

Literacy and Power in Madagascar*

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“There is no question,” writes historian Sugata Bose, “that the history of the Indian Ocean world is enmeshed with its poetry and in some ways propelled by it.”¹ The same might be said of its manuscript and print cultures. Literary historians of Indian Ocean Africa have in recent years turned their attention to the audiences of and communities fostered by composition and publication. Oceanic connections are central to a number of recent studies on the circulation of Islamic texts in Africa and in publishing links between India and Africa. Between poetry and print, epistolary networks in Africa’s Indian Ocean region and beyond reveal how communicating friends positioned themselves among places of birth, residence, and exile through connections fostered by shared experience and long-distance travel.² Some literary historians have argued for “the ability of an Indian Ocean perspective to complicate received paradigms and academic traditions” in African studies.³ That may be the case, but rich genres of literary history have emerged from within African studies as well. One of them takes an individual and his or her writing practices as its theme, exploring self representation and personal subjectivity through composition.⁴ Another examines political discourse, asking how communities were made and broken through sometimes cacophonous discussions of civic virtue, race, and nationalism.⁵ The analysis of particular genres of creative writing, especially fiction in both European and African languages, is another common form of literary study in Africa.⁶

*I am grateful for comments on a previous version of this article by two anonymous reviewers for this journal. The following abbreviations for archival collections are employed in the footnotes: ANM, Archives Nationales de Madagascar, Antananarivo, series BB (outgoing letters of the court); CO, National Archives of Britain, Kew, Colonial Office series; GMS, Grey Manuscripts, Sir George Grey Library, Auckland City Central Library, New Zealand; LMS ILM, London Missionary Society, Incoming Letters from Madagascar, School of Oriental and African Studies, Special Collections; LMS ILMAU, London Missionary Society, Incoming Letters from Mauritius (also at SOAS); MNA, Mauritius National Archives, Coromandel, series HB (Madagascar). Numbers appearing at the end of archival citations, after the comma, are folio and page numbers; all folio numbers are followed by r (recto) or v (verso), page numbers are sometimes marked on the document and sometimes calculated by the author

¹ Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006), 5.

² Pier M. Larson, *Ocean of Letters: Language and Creolization in an Indian Ocean Diaspora* (Cambridge, 2009), pages; Cyrius Vukile Khumalo, “Ekukhanyeni Letter-Writers: A Historical Inquiry into Epistolary Network(s) and Political Imagination in Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa,” in Karin Barber, ed., *Africa’s Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self* (Bloomington, 2006), 113-142.

³ Isabel Hofmeyr, Preben Kaarsholm, and Bodil Folke Frederiksen, “Introduction: Print Cultures, Nationalisms, and Publics of the Indian Ocean,” *Africa* 81,1 (2011), 14.

⁴ Barber, ed. *Africa’s Hidden Histories*.

⁵ Jonathon Glassman, *War of Words, War of Stones: Racial Thought and Violence in Colonial Zanzibar* (Bloomington, 2011); Derek Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth, 2004); James Brennan, *Taifa: Making Nation and Race in Urban Tanzania* (Athens, 2012).

⁶ Abiola Irele, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel* (Cambridge, 2009); Stephanie Newell, *Literary Culture in Colonial Ghana: “How to Play the Game of Life”* (Manchester, 2002).

Literary histories of mainland and oceanic Africa share certain characteristics. Most are studies of the twentieth century. They tend to favor composition and publication over reading and figuring. And they typically emphasize a particular practice or genre of literacy (print, newspapers, letters, journals, novels, plays), specific persons (editors, publishers, newspaper readers, letter writers, social groups, individuals), or distinct subjects (nationalism, race, civic virtue, reading publics, how presses function). Each literary history abstracts its particular subject from the complex web of reading, writing, and figuring in a particular place. The composite literary landscapes, or mosaics, from which most studies derive their specific subject matter, however, typically include diverse forms of literacy habit and multiple actors, each with their specific objectives together with their connections near and far.

There are many advantages to specialized studies that take as their primary subject a literary component or strand of discourse in a literary landscape. It is neither possible nor desirable to bring every element of a literary landscape into a single study. But what can be the limits of such analyses? The intellectual and cultural histories that studies of literary practice in Africa expose are informed by both their local and distant networks. The transoceanic connections typically highlighted in literary histories of Indian Ocean Africa may seem isolated from the proximate literacy mosaic of which they are a part. Adjacent elements of the literacy landscape may domesticate or transform international linkages, with which they may be in dialogue, tension, or competition. Thinking about literary mosaics as ensembles of local and distant interconnections requires the historian to look deeply into the mosaic as well as broadly at its connections to other places. Parsing adjacent practices of literacy also assists historians to identify the power relations imbricated in different types of literacy and literary exercise in one place, some of which may be internationally connected or linked to domestic states or state institutions.

A key feature of literary landscapes is that the literacy practices that constitute them are not single, straightforwardly definable things nor are they typically confined to a particular segment of society or discursive theme. Literacy as it exists in both time and place is a *bundle* of associated practices with varied social and political implications, involving fractured and often contending publics that—while in proximity—may or may not be in communication with each other or in connection with the exterior. The different and sometimes competing ways that individuals, collectivities, and states set elements of the literacy bundle into motion produces fluid literary landscapes that can change rapidly or defy state (or any other) efforts to direct and control them. Assessing the influences of literacy in a broader literary field requires the historian to move among social groups and to assess the ways in which they differently employ elements of the literate complex.

In this article, I seek to deepen the chronology and broaden the scope of literary histories of Indian Ocean Africa by examining the evolving and at times unstable literary mosaic of highland Madagascar between 1820 and 1860. Because those who employed elements of the literate bundle were impelled into positions of social influence or marginalized from it, understanding Madagascar's literary mosaic with its many distant and insular interconnections is especially useful for thinking about contests over power there, especially in and around the court at Antananarivo, and hypothesizing how literacy may enter into sociopolitical struggles and literary landscapes elsewhere in Africa.

Empires and Schools: The Three Rs in Imerina

Madagascar's nineteenth-century literary mosaic lay at the intersection of three empires, the first of which was Malagasy and confined to the island itself.⁷ Building on the territorial achievements of his predecessors, King Radama of Antananarivo (reigned 1809-1828) rapidly extended the boundaries of his landlocked kingdom outward to encompass Madagascar's east and northwest coasts. The instrument of that expansion was a military, professionalized after 1820 from a mass band of farmers into a standing army, that captured territory and administered it through garrisons and military governorships (see map). All of Radama's conquests were confined to Madagascar, but at his death the king was toying with a seaborne conquest of southeast Africa.⁸ Queen Ranavalona, Radama's senior wife and successor (reigned 1828-1861), abandoned aspirations for oceanic expansion to more effectively challenge the foreign powers around Madagascar's coasts. She and her military bureaucracy efficiently administered a sprawling empire-state from their capital of Antananarivo.

The other empires in this story were European and seaborne. Britain conquered île de France from France during the Napoleonic wars and renamed it Mauritius. The colony's new governor, Robert Farquhar, sought to curtail French influence in the region by extending British informal empire to Madagascar, which with southeast Africa provided the food and labor essential to economic growth in the Mascarene islands. Religion and literacy played crucial roles in Farquhar's designs. He sought, as he phrased it, to "hinder the musselmen from inculcating opinion against the Christian faith," and was also keen to reduce the footprint of Catholicism in the region. "It being virgin soil," he reasoned about Madagascar in 1816, "the protestant religion may be easily introduced."⁹ To claim Madagascar for British Protestantism, Governor Farquhar requested the London Missionary Society (LMS) to send him missionaries, who he placed, by 1820, as teachers at the court of King Radama. Radama embraced British Evangelicals as partners in creating a military bureaucracy.¹⁰ Together king and cleric fashioned a system of schools in Imerina—the region immediately surrounding Antananarivo—that trained future bureaucrats in the three Rs for service in Radama's army and administration.

Between 1820 and 1836 British evangelicals and the royal court jointly supervised the schools of Imerina. The court at Antananarivo issued orders for populous towns surrounding Antananarivo to dispatch some of their children to the schools and supported the pedagogical work of LMS missionaries with rhetoric, construction materials, and conscripted manual labor. Missionaries and their most advanced students staffed the schools and produced their curriculum with advice from the court. Paper—*taratasy* in Malagasy (deriving from the Arabic *kartas*)—is the term people in Imerina came to employ to designate school-based instruction and

⁷ See Solofo Randrianja and Stephen Ellis, *Madagascar: A Short History* (London, 2009).

