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Maritime Migration and Islamization of the Malay Diaspora to Madagascar

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ABSTRACT

Abstract: This study reconstructs the historical and sociocultural trajectory of the Malay diaspora in Madagascar, examining their significant role in Islamization across the western Indian Ocean. Using a critical, diachronic historical method, comprising heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. Findings show that the Malagasy population reflects a distinctive Afro-Asian synthesis, genetically most closely linked to South Kalimantan populations, particularly the Banjar and Ma'anyan peoples. Linguistically, Malagasy belongs to the Malayo-Polynesian family, retaining loanwords from Malay and Sanskrit absorbed through Javanese influence. The Malay diaspora also introduced wet-rice cultivation, rectangular house architecture, and outrigger canoe technology, all essential to the island's material culture and trans-oceanic mobility. In the religious sphere, Islam spread through the active involvement of Southeast Asian Muslim communities via trade, intermarriage, and education, evidenced notably by the Sorabe script, in which Malagasy was written using Arabic letters to preserve religious texts and genealogies.

Kata Kunci:

Melayu,
Madagaskar,
Islamisasi,
Migrasi Maritim,
Persebaran Muslim.

Abstrak: *Studi ini merekonstruksi perjalanan sejarah dan sosiokultural diaspora Melayu di Madagaskar serta mengkaji peran penting mereka dalam proses Islamisasi di kawasan Samudra Hindia bagian barat. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode sejarah diakronis yang kritis, yang mencakup tahapan heuristik, kritik sumber, interpretasi, dan historiografi. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penduduk Madagaskar mencerminkan perpaduan unik antara unsur Afrika dan Asia; secara genetik, mereka memiliki keterkaitan paling erat dengan populasi Kalimantan Selatan, khususnya suku Banjar dan Ma'anyan. Segi bahasa, bahasa Malagasi termasuk dalam rumpun bahasa Melayu-Polinesia dan mempertahankan kata-kata serapan dari bahasa Melayu serta Sanskerta yang masuk melalui pengaruh bahasa Jawa. Diaspora Melayu juga memperkenalkan teknik budidaya padi sawah, arsitektur rumah berbentuk persegi panjang, dan teknologi perahu bercadik, unsur-unsur yang menjadi bagian penting dari budaya material serta mobilitas lintas samudra di pulau tersebut. Dalam ranah keagamaan, Islam tersebar melalui keterlibatan aktif komunitas Muslim Asia Tenggara lewat jalur perdagangan, pernikahan antaretnis, dan pendidikan; hal ini dibuktikan secara nyata oleh keberadaan aksara Sorabe, yaitu sistem penulisan bahasa Malagasi menggunakan huruf Arab untuk melestarikan teks-teks keagamaan dan silsilah.*

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A. INTRODUCTION

The term "Malay," as defined by UNESCO in 1972, designates the Malay ethnic group inhabiting the Malay Peninsula, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Madagascar. According to the Malaysian government, however, the term "Malay" refers specifically to an ethnic group that adheres to Islam, implying that not all individuals descended from Malay ancestry are necessarily classified as Malay. From a historical perspective, the term "Malay" is a relatively recent construct, emerging after the Malay Sultanate of Malacca and persisting

into the seventeenth century. J. Crawfurd's theory of the Malay Archipelago posits that the Malay nation had attained an advanced civilization by the nineteenth century (Mawangir 2021:2995).

Contemporary scholarly discourse on the archaeo-anthropological origins of the Malay people suggests that speakers of the Malay language originated from Taiwan. The earliest ancestors of the Malays are believed to have been a group of Chinese farmers who migrated to Taiwan around 4,000 BCE. Subsequently, around 3,000–2,500 BCE, these populations began sailing across the ocean toward the Philippine Archipelago. This diaspora continued until approximately 2,500 BCE, when the migrants began entering Sulawesi, Kalimantan, and neighboring islands (Putra 2022). By around 2,000 BCE, they had likely reached Maluku and Papua. During this same period, Malay peoples from mainland Southeast Asia gradually entered the Malay Peninsula and the western islands of Indonesia. Migration toward the Pacific Islands began around 1,500 BCE and continued until roughly 500 BCE (Ali and Farhan 2024:384).

The Malay nation's presence was centered on the Malacca Peninsula and the northern coastal region of Sumatra, a strategically significant location for inter-island and international trade in the past. As a result, the Malay language became the medium of commercial transactions throughout the Nusantara (Malay Archipelago). The Malays constitute an ethnic group dispersed across Southeast Asia, encompassing Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei Darussalam (Putra 2021a). The Malay ethnic group is an Austronesian population primarily inhabiting the Malay Peninsula, eastern Sumatra, southern Thailand, the southern coast of Burma, Singapore, Brunei, western Kalimantan, Sarawak, and coastal Sabah (Muhsinin 2019:2; Sudarman et al. 2021; Sudarman, Suryadi, and Putra 2025), with its dispersal extending as far as the African continent, specifically to Madagascar.

