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## Crocodiles: From Katsina to Madagascar

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## December 2011 Newsletter

### Crocodiles: From Katsina to Madagascar

By Wendy Wilson Fall

#### Introduction

Crocodiles? They seem to have followed me, across continents, through time, from the desert to cities and to the island of Madagascar and back.

I had a crocodile etched into my arm as a tattoo. As a graduate student and the only (to my knowledge) American student at Ahamdu Bello University in Zaria, in northern Nigeria I'd been studying local tattoos. I was a student of the sublime and graceful culture of the Fulani nomads of that area. Every morning, an extension agent from the Agricultural department would pick me up at Amina Hall girls' dormitory and take me out of the (then) small town of Zaria to a Fulani encampment about ten miles from the city limit. Although I had begun in Art History, focusing on creating a sort of visual encyclopedia of the Fulani's different tattoos, I was actually sliding over to anthropology without realizing it. Sensing that recording the form and name of tattoos was not enough, I had managed to get a double major approved, and so was also registered in the Department of Sociology. I wanted to know who wore what, where and why – and at that time, it was the sociologists at A.B.U who would help me expand my inquiry in those directions. In the Fine Arts department, I continued my drawings and etchings on zinc sheets for prints of Fulani women and men with their tattoos.

The tattoos are blue. There are special ones for the face, for the back, for legs (calves), even the neck. Although some of the more elaborate ones are now gone out of fashion, village girls still do get them, in northern Nigeria and across the border in south-central Niger. I was doing my major research with Fulani people of the Katsina clans, the Ba'en specifically, and their favorite symbol was the crocodile. The crocodile was an important symbol for the region of Katsina, an ancient sign referring back to a time when they were plentiful in the rivers that web the north, tributaries of the great Niger River. In fact, the name of the city of Kaduna, then the regional capital, means crocodiles, and refers to the large population of crocodiles that inhabited the rivers in that area.

There came a moment in the research when I felt it would be important to have photos taken of the tattoo process. I couldn't seem to catch up with anyone who was having one done, though. I was impressed with the simple geometric beauty of these blue tattoos, which I felt looked fine on brown skin. Being brown skinned myself, I decided that I would engage this aesthetic on a more personal level and get one myself. This would allow me to know what it felt like, and to gain a distinctive beauty mark that would be a meaningful personal symbol to me. It would solve the problem of having tattooing photographed. I was young and idealistic as young people are. It seemed fitting to fix something on my own body that could not easily be removed that symbolized, for me, the incredible time I had spent with the Katsina Fulani and their gracious Hausa neighbors.

I asked my Fulani hosts to take me to where they got their tattoos done. The Hausa *mai zane* who was their tattoo technician looked me over and proceeded to design a crocodile on my extended right arm. I was flattered that everyone concerned felt that I could have this important symbol on my arm, physically and visually affiliating me with my hosts, as it were, for ever. It was, and still is, a lovely crocodile. Many people admire it, and in this time of extensive and varied tattooing, I am suddenly in the vanguard for something I did more than 20 years ago. When I got that tattoo on my arm, I was 23 years old.

### **Crocodiles East and West**

At the time I got my tattoo in Katsina, I didn't know that crocodiles were also an important symbol in Madagascar. I did know about Madagascar, though. When I was about 12 years old, my mother showed me a letter her father had typed out and distributed to herself and her siblings. I remember clearly the wrinkled tissue paper quality of the carbon copy, and the fuzzy look of the letters. This was way before computers, and I thought my grandfather quite modern to have typed his letter out. It was a letter to the family about their common ancestor, Ali Mahomet of Madagascar. A few years later, I accompanied my parents to an Independence celebration at the Embassy of Madagascar. My parents knew the Ambassador, and he clasped my mother's hand (I was both delighted and embarrassed, if I remember correctly) telling several people nearby: "Her ancestors are from Madagascar!"

