

## THE 1947 ANTI-COLONIAL INSURRECTION IN MADAGASCAR

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*The Many Faces of an Anti-Colonial Revolt: Madagascar's Long Journey into 1947.*

By RAYMOND K. KENT. Albany, CA: Foundation for Malagasy Studies, 2007.

Pp. xvi + 326. \$20, paperback (ISBN no. pending).

KEY WORDS: Madagascar, decolonization, nationalism, resistance.

This is the most eccentric book I have ever reviewed, and yet it makes a significant contribution to an important subject, the 1947 anti-colonial insurrection in Madagascar.

In fact, it is not clear that this volume is really a publication at all in the normal sense, since it lacks an ISBN number and is published by a foundation that appears to be the author's own personal vehicle, and which presumably has only a small distribution network. The text contains a vast number of typographical errors, quite often several on a single page, and odd mis-spellings of proper names. It has variable margins, font sizes and text layout. There are incomplete sentences and missing references. There are some truly bizarre endnotes, including a half-page denunciation of media disinformation concerning Serbia (pp. 21–2), a whimsical anecdote about publishing (pp. 88–9) and personal remarks about other scholars (p. 322) casually slipped into a bibliography that, although impressive, contains inexplicable omissions. Needless to say, there is no index. While the back cover informs us that this manuscript is the product of several preliminary drafts, a draft is really what it remains. This is a pity, as Raymond Kent, Emeritus Professor of African and Afro-Brasilian History at the University of California at Berkeley, and the author notably of an erudite work on precolonial state formation in Madagascar, has been studying the island's history for some fifty years.

Despite these shortcomings, the overall thrust is clear enough. It is the first full-length study of the 1947 insurrection to appear since Jacques Tronchon's pioneering work of 1974, based on a mass of primary documents that Tronchon had succeeded in acquiring. Tronchon largely put to rest the old myth of the French Left that the rising was provoked by officers of the colonial secret police who were determined to flush their enemies out into the open in order to destroy them. However, he gave some comfort to the nationalist view that the rising, although not organized by those leaders of the legally constituted Mouvement Démocratique de la Rénovation Malgache (MDRM) party who were convicted by a French court, may nevertheless have been coordinated by two shadowy secret societies, known as PANAMA and JINA. Kent shows convincingly that the two secret societies were of secondary importance.

Because Madagascar's colonial government had declared for Vichy in 1940, the island was invaded by British and South African troops in 1942. In the following year the British handed power to a Free French administration but retained a military liaison office with an intelligence function. The blow to French prestige delivered by British intervention was telling. There was little to restrain those Malagasy who harboured grievances caused by heavy taxes and labour dues as well as by more general anti-colonial feelings. Such people were particularly numerous on the east coast, an area heavily settled by colonists from Réunion Island. For more than a year before the night of 29–30 March 1947, generally regarded as the start of the insurrection, there were numerous cases of evasion, physical attacks on colonists or collaborators, and various forms of minor rebellion. Kent shows how the rising gained in military sophistication during a second phase after mid-1947,

when it was stiffened by combat veterans from the French army returning from Europe. These new insights are based on a re-reading of the substantial archive assembled by Tronchon, research in French military archives and, most particularly, the most effective use yet made of the archives of the British military administration and of the intelligence unit it left behind.

There is no doubt that the rising was anti-colonial, but it also contained a number of complex sociological and psychological strands. Broadly speaking, Kent sees the rising as a class struggle, in the sense that it tended to be the socially junior sections of insurgent groups that took the lead; it also contained elements of a civil war and a peasant revolt. He points to the role played by Antemoro clerics, a prestigious group who had played an important role in precolonial statecraft in various parts of Madagascar but who were routinely dismissed by colonial officials as charlatans. The rising marked a reassertion of honour by people who had been routinely humiliated and abused during two generations of colonial rule.

In analytical terms, the main problem posed by the version of events presented here concerns the interpretation of ethnicity. Professor Kent holds to the view that Madagascar contains 18 distinct ethnic groups that have remained fairly stable throughout recent centuries, and that successive major kingdoms before the French conquest of 1895 therefore represented formations of an indigenous imperialism. Apart from being debatable on purely historical grounds, such an interpretation makes it difficult to explain how it was that people from the east coast were able to work with people of highland origin in the 1947 rising. Professing allegiance to the leaders of the Merina-dominated MDRM, the insurgents sometimes expressed a commitment to Madagascar as a whole. French colonialists often explained this by representing the insurgents as the naïve dupes of cunning Merina politicians. A more likely explanation, in view of recent work on the history of ethnicity, is that ethnic distinctions were never as rigid as colonial ideology would have us believe.

Professor Kent would do a great service to historians of Madagascar and of nationalism more generally if he were to edit his text thoroughly and have it published by a conventional publishing house.

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## THE MAKING OF THE ETHIOPIAN JEWS' RESCUE POLICY

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*Black Jews, Jews, and Other Heroes: How Grassroots Activism Led to the Rescue of the Ethiopian Jews.* By HOWARD M. LENHOFF. Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2007. Pp. iii + 324. No price given (ISBN 978-9-65229-365-7).

KEY WORDS: Ethiopia.

Howard Lenhoff considers his book *Black Jews, Jews, and Other Heroes* as a piece of Jewish history – the heroic rescue of an ‘endangered’ Jewish group by a grassroots Jewish organization, the American Association for Ethiopian Jews (AAEJ). Since that Jewish group lived in Ethiopia and their ‘rescue’ took place in that part of Africa, the book is as much a fragment of African history as it is a piece of the Jewish experience.