The presence of the Malay Muslim community in Madagascar forms part of a long history of interaction between the Nusantara and the island. Genetic and linguistic research indicates that the ancestors of the Malagasy population share close ties with the peoples of Indonesia, particularly South Kalimantan (Putra 2021a). These migrants brought with them their culture, language, and agricultural practices, most notably wet-rice cultivation, traces of which remain visible in Malagasy society today.

Although situated approximately 250 miles (400 km) from the African continent, Madagascar's population is primarily linked not to Africans but to Indonesians, located more than 3,000 miles (4,800 km) to the east. Furthermore, the Malagasy people do not identify themselves as African; however, owing to enduring ties with France resulting from prior colonial rule, the island developed political, economic, and cultural relations with francophone West African nations. The island's fauna and flora are similarly anomalous, differing markedly from those of nearby Africa and unique in many respects (Marzuenda 2021). Although the coastal regions have been known to Europeans for more than 400 years, and to Arabs for even longer, more recent and intensive historical developments have been concentrated in the central highlands, home to the capital city of Antananarivo (formerly Tananarive) (Bang 2014:98; Levy 2010).

Madagascar has been inhabited by humans for a relatively short period, approximately 1,300 years. Although the island's language and culture clearly reveal Indonesian origins, no empirical evidence exists regarding how, why, or by what route the first settlers arrived. While studies of Indian Ocean winds and currents suggest that voyages from Indonesia were feasible, considerable controversy persists regarding the nature of these journeys (Sudarman and Hidayaturrahman 2020). Some scholars argue that the earliest settlers arrived directly from Indonesia, possibly in a single voyage, and that the African elements found within the population and culture were introduced later through subsequent migration and the slave trade. Others contend that the island's population resulted from multiple voyages along the coasts of India, the Arabian Peninsula, and Africa, and that the population which eventually settled on the island was already of mixed origin (Britannica 2025; Versteegh 2015).

The background presented above demonstrates that the migration of the Malay people from mainland Asia to Madagascar constitutes a lengthy process that can be traced through archaeo-anthropological, linguistic, and socio-historical approaches, beginning in Taiwan around 4,000 BCE, passing through the Philippines and the Nusantara, and culminating in a crossing of the Indian Ocean approximately 1,300 years ago. Genetic and linguistic studies reveal a close connection between the Malagasy population and the peoples of the Nusantara, reflected in linguistic similarities and shared cultural practices such as rice cultivation. Beyond the traces of early migration, the socio-historical dimension is equally essential in uncovering how the process of Islamization accompanied the movement of the Malay Muslim community to Madagascar, bringing with it religious teachings, traditions, and trade networks that reinforced interaction between the Nusantara and the

island. Nevertheless, empirical evidence concerning the routes and patterns of these early settlers' voyages remains a subject of scholarly debate: some experts maintain that the journey was made directly from Indonesia, while others argue that the migration occurred gradually via the coasts of India, the Arabian Peninsula, and Africa—a divergence that has, in turn, shaped the patterns of cultural and religious acculturation that persist in Madagascar to this day. A comprehensive study integrating archaeological, linguistic, and social-historical perspectives is therefore needed to more thoroughly reconstruct this process of migration and Islamization.

B. METHOD

This study employs the historical research method as its principal approach to reconstructing the trajectories of migration, Islamization, and sociocultural interaction among the Malay people of Madagascar. The historical method was selected because the subject under investigation is inherently diachronic in nature, that is it traces past events that cannot be directly observed, thereby requiring a rigorous, critical process of locating, examining, and interpreting historical sources in order to arrive at an authentic and credible reconstruction. Drawing on Louis Gottschalk, the historical research method is carried out through four principal stages: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography (Abdurahman 2019; Putra 2021b; Sjamsuddin 2014), each of which is applied in this study as follows.

1. Heuristics (Source Collection)

The heuristic stage involved the compilation of written sources relevant to the topic of Malay migration to Madagascar, including books, scholarly journals, research articles, genetic and linguistic study reports, and colonial as well as post-colonial historical documents addressing Nusantara–Madagascar relations. Sources were classified into primary sources, comprising historical records, population genetics research findings, and comparative linguistic data and secondary sources, consisting of journal articles and analytical books discussing Austronesian migration, Islamization, and cultural acculturation in Madagascar. Source retrieval was conducted through academic databases using keywords such as "Malay migration," "Malagasy," "Austronesian," and "Islamization of Madagascar".

2. Source Criticism (Verification)

Once the sources had been collected, source criticism was undertaken, comprising both external and internal criticism. External criticism was employed to assess the authenticity and physical credibility of the sources (Hamid and Madjid 2011), including publication year, publisher, and the author's scholarly reputation, in order to ensure that each source originated from an institution or researcher with recognized competence in history, anthropology, or Austronesian linguistics. Internal criticism, in turn, was conducted to evaluate the content and accuracy of the information by comparing findings across sources for instance, cross-referencing genetic research findings (Putra, 2021a) with linguistic data and colonial historical records—so as to ensure factual consistency regarding the origins and migratory processes of the Malagasy population.