Somehow, I learned to simultaneously be very proud and fairly reticent about the Malagasy side of my family's beginnings. I have since been able to see that this is a pretty typical response of immigrant descendents. But my immigrant was so early, and of such an improbable origin compared to what I knew of others in my African American community, that I kept it to myself. We were very proud of Mahomet, remembered as a prince who came to the

U.S. during slavery but who managed to install himself, still free, in Frederick, Maryland. So I learned to consider Mahomet as very real and very private...this ancestral story was for family consumption. When I first heard the story, crocodiles were not a part of it. They entered the picture some 10 years after I my stay in Nigeria, and about two years after my return from Nigeria's northern neighbor, Niger. My cousin Jeremiah associated crocodiles with our family in Madagascar. In an effort to corroborate or confirm some of my cousin's stories, I began meeting with the Cultural Attache of the Embassy of Madagascar - Suzanne Tsiangalara. As it happens, she herself was from northern Madagascar, and "unpacked" my cousin Jeremiah Mahammitt's stories about crocodiles. She was able to decode much of what I had recorded but was unable to fit together, including phrases in the particular Malagasy of the northwest, which is often mixed with Swahili.

My cousin Jeremiah and his branch of the family had been lost to us for at least a generation. Although my grandfather's letter explicitly referred to his visits to Frederick to see his cousins, it didn't say who they were or where they lived. When my grandfather died, the secret of where our lost cousins were went with him. Meanwhile, my mother's sister Sheila had become engrossed in genealogical research about the family and Mahomet's descendents, particularly his daughter Margaret who was my mother and aunt's great-grandmother.

On trips home from West Africa, I would find my aunt poring over voluminous notes which she had compiled during visits to the National Archives and the Library of Congress. It was fascinating to watch, and I thought that maybe my Aunt Sheila was becoming a little bit obsessed. But genealogical research is like that. When I moved back to the U.S. (with my crocodile tattoo) I quickly became my aunt's accomplice and before long was bit by the genealogy bug.

One day I visited my aunt's house in Shepard Park, a section of Washington, D.C. and found her in a familiar pose with papers spread all over the dining room table. After some initial chatting, she declared that we would look in the phone book for our Frederick relatives. For some reason my family has remained adamant about the way we spell the name Mahomet. Folks whose name Mahomet was spelled differently, for example with a "u" after the M, or which ended in "ed" instead of "et" or "itt" were considered out of the question and out of the running as possible relatives. As my cousin Jeremiah later remarked, once we found him, "we aren't related to any of those converts." Nevermind that my family was no longer Muslim! So, we looked for Mahomets with a "t" or "tt."

After a few false starts, we found the Mahomets with a "t" in the phone book, and we called them. Just like us, they were suspicious and skeptical at first, since not all Mahomets were

ours. After sharing a litany of family names, branches, and places, we agreed that we were probably relatives and should meet. A few weeks later, my Aunt Sheila, her brother Monty, and myself found ourselves at a big family picnic in Frederick. Sure enough, Jeremiah's sisters looked quite a bit like other aunts we knew in our branch of the family. The plot thickened.

I started visiting my cousin Jeremiah at his home in Baltimore. Fresh from the field (this time from Niger) I was still in the fieldwork mode. Little did I realize how much this would impact my participation in the ongoing Mahomet saga. I decided to take notes, and chat with my cousin, just as I had recently done with the Katsina Fulani. I didn't worry about whether everything he said was true, or how such and such a detail could have happened; I just wrote everything down, listened, and asked more questions. Eventually Jeremiah remembered words from his childhood, and many details that no one had bothered to ask him about for years. One of these was that his grandfather had described our ancestral home in Madagascar as a place with "lots of crocodiles."

In spite of the letter from my grandfather and stories from other relatives, I was amazed at what Jeremiah told me and started wondering if he perhaps he wasn't making things up. Maybe he had seen a National Geographic program?? Maybe he just wanted to pull my leg, his smarty-pants little Washington, D.C. anthropologist cousin's leg! What made these suspicions unlikely was that Jeremiah grew up in rural Maryland in the 1930s. He didn't make it much past junior high school level. Even fabrications require some basic information in order to make sense. Yet, my cousin was unfamiliar with maps of Africa and even maps of Madagascar. What he recounted he had learned through family oral traditions. For him (and his sisters and nieces in Frederick I was later to learn) Madagascar was "the old country."

