out and the military situation became aporetic. When the annexation law of Madagascar of August 5, 1896 was voted, it was published in Tananarive a month later and its application was assigned to General Galliéni. The method used by Lyautey was conciliatory in the sense that he conceived a proximity colonial policy. Several French officers (Colonel Lyautey, Captain Grammont, Colonel Berdoulat...) conducted pacification operations. One of the local insurgent chiefs declared for instance that “he revolted because his family and friends were persecuted”. Just like Lyautey, the interim of Galliéni, Pennequin was considered to be lenient with the natives given the fact that he granted the villagers the freedom to choose their chiefs among the village notables[11]; he allowed the restoration and management of the domestic affairs by the local community, the *fokonolona*.

In 1900, the military structures were modified by the Overseas Army. Besides, the situation in Europe gave cause for concern. The English fleet which circulated along the coasts of Africa cast the threat of an invasion. Moreover, the promulgation of the order of May 2<sup>nd</sup> 1901 and the decree of March 9<sup>th</sup> 1903 accused the *fokonolona* of being the instigator of disorder[17]. Gallieni, the architect of the great sword effects and the races policy tendered his unexpected resignation in October 1905. Furthermore, it is believed that Galliéni could not stand the inspection dispatched to the colony in 1903[11].

Renowned for his anticlericalism, his antimilitarism and his socialist ideology, General Governor Victor Augagneur arrived in Madagascar towards the end of 1905 and collaborated with some elements who already effectuated a long stay in Madagascar, such as Renel and Villette. He planned to grant the Malagasy the rights to do mining prospection and he created an acreage tax on mines. These decisions disturbed the metropolitan public opinion supported by the written press of the times (*La Tribune de Madagascar, le Réveil de Madagascar, L'Impartial, Le petit Courrier de Tananarive...*).

The resurgence of petty criminal acts (or *tontakely*) and possession (*tromba*) in the northern and the south western parts of the island also embarrassed the colonial contingent. Irreverence towards the colonial personalities, attacks made on the posts and stealing of arms, refusal to pay taxes, etc, all resulted in the removal of Augagneur from his post. He was replaced by a senior colonial officer, Albert Picquié (1910-1914). He continued the militarisation of the local districts heads; besides, he managed the budget rationally in a way to please Paris and enforced the decree of March 13<sup>th</sup> 1913 relative to the definitive status of religious services and the end of the controversies between the public authorities and the missions. The former military chief of staff of Augagneur and Secretary General of Albert Picquié, Hubert Garbit, ensured his first mandate as a Consulate from 1914 to 1917, a period which coincided with World War I.

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comparable to a lieutenant general; 12 honors: Supreme military chief having 10 000 men under his command, also called *Marosaly* (Marshal)[10]

#### 4. Paradoxical and Mitigated Representations of the North by the South

An overview of the armed forces before World War I can start with some quantitative data. The French army stationed in Madagascar counted 8 652 men. There were 326 officers, 612 non-commissioned officers, 1727 Corporals and soldiers of French origin, that is to say 2665 in total. From the Malagasy side, there were 199 non-commissioned officers, 5788 corporals and soldiers[6].

From a legal point of view, the indigenous troops were regulated by a few basic texts. According to the September 24, 1903 decree, enlisted and re-enlisted men remained at the disposal of the military authority 4 years after their liberation; they were enrolled in the reserve and could be recalled in if needed. The recruitment of the indigenous troops of Madagascar was regulated by the May 19, 1908 decree, completed by the June 22, 1912 decree. Malagasy soldiers were allowed to enlist in the French army for 2 or 3 years; for an enlistment of 3 years, they received an allowance of 20 francs. At the end of the enlistment period, they could re-enlist for 2 or 3 more years and earned a bonus of 40 francs for 2 years, and 60 francs for 3 years. The re-enlisted men were entitled to a high pay which ranged from 5 to 15 centimes for the corporals and soldiers, from 10 to 20 centimes for the non-commissioned officers. The re-enlistment limit was up to 15 years. After 15 years of service, the soldiers received a commensurate pension.[6]

After these quantitative data and legal way marks we can move on to the ethno-military data. The military circle itself was affected, not to say, infected by the policy of races, aimed at lowering the social position of the *Merina* as a reference ethnic group. This explained the following typology of moral and military values: on top, there were those who were very good: Comorians, Zanzibarites, Makoa, Antakarana; then the good: Sakalava, Antaisaka, Betsimisaraka, Bara, Bezanozano, Antaimoro, Antaifasy, Black Hova and Betsileo; thereafter, the mediocre: Tanala, Antsihanaka, Antanosy, finally, the truly Betsileo stock and the purely Hova stock “as cited in[17]. This practice was also confirmed by the President of the Association of war veterans of Madagascar (A.C.O.M).

Following the recruitment campaigns to strengthen the ranks of the Allies, and especially the French troops, the Governor General Garbit pointed out during the conference he gave on May 16, 1919 that there were 45,863 Malagasy conscripts among who 41,355 served in the fighting units and 4,508 as noncombatant[6]. In his 1920 publication, Guyon[7] suggested the following figures: 42,000 Malagasies were enrolled in Europe, 25, 000 returned safely home. Important contingents were back, others were to follow. For his part, Ralaimihoatra[11] assumed that there were 41,000 Malagasy voluntary enlistments to the front and a subscription of five million francs. Apart from the physical participation of the infantrymen, Madagascar also

contributed to the supply of victuals (rice, meat) and a great quantity of raw materials (graphite, leather).

