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TOPONYMY IN MADAGASCAR

Submitted by the Malagasy Republic

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### TOPONYMY IN MADAGASCAR

The Principal characteristics of Malagasy toponymy can be summed up as follows:

(1) Relative simplicity, due to its essentially descriptive character, since it is closely related to physical geography and topography, and the small number of names of foreign origin (Arabic or European). On the other hand, in most of the country the low population density and the instability caused by local migrations has resulted in a paucity of names and toponymic inconsistency, which gives rise to some repetition and confusion.

(2) Transcription into a writing system, virtually unchanged for over a century, which uses Roman letters and simple phonetically univocal spelling. The language itself, belonging to the Malayo-Polynesian family, lends itself particularly to composite words and reveals a basic unity under the local variations and dialects.

(3) Considerable and rapid expansion of cartography based on medium-scale (1:100,000) maps establishing and facilitating the location of place names. As a result, an index has been progressively and systematically compiled, largely by personnel of the Geographical Service. This work considerably facilitated official recognition and publication of the names.

(4) The problem of standardization of geographical names has been simplified and, in general, already been satisfactorily resolved. The establishment of a national toponymy committee, plans for which are now being prepared, will make it possible to give the standardization due publicity and help to make it official.

Malagasy, which belongs to the Malayo-Polynesian family of languages, is an agglutinative language in which words are formed by successive addition to a root or simple word, with frequent consonant modifications or omission of unaccented final syllables of the constituent words in the structural links within the composite word. This sometimes makes it difficult to break down composite words and can lead to errors in transcription or translation; however, the rules governing word formation are invariable and easy to remember after some practice.

For example, the name Amborompetsy (the place where there are white birds or oxpeckers) can only be divided into: AN-VORO (NA)-FOTSY.

Various local dialects in fact reveal a close relationship<sup>1/</sup> beneath their apparent differences and the grammar and syntax are virtually the same. As far as geographical names are concerned, the differences relate principally to:

- (a) Certain roots which give quite different names for the same object in different regions;
- (b) Final syllables which sometimes disappear in some coastal dialects (e.g. "Lakana", a dug-out canoe in Merina, becomes "Laka" in Sakalava), or have their final letter modified (e.g., "ka" or "tra" can become "ki" or "tri", "ke" or "tre");
- (c) Replacement of some letters (e.g. "d" by "l").

These variations have sometimes led to errors of interpretation on the part of early investigators, who tended to "merinize" names, thereby altering the meaning. Mr. Mollet<sup>2/</sup> cites in particular: Manazary as becoming Mananjary, Andovoranty (at the line of lagoons) as becoming Andovoranto (at the slave market).

Also a number of localities, generally in coastal areas long frequented by Europeans, have been gallicized, although their Malagasy form is easy to reconstruct. The best-known examples are:

Fénérive (Fenoarivo), Vohémar (Vohimaro), Tamatave (Toamasina), Tananarive (Antananarivo), Nossi-Bé (Nosibe).

Lastly, there are names of foreign origin, either Swahili (Majunga?), or Arabic (all names of places such as markets associated with days of the week), or, rarely, European (Fort-Dauphin, Foulpointe, Sainte-Marie, Sainte-Luce, etc....)

<sup>1/</sup> If allowance is made for certain differences in pronunciation or sound; this recently prompted the Government to add two characters to the official orthography to represent the French sounds gn (ñ) and o (ö) which do not exist in the Merina dialect, from which the official written language has been derived.

<sup>2/</sup> In his "Petit Guide de toponymie malgache" (IRSM 1957), which is well documented especially on words of "coastal" origin and from which this paper has taken many examples.

Some place names and the names of tribes are of religious, legendary or historical origin (for example, the well-known sequence Fenoarivo - Arivonimamo - Miarinarivo - Fenoarivo recalls the adventure of the thousand who assembled, got drunk, sobered up and were reunited.