The story of Mahomet's departure from Madagascar was passed down orally from generation to generation. T. M. Gregory (my grandfather), learned it from his maternal grandmother (Margaret) who was Mahomet's daughter. Her daughter, later called "Ma Fannie," was Gregory's mother. He recalled that his ancestor had arrived free to settle in Frederick County in a community known as "Jerusalem," situated in the western hills of Frederick, Maryland. We have since found census records and commercial records of Jeremiah Mahomet, his daughter Margaret, and numerous other cousins in the region, including Hagerstown, Frederick and Baltimore. On a field trip in the late 1980s my Aunt Sheila and I found the area which we supposed to be Jerusalem, "in the hills of Frederick," of which my grandfather had written. At that time, no African Americans were resident in the area, nor was there anyone who remembered or recognized the story of Mahomet and his family. This is not so surprising given

the shifts in demographics over the years.<sup>1</sup> What has been more frustrating is finding numerous Mahomets, and Mahammitts, in Baltimore and Frederick in the 19th century and beginning 20th century, and less than half that number by the 1990s. We have found far fewer descendents. Where have they all gone??

My grandfather (T. M. Gregory) remembered the name as Ali Mahomet. In his version, Mahomet was a prince in Madagascar who was sent on an educational tour by his father. He spent roughly a year in France and then settled in Baltimore and Frederick. Early on he became friendly with Roger B. Taney, and bought his wife, a free mulatto living in the Taney household, for \$1,000. We assume that she must have been under bond, not an unusual situation for free coloreds. Gregory's version also remembers this wife, Jane, as a colored relative of Taney's. Mahomet's father, after receiving correspondence regarding this marriage, cautioned his son that such a union would not be "appropriate" for him.<sup>2</sup>

Gregory's version of the story differs somewhat from that of his cousin, Jeremiah Mahammitt of Frederick and Baltimore, descended from Mahomet's son. In his story, Mahomet, a wealthy merchant or prince, was forced to leave the island due to a violent conflict. He stayed for sometime under a year in France, and realized that he could not return home. On such refugee ships, he said, there was often conflict, as some people were killed for being "traitors." In those days, he was told, "a lot of Blacks and Indians were helping to enslave and kill other Blacks and Indians" (meaning Indians of India). He also said "You had to have slaves, or be a slave, things were very hard and dangerous in those days." According to Jeremiah, the family owned large boats which he called "wind boats" and sailed across a body of water to a place called Mexicu. I later realized that we were talking about the Mozambique Channel, which was indeed a major thruway for ships leaving the northwest coast of Madagascar for east Africa and the Cape of Good Hope. Later, Dutch merchant ships would carry slaves from Mozambique and Madagascar as well to install them at the Cape. To this day, there are neighborhoods in Cape Town remembered as being originally Malagasy settlements.

There is probably truth to both versions. It might be that the study tour version is a detail in the larger picture: things were bad at home, better to send the youth away until they got better! One side remembers a more glorified departure, focusing on the trip for exposure to European ways – the other side, the male descendent's side, remembers the tragedy of the departure and the conflicts along the way.

Madagascar was not unknown in Baltimore. Mahomet arrived to Maryland about fifty years after the noted Polish Count Beniowsky fascinated the salons of Baltimore with his tales of adventure on The Red Island, St. Laurent, or “la grande Isle,” as Madagascar was also known. The Baltimore papers of the era, circa 1820, are filled with frequent references of sales of objects of Indian Ocean provenance, in particular tortoise shell, copal, and hides.

A person named “Po Mahomet” is listed as a passenger on a ship arriving from Sumatra to Baltimore in 1822. We do not know for sure if this is the same person as the Frederick resident we discuss here. However, Sumatra (Indonesia) was a logical departure point for Dutch and French ships going through the Indian Ocean routes to South Africa. The first mention of Jeremiah Mahomet is the record of his residence in Baltimore, in 1828. Po Mahomet does not appear again in the records. We have yet to find documented evidence of Po Mahomet being the same person who appears in 1828 as Jeremiah, but this seems a likely possibility.