3. Interpretation

The verified data were subsequently interpreted by classifying information according to thematic categories (Madjid and Wahyudhi 2018), namely: the origins and migration of the Malay people, the genetic-cultural relationship between the Malagasy and the Nusantara, the process of Islamization, and the ongoing controversy surrounding migratory routes. At this stage, a causal analysis was conducted to elucidate the interrelationships among historical events for example, how maritime trade routes simultaneously functioned as channels for the dissemination of Islam and Malay culture to Madagascar. Interpretation was carried out through a critical-comparative lens, taking into account the divergent perspectives of scholars regarding migration patterns, whether direct or gradual in nature.

4. Historiography

The final stage, historiography, entails the composition of the interpreted findings into a systematic, chronological, and logically coherent historical narrative (Shamad 2016). At this stage, findings drawn from various sources were synthesized into a unified narrative that comprehensively explains the process of Malay migration to Madagascar, encompassing its archaeo-anthropological, linguistic, and socio-historical dimensions of Islamization thereby producing a holistic account of the formation of Malay-Malagasy identity from the past to the present.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The History of Malay Migration to Madagascar

Figure1. Madagascar Island (Britannica 2025)

Madagascar is the world's fourth-largest island. In addition to the main island, several smaller islands in its vicinity are also claimed by the republic, namely Juan de Nova Island, Europa Island, the Glorioso Islands, Tromelin Island, and Bassas da India. Although geographically proximate to Africa, Madagascar's geological, biological, and demographic history differs markedly from that of the African mainland (Handasah 2017). The island lies a mere 400 kilometers from the eastern coast of Africa; nevertheless, Malagasy culture bears a closer resemblance to Malay culture, having reached the island through the aid of prevailing winds and ocean currents (Steven 2023).

Archaeological investigations conducted in the twentieth century indicate that human settlers reached Madagascar around 700 CE. Although the island is geographically situated near Bantu-speaking Africa, its language, Malagasy, belongs to the Western Malayo-Polynesian branch, situated at a considerable remove from the broader Austronesian language family (Adelaar 2006; Dadoo 2014). Bantu elements are nonetheless present in every Malagasy dialect and appear to have developed over an extended period. As a people, the Malagasy represent a unique fusion of Asian and African cultural traits found nowhere else in the world. Although Asian characteristics predominate overall, African ancestry is clearly present, and African influence is evident in both the material and non-material culture of the Malagasy; the precise history and nature of this relationship, however, remain a subject of scholarly debate (Dewar 1995).

By the fifteenth century, the northwestern coast of Madagascar had become home to an important trading system, which Pierre Vérin (1975) described as a "trading scale." Major trade routes originating from key port cities across the Indian Ocean converged at several Malagasy ports, from which smaller routes extended to lesser coastal trading harbors. In the seventeenth century, the Antalaotra people developed strong commercial and cultural ties with East Africa and the Comoro Islands, transforming the Malagasy coast into a site of cultural interaction. Although coastal and inland communities retained their distinct characteristics, the emerging role of the coast enabled the sharing of common cultural features across regions, including rice cultivation, zebu-related rituals, and even the Malagasy language, which took shape in the interior while also being spoken by the Antalaotra. Along the Malagasy coast, the role of the Antalaotra paralleled that of Swahili speakers along the East African coast; both groups forged an urban, coastal trading identity that merged maritime commercial

identity with local culture. Indeed, the early prosperity of the Malagasy coast coincided with a major phase of migration from the African and Indian coasts toward the northwestern part of the island (Verhoog 2024:83).

In the early eighteenth century, the Antalaotra and Sakalava peoples forged a political and economic alliance for the purposes of trade, using Mahajanga as the shared capital of both communities. However, when the Kingdom of Merina seized control of this port city, the regional trading system underwent drastic transformation. First, the Merina Kingdom prohibited Antalaotra and Arab traders from constructing sailing vessels for regional trade, thereby disrupting the established trading system and the way of life of coastal communities. Between the 1820s and 1830s, Indian traders rapidly supplanted the Antalaotra, who despite not seeking political dominance consistently safeguarded their cultural distinctiveness and posed a threat to Merina political hegemony owing to their alliance with the Sakalava. Consequently, by the 1830s the majority of the Antalaotra had fled to the Comoro Islands in the Indian Ocean, off the northwestern coast of Madagascar, leaving only a small remnant in the Boeny region to the northwest (Verhoog 2024:83).

Hurles et al. published a study employing a detailed phylogenetic and geographic resolution of paternally inherited Y-chromosome lineages and maternally inherited mitochondrial DNA lineages to partition Malagasy ancestry into component founding populations. The authors claimed that, through this approach, the contribution of different ancestral populations to the modern Malagasy gene pool could be directly estimated, and likely geographic origins could be precisely determined (Adelaar 2006:14).