⁸ Aristide Corroller, "Relation intéressante de Madagascar depuis 1808 jusqu'à 1835," c. 1835, Translated by H. Frederick Robe from French into English (in c. 1836), GMS 8, 33r.

⁹ Farquhar to Le Sage, Port Louis, 6 November 1816, MNA 7/6, 556.

¹⁰ Bonar Gow, *Madagascar and the Protestant Impact: The Work of the British Missions, 1818-1895* (New York, 1979); Vincent Huyghues-Belrose, *Les premiers missionnaires protestants de Madagascar, 1795-1827* (Paris, 2001); Pier M. Larson, "Promiscuous Translation: Working the Word at Antananarivo," in *The Power of Doubt: Essays in Honor of David Henige*, ed. Paul Landau (Madison, 2011), 89-111.

knowledge. *Taratasy* foregrounded by synecdoche literacy's aspirational yet ever-scarce commodity, paper. In 1832, LMS missionary J. J. Freeman explained *taratasy* as "a sort of generic term employed by the Malagasy to express every thing connected with Education ... to signify a Book, teaching to read, or write a Book, letter &c. anything in short that is not strictly a handicraft."¹¹ Evangelical lessons in "paper" relied, in theory, on the importation from Europe of the essential commodity of nineteenth-century bureaucratic empire. Ironically given its name, much *taratasy* in Imerina's schools was conducted with little paper.

As students in the schools practiced the three Rs with scant supplies of imported stationary, court and cleric vied to shape the specific bundle of literacy and numeracy skills school youth acquired. The court especially prized writing and arithmetic. During his annual examination of scholars at Antananarivo in March 1826, "His Majesty [Radama] paid particular attention to their writing and as a token of his approbation gave a piece of silver to the best writer in every school."¹² Little invested in a reading public, Radama sought professional secretaries, a service corps of competent writers with facility in correspondence and numeracy for managing his armies, compiling lists, recording taxes, figuring accounts, making censuses, and communicating with his governors and commanders distantly ranging about the island. Reading on the other hand was to be ancillary to administrative composition and mostly bureaucratic in nature. Designated as "writers" (*mpanoratra*) rather than as "readers," secretaries would read incoming letters to the illiterate adult administrators they served, composing responses by dictation. In the constellation of government bureaucratic practices that resulted from schooling, reading was not encouraged as a creative or introspective activity, but as the means for reception of information and directives from afar in the furtherance of state power.

With Christian evangelism to mind, Protestant missionaries were considerably less invested in writing and numeracy—or in blank paper—than in reading and the pious self-examination they hoped vernacular texts of scripture might catalyze. Evangelicals' intention at home and abroad was to create a literate public capable of consuming scriptures in their mother tongue so as to foster an unmediated relationship between individual reader and God. "Unless we establish schools to teach these people to read," they argued, "it will be of no use to put either tracts or Bibles into their hands."¹³ Serving both court and cleric, the curriculum of schools in Imerina reflected ongoing tensions between writing and reading. Each party emphasized different elements of literacy as a bundle. "The word of God forms the principle portion of their lessons," missionaries explained to friends in Britain about vernacular reading texts available in Imerina's schools, for as they conceived of it "elementary instruction and Christian knowledge are combined."¹⁴ "All their lesson-books are filled with scriptural details," reported a British diplomatic envoy, "it is impossible for [missionaries] to go on without infusing moral and religious principles."¹⁵

¹¹ Freeman to Hankey, Tananarivo, 18 June 1832, LMS ILM 4/2/D.

¹² Jones and Griffiths to Burder, Tananarivou, 9 June 1826, LMS ILM 2/3/A, 3.

¹³ Jones and Griffiths to Burder, Tananarivou, 14 June 1826, LMS ILM 2/3/B, 11.

¹⁴ Jones, Griffiths, and Hastie, "An Appeal to the Christian World," Antananarivo, 14 November 1825, LMS ILM 2/2/C, 4 (principle portion); David Jones et al., *The Second Report of the Madagascar Missionary School Society, 1828, Under the Patronage of His Majesty Radama* (Tananarivo, 1828), (elementary instruction).

¹⁵ Lyall to Colville, Tananarivou, 26 December 1828, MNA 19/13, 10.

Titled *The Root of Learning*, an introductory primer of vernacular lessons for Imerina's schools was available only in manuscript before its first printing in Antananarivo in early 1828.¹⁶ The primer introduced the alphabet, starting with vowels (*ny mampiteny*), then consonants (*ny tena soratra*), and finally punctuation (*ny fianonana*). Instruction in numbers (*marikia*) came next, in both Roman and Arabic form, as an entry to calculation. The primer moved on to spelling, from words of one, two, and three syllables (*vaky*) up through those of eight and more. The last spelling section on page 13 listed the names of four of Imerina's legendary kings (including the eleven-syllable An-dri-am-pa-nom-pon-ja-na-ko-lo-na). Tying the notion of syllables to royal history, the primer was domesticated to Radama's kingdom, linking Latin-alphabet literacy and the king's nascent bureaucracy to royal precedent.

Paragraph-long reading, writing, and spelling exercises titled "wisdom" (*hehendrena*) appeared at the end of each of the primer's chapters. Missionaries and their helpers translated some exercises directly from English and composed others anew to reflect contexts and experiences familiar to Imerina's schoolchildren. Among the dictation exercises on page 6 were "Forge a spear to take to war" and "Go make rice for the guests" (page 6). The military service awaiting virtually all boys departing from Imerina's schools was showcased in a jocose reading and spelling exercise appearing on page 15.

Are you going to war? Yes. When are you going? On whatever day the king fixes. Will you be there quickly, or will it take a long time? I don't know; whatever time is made by the commander of the army. May you arrive well and in good health, be blessed by God, arrive well, return well. May the desire of both king and people be achieved. Yes. Have you returned? ... Was there a fight, or did they surrender? Some surrendered, some fought.

The final pages of *The Root of Learning* contain sundry New Testament readings, a requirement of Evangelical missionaries. Other curricular books produced for use in Imerina's schools were exclusively composed of scripture readings. One such collection of texts was the undated 48-page "Reader" (*Famakian-Teny*) offering selections from both the Old and New Testaments. The language and orthography of this work suggest it was printed in Antananarivo during the early 1830s.¹⁷ During most of the preceding decade, however, instructional works were available only in manuscript. The curriculum introducing the three Rs to the youth of Imerina consisted of a mix of sacred and profane texts orienting school learners to the requirements of king and cleric and representing the uneasy compromise between their divergent interests in literacy's compound bundle.

King Radama's keenness for calculation is reflected in a manual of arithmetic lessons employed in the schools and titled *Counting, Lessons in the Nature of Numbers*.¹⁸ The *Counting* first demonstrates both Arabic and Roman numerals, then introduces the functions of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division in successive lessons. Each of its chapters is followed by a set of word problems

¹⁶ *Ny fototry ny fianarana* (An-Tananarivo, n.d.). This is likely to have been an early edition of the primer, printed in 1828 or 1829.

¹⁷ *Famakian-teny Nalainy tamy ny Teny n' Andriamanitra, Hampianarana Fahendrena* (An-Tananarivo, 1834).

¹⁸ *Fanisana, Fampianariny ny Fombany ny Isa* (An-Tananarivo, 1836).

(*ohatra*). On page 11, a typical exercise adapted to the agro-pastoral context of Imerina exposes missionaries' ignorance that daughters as well as sons typically stood to inherit from their parents:

Nine sons took the cows left to them at the death of their father. Son A took 31 cows, B took 17, D took 73, E took 31, F took 52, G took 63, H took 16, I took 84, J took 76. How many did they take all together? Answer 443.

Few students would have enjoyed inheritance of as many cattle as are mentioned in this happy exercise, and not all homework problems were as well embedded in the things of Malagasy society. One of the problems offered in the lesson on subtraction (p. 12), for example, reflected a biographical history more proximate to the canon of British Nonconformists: "Sir Isaac Newton was born in the year 1642 and died in the year 1727, how many years did he live before his death? Answer 85 years." An awkwardly worded problem on page 13 referenced both gunpowder and religion, the respective interests of king and cleric.