In the northwest of Madagascar many free (Sakalave)<sup>3</sup> families took on Arab names, a result of intermarriage with the Antalaotra and Arab traders from Muscat. The traditions, ceremonies and vocabulary which Jeremiah remembered point to a Sakalave heritage. In interviews of 1987, the first words he remembered when we started the interviews were *kanaka loa*, meaning first son. These words must have had an important place in the oral histories which he listened to. Jeremiah’ father, according to him, had “old time truck” and learned to “look at pictures.” He would read “sticks” which he brought with him from the woods near their home in Frederick. He described the boats of his homeland, which he called “windboats,” and talked of ancestor burial grounds. Although he remembered the name for uncle as “Thit,” research shows that this is a male name, and so was probably the name of an uncle, the name being, in Malagasy, “Thiteo.”

Around 63 years of age at the time of the interviews (1989-1991), he related that his great-great grandfather left Madagascar on an Indian ship with a French name. This ship, he claimed, was built by Indians, but they gave the ship a French name so “they” would think that it was a French ship in order for it not to be destroyed. The ship had to sail at night to keep from being discovered. The ship’s occupants, he reiterated several times, had no rights (in Madagascar, after the trouble). He explained that his grandfather said the family “couldn’t go back” for some reason, and that “the family had taken a great loss; that they had lost everything by leaving home; that they were forced out.” He also seemed to have inherited the sense of fear,

hurt and particularly loss, and communicated this in interviews on the experience of leaving Madagascar.

Oral tradition also included recollections that they “once owned boats that could carry as many as 100 heads of cattle per boat between their home and Mozambique.” Of a relative who returned in the early-1900s, it is related that he was “very discouraged” by what he found there. According to him, this uncle stated that “everything had changed, and everything had been lost.”

As a small boy, Jeremiah would often sit around and listen to the old people talking. He also remembered that sometimes there were visits of people from the “old country,” and that he would sit on the sidelines while they chatted and drank tea. He said that his grandfather was able to show him what boats in the old country looked like, as well as what their “temples” looked like by drawing pictures for young Jeremiah to see. Among the family there were also certain “power” days which should be set aside for communing with the spirits, which he called “temple driving.”

He remembered that his grandfather would say to him “*Kason na nyolo.*” (“Why do you be so bad?") Later that year (1987) I found out, by talking with Suzanne at the Embassy (who was from *Nosy Be*) that this phrase meant “angry, or spoiled child” in the Malagasy dialects of northern and northwestern Madagascar.

Jeremiah’s narratives spurred my aunt and myself on to more archival research and research in other historical sources such as newspapers, census records, and commercial records. This proved fruitful, for we found that in 1829, Mahomet shows up in local Frederick records in reference to land and horse purchases which he made, or land sales. One newspaper article of the time refers to Mahomet’s wife (in 1829) as Selena. In the 1870 Maryland census, there is a Serena Mahammitt, aged 50 years, listed as mulatto, in Frederick., and an Emma Mahammitt, who is 35 years old, and a John T. Mahammitt, who is age 7. In 1865 records, there is a Jerry H. Mahammitt in Frederick, MD., living with Mary, Beatrice, and Sarah. In 1870, there are also Clara J. Mahammitt, age 3, and Cora V. Mahammitt, age 2, as well as Nani Mahammitt, age 6 months. Some are listed as mulatto, and some as black. This is probably a reflection of their appearance to the census taker, rather than a clear description of their racial background – as was common in those days. In summary, it appears Mahomet had five children: Jeremiah, Isaiah, Josiah, Margaret and Emma. In the 1850s, they appear to maintain among them three households.



My research for better understanding of the historical context also led me to an amazing discovery: one hundred years before Mahomet arrived as a free immigrant from Madagascar, more than 1,300 slaves had arrived in Virginia from Madagascar on British ships. They entered through the York and Rappahanock rivers, and a good amount of documentation exists thanks to conflicts at the time relative to British foreign and commercial policy regarding American colonies, pirates, and the Indian Ocean. In the 1600s as well, slaves arrived from Madagascar to ports in New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts. I have thus come to appreciate that the story of Mahomet is part of a bigger story that describes the relationship of the U.S. A. to the Indian Ocean and the China Sea Trade. It is also the story of networks of African American families, particularly in the case of Virginia who can count back 7 or more generations to ancestors from Madagascar. According to my research, some descendants of these earlier Virginia arrivals later married free immigrants from Madagascar who arrived in the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s, most of them connected with American missionaries. Jeremiah's story, then, can in some ways be taken as an example of how these 19th century Indian Ocean immigrants managed in America way back then.