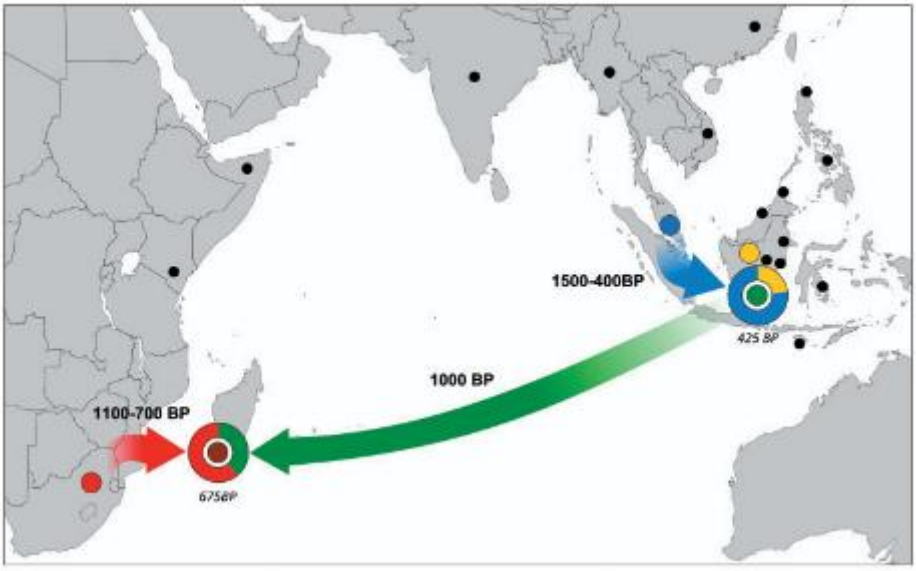
The principal findings of Hurles et al. are as follows:

a. The Malagasy people represent a mixed African–Southeast Asian ancestry.
b. The Malagasy do not exhibit the reduced genetic diversity typically observed on other recently colonized islands (such as those settled in the Pacific). This finding supports a direct migration scenario rather than a gradual one, or, alternatively, suggests that successive waves of migration from Asia may have introduced a series of distinct lineages to Madagascar.
c. Genetic diversity among maternal lineages of Asian and African origin in the Malagasy population reveals that Asian lineages are considerably more diverse. This suggests that migration from Africa may have been more limited than migration from Indonesia.
d. Paternal and maternal estimates of the proportion of African ancestry among the Malagasy are statistically indistinguishable, indicating no evidence of sex-biased ancient admixture.
e. A "Polynesian mitochondrial motif" is present among Malagasy maternal lineages. However, direct migration from Polynesia can be ruled out, since the dominant Y-chromosome haplogroups found in Polynesia (O3 and C) are entirely absent among Malagasy paternal lineages.
f. Among ten potential ancestral populations elsewhere in the Austronesian world, the Borneo populations (Banjarmasin and Kota Kinabalu) exhibit the Y-chromosome haplogroup distribution most closely resembling that observed among the Malagasy (Adelaar 2006:15).

The significance of Hurles et al. (2005) lies in the fact that this was the first genetic study of the Malagasy population to align with existing linguistic evidence. The study corroborates an argument that had persisted for more than half a century based solely on historical linguistics, that the Asian origins of the Malagasy should primarily be sought in South Kalimantan. This publication is therefore welcome news, although one might question why the researchers selected the city of Banjarmasin as one of their sampling regions rather than the Ma'anyan (Dayak)-speaking area itself, which lies not far from Banjarmasin (Hurles et al. 2005).

The Asian ancestors of the Malagasy are believed to have originated from various parts of Southeast Asia, with the first migrant group consisting of speakers of Southeast Barito languages, who formed the core population with which all subsequent migrants became linguistically assimilated, according to a sociolinguistic approach. Later migrants may have contributed to regional culture and the Malagasy mainstream to such an extent that the distinctive Southeast Barito features became less prominent or disappeared altogether. Linguistically, however, these later migrants would have had to adapt to the language of the core group. This theory also accommodates an alternative account holding that the relationship between Southeast Asia and East Africa was fundamentally established by the Malays, who likewise served as the agents behind the migration of Southeast Barito speakers to Madagascar. The Malays would certainly have employed subordinates, whether as crew members or as enslaved individuals in the voyages they led to East Africa. This theory is supported by the fact that neither the Southeast Barito Dayak nor the Malagasy ever developed the maritime skills required for the ambitious voyages undertaken by their ancestors, whereas the Malays had already developed such skills (Thompson and Adloff 1965).

The Banjar people, who currently reside in southeastern Kalimantan, exhibit the closest affinity to the principal genetic ancestry component found among the Malagasy, and can therefore be presumed to have been the ethnic group that accompanied the Malays on their maritime voyages to Madagascar. This population of composite ethnic ancestry emerged from the longstanding presence of Malay communities in Kalimantan, which gave rise to mixed communities with local Austronesian-speaking groups such as the Ma'anyan. Prior to the likely date of migration (approximately 1,000 years ago), the ancestors of the present-day Banjar must already have possessed the combined genetic diversity of both the Malay and Ma'anyan peoples. Although the precise maritime migration route from Kalimantan to Madagascar remains an open question, this research identifies the flow of Malay–Ma'anyan genomic ancestry, carried by the ancestors of the Banjar, as the primary source of Malagasy ancestry (Brucato et al. 2016:2399).