However, most names of places or regions are of simple geographical origin, indicating topographical form, structure of detail: Ivohibe (big mountain), Bezavona (place of many mists), Betsiloka (place of much fresh water), Bongolava (lines of hills), Ambatomainty (at the black stone), etc., or refer to flora or fauna: Amborompotsy (place where there are white birds - oxpeckers), Analamanga (blue forest), etc., or to the presence or direction of dwellings: Antanandava (at the long village), Ambohibao (at the new village), Ambohidempona (at the village in the hollow), Ambohimahasoa (at the village of happiness), etc.

Because of the low population density over much of the country and the small number of names relating to the historical or legendary past (except on the plateaux), toponymy in many areas is still very limited and therefore repetitive in its reference to accidents of topography or localities, with the attendant risk of confusion. An attempt is generally made to remedy this by adding adjectives indicating the region or orientation, or sometimes using Roman serial numbers.

In that respect much classifying and codifying remains to be done, sometimes contrary to customary usage, which has readily accepted combinations of Malagasy and European terms such as: Mananara-Nord, Ambohimanga du Sud, Midongy-Ouest.

It seems difficult to remedy the present inconsistency in the naming of villages, which are often moved or even disappear altogether as a result of local population movements connected with economic instability and taboo customs.

In regard to writing, the most important factor is that, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Malagasy language - or more correctly the dialect spoken by the Merina, which quickly became the official language of the Island - has been transcribed on a virtually standardized basis <sup>(1)</sup> into Roman letters. The spelling adopted includes some original pronunciation features which are easy to master with a little practice, but, above all, it offers the great advantage of remaining virtually univocal phonetically.

Given a little care, this can facilitate the transcription of names collected orally by the field staff responsible for preparing maps, who are guided notably by the "Vocabulary of the Commonest Words and Principal Geographical Expressions in the Malagasy Language, with their French Equivalents", compiled and brought up to date several times by the Geographical Service in collaboration with Malagasy language experts of the Government and the Malagasy Academy. Before leaving their survey areas, the field teams also have to arrange for the checking by local Government officials of the spelling of names collected. The names are also compared with those obtained from other sources (geologists of the Mines Department, surveyors of the Topographical Service, research workers of the Madagascar Institute of Scientific Research, etc.); objections or divergencies are referred to an authority on the Malagasy language. Administrative names are transcribed in conformity with the Official Geographical Code prepared jointly by the Ministry of the Interior and the Statistical Service.

Nevertheless, some rules still remain to be formulated or clarified, and that will be the task of the future Malagasy Toponymy Commission, which will be guided by the rules recommended by the Group of Experts of the United Nations Economic and Social Council. <sup>(2)</sup>

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- (1) With the exception of the recent modification by decree mentioned earlier.
  - (2) Especially Economic and Social Council Resolution 814 (XXXI) of 27 April 1961, which was the subject of an official reply addressed to the United Nations Secretariat by the Malagasy Republic in late 1962.

The main points which will have to be clarified can be summed up as follows:

- (1) Preservation of original regional forms of names of places or small localities (large population centres will have to retain their present name).
- (2) Elimination of possibilities of confusion between identical names or similar spellings and correction, if necessary, of empirically devised names in use; thus, Fenoarivo-Atsinanana will be written instead of Fénérive to distinguish it from other localities with the same name, and Amboditetezana instead of Amboditont.
- (3) Standardization of the use of the initial article I in many place names and establishment of rules for the use of the locative prefix An-, Am-, A-, or its derivative forms.
- (4) Clarification, if necessary, of the collective names or extent of major geographical entities.
- (5) Replacement of foreign by Malagasy names when there are no overriding reasons for retaining the former. Qualifications of orientation - for example, Nord, Est, Sud, Ouest - can easily be replaced by their Malagasy equivalents. Midongy Atsimo would thus be written instead of Modongy du Sud, Fenoarivo Afoarivo instead of Fenoarivo Centre, and Mananano Ambony instead of Haute Mananano.
- (6) Preparation of a comprehensive geographical dictionary or glossary.