Gunpowder was seen [discovered] in 1344 A.D., and the split with popery occurred in 1517, how many [years] were between them, and how many years from that time until today, and how many years from each of the two if today? Answer 173 and 491, and 318.

This math exercise may have been translated in 1835, the year which supplies proper answers to its obfuscatory syntax and its religious history.

An exercise in division required reconciling Imerina's lunar calendar with the solar Gregorian calendar (p. 21), an often-encountered problem in Madagascar's diplomatic and commercial relations with the exterior.¹⁹

If the Malagasy year is 354 days, and the European (*vazaha*) year is 365 days, how many Malagasy and European years are comprised by 11682 days? Answer, 33 years in Malagasy years and 32 years and two days in European years.

The arithmetic primer next moved into basic accounting in Imerina's complicated currency system based on the silver Spanish piaster (*ariary*) and cut bits of it.²⁰ Figuring currency transactions involved adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing columns of different units of silver weight (designated respectively as F, A, S, E, V), each in varying base systems. Such intrinsically difficult calculations were typically managed mentally. School youth were set to paper-and-ink accounting tasks in arithmetic lessons, many of which prepared boys for the martial transactions that they would encounter in Radama's bureaucracy. The following problem from page 27 of the *Counting* involved items of sartorial distinction typically worn by military officers.

A certain officer spent much money purchasing military clothing. For the coats he paid F150..S10..E4..V6 and hats A70..6..6 and epaulettes A30..0..4

¹⁹ The lunar calendar is explained in William Ellis, ed. *History of Madagascar: Comprising also the Progress of the Christian Mission Established in 1818*, 2 vols. (London, 1838), i, 445-454.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, i, 335-336.

and other items A7, and for thigh-length gaiters A17..4..0 and for *zepe* A13..2..0 and shirts A11..4..1 and boots A5..4..3 and muskets A2..3..4. How much did he spend [in total]? F150 A158..5..6.

Another set of students' soldierly calculations involved determining the rice required to sustain detachments of the king's troops while on expedition (p. 46): "If 400 soldiers have rice to last them three months, how many soldiers would need to be added to consume the rice in one month? Answer, 800 men." Basic algebra lessons of this sort adapted for Radama's military bureaucracy sank deep roots into the numerate routines of Imerina's youth and feature prominently in the archive they generated. The literacy and numeracy taught in Imerina's schools and practiced by its military bureaucracy increased the efficiency and capability of Radama's communications and of his power.²¹

Reading as Recitation: Youthful Evangelical Memorization

If the court promoted composition and calculation, LMS missionaries proposed salvation through the reading and recitational activities of children. Welsh missionaries David Jones and David Griffiths designed classroom training to bring youth to "Christian knowledge" and to transform vernacular reading into evangelical oracy. Because paper and print were dear and scarce, passages of vernacular reading served primarily as mnemonic devices. By knowledge of reading learned in the schools, Professor David Bogue had reasoned in his lectures to Jones and Griffiths at the LMS's theological school in Gosport, near Portsmouth, "children are ... made the teachers of their parents and will convey to them many valuable ideas." "Those who are catechised," he elaborated, "will be led to convey many useful ideas to other heathen."²²

When they arrived in Madagascar, missionaries explained that their goal was to "establish schools as extensively as possible for the instruction of the young in particular, who would be able in time to read suitable tracts and discourses in their houses to their parents, and on the sabbaths in different places in the hearing of the multitude."²³ Reading, in this system, amounted to ecclesiastical recitation in which students spoke aloud from or expounded extemporaneously upon translated sacred literature. Nonconformist clerics intended youthful students to employ their literacy skills to take reading to private spaces, to proclaim the Word of God verbally to domestic audiences throughout Madagascar, and thereby to "extend their influence over thousands of their compatriots."²⁴

In the schools of Imerina, which enrolled more than 2,000 children at the end of 1824, LMS missionaries "gave out a good deal of paper to the teachers that they might write out of the translations certain and suitable portions of the scriptures for

²¹ Ghislaine Lydon makes a similar argument about Arabic literacy in western Africa in her book *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa* (Cambridge, 2009), pages.

²² Lecture 8, "On Catechising," & Lecture 10, "Of Setting up Schools" (quotation in the text) in "Missionary Lectures, By David Bogue D.D., Tutor of the Missionary Seminary, Gosport," Transcribed by Robert Moffat, 1817, handwritten copy, 127p., Council for World Mission Library, Manuscripts, School of Oriental and African Studies Library, London.

²³ Jones and Griffiths to Burder, Tananarivou, 30 July 1825, LMS ILM 2/2/B, 6-7.

²⁴ Hastie and Jeffreys to LMS Directors, Tananarive, 17 June 1822, LMS ILM 1/3/C.

reading lessons in their schools.”²⁵ But given the chronic scarcity of imported paper serially lamented in missionaries’ letters, together with the absence of a functioning press until late 1827, reading as such could hardly have been common in Imerina’s schools. “One person would learn to read more than twelve could transcribe,” reported Jones and Griffiths in frustration over their inability to put as much reading material into the hands of students as they desired.²⁶ When it came to “reading” in the schools, students were mostly dependent on copying and studying short passages of sacred texts on their slates or on scraps of paper and on hearing the words read aloud by teachers from manuscripts and school boards. “The holy scriptures are read and committed to memory,” Griffiths affirmed of the country schools two years after they were formed.²⁷ The students “repeat by heart portions of the sacred scriptures which they write from our manuscripts that they may learn during their leisure hours in the week,” reported Jones and Griffiths in 1827.²⁸ Shortly after missionary J. J. Freeman arrived in Antananarivo, he proclaimed in a letter to the Rev. David Phillip of Cape Town that the students “are not merely taught to read, they read the Scriptures, [and] they commit much to memory.”²⁹

Jones and Griffiths desired school students to read, but in practice they mostly memorized. Memorization was inherent to the pedagogy of catechisms, “in which [the students] are most carefully instructed.”³⁰ “Knowledge is diffused among these poor heathens through the means of the catechisms,” explained missionaries, “which are taught every day in the schools, and on the sabbaths, when we visit them.”³¹ Only teachers possessed a manuscript copy of the catechism until its first printing in 1828. In 1827 missionaries reported that “There are hundreds in the schools who have committed to memory all the assembly catechism with proofs.”³² “They, both in town and the country,” Griffiths scrawled to a friend in Mauritius in late 1824 about school students, “have learnt almost all a large catechism of Brown’s that I have translated and formed for the use of all the schools.”³³ In later years missionaries came to admit that much of their instruction during the 1820s consisted of “the mere routine of Catechetical instruction enforced on scholars almost mechanically.”³⁴

Memorization constituted a more significant component of teaching in Imerina than studies of Christian mission pedagogy in Africa sometimes admit.³⁵ Elementary instruction in “religions of the book” have classically relied on memorization. Literate practices in the ecclesiastical settings of early nineteenth-century Madagascar bore many resemblances to the “tin-trunk literacy” that Karin Barber argues

²⁵ Jones and Griffiths to Burder, Tananarivou, 30 July 1825, LMS ILM 2/2/B, 2.

²⁶ Jones and Griffiths to Burder, Tananarivou, 19 December 1825, LMS ILM 2/2/C, 10.

²⁷ Griffiths to Hankey, Tananarivou, 16 June 1826, LMS ILM 2/3/B, 1.

²⁸ Jones and Griffiths to Burder, Tananarivou, 30 May 1827, LMS ILM 2/4/A, 19.

²⁹ Freeman to Phillip, Tananarivo, 3 June 1828, LMS ILM 2/4/D. See also Freeman to Orme, Port Louis, 10 December 1829, LMS ILM 3/2/C.

³⁰ Hastie and Jeffreys, Report on the Public Examination of the Schools, Tananarive, 17 June 1822, CO 167/63, 4.

³¹ Jones and Griffiths to Burder, Tananarivou, 4 August 1825, LMS ILM 2/2/B, 8.

³² Jones and Griffiths to Burder, Tananarivou, 30 May 1827, LMS ILM 2/4/A, 19.