Picture 2. Malay Migration to Madagascar

Scenario for the Asian genetic ancestry among the Malagasy, based on the best-fitting model inferred by GLOBETROTTER. The brown circle represents the Malagasy (bottom left), while the green circle represents the Banjar (right). The red half-circle indicates African ancestry (South African Bantu), whereas the remaining half-circle represents Asian ancestry derived from the Malay (blue), Banjar (green), and Ma'anyan (yellow) populations. Black dots highlight other populations included in the high-density genomic dataset. Arrows indicate inferred migration events, with indicative routes, as determined in our analysis, with admixture dates shown in italics as estimated by GLOBETROTTER. Dates shown in bold correspond to migration dates estimated from archaeological and historical data (Brucato et al. 2016:2399).

2. The Process of Islamization in Madagascar

The history of Islam in Madagascar is largely tied to migrations that occurred along the island's eastern coast. The Antemoro, Antambahoaka, and Antanosy ethnic groups all claim descent from a common ancestor, Ramia, who is said to have originated from Mecca. Modern research, however, has revealed that these ancestors were not Arabs but rather Indonesians who had already converted to Islam. The reference to Mecca is therefore essentially symbolic, which explains why no direct connection exists between Malagasy Muslims and other Muslim communities, particularly those in Africa (Travel 2025).

The earliest settlers of the great island inhabited its coastal regions, as it was easier there to sustain themselves through their activities already practiced fishing, trade, and, in some cases, farming. These settlers appear to have been Austronesian, drawing on several distinct cultural elements. Rice, rather than maize as in East Africa, constitutes the Malagasy staple food. Rice was cultivated both in flooded fields in swamps and lowlands and through rain-fed methods, or on terraces that captured water from springs or rainfall during the wet season and channeled it from one terrace to the next until it reached the river (Şaitiş 2022:135).

The arrival of the Austronesians on the island brought with it crops adapted to Madagascar's environment such cassava, sweet potato, ginger, sugarcane, and bananas, they are as well as trees such as coconut, breadfruit, lemon, and citrus. At the same time, the technique of constructing rectangular rather than round

houses, the latter being characteristic of Africa, attests to a South Asian origin. Along the Indian Ocean coast, single-hulled or double-hulled canoes, stabilized by outriggers, proved resistant to strong ocean waves without capsizing. However, with subsequent migrations during the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, this Austronesian-descended population was compelled to move into the highland mountain regions and exploit them, in order to avoid conflict with populations that had since settled on the island. These groups formed tribal communities led by family heads known as kings (mpanjaka). This second wave of migration brought Arab and Islamic groups, as well as Swahili traders from the East African coast, to the shores of Madagascar along with peoples from India's western coast, near what is now the India–Pakistan border (Şaitiş 2022:135). Gujarati Indians, known as Karany, began arriving initially as traders in spices, highly prized Indian chili peppers, cotton cloth, and pepper, later settling in the northern region of the country, where they formed insular communities. This migration was driven by the expansion of trade routes under Islamic caliphates, which came to dominate not only commercial markets across the Indian Ocean from the Indonesian Archipelago to the Gulf of Aden but also land markets in East and Northeast Africa (Şaitiş 2022:135).

These Arab groups became integrated into already-established coastal communities, bringing with them their traditions and culture most notably Arabic script and the sacred Sorabe writings, which were safeguarded by a small group of Islamic religious leaders known as ombiasy, who became integrated into Malagasy tribal culture. They also introduced the concept of kingship to coastal communities, giving rise to kingdoms that unified communities of shared ethnicity between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Betsileo kingdom emerged in the fourteenth century in the southeastern part of the island; in the sixteenth century, the Sakalava Kingdom arose in the west, alongside the Amongo and Iboina kingdoms in the north. Along the western coast, where two major ports developed (Toamasina and Nosy Boraha), various tribes united in the seventeenth century to form the Betsimisaraka kingdom. The Imerina Kingdom, the largest of these polities, emerged around the Central Highlands in the eighteenth century. Gwen Campbell, in Bondage and the Environment in the Indian Ocean World, identifies several factors that accelerated the development of this kingdom into one of the most powerful on the Great Island. The Imerina became the island's principal rice suppliers, owing to their development of improved cultivation techniques, growing rice both in rain-fed areas and on terraces. They established the island's first factories, in which they employed enslaved laborers, alongside a forced-labor system known as fanompoana, compulsory for the kingdom's free citizens. They also cooperated with major powers that had reached the Indian Ocean in search of territory and labor, with the Merina kingdom becoming one of the most significant suppliers of enslaved people during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Campbell 2016).

