

## THE MALAGASY

THE ethnology of the aborigines of Madagascar has never been satisfactorily worked out. Whether all the native tribes have sprung from a common origin, or are a mixed race, are still moot points. Judging from their physical characteristics, the latter conclusion is irresistible; while, on the other hand, the remarkable identity of their dialects proves that, if they have not sprung from a common stock, the progress of assimilation dates from very remote times. The Hovas, the ruling race of Madagascar, who have established their sway over nearly the whole island, are distinguished by their light olive complexion, intellectual features, and well-made figures, from the other native races. Their ethnology is undoubtedly Mongol, and there are so many points of similarity between them and the Malays of Polynesia, that, with the cumulative evidence afforded by language, intercourse in very early times, or, in the alternative, a common parentage for these two distant peoples is the necessary inference. The tribes of the West Coast, on the other hand, exhibit strong negro affinities in their ebony colour, thick lips, and woolly hair. Some of the inhabitants, again, lay claim to an Arabian origin, and others, on the east coast, boast French or Indian descent. These facts suffice to indicate some of the initial difficulties with which ethnology has to deal in the Malagasy. Philologists, on the other hand, have a much easier task. Malagasy is undoubtedly closely akin to Malay. The frequent occurrence of Caffre idioms is admitted; but this is easily explained, since, from very early times, the Malagasy were in the habit of periodically making predatory raids upon the inhabitants of the Comoro Islands, and of the African coast, and of carrying off some of them into slavery. The virtual identity of the language spoken in all parts of the island is, indeed, not a little remarkable. Differences of dialect exist, but these are chiefly in accentuation and pronunciation, and the inhabitants of all the different districts can readily understand one another.

A Malay origin for the Malagasy is principally supported by philological evidence. Thus the name Madagascar may be, etymologically, Malagascar—and a Malay word. It is, however, admitted that it is quite impossible to fix the date of the hypothetical settlement of the Malays here, and the distance between Malacca and Madagascar suggests that the two races might have had a common parentage in prehistoric times. It is, of course, possible that the Malagasy derive their Mongol strain from early navigators. The Malagasy of the present day are naturally industrious and intelligent. They possess a half-civilisation of their own, and are strongly affectionate in their natural relations. They are, physically, a fine people, robust, and active, and are distinguished by well-shaped heads, indicating a high intellectual and moral development. Thus, the eye is clear and bright, the forehead full, the back of the head almost flat, and the nose small and often a pure aquiline.

Historically, the Hovas are the representative race. They have not only assumed sovereignty over, practically, the whole island, but have made it important enough to excite the cupidity of foreigners. Down to 1850 religious persecutions were of frequent occurrence. Under Radama, the Peter the Great of Malagasy history, Christianity was taught in the island, but since then, until the present reign, it has been periodically closed to missionary effort, and made the scene of the wholesale martyrdom of Christian converts. The Hovas are still peculiarly attached to ancient usages. Polygamy is practised among them, but only those who are well-to-do can afford to keep more than one wife, and no one, except royalty, more than twelve. The native religion seems to acknowledge a good and evil principle, but its chief objects of worship are idols, and the idolatrous priests have long terrorised over the people, although, happily, there is reason to believe that the darkness of Paganism will soon cease to exist now that the Bible can be openly sold and distributed. One of the most curious of the old native customs was the ordeal of the tanguin, or tanghin. This was, originally, almost the only form of trial of criminals, and of those who offended the priests, and who were accordingly charged with the capital offence of sorcery. The prisoner was generally made to swallow three bits of the skin of a fowl, and then drink a broth containing the tanghin, a poisonous nut which acts, in small doses, as an emetic. If he threw up the bits of skin he was acquitted; otherwise he was condemned and executed. The mode of execution was usually precipitation over a lofty cliff.

Madagascar was long closed to civilisation and colonisation. The dread of a foreign yoke, which has for so long a time been characteristic of the Hovas, was encouraged by the idolatrous priests; and, although the example of the native Christian martyrs was never wholly effaced by the teachings of Paganism, the Christians were long regarded as revolutionary subjects who would not be averse to the destruction of the native dynasty. The present claims of France are not only politically indefensible, but greatly to be regretted, since they are likely to retard the progress of civilisation, and to rouse once more that suspicion of foreign influence which has so often proved a powerful weapon in the hands of the adherents and teachers of the native faith, who are still powerful for evil.

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