For example, an interesting aspect of the Frederick, Maryland story is the diverging fortunes of Mahomet's offspring. Margaret left the area sometime during the Civil War, and went into business. She managed to put her daughter through school and eventually into university, where she met James Monroe Gregory. Margaret's daughter Fanny joined the milieu of children of free coloreds who would later be known as DuBois' "talented tenth." She met her husband at Howard University while studying there. This side of the family became involved in education. Fanny's husband James Monroe was Superintendent of Public Schools in Washington, D.C. during reconstruction.<sup>4</sup> He met Frederick Douglas during a visit to his father in New Bedford, Massachusetts.<sup>5</sup> When he was grown he would write and publish the first biography of Douglas. His son, T.M. Gregory, became a writer for the CRISIS Magazine of the NAACP, a principal of Atlantic City High School, and an activist in the New Negro Theater Movement. Gregory attended Harvard and graduated in 1910, and began the Drama Department at Howard University in Washington, D.C. before moving to New Jersey.

### **Early (Black) Transnational and Migration Stories in the U.S.?**

There are a few self-published books from Virginia families which describe similar networking into the black middle class. One such book, written about the Madden family, specifically refers to their Malagasy roots as a point of pride and distinction.

Which leads us to ask, how generalized was knowledge about Madagascar and Malagasy origins among African Americans in the 19th century? Particularly in the mid-atlantic coastal regions, where slavery and segregation limited the movement of blacks and where many families had kin networks to mariners in one direction and teachers in black institutions in the other direction. We don't know, for example, whether Frederick Douglas and James Monroe Gregory knew of or talked about slaves or immigrants from Madagascar, but it's possible. One reason for this is Douglas' experience in the port and on the wharfs of Baltimore, and later, his time in Nantucket and New Bedford. Many of the Madagascar stories include stories of Malagasy sailors, and slaves from there were imported into Massachusetts in the 17th century. During Douglas' time the descendents of the slaves of Virginia were only third generation. The descendents of the slaves of New Jersey, New York, and parts of New England would have been third and fourth generation. The presence of a large mariner population among African Americans, including a large Cape Verdean population in the northeast, offers interesting possibilities to pursue along this line. We do know that African Americans already had an international perspective, that Douglas was named Ambassador to Haiti, and that later, an African American named Waller was named Ambassador to Madagascar in the 1880s.

Margaret Mahomet, born in Frederick, left just before the Civil War. Her business ventures included a laundry employing several women in Baltimore, and, during the Civil War, a health spa in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Her business in Williamsport was well-enough known to have received a write up in the Williamsport Gazette. These were rare achievements for African Americans in the 1860s. She is remembered by her family as an autocratic personality.

Fannie Emma Whiting is the only known child of Margaret.<sup>6</sup> Josiah and Isaiah's children would have been the contemporaries of Fanny. However, Fanny grew up away from Frederick in Washington and Baltimore. While she entered into the intellectual life, the family in Frederick continued to hold on to tradition. In Frederick, the history of the family and the traditions were retained in greater detail. There they had their own world and were known in their community. During the 19th century, John T. Mahammitt built both a school and a church for the family in Frederick. The exact site of the school is not yet precisely identified, but the family considers it the pre-cursor to the Wayman AME Church in Poolesville. His father, also named Jeremiah Mahammit, is buried in the cemetery there.

Serina Mahammitt is listed in the Baltimore City Death Index as having died on the 7th of July, 1879. In the 1881 Baltimore City Directory, there are: Edward L. Mahammitt, living at 27

Jordan Alley, Jeremiah Mahammitt, Senior, living at 38 St. Mary, Mary E. Mahammitt at Madison Avenue and Wilson; and Thomas Mahammitt, also living at 38 St. Mary. Thomas later moved to Lincoln, Nebraska. These were probably children of Margaret's siblings. We have yet to find birth certificates or death certificates. This is not an uncommon problem for research of African American families from that era.