Of particular significance among this legacy is Islam, which became the religion of the inhabitants of the Madagascar Islands. In addition, the local population's writing employed Arabic script, along with a substantial vocabulary of Arabic-derived terms—including terminology related to astronomy, greetings, names of garments, currency, musical instruments, and the names of days and months, among many others. An Islamic-based newspaper, published in both Arabic and the Malagasy language, once circulated in the city of Tananarive (the capital of Madagascar), under the name Qamar al-Dīn. Manuscripts of the Holy Qur'an and other Arabic-language religious texts were held in the highest esteem by Madagascar's Muslim inhabitants, passed down through successive generations (Hurles et al. 2005).

Portuguese explorers visiting the Matitanana River valley in southeastern Madagascar witnessed the arrival of a group of Afro-Arabs (the "Moors of Malindi") between 1507 and 1513. Within one or two generations, the descendants of this group had intermarried and merged with the local tompontany to form another group known as the Antemoro. By the 1630s, the Antemoro had established a theocratic state—the only state in Madagascar at that time to possess written texts. Using the Arabic alphabet, these texts were written in the Malagasy language and encompassed both religious and secular subject matter (Nave 2005:1030). Proximity to Islam served as a principal criterion among the Antemoro for claiming the right to rule, and there is little doubt that the four Antemoro clerical clans held a considerably closer relationship to Islam than did the Zafindraminia of the Fort-Dauphin region. Over time, Antemoro holy men, who traveled widely across Madagascar, began to influence other Malagasy peoples in both religious and governmental matters (Bang 2014:166)

Regardless of the precise number of Muslims in Madagascar, the presence of Islam in this former French colony is beyond doubt. The Muslim population resides predominantly in the western part of the island,

formerly known as the Malagasy Republic. Most of these Muslims are immigrants from Yemen, Iran, Zanzibar, and other countries. Approximately 50,000 Muslim refugees from India, the Comoros, and Somalia live comfortably on the 587-square-kilometer island, and a considerable number of local inhabitants have also converted to Islam and joined these communities (Handasah 2017).

Another channel through which Islam spread to Madagascar operated during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, when the Muslim community in Cape Town and other parts of the Cape Colony produced a substantial body of manuscripts and printed works across various fields of Islamic learning. Many of these texts were written in Arabic script, yet in the Afrikaans language a creole variant of the language brought by Dutch traders to South Africa. The Cape Muslim community originated primarily from South and Southeast Asia. During the second half of the seventeenth century, most of its founding members had been expelled or forcibly transported by Dutch authorities from the Dutch colonial territories in Asia. Approximately one-quarter of the 63,000 enslaved people transported to the Cape Colony between 1652 and 1808 came from Southeast Asia. These enslaved individuals and exiles from Southeast Asia were predominantly Muslim, and for many of them, Malay became a language they learned, even though it was not their mother tongue. Malay had already become the lingua franca of the Indonesian archipelago by the late eighth century, and had been adopted by Muslim traders and missionaries throughout Southeast Asia as a language of commerce and religious instruction (Versteegh 2015:285).

The language eventually adopted by these newcomers in the Cape Colony was Afrikaans. Following initial contact between Dutch colonists and the indigenous Khoe population, a Dutch pidgin had developed, which subsequently creolized and became the vernacular language across much of the colony. At that time, Afrikaans was not yet a standardized language in the Cape Colony, where only Dutch was recognized as the official written language, though it competed closely with English. Afrikaans did not become an official language of the Cape Colony until 1925 (Uys 1983). Because the enslaved people and exiles from Southeast Asia constituted a multilingual society, speaking several Indonesian languages such as Bugis, Javanese, and Makassarese, they quickly adopted Afrikaans as their everyday language of communication within the group. Malay nevertheless continued to be preserved by Muslims as the language of religious instruction, just as in Southeast Asia though from at least 1804 onward, once Islamic schools were permitted by the colonial government, Afrikaans became the spoken language of religious instruction (Versteegh 2015:285).

Indirectly, the religion brought by these migrants was marked by beliefs and practices distinctly Indonesian in character. Since their arrival, these Muslims have also been influenced by local traditions and religions. Today, their presence is reflected more in surviving cultural traits than in orthodox Islamic practice. These traits include references to Mecca and the Qur'an, knowledge of particular verses and prayers, and dietary prohibitions such as the avoidance of dog or pork consumption. Astrology and seed divination, practices associated with geomancy, likewise form part of this inherited legacy (Travel 2025).

3. Traces of Malay Culture and Language in Madagascar

More than nine-tenths of the population are Malagasy, divided into approximately twenty ethnic groups. The largest and most dominant group is the Merina, distributed across the entire island. The name Merina (Imerina) is said to mean "the Noble People," derived from the fact that they inhabit the highlands. The second-largest group is the Betsimisaraka ("the Inseparable People"), who generally reside in the east. The third most numerous group is the Betsileo ("the Invincible People"), who inhabit the highlands around Fianarantsoa (Crossland 2003:20; Ottino 1983).