³³ Abstract of a letter from Griffiths to Le Brun, Tananarive, 23 September 1824, LMS ILM 2/1/C, 1. The catechism in question is David Griffiths, *Ny Fanadinana na Fampiheverina ny Teny ny Andriamanitra amy ny Fanontaniana, sy ny Famaliana* (An-Tananarivo, 1828).

³⁴ Johns, Freeman and Canham to Ellis, Antananarivo, 21 May 1833, LMS ILM 4/4/B.

³⁵ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, 1989).

characterized twentieth-century Africa in that they inhabited “a hazy zone where oral and written genres existed in particularly close rapport.”³⁶ The importance of memorization in Imerina’s schools seems also to affirm a comment Walter Ong once made about “manuscript cultures”: that they remained mostly “oral-aural,” for “manuscripts were not easy to read, by later typographic standards, and what readers found in manuscripts they tended to commit at least somewhat to memory.”³⁷ Ong’s comment describes practice in Imerina’s paper and print-starved schools, but it is not an accurate characterization of literate routines within King Radama’s military bureaucracy, where paper—procured and supplied by the state—was plentiful and where letters composed in one location were carefully studied in another. The king’s scribes employed imported ink and paper as well as flexible compositional skills, not memorization. Their activities generated a substantial archive.

Writing and Reading the Command: Military Bureaucracy

Prior to the arrival of LMS missionaries in his kingdom, Radama obtained writers from Madagascar’s southeast coast. Known as *ombiasy*, and experts in the arts of divination and healing, these men employed the Arabic alphabet to compose their mother tongue. Radama’s experiment in *ajami*-type writing did not yield dividends, however. Diviner-scribes were proprietary about their skills and refused to teach them to a large number of students.³⁸ In about 1819, Radama turned to a deserter from the French army, Adolph Robin (who had absconded from île Bourbon with his colleagues’ pay), to instruct him in speaking and writing French Creole. Later, Robin taught some of Radama’s military commanders and their wives to read and write Malagasy utilizing the Latin alphabet. Adult students in Robin’s “School of the Sun” at Radama’s court employed a “French” orthography distinct from that of LMS missionaries and their students, making texts issuing from the two milieus easily discernable in the archive.³⁹

During the mid 1820s, written notices scribed in Robin’s “French” orthography for Malagasy began to supplement court criers and other verbal forms of royal publicity. “Radama occasionally adopted the mode of affixing to the outer gate of his palace a written notification of a new law,” a resident reported.⁴⁰ One of these notices was an ordinance forbidding the king’s subjects from purchasing liquor of foreigners, and visitors from selling it to them. The notice was affixed to the court gate on the 21st day of the lunar month of Adijady, 1826.⁴¹

I say unto you that those who purchase liquor from foreigners I will reduce to slavery along with their spouses and children; and the foreigners from whom

³⁶ Karin Barber, “Introduction: Hidden Innovators in Africa,” in Barber, ed., *Africa’s Hidden Histories*, 18.

³⁷ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London, 1996), 119.

³⁸ Ludvig Munthe, Charles Ravoajanahary, and Simon Ayache, “Radama I et les Anglais: les négociations de 1817 d’après les sources malgaches (‘Sorabe’ inédits),” *Omalasy Anio* 3-4 (1976), 9-104; Fernand Kasanga, *Tantaran’ ny Antemoro-Anakara teto Imerina tamin’ ny andron’ Andrianampoinimerina sy Ilaidama* (Tananarive, 1956).

³⁹ Antony Jully, “Notes sur Robin,” *Notes, Reconnaissances et Explorations* 31 (1898), 511-516; Jean Valette, “Notes sur Robin,” *Bulletin de Madagascar* 263 & 268 (1968), 345-361 & 772-784.

⁴⁰ Ellis, ed., *History of Madagascar*, i, 370.

⁴¹ No complete and accurate schedule of conversions to the Gregorian calendar exists. See Jean Valette, “Notes sur l’établissement d’une table de concordance entre les calendriers malgache et grégorien,” *Bulletin de l’Académie Malgache* 38 (1960), 29-33.

they purchase will be arrested and sent back to their countries, says RADAMA.

Another hand-scrawled announcement dated “Antananarivou,” 22 Adalo 1826, forbade residents from selling land to foreigners: “I say unto you my subjects do not sell land to foreigners, if it is not land they will use to serve the king, says RADAMA.”⁴²

Announcements posted to the court gate where literate passersby might ponder them also offered news flashes from Antananarivo’s expanding empire. A perfunctory communiqué dated 27 Alakaosy 1826 relayed news that Ramananolona, Radama’s governor at Fort-Dauphin in southeast Madagascar, was safe and sound despite rumors of revolt: “Andrianalaza has arrived here from Fort Dauphin, all is very well with the Governor General Ramananolona at Fort Dauphin, says Ramananolona.”⁴³ Radama’s experiment with written news releases persuaded him of the utility of an administrative bureaucracy. Schools run by evangelical missionaries became his preferred training ground for government scribes.

The first 68 boys to enter Radama’s military bureaucracy departed from Imerina’s schools in mid 1825. Seven years later, a total of some 2,629 students—virtually all the male school leavers—had been drafted as scribes. (Girls attended the schools and consistently comprised a third of the pupils, but they were not permitted to staff the military bureaucracy.) Some 2,500 students were enrolled in the schools in late 1832. When in 1836 LMS personnel departed Madagascar, the schools were staffed by graduates. Well more than 2,500 students for the state bureaucracy issued from the schools between 1832 and the 1840s, putting the total number of male scribes to leave the schools at over 5,000. Teenage boys taken into the state writing service entered a highly mobile profession. Scribes were posted to military garrisons around the island (see map), and often moved from one place to another. Their skills supported routine, bidirectional correspondence between Antananarivo and its provinces, generating a central administrative archive of some size by the death of Radama in late July 1828.⁴⁴

To support its bureaucracy, the court routinely ordered governors along Madagascar’s east coast to procure paper and ink from abroad and forward it to Antananarivo.⁴⁵ The observation of an English visitor to a government official in the kingdom’s oceanic port of Tamatave illustrates some of the routines through which writers trained in Imerina’s schools performed their work. One of the official’s youthful scribes

entered with a couple of letters, which at the chief’s request, he read, and which the chief told him he must answer. The young man then went to a box at the side of the room, brought paper, pen, and ink, and, seating himself cross-legged on the ground near the lamp, laid a quire of paper on his knee,

⁴² André Coppalle, *Voyage à la capitale du roi Radama, 1825-1826* (Tananarive, 1970), 66.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴⁴ Joseph John Freeman and David Johns, *A Narrative of the Persecution of the Christians in Madagascar* (London, 1840), 7.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Ranavalomanjaka to Rainitsimivony and Rafaralahifitsaharana, Antananarivo, 12 Adijady 1843, ANM 25, 2v-3r.

and having folded a sheet, the chief raised himself upon his mat and dictated while his secretary wrote a reply. When the letter was finished the secretary read it aloud, and, the chief having approved, the writer brushed the sand adhering to his naked foot with the feathery end of his long pen upon the freshly-written sheet to prevent its blotting, then folded his letter and departed to dispatch it to its destination.”⁴⁶

Generated through homespun practices of this sort performed with commodities both imported (paper, ink) and domestic (feather pen, sand, lamp, mat), Radama’s archive comprised incoming and outgoing court letters together with reports submitted by roving military detachments. After returning to Antananarivo from their expeditions, commanding officers in Radama’s battalions usually provided a public verbal account of their exploits at the urban speech-grounds of Andohalo before submitting reports of their missions, in writing, to court officials.⁴⁷ By 1827 the king also commissioned literate foreigners to tour parts of his kingdom and compose treatises on its natural and political history. “Radama wished to publish these for general information,” noted Aristide Corroller, one of those composers, “but such parts as appeared precious and particularly interesting to natural history, philosophy, and the arts & sciences, remained obscured in the most profound silence and at Radama’s death were burned together with the journals and reports of the generals on their return from their military expeditions.”⁴⁸ The fires were kindled by the kingdom’s new administration to prevent the archive of Antananarivo with its accumulated intelligence of their island and army from falling into the hands of domestic and foreign opponents. Bureaucracy strengthened the state, and it also presented risks.

