

**Reading the Red Island:**  
**Travel Writing and Maps of Madagascar**

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**"All accounts of travel are either authentic or fictitious. Those of the former class may be, and frequently are, embroidered by the writer's imagination. This does not, however, alter the fact that in every case the narrative is an account of, either a voyage that has actually been made, or of a voyage that never had any existence outside of the author's imagination" (1963: 8).**

**-William Eddy**

**"Maps...even today are, interpreted, according not only to what is objectively out there, but also to what we wish were out there, or hope to find out there" (1993: 24).**

**-Kent C. Ryden**

### **Introduction**

In this paper, I analyze a series of travel writing and maps of Madagascar in order to understand the way in which the island has come to be popularly perceived today. The texts I review are not a comprehensive representation of travel writing on Madagascar. Rather, they have been selected for the purpose of executing a diachronic study of the representation of Madagascar in terms of travel<sup>1</sup>. Information from the texts provides a context for the maps, assisting in the process of placing the maps within a social, cultural and historical context..

Following the anthropology of Roland Barthes (and others), I employ an expanded notion of the word *text* in this paper: one that includes other cultural productions such as maps and photographs, as well as the landscape itself. Places must be explored as "intertextual sites" because "various texts and discursive practices based on previous texts are deeply inscribed in their landscapes and institutions" (Barnes and Duncan 1992: 8). According to the theoretical observations of sociologist Michel de Certeau (1988: 115), "every story is a travel story - a spatial practice." That is, every narrative account evokes space in the mind of the reader. Protagonists move through and act within space. However, at times narratives are silent. Children's picture books provoke a narrative in the mind of the child. If he or she cannot read, the story that has been told in the past can be grafted onto the imagery. The narrative arises from within the child's

memory and plays among the pictures on the page. Likewise, the story, told separately from the pictures, provokes mental images of the pictures within the child's imagination. The space within the plot of the narrative, the spatial references within the pictures, and the space within the mind of the child all come together - though perhaps not simultaneously.

In a similar manner, the narrative space in travel writing informs and is informed by visual and mental images of space. Photographs, maps and other cultural materials come together in the mind to form an image. Within the rubric of science, some accounts of space are more objective than other, more subjective accounts. De Certeau (1988: 119) cites a study of New Yorker's descriptions of their apartments used to illustrate the "social interactions and conventions that govern 'natural language'" by C. Linde and W. Labove. The descriptions resulted in two types: the *map* and the *tour*. Some accounts listed the rooms of the apartment in no spatial order. These were labeled *maps* because they provided a description that presented a tableau. A *tour*, on the other hand, is an active description of movements. In these accounts, the apartment dwellers described what it was like to enter the door of their apartment and move from room to room (ibid.).

The differences between *maps* and *tours* have been framed by scientific discourse. Satellite images, guide books, and street maps have come to represent a scientific and truthful *map*. Maps are created to be used in navigating a landscape and in obtaining objective information. In contrast, the *tour*, which becomes the domain of the travel narrative, is subjective and often anecdotal. Readers of travel texts about Madagascar have engaged both maps (and other images of space) and travel writing in creating an image of the island. They have employed travel texts in the creation of mental maps of the landscape and people, and have recalled these texts in their interpretation of maps, photographs, and other cultural materials. Travel texts create models for future "readings" of landscape.

### Travel and the landscape in Madagascar

"A naturalist's paradise, Madagascar lies only 250 miles off the coast of Africa in the Indian Ocean - but is a world apart. Evolving in isolation, Madagascar's plant and wildlife is a living laboratory for naturalists and biologists - an island sanctuary for mammal, bird, and flora species found nowhere else on earth! (In many ways, Madagascar is the Indian Ocean counterpart of the Galapagos Islands!) We'll see several varieties of lemur - unique primates - and an abundance of other birds and wildlife. Our visit here will also focus on the fascinating Malagasy culture, which centers around ancestor worship.

In a fascinating land which few travelers visit, our itinerary combines the best wildlife reserves, fantastic beaches and coastal scenery, rugged highlands, spiny forest, and the traditional tribal peoples of the south" (1994: 67).

-Scott Senauke

Travel books and brochures have a profound effect on perceptions of place. Upon receiving a catalogue from Wilderness Travel which included the 15-day wildlife adventure described above, I began to reflect on the way in which Madagascar has come to be understood and represented in the Western world. Madagascar has been the subject of a corpus of travel tales dating from the distant past to the present. Marco Polo (1298) heard rumors of the mysterious land as he crossed Arabia. He was told of "the biggest and best [island] in the whole world" by Islamic traders (Shoumatoff 1988: 51). Polo is often credited with naming the island as he supposedly confused the island with other Arabic descriptions of Mogadishu and bestowed it with its name, Madagascar. According to Polo, the island was inhabited by all of the animals of the African mainland, including the *Roc* of Persian and Arabic legend. The *Roc* [figure 1] was a half-bird, half-lion, "which pounced on elephants, flew up with them to great height, let them go, and then fed on the splattered carcasses" (ibid.).

Currently, Dannon's commercial for yogurt includes a reference to the exotic and distant location from which the company obtains its vanilla. An old map of Madagascar is flashed on the television screen with a description of their travel to this far away place to obtain the highest quality vanilla. Similarly, a









































