Other significant groups include the Tsimihety ("Those Who Do Not Cut Their Hair"), the Sakalava ("People of the Long Valleys"), the Antandroy ("People of the Thorny Bush"), the Tanala ("People of the Forest"), the Antaimoro ("People of the Riverbank"), and the Bara (whose name's origin remains unknown). Smaller groups include the Antanosy ("Inhabitants of the Island"), the Antaifasy ("Inhabitants of the Sand"), the Sihanaka ("Inhabitants of the Lake"), the Antakarana ("Inhabitants of the Rock"), and the Betanimena ("Inhabitants of the Red Land") the latter now largely absorbed into the Merina as well as the Bezanozano ("Those with Many Braids") and the Mahafaly ("Those Who Make Taboos"). These ethnonyms do not represent clearly delineated cultural boundaries, as in many instances one group blends imperceptibly into another. Moreover, conventional translations of these names are entirely unreliable, and most of the names themselves are of relatively recent origin, likely crystallized and reinforced more by the demands of colonial administration than by any authentic underlying cultural reality. In many cases, these peoples represent endogamous descent groups that are frequently non-unilineal (Britannica 2025).

Adelaar (1989) interprets Sanskrit influence in a distinctive manner. All but one of the Sanskrit loanwords in Malagasy have equivalent forms in Malay and/or Javanese (Adelaar 2006:12–13). On the other hand, evidence from seventh-century Old Malay inscriptions clearly demonstrates that a comprehensive process of Indianization was underway in Srivijaya, reflected among other things in political organization, religion, architecture, lexicon, the use of Indian-derived script, and, notably, the adaptation of the writing system itself. Other Indianized polities existed in Southeast Asia by the seventh century, but Srivijaya was the first to clearly involve Malay speakers. These inscriptions not only provide a precise "post quem" date for the earliest manifestations of Indian influence on the Malay language; they also establish the date of emergence of a Malay society that had, at least in outward appearance, embraced numerous aspects of Indian civilization (Putra 2025).

The language of Srivijaya must have influenced Malagasy, since Malagasy contains numerous Malay loanwords reflecting an 'e' corresponding to the Malay penultimate '/ə/'. These loanwords can be contrasted with Banjar Malay loanwords in Malagasy that instead reflect the Malay penultimate schwa. Furthermore, several Malay loanwords in Malagasy clearly originate from a Southeast Sumatran milieu (Ottino 1983:254), such as terms for cardinal directions and wind names, which could scarcely have developed in Kalimantan—including varatraza (< barat daya, "southwest") and tsimilotru or tsimilautra (< timur laut, "northeast") (Adelaar 2006). We may further add the appearance of certain lines at the beginning of the 686 CE Old Malay Telaga Batu and Kota Kapur inscriptions, which appear to constitute a form of Ma'anyan script, although efforts to translate them have not yet been fully successful (Adelaar 2006:13).

The abundance of Bantu animal names, particularly terms for large domesticated animals, points to a gender bias running in the opposite direction from that claimed by Dahl. In Madagascar, as in Africa generally, livestock management is predominantly a male concern. It appears that the early Malagasy relied heavily on their Bantu neighbors for knowledge of local fauna and cattle husbandry, even where this involved animals also present in Kalimantan (Capredon et al. 2013:2). Indonesian names for domesticated animals appear to have been lost or to have become lexically unstable (for instance, Malay ləmbu, meaning "cow, bull, cattle," was borrowed into Malagasy as lambu, meaning "pig"). On the whole, Dahl's inventory of Bantu loanwords spans domains that might appear gender-associated, but includes both male and female domains, and the Bantu loanword inventory as a whole shows no bias toward either gender (Adelaar 2006:16).

Loanwords from Malay and, to a lesser extent, Javanese sometimes attest to historical facts that historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists had previously been unable to substantiate. These loanwords indicate that the earliest Malagasy migrants to East Africa had been in contact with Malay speakers, and that the period of Malay-Malagasy contact was of considerable duration. This period began prior to the migration to East Africa and continued even after contact between Austronesian and African (predominantly Bantu) populations had produced an ethnically mixed society in Madagascar. Two circumstances allow us to divide Malay-Malagasy contact into several distinct periods: the emergence of Banjar Malay loanwords, and the emergence of Malay loanwords that had not yet undergone significant phonological change under the influence of the Comorian language a pattern reflected almost throughout the Malagasy lexicon (Adelaar 2013:51).

The presence of Banjar Malay loanwords alongside other Malay loanwords indicates that proto-Malagasy had already been influenced by local varieties of Malay before its speakers left their original homeland in South Kalimantan for East Africa. The fundamental phonological distinction between Banjar and other Malay dialects is that Banjar exhibits 'a' where other Malay dialects have schwa. In the process of borrowing into Malagasy, this Banjar 'a' became Malagasy 'a', whereas the schwa in other Malay dialects became the Malagasy mid-front vowel 'e'. (It should be noted, however, that in the penultimate syllable, both Banjar 'a' and the schwa of other Malay dialects are rendered in Malagasy as 'a') (Adelaar 2013:51).