In the next century, circa 1931-1939, John Mahammit, worked as a laborer in Frederick and lived at 626 Klineharts Alley (from Polks 1931-39). Joshua Mahammit, married to Mabel, worked for Charles G. Kline, and also lived on Klineharts. Charles G. Kline ran an Antique store, located at 633 North Market Street according to Polks Commerical records of Frederick (1931-32). Earlier, from the same source, Joshua is shown working at Kline & Brice, and is at 520 North Bentz, sometime during the period 1928 -1929. The family was eventually spread out in Frederick, Washington, and Montgomery counties in Maryland.

We can see that Margaret's departure from Frederick led her family to a different lifestyle than that of her siblings' children. Although her grandchild, T. M. Gregory, did visit once in his youth and was aware of the family in Frederick, this separation meant that he would not learn the extent of the family cultural heritage as his cousins would in Frederick.

### **Madagascar, Flags and Crocodiles in Frederick, Maryland**

The story of the first American generation of the Mahomet family, of their former life in Madagascar, and how they expressed and protected Malagasy identity was well known by Jeremiah Mahammitt of Baltimore. In 1987 he remembered many words in Malagasy. The vocabulary, the pronunciation and the places described have been traced to the late 18th century – early 19th century. They are typical of the Majunga -- Maravoy area of north western Madagascar. Other stories of dances, music, living conditions and ceremonies helped to confirm this geographic area of origin. Locations were also identified through details remembered such as that “the place where the family was from was known for the large number of crocodiles nearby.” The literal translation of Maravoy means “lots of crocodiles,” although crocodiles are prevalent throughout the northwest region of Madagascar, once famous for the Boina Bay and the many small bays, inlets and islands which attracted American sailors of the China Sea Trade two centuries ago.

Oral histories on family life in the 1920s to 1930s were collected in 2000 and 2001 from relatives and neighbors of the Mahammitts.<sup>7</sup> Many of the stories refer to the Mahammitt

residence then on Klineharts Alley in Frederick, and neighbors have been a good source of confirmation, or elaboration of stories that were collected from Jeremiah.

One neighbor explained in an interview that her family considered the Mahammitts to be strange, and that they often had visitors from “the old country.” She described, in graphic terms, a family party that she was prohibited from attending that was held at the Mahammitt’s house next door. “My daddy wouldn’t let me go,” she said, “although they said I could come. They would put up a flag that had white and gold on it, with black markings, and lots of people would come. Some of them wore turbans.” J. Mahammitt of Baltimore (1987) also mentioned flags, and that such parties took place annually in July. He also gave examples of songs and dances from those occasions. In Sakalave culture, there is some symbolism associated with the flags and their colors, which the French researcher and author Marie Ballarin refers to as “regalia” in her recent work on royal relics in Madagascar. The very interesting aspect of this story from Frederick, Maryland is that the parties took place in July, which is the month of celebration of the royal ancestors in western and northwestern Madagascar. The turbans, or headbands, are typical wear for ceremonies there.

During these parties, it is remembered that the family sang a slow, almost dirge sounding song. A dance of family men and women took place at which time women would unbraid their hair, and men would tie colorful sashes around their waists. Men also, he said, pierced their left ears. Jeremiah’s ear was pierced this way, and he wore his hair long in braids until he reached young adulthood, which he claimed as a tradition. According to Malagasy historian Emmanuel Tehindrazanarivelo, the traditions of ear piercing and hair braiding were signs of a free man among the Sakalave during the days of slave trading. Piers Larson, an American historian who recently published a book on Madagascar, also remarks on the importance of long, braided hair there in 19th century.

Mahomet himself may be buried at Wayman. It would not have been unusual to move the remains to a family plot, at least in Malagasy terms. There are unmarked headstones in the cemetery, which according to Maryland records came into the family in the late 1860s. A sonar search would have to be carried out to know whether these are actually stone markers of older graves. However, their positioning recalls certain burial requirements of Saklave culture, according to Tehindrazanarivelo. Other family members are also buried there, and the