Fortunately for the historian, the entire archive was not destroyed. Shortly after their conquest of Antananarivo in late 1895, French officials discovered some of King Radama’s papers in a trunk in one of his royal edifices. The documents consisted of letters and summaries of letters dispatched by governors, military commanders, and officers from the provinces to Radama, with notations of the dates of their arrival and reply. None of the letters dated from earlier than 1820, and most spanned the four years preceding Radama’s expiration in mid-1828.⁴⁹ It was probably this cache of documents to which “the Chief officer” at Antananarivo’s court, Rainimaharo, adverted in 1840 when he claimed that “I have all the papers of Radama & I know all that he did during his reign.”⁵⁰ These tin-trunk manuscripts now comprise the relatively scant collection of Radama-era documents in Madagascar’s national archives.

Radama’s outgoing letters testify to the variety of his governing interests. One genre of communication was admonishment of military administrators about whom

⁴⁶ William Ellis, *Three Visits to Madagascar during the Years 1853-1854-1856* (New York, 1859), 135.

⁴⁷ Corroller, “Relation intéressante,” GMS 8, 31r. A report of Rainivodihazo on a two-month expedition in the province of Antsihanaka is described in Lyall to Colville, Tananarivou, 21 February 1829, MNA 19/17, 7-8.

⁴⁸ Corroller, “Relation intéressante,” GMS 8, 6r & 7r. On Corroller see Pier M. Larson, “Fragments of an Indian Ocean Life: Aristide Corroller between Islands and Empires,” *Journal of Social History* 45,2 (2011), 366-389.

⁴⁹ July, “Notes sur Robin,” 512.

⁵⁰ Jones to Foreign Secretary, Mauritius, 29 October 1840, LMS ILMAU 2/4/B, 2.

uncomplimentary news was filtering back to court. A missive scribed in early 1828 scolded two governors at Madagascar's east coast, Rajery and Rainimahatana, for pressing labor out of ethnic Betsimisaraka subjects who had voluntarily submitted themselves to Antananarivo.⁵¹ The court expressed concern about the treatment of its coastal subjects, but those worries seem to have been ignored by many local administrators. Radama's ability to issue written reprimands of this sort required a counterflow of verbal intelligence toward the court: rumor in one direction, ink and paper in the other.

Virtually all communications copied into Radama's ledger of outgoing letters testify to the significance of his standing military of some 30,000 men in his strategies of governance. One of the ongoing administrative questions concerning the army was the division of loot taken in battle. During the 1820s the court typically claimed between one-quarter and two-fifths of cattle and human captives confiscated by the king's regiments from among those who actively opposed them. Radama addressed this issue in a letter of early 1828 to Ramanetaka, his brother-in-law and governor of Mojunga (Majunga) on Madagascar's northwest coast:

As for dividing the booty, the soldiers and the civilians who receive a value of 10 dollars and more [in human and material plunder] must give 4 dollars for each war captive to me; and those receiving less than 10 dollars in value must give a quarter of the value to me, and a quarter of all cattle are mine says Radama.⁵²

Related to war plunder was feeding soldiers. Itinerant armies typically received support in food and sometimes also money from the court that deployed them. But soldiers stationed at garrisons (see map) were encouraged to cultivate for their subsistence, an issue taken up in a communication addressed to a commander named Ramambalahy. Radama urged Ramambalahy to wean his soldiers from government aid—which was requisitioned from nearby civilian populations—and required them to cultivate their own food:

for if they become accustomed to receiving provisions I will not allow it. Let the strong who are not sick work competitively in teams, so that they work for themselves, for if they sit idly it is not permitted but competitive working is good. Let them labor, for simply receiving is not permitted. Where will the money you give them come from if they don't work for themselves?⁵³

Another letter offers congratulations to Aristide Corroller for crushing a revolt that broke out during the course of 1827 in the forest east of Antananarivo. "I greet you Corroller, for the death of the rebels is wonderful (*sitraka telina mahafinaritra, famaty ny jiolahy*), and the land is pacified. So thanks to you Mr. Commandant Corroller. Your capacity to restore the kingdom is fantastic."⁵⁴ If students in the schools memorized and recited rather than read, scribes practicing in Radama's bureaucracy learned to become competent writers skilled in conveying orders and in composing tables and reports.

⁵¹ Radama to Rajery and Rainimahatana, Tananarivo, 7 Adaoro 1828, ANM 1, 22r.

⁵² Radama to Ramanetaka, Antananarivo, 27 Adaoro 1828, ANM 1, 31r.

⁵³ Radama to Ramambalahy, Antananarivo, 19 Adaoro 1828, ANM 1, 28v.

⁵⁴ Radama to Corroller, Tananarivo, 26 Adizaoza 1828, ANM 1, 38v.

Historian Gerald Berg has described how Radama's scribal service and professional army allowed for meritorious individuals to advance in government service.⁵⁵ The creation of a standing military and a bureaucracy that rewarded performance also served to shift power from civilian into military hands. Of all the interested factions struggling for primacy at court, it was the military that most embraced writing and benefitted from it, especially officers from the northern districts of Imerina. "The two more powerful parties, one composed chiefly of the Military officers, the other of the [civilian] Ministers, judges &c. have been on the point of coming to blows," noted British ambassador Robert Lyall in 1829 of civilian-military tensions at court.⁵⁶ Military officers prevailed over civilian judges and ministers, relegating them to secondary status. Many of the latter remained illiterate.

Among King Radama's bureaucratic interests was fashioning a code of laws from the sundry papers once serially affixed to court walls. In 1821 he drew up "an ordinance in thirteen articles in French entitled 'Law Code for Foreigners in Thirteen Articles,' enacting that visitors should be subject to the [poison] ordeal of the *tangain*, to tithes, to corvées, to marriage with women of the country to the exclusion of foreign women, and all under pain of death."⁵⁷ The code was never promulgated by Radama. According to Aristide Corroller "not more than about one hundred articles were left finished at [Radama's] death."⁵⁸ A set of written domestic laws based on this work was later published by Queen Ranavalona, Radama's successor. Dated 27 Alahasaty 1828, Ranavalona's manuscript code was entitled "The Laws of the Kingdom, or the Commands of the Sovereign, with the Fines to be imposed."⁵⁹

Scripture Reading and Prayer: Emergent Christian Communities

The court-mission schools of Imerina produced thousands of writers and mathematicians for Radama's bureaucracy between 1820 and 1830, but few Christian converts. During and after this decade, reading was practiced more by Imerina's adults than by its schoolchildren. Adult interest in reading developed fairly rapidly after 1825. In 1826, one visitor reported seeing "Old women ... going to school and there is perhaps not a house in which you cannot find a board containing the letters of the alphabet."⁶⁰ Some adults eagerly absorbed reading skills from schoolchildren and youthful bureaucrats, or determined how to read on their own with instructional material acquired from the LMS and alphabets copied from friends and acquaintances. Some formal opportunities for learning to read became available soon after King Radama's death in mid-1828. In about 1829, missionary artisan John Cameron established an evening school for adult laborers in the royal court's gunpowder mills near Antananarivo, which he had been contracted to supervise.⁶¹ LMS handyman George Chick likewise arranged for literacy classes among the

⁵⁵ Gerald Berg, "Virtù, and Fortuna in Radama's Nascent Bureaucracy, 1816-1828," *History in Africa* 23 (1996), 29-73.

⁵⁶ Lyall to Colville, Tananarivou, 22 January 1829, MNA 19/15, 10.

⁵⁷ Corroller, "Relation intéressante," GMS 8, entry for 1821. Radama's draft code of laws is also mentioned in Johns, Freeman and Canham to Ellis, Tananarivo, 27 February 1834, LMS ILM 5/1/B.

⁵⁸ Corroller, "Relation intéressante," GMS 9, entry for 1824.

⁵⁹ A portion of these are reproduced in English translation in Ellis, ed., *History of Madagascar*, i, 381-386.

⁶⁰ Coppalle, *Voyage*, 80.