Approximately thirty-five Sanskrit loanwords exist in Malagasy. These words must have been borrowed indirectly through Malay or Javanese, for two reasons. First, nearly all of these loanwords also appear in Malay or Javanese at some historical stage. Second, Malagasy reflects the same phonological (and occasionally semantic) changes that Sanskrit words underwent in the process of being borrowed into Malay or Javanese. Compare the following pairs, in which the Malagasy equivalents display the same phonological changes relative to the original Sanskrit forms as do their Malay or Javanese counterparts (Adelaar 2013:51).

The Malagasy have thus succeeded in constructing a shared identity, despite pronounced ethnic differences in both geographic distribution and religious affiliation. These ethnic groups have undergone numerous transformations across roughly two thousand years of history to arrive at their present-day identities.

Arriving as migrants from Southeast Asia and the Austronesian world, or as Bantu migrants from East Africa, they settled within the same territory in differentiated strata, each successive group compelling the other to relocate from coastal and lowland regions toward the mountainous Central Highlands. Having subsequently formed kingdoms comprising families of shared ethnicity, they sought to assert their cultural and religious superiority over rival kingdoms, and it was the contest for territorial dominance, together with trade, that ultimately brought them into convergence. The power of great empires and colonial domination eventually forced them into closer proximity with one another and prompted efforts to construct a notion of Malagasy nationhood or nationalism (Ahmed et al. 2025).

Subsequently, following liberation from French colonial rule, they embarked on a process of "Malagasization," wherein all were to share equally in the nation's benefits, striving together for their own collective welfare regardless of geographic origin. It cannot be said that a complete symbiosis was achieved; nevertheless, a shared thread persisted, a notion of identity, a common pattern found to varying degrees within every ethnic group, that allows Malagasy people the world over to take pride in locating their identity in the Indian Ocean, in Madagascar (Șaitiș 2022:142).

Another important dimension of this cultural transmission is the Arabico-Malagasy script, the transcription of the Malagasy language into the Arabic alphabet. Antemoro lineages still preserve manuscripts known as sora-be, containing Qur'anic verses, esoteric texts, genealogies, and historical records. Today, Islam in Madagascar is upheld largely by the Indo-Pakistani community, which finances the construction of mosques and Qur'anic schools. This new dynamic has helped revitalize the presence of Islam on the island, even as it coexists with Malagasy beliefs and cultural practices (Travel 2025).

Although not the majority religion, Islam has grown rapidly in Madagascar. Over the past decade, the number of mosques has increased from merely a handful to several dozen. Today, at least fifty mosques and Islamic centers stand across the country (Handasah, 2017). Muslims also operate restaurants serving halal food, and have established clinics, schools, and social foundations, while playing an active role in the economic and political spheres. Islamic preaching (da'wah) is likewise freely broadcast via national television and radio.

D. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The identity of the Malagasy people in Madagascar represents a unique synthesis of Bantu African and Austronesian Southeast Asian elements that have been forming since the 7th century CE. This research indicates that this identity is not monolithic but rather a "plural mosaic" resulting from complex and ongoing waves of maritime migration. Scientifically, the close connection between the people of Madagascar and the population of South Kalimantan—specifically the Banjar and Ma'anyan tribes—has been proven through genetic and linguistic studies. The Malagasy language, a branch of the West Malayo-Polynesian family, contains numerous loanwords from Malay and Sanskrit, which were adapted through Javanese influence. These findings confirm that Austronesian migration was a long-term process of social structure formation that preserved Nusantara cultural roots.

Beyond genetic aspects, the contribution of the Southeast Asian Muslim community was a key agent in the process of Islamization in Madagascar through trade networks and education. The Antemoro ethnic group serves as tangible evidence of Islamic intellectual transmission through the use of the Sorabe script (Malagasy written in the Arabic alphabet) to record genealogies and religious texts. Material culture contributions are also significant, as Malay migration introduced wet-rice cultivation technology, rectangular house architecture, and the use of outrigger canoes for transoceanic voyages. Overall, these findings reconstruct the global historical narrative by positioning Southeast Asian Muslims as primary actors in the often-overlooked trans-Indian Ocean networks. This study proves that Nusantara influence provided a profound impact on Malagasy civilization, creating a historical legacy that enriches global Islamic identity to this day.

For future study development, this research recommends applying a broader interdisciplinary approach to map migration routes more precisely. Given that the controversy regarding direct versus gradual migration routes persists, integrating underwater archaeological data and ancient DNA analysis is crucial to clarifying this maritime historical narrative. Furthermore, systematic efforts are needed to preserve this intellectual heritage through the digitalization and restoration of Sorabe manuscripts in Madagascar as authentic evidence of transregional Islamization. Finally, strengthening cultural dialogue through sister-city cooperation between the Indonesian government, specifically the South Kalimantan region, and Madagascar is highly recommended to bolster the historical-emotional ties that have existed for thousands of years.

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