One wonders whether the departure of the Malagasy fighters was not, in fact, associated with exoticism, civic commitment, the lure of civilization (admiration for French infrastructures, way of life, changing seasons, etc.), the concord spirit and the quest for socio professional promotion. In practice, an honorary title or indigenous merit was created as an additional distinction destined to all those who offered to help France as cited in the government official publication (J.O.M.D) of December 4, 1915[17]. Valensky further noted that: “the prospect of acquiring citizenship through naturalization, otherwise, the exemption of indigenous obligations in exchange for participation in the war effort stirred up individual competitions and created a favorable consensus for the action of the general government, particularly in matters of recruitment”.

The following observation seems to confirm our work postulate: “War propaganda spread by the infantrymen contributed to the consolidation of France as a colonizer and the Malagasy conscripts as committed to a humanitarian intervention. In symbiosis with the spirit of the conflict, the quality of their participation[2] and their insertion within some French units reinforced this impregnation which can be ascribed to an assimilation perspective”[17]. This is not opposed to the information revealed by the president of the Association of Malagasy war veterans (ACOM) in January 2011 during the interview; he enumerated the positive sides of the military-colonial system: the sense of civics, inculcation of discipline, respect for hierarchy, competence without consideration of gender and regional quota, honesty, obligingness, equality, affectation to serve the nation, patriotism.

Nevertheless, a ferment of discord and a whiff of “metropolophobia” were also noted. The vicissitudes of the war and the reactive depressions[14] caused by a disorientating tangle of facts (solitude, exile, a pervading fusion *Chief – White – Mother – Homeland*.) often ended by destabilizing even the convictions of the better established and the strong personalities. This accounted for certain rebellious attitudes: “...the infantrymen...proved to be traffickers of military effects, tobacco and other hems; the ones who robbed dead chief in the battlefield...”[17]. There were also cases of exactions of officers both French (misappropriation of pay, physical abuse, corruption for getting promotion or leave) and Malagasy (abuse of power)[17]. Contestation intensified and became resistance, this is the reason why Baba Kake[2] even said that “their experience (that of the veterans) of the Whites allowed them to play the role of important political fermentation”. Social injustices and unequal rights between French and Malagasy had contributed to the emergence of nationalist feelings among the group of Malagasy fighters.

The secret association V.V.S. or *Vy Vato Sakelika*, that is to say, Iron, Stone, Ramification, was created and the adepts were recruited among the students of the School of Medicine

of Tananarive; in 1915, it counted around 2500 members scattered around the main towns of the Island. Among those who were accused were, pastor Rabary, Razafimahefa, Ravelojaona, the father of Venance Manifatra, the brother of Raphaël Rafiringa, Doctor Ravoahangy, and Avana Ramanantoanina, the poet. One hundred and seventy militants were deported and imprisoned in Nosy Lava. They combined Christian ideals with Malagasy nationalism[4]. After their liberation, the secret society was dissolved. In France, three militants among whom, a doctor, were suspected of being and denounced as instigators of the acceleration of the independence re-conquest process. A number of French intellectuals and some members of the Colonial Fraternity also supported the actions of the V.V.S.

At the end of World War I, the liberated militaries found themselves in their country of origin, isolated, without any definite resources, and indifferent to the community. Some of them did not rejoin their families but lingered or settled in the urban areas of the Colony, such as Tananarive, Tamatave, Majunga, and Diego-Suarez, where there were many temptations[7].

## 5. Conclusions

Even if the perceptions of the Malagasy conscripts in the French Army during World War I and those of their families who remained in Madagascar were somehow antinomic, the gallantry and combativeness of the Malagasy immigrant soldiers were exemplary; much ink has been spilt about this fact and it became the subject of many hyperbolic and even dithyrambic speeches. Let us recall, in this respect, the motto of the Malagasy Division : “ No rest as long as the enemy is on the French soil[12], or the following epic lines published in Tribune de Madagascar[16] in October 1915:

*“They were gone, the soldiers,  
They left Tananarive;  
Under their fez flowers fell;  
They went far away, on the other side of the river,  
Their heart ardent, their soul expansive,  
With proud and threatening look in their eyes  
Shiver, Boches, drunk with blood!”*

The overestimation of the North by the South, the positive representation of the Colonial State at war by the colonised country and the “determination of the black armed force” in the fronts, revealed to us the intercultural and operational approach, more particularly paternalism through certain farcical sides and a sort of compensatory heroism. The logic of sharing and reciprocity of perspectives, the indelibility of the traumas and aftermaths would call for a consistent and perennial social indebtedness to the infantrymen and their country of origin.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The discourse of Hubert Garby, (Hardy L. Press, Paris) does not go against our analysis when he wrote: “Oh, glorious Dead, Dead of our old soil of France, Dead for all the new Frances, melancholic plains or shores of the Ocean...you were thrown into the awful blaze of thunder and fire, because you wanted to

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*defend, you wanted to avenge our homeland, confident that if you succumbed, new legions would die to avenge you in their turn...The sons of France do not either forget that you have sacrificed your life for an ideal of Justice, that this bright Torch made our strength, that it brought Victory to us and it should be borne unflinchingly, from generation to generation, as time goes on, and the history of humanity will continue, the history of our race. Your new children, O France, willed, also, their part of suffering and glory: They willed the honor to die for their far away Country. Today, the light of the French flag spreads over vast new lands and reaches out, softly, to wide regions which already bless it...You will remain, O beloved Dead O revered Dead, our guides and protectors, if some new storms arise. And you are not dead at all, since your remembrance, in spite of years and centuries, will remain immortal in the heart of the living”.*

What Garby wrote, was also corroborated by Simon *et al.*’s surveys and films[15], as well as by the President of the Association of war veterans of Madagascar (ACOM).

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