⁶¹ Johns to Arundel, Tananarivo, 15 July 1831, LMS ILM 4/1/B.

corvée recruits toiling in the government's tanning shops.⁶² For a time, British missionaries also held a “night school for the servants”—Antananarivo’s adult slaves who repaired to the classroom when their daily labor had been completed.⁶³ By late 1830 the demographic profile of readers and learners associated with the LMS had shifted fundamentally from the mid-1820s. “The number of adults is so considerable as to render the [school] children almost invisible,” the LMS printer remarked about interest in reading and attendance at the mission’s chapels in late 1830.⁶⁴

Reading and Christianity became linked by the nature of vernacular texts available to adult learners. In 1827 the LMS acquired a press and began issuing individual books of translated scripture and instructional works for both schools and adults. In March 1830 missionaries and a few of their advanced students completed translation and publication of all the books of the New Testament. Two years later the mission press issued “21,000 copies of small books of different kinds” while “not fewer than fifteen thousand copies, and portions of the Scriptures, and other books, were furnished” during 1833.⁶⁵ The LMS’s two presses issued hundreds of thousands of books before they ceased operations in 1836 (more than one book per inhabitant of Imerina). Applications to missionaries for primers, books of scripture, and religious tracts augmented dramatically from mid-1830. Most printed scriptures and a portion of the instructional books were distributed gratis to adults. Learning to read—which mostly entailed studying vernacular scriptures and missionary tracts—exposed many adults to the Christian Word.

Sacred texts fascinated and puzzled readers. Adults began to crowd mission chapels in Antananarivo on Sunday morning, peppering LMS personnel with questions. “Some complain that in many passages they understand the *words* very well, but yet cannot get at the meaning,” noted Edward Baker of the bafflement expressed by new readers.⁶⁶ Bewilderment may have stemmed as much from infelicitous translation as from Christian theology, but this did not dampen readers’ enthusiasm. As adult learners struggled to make meaning of scripture, they convened among themselves to work out the gist of challenging texts. “The Christians were accustomed to hold meetings at their own houses, during several evenings of the week,” LMS personnel reported of this period, assuming (incorrectly) that all adult readers identified as Christians.⁶⁷ “The meaning of passages of Scripture is sought out by many with considerable eagerness, and communicated from one to another,” they affirmed.⁶⁸ From late 1830, reading in Imerina was nurtured within autonomous assemblies operating at arm’s length from foreign missionaries.⁶⁹ Adult curiosity with reading translated into assemblies of readers, opening up new social and intellectual spaces in highland Madagascar.

Reading assumed communal dimensions when adult readers gathered. Texts were read aloud and explicated by participants of the circle. Favorite passages were

⁶² Johns to Arundel, Tananarivo, 12 April 1831, LMS ILM 4/1/A.

⁶³ Griffiths and Johns to LMS Directors, Antananarivo, 4 September 1830, LMS ILM 3/4/A.

⁶⁴ Baker to Arundel, Antananarivo, 1 September 1830, LMS ILM 3/3/D.

⁶⁵ Ellis, ed., *History of Madagascar*, ii, 458, 470.

⁶⁶ Baker to Arundel, Antananarivo, 1 July 1830, LMS ILM 3/3/C.

⁶⁷ Ellis, ed., *History of Madagascar*, ii, 448.

⁶⁸ Baker to Arundel, Antananarivo, 1 September 1830, LMS ILM 3/3/D.

⁶⁹ See especially Brother of Andriantseho to Johns, Tamatave, 10 December 1837, LMS ILMAU 2/3/A.

committed to memory, but rote learning was far less characteristic of adult readers than of children in the schools. As they advanced in reading, adults also began to pray. Nonconformists understood scripture as promoting an unmediated relationship with God. Adult readers came to agree with this proposition and experienced reading as an invitation to prayer. The prayers to God that issued audibly from readers' gatherings inspired passers-by to dub adult learners the *mpivavaka*, "those who pray." The name stuck. Christianity itself became designated as "prayer" (*fivavahana*), a term embraced by readers and still current today. In their meeting places, Antananarivo's adult readers, nascent evangelicals themselves and without formal leadership, spawned a homegrown religious culture and vocabulary. Jesus was commonly referred to as "Jehovah-Jesus," a designation missionaries protested they never taught. By the end of 1831 a number of "devoted and pious native preachers" were emerging from within the assemblies.⁷⁰

As adults appropriated scripture reading and interpretation to themselves, elements of the literate bundle ramified through highland Malagasy society. First cultivated in Imerina's schools, practices of literacy broke free of the administrative and ecclesiastical channels that introduced and previously contained them. By 1840 as many as 25,000 persons—a remarkable 5 percent of the population of Imerina—could read and/or write.⁷¹ A fifth or fewer of these were baptized Christians, though many others joined in Christian assembly. The court at Antananarivo had anticipated neither the rapid expansion of literate knowledge beyond government control nor the ways in which many adults, through reading, came to affiliate with Christianity and to pray. While they hoped that scriptures printed in the vernacular would entice readers to seek God, British missionaries were also surprised by the intensity of the turn to assembly and prayer among Imerina's adults.

Conflicts over Reading and Texts

Reactions to adult reading differed. Missionaries considered the "spirit of inquiry" manifested among Imerina's readers "delightfully encouraging."⁷² They also acclaimed readers' struggle to comprehend difficult passages of scripture and to grapple with the meaning of translated tracts. As Congregationalists, LMS missionaries expressed a reluctant acceptance for the organic independence of Malagasy Christian practice. But the emergent association between adult reading and Christian prayer raised anxieties among some court officials and the public. The court's bureaucratic service emphasized administrative writing and encouraged reading of official correspondence by authorized scribes. Dangers lurked, an increasing number of officials felt, in reading practices unaffiliated with government business. What was even more troubling for certain members of the government was the direct access to God that both written scriptures and Christian prayer offered Imerina's people, for the kings and queens of the land had long claimed to mediate between their subjects, on the one hand, and royal ancestors and deities on the other.⁷³ Prayer appeared to circumvent that role (this is what Christians also thought) and the

⁷⁰ Ellis, ed., *History of Madagascar*, ii, 443.

⁷¹ Raison-Jourde, "L'échange inégal," 641. This percentage of readers and writers was comparable to that of western European countries of the time.

⁷² Johns and Freeman to Wilson, Antananarivo, 25 May 1833, LMS ILM 4/4/A.

⁷³ See Gerald Berg, "Sacred Acquisition: Andrianampoinimerina at Ambohimanga, 1777-1790," *Journal of African History* 29,2 (1988), 191-211; Alain Delivré, *L'histoire des rois d'Imerina: interprétation d'une tradition orale* (Paris, 1974).

rituals of baptism and holy communion that Christian readers practiced in their meetings also created suspicion. The allegiance of Imerina's people, many thought, should be to their queen rather than to each other, God, or foreign clerics.

Antananarivo's civilian judges (*andriambaventy*) were enlisted in the sharpening civil struggle over reading practices when a neighbor accused one Andriantsoa for his praying.⁷⁴ Other civilians displeased by what they perceived as the deleterious innovations of reading and praying brought the words of Christian books and prayer before the court's judges for inspection and adjudication. Plaintiffs in such suits complained about the dangers of changes to "ancestral" practice. Reflecting intellectual divisions within Imerina, however, judges were often ambivalent about the charges brought to them and tended to side with defendants. They found it difficult to separate what was unacceptable innovation in Christian reading and praying from what was within the bounds of legitimate spiritual practice, which had always been dynamic and creative.⁷⁵ For some of Imerina's residents, the prayer of Christian assembly was but an extension of the ways in which people called on their ancestors and on deities named *andriamanitra* and *andriananahary*. Christians had assimilated these deities to their God, collapsing distinctions between Christian and non-Christian prayer.

Few of the cases brought to judges against individual readers stuck, angering plaintiffs and sections of the royal court. In response to such disapproval, adult readers began to hide their practices by taking their assemblies to the countryside and by also reading and praying individually. Ratsilainga summed up the feeling of many readers when in 1854 he wrote that "the Testament is a friend in times of solitude."⁷⁶ As in Radama's administrative bureaucracy, literacy and mobility were linked in emerging Christian practice, but differently so. Secretaries in government service dispatched letters to distant parts of the island and received them in turn. They also itinerated from garrison to garrison as they assisted military governors and armies on expedition. Mobility and literacy among praying adults took a different form. Most printed books issuing from the LMS press were light and portable. Readers undid bound Testaments and circulated constituent books separately. Individual tomes of scripture and small instructional manuals could be stowed in clothing, leaving hands free for travel, socialization, and labor. In this way, readers passed discretely into public spaces with their scriptures, which traveled from home, to workplace, to assembly secreted in apparel. Readers consulted their books during quiet moments, or collectively away from the crowd. Scriptures circulated mostly unseen. "The testament, tracts, and whatever else we print are circulated from one end of Madagascar to the other," reported Edward Baker in mid-1831.⁷⁷ "Wherever the native Christians went," his colleagues elaborated,

they carried with them the New Testament and other portions of the Scriptures, as well as spelling book, catechisms, and hymn-books. Unfolding in their conversation, and exhibiting in their example, the doctrines and tendencies of the gospel, they acted as missionaries, and induced many to

⁷⁴ Freeman and Johns, *Narrative*, 99-107.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 133, 179.

⁷⁶ Ratsilainga to unnamed (Cameron), Antananarivo, 25 Asorotany 1854, GMS 91, 10.

⁷⁷ Baker and Griffiths to Clayton, Antananarivo, 18 August 1831, LMS ILM 4/1/B.

learn to read, to believe on the living God, to trust in the only Saviour, and to unite with them in the observance of the sabbath.⁷⁸

Concern among Queen Ranavalona's advisors that reading Christians were insufficiently attached to her and insubordinate to orders issued in her name set many against them.⁷⁹ Imerina's semi-concealed adult literate piety of the 1830s and a perception that the kingdom's soldiers and bureaucratic scribes might cross over to join civilian adults in reading, praying, and assembly—transferring their allegiance to the assemblies and God rather than obeying the queen—caused much unease at court. Crossovers did occur, but they were modest in number. In early 1829 LMS personnel were instructed by court officials not to proffer clothing, paper, books, and other writing supplies to their affiliates and teachers for free.⁸⁰ This order seems to have been disregarded in later years, for most scriptures were not sold but distributed gratis. Royal permission to perform baptisms, granted in late May 1831, was withdrawn in December that year. In 1832, the court prohibited slaves from learning to read and write.⁸¹

Worried that most adult voluntary learners affiliated themselves with the growing party of prayers, the court took a progressively nativist stance toward them by defining certain practices of literacy independent of the queen's bureaucratic service, especially scripture reading and prayer, as dangerous innovations contrary to "the traditions of the ancestors." (This selective nativism, of course, omitted innovations in military organization and in bureaucratic writing, numeracy, reading in service of the state.) In December 1834 the court issued an edict forbidding anyone outside government schools from learning to read and write.⁸² During the last week of February 1835 opponents of the praying won out at a court deeply divided over the issue. Some thought Christians too insignificant a group to worry about—readers comprised five percent of Imerina's population—and embraced scripture-reading as a way to acquire literate skills for government and personal use. Missionaries, however, received orders to desist evangelization and the distribution of printed scriptures in late February 1835. At a large assembly in Antananarivo a week later, Queen Ranavalona trumped both civilian judges and intense public debate by outlawing specific words found in Christian texts and certain Christian practices.⁸³

The declaration proscribing the praying represented a dramatic expansion of the monarchy's efforts to regulate reading. Couched as a prohibition of particular words (Christian concepts) and actions (baptism, communion), the edict aimed at eliminating scriptural reading and distinctly Christian activity. During the second week of March 1835 orders were issued requiring all reading materials to be turned in for examination, on pain of death. In following months printed books were checked by a state board of censors comprised of individuals trained in the court-LMS schools "to ascertain whether any of them were free from the obnoxious expressions" of Christian discourse. When it was found that Christian expressions like "darkness,"

⁷⁸ Ellis, ed, *History of Madagascar*, ii, 471. See also Freeman and Johns, *Narrative*, 143.

⁷⁹ Freeman and Johns, *Narrative*, 143.

⁸⁰ Lyall to Colville, Tananarivou, 10 February 1829, MNA 19/16, 25.

⁸¹ Freeman and Johns, *Narrative*, 90-91; "Minutes of the Proceedings of the Missionaries at Tananarivo, Madagascar, from Novr. 1832 to May 1833," LMS ILM 4/4/B, entry for November 1832.

⁸² Ellis, ed., *History of Madagascar*, ii, 486.

⁸³ Freeman and Johns, *Narrative*, 119ff.

“Jehovah,” “Jesus Christ,” “hell,” “Satan,” and “resurrection” could be found in all of them, they were banned and returned to LMS personnel (the claim that books were burned, common today, is mostly apocryphal).⁸⁴ According to the royal court, reading and writing could be stripped of Christian content and literacy retained only for the state’s bureaucratic pleasure. “The plan seems to be,” noted J. J. Freeman with prescience as early as 1832, “to encourage reading, writing &c only so far as required for filling a few offices in the military services.”⁸⁵

Not long after the prohibition of early 1835, court officials urged missionaries to publish a secular reader of tales containing translated selections from *Aesop’s Fables* as well as stories acquired from verbal performers in Imerina. LMS missionaries obliged and did produce such a book of secular tales in early 1836, but less to comply with court directives than to protect affiliates who persisted in reading scriptures and tracts.⁸⁶ “The chief benefit arising from the circulation of these” fables, they explained, “is that our friends who are in the habit of reading tracts &c will not be so easily detected” by government censors.⁸⁷ Despite its claims about the importance of protecting ancestral tradition from innovation, the dominant political faction at Antananarivo was eager to promote innovations in literature—a *mélange* of *Aesop’s Fables* and Malagasy oral tradition—as long as the resulting publications omitted recognizably Christian vocabulary.

Secularizing reading and outlawing the praying, which in practice was a particular orientation to literacy and oracy, proved unachievable goals. After the departure of the last British missionaries from Madagascar in mid-1836, Imerina’s readers continued to offer instruction in “spelling and lessons” in their homes to the interested.⁸⁸ Rakotovao was one of these. The son of a subaltern administrator from Imerina stationed at Fianarantsoa some 400 kilometers south of Antananarivo, he learned to read and write during the 1830s in such a manner. At age 13 he entered service as a writer for the governor of Fianarantsoa.⁸⁹ In 1840, it was reported that many indentured laborers arriving in Mauritius from Madagascar could read.⁹⁰ Books, paper, and writing instruments sold openly in the markets of Imerina.⁹¹ Adult pursuit of literacy trickled out of the classroom, ran beyond the bureaucracy, and was mostly unchecked by either missionaries or the state.

Christian Composition: A Community of Suffering

Scripture reading drew a minority of adults in Imerina to Christian practice. Official disapproval of the praying pushed them to write. Genres of adult

⁸⁴ Ibid., 144-145. For the return of books see Edward Baker, n.d. (about 15 June 1835), “Brief Account of the Suppression of Christianity in Madagascar,” LMS ILM 5/2/C, 8.

⁸⁵ Freeman to Philips, Tananarivo, 19 April 1832, LMS ILM 4/2/C.

⁸⁶ No copy of the 1836 edition of this publication could be located. The earliest edition found was the third: *Angano Voadikan’ ny Mpianatry ny Misionary Taloha*, Tontaina Fanintelony (Antananarivo, 1875).

⁸⁷ Johns to Ellis, Port Louis, 14 November 1836, LMS ILMAU 2/1/D, 4. See also Johns to Ellis, Port Louis, 9 September 1836, LMS ILMAU 2/1/C, 2.

⁸⁸ Paoly and Malagasy Christians to Ellis and Freeman, Antananarivo, 24 Asombola 1837, LMS ILM 5/3/A, 1-2 & 4.

⁸⁹ Rakotovao, *Ny Bokin’ dRakotovao, 1843-1906* (Antananarivo, 1992), 83.

⁹⁰ Baker to Johns and Freeman, Piton (Mauritius), 17 December 1840, LMS ILMAU 2/4/B.

⁹¹ Griffiths and Johns to LMS Directors, Tananarivo, n.d. (probably late 1830), LMS ILM 3/4/C.

composition developed in response to the harassment and involuntary mobility that court and public intimidation engendered. Christians who had been enslaved or banished from Imerina for praying and reading, or who fled impending arrest, communicated with family, friends, and foreigners by letter. In these missives readers spun narratives of their personal and collective hardships. Sources of comfort for Christians, essays on government and public harassment (*fanenjehana*) penned by Imerina's readers celebrated the praying as a practice of suffering bringing Christians closer to Jesus and imitating his experience. "Such is the benefit or pleasure which the people find in thus communicating with each other that scarcely a traveler ever journeys from one place to another without being a letter-carrier," noted a visitor at mid-century.⁹² Private letters followed the same paths to the towns of Madagascar as did administrative correspondence, but in the hands of different carriers, usually Christians.

Associated as it was with the praying, private writing for many court officials signaled opposition to the state and met with disapproval in Antananarivo. In 1830, the high-ranking military officer Andriamihaja, who had risen through the grades of Radama's schools and army to become a close consort and advisor to Queen Ranavalona, was bested by his competitors at court and executed. Andriamihaja had conducted private correspondence from his residence. His papers were seized and their production outside the confines of the court adduced as a reason for his elimination. "He has been accused of secreting official letters, or of imperfectly communicating their contents to the Ministers, who cannot read," reported the British ambassador to Antananarivo.⁹³ Andriamihaja's death and the rhetoric of treacherous private writing that it justified discouraged servants of government from sending personal letters or hoarding documents and books of scripture in their homes, as Christians tended to do. Papers had to be hidden, and letters entrusted to friends.

Missives composed in secret and dispatched to the coast kept Evangelical friends in Mauritius, Cape Town, and London apprised of readers' travels and travails in Madagascar. At Tamatave on Madagascar's east coast, Christians visiting from Imerina slipped letters into the hands of foreigners and disappeared back into the crowd.⁹⁴ Letters were delivered to sympathetic ship captains and crew who took them out of Madagascar and dispatched them on to Mauritius and the Cape Colony. Oceanic circuits of letter writing were closely linked to domestic, landed ones; both conveyed tales of persecution and represented Christians as beset by a malevolent state that clung to indecent and outdated ancestral tradition. A typical story composed at home and transmitted abroad involved teachers who had once staffed royal-LMS schools. The teachers "were compelled to take the *tangena* [poison ordeal]," it was reported. The accusation [against them] was for writing some paper and placing [it] near the house of an officer."⁹⁵ "Someone wrote a letter and affixed it to the house west of Ambatondrafandra," wrote Christians Noah, Abraham, Lot, and Zakaiosia, reporting the same event. "The queen was angry when she heard of it and gave a

⁹² Ellis, *Three Visits*, 136.

⁹³ Lyall, "Continuation of Mr. Lyall's Journal of Madagascar Affairs," 13 July - 18 October 1830, MNA 20, 386-387.

⁹⁴ Baker to Freeman, On Board the Frigate *Courage* leaving Tamatave, 21 October 1844, LMS ILMAU 3/3/A, 2-3.

⁹⁵ Mary Johns to Tidman and Freeman, Port Louis, 3 January 1843, LMS ILMAU 3/2/A, insert.

speech to the people saying that whoever had written it should turn himself in.”⁹⁶ The court claimed sole prerogative to post papers. Some Christians challenged that prerogative, expressing their dissatisfaction with the court in notes fastened to government buildings. By circulating texts of domestic experience abroad, Christians widened their audience and garnered moral and economic support for their suffering.

Historian Françoise Raison-Jourde has demonstrated how sporadic and restrained government pursuit of Christians actually was.⁹⁷ It was the intermittent eruptions of persecution, however, that most influenced Christian composition. A round of court harassment of independent readers erupted in 1849, when nearly two thousand adults were accused of transgressing the prohibition against the praying. Most of these turned themselves in to the royal court when required to do so. Others were menaced with death.⁹⁸ Seven years later, in 1856, Christians were implicated in an attempt to overthrow Queen Ranavalona. In the aftermath, the court executed 79 of them while another 1,625 self-incriminated and faced lesser penalties.⁹⁹ In 1858 during one of the court’s periodic sweeps for printed matter, officials collected some 1,700 books of scripture.¹⁰⁰ As people in Imerina struggled over elements of the literate bundle as they manifested themselves in highland Madagascar, the number of independent readers and prayers continued to expand. By 1851 there were seven assemblies in Antananarivo in which preachers were baptizing and administering sacraments.¹⁰¹ The number of baptized Christians reported by these assemblies expanded from less than a hundred in 1836 to nearly 3,500 twenty years later. Readers associated with those who had been baptized were even greater in number.¹⁰²

Well before 1860 it was clear that the court at Antananarivo had lost the battle to confine reading and writing to the military bureaucracy and to curb the growth of the praying. At Queen Ranavalona’s death in August 1861 there were at least 5,000 baptized Christian prayers in Imerina, most of whom could read and write at some level. When less than a decade later (1869) the queen, prime minister, and court at Antananarivo converted to Christianity, they recognized that praying, books of scripture, and widely circulating narratives of persecution had transformed the exercise of state power in Madagascar, which could no longer credibly oppose practices of literacy and praying beyond the military bureaucracy. The court now sought to channel Christian reading and writing through the mechanism of a state church, and to gain control over its forms of piety and oceanic connections.

Literacy, Power, and the Bundle

This article has explored how individual and collective adopters of the three Rs differently took up and emphasized elements of the literate bundle in highland

⁹⁶ Noah et. al. to Freeman, Johns and Baker, Antananarivo, 13 Alohotsy 1842, LMS ILMAU 3/1/C, 1-3.

⁹⁷ Françoise Raison-Jourde, *Bible et pouvoir à Madagascar au XIX^e siècle: invention d'une identité chrétienne et construction de l'état, 1780-1880* (Paris, 1991), pages.

⁹⁸ “Ary ny voalohany ny fanenjehana taminizao; An account of the persecution of the Christians in Madagascar in 1849,” Antananarivo, 1 Asombola 1850, GMS 85, entry for 3 Alakaosy 1849.

⁹⁹ Ramanandray et. al. to Andrianado, Antananarivo, 11 May 1857, GMS 90, 7r.

¹⁰⁰ Andrianado to Cameron, Mauritius, 22 March 1858, GMS 91, 74.

¹⁰¹ Ramonja et. al. to Le Brun, Tananarivo, 24 April 1852, LMS ILMAU 4/1/A, 2.

¹⁰² “Isany Kristiana sy Fitambarany ny Ankohonany, hoy Ramanandray atao hoe John J.F. sy ny namany Rainimanga sy Rainitsontsoraka,” Antananarivo, 28 October 1856, 2p, foolscap, GMS 88.

Madagascar over a four-decade period. I have argued for treating literacy and literary landscapes not as single things but as collections of interconnecting exercises with widely varying implications that produce unique and shifting mosaics of literacy practice. In highland Madagascar the literary landscape was fashioned by intersections of domestic and oceanic connections that entered into dynamic interaction. The international dimensions of Imerina's literary history are both significant and far-reaching. Their implications are best assessed by examining them together with adjacent literacy practices taken up and disputed by the people of highland Madagascar, their state, and their missionary visitors. Incongruent and competing elements of the literate bundle in Imerina came to occupy key locations in the political landscape, informing social struggles.

The history of the literate bundle in highland Madagascar, then, can also help scholars to parse out the contours of inequality and power at the center of its socially and politically stratified nineteenth-century kingdom ruled from Antananarivo. The writing and mathematical exercises emphasized in Imerina's schools were to serve, along with the empire-state's army, as tools for conquering and then ruling by bureaucratic routine. Scriptural reading and the stories that Christian writers composed and broadly circulated about experiences of harassment came to pose significant challenges to the court's power and its military bureaucracy. The empire-state of Antananarivo was one of several in Africa in which literacy played a key role in struggles for power and international connections before the twentieth century. It is, however, one of the few that produced a sizeable administrative archive available for scholarly consultation. The connections between literacy and power in Imerina's mosaic of literary practices can inform studies of other parts of Africa, with their equally complex and ever-changing literary mosaics and their linkages between power and certain elements of the literate bundle.

Historians of Africa have found writing to be an especially compelling research subject. Composition provides an entry to human subjectivities and intellectual histories inaccessible by other means. Writing, however, exists in interaction with other elements of the literate bundle. It implies, for example, certain types of reading. And reading behaviors influence both composition and human subjectivity. In Madagascar, as elsewhere, writing was aimed at contemporaries rather than modern scholars, who may read historical compositions rather differently than contemporaries did. This is an especially important reason for investigating histories of reading in Africa. Numeracy, calculation, and arithmetic, the ends to which they were employed, and the ways they organized knowledge were also part of literary mosaics but have been little explored by historians of Africa. Each of the three Rs offer scholars who follow their many connections and social trajectories useful tools to think about the nature of social and political power in Africa, and the role of the literate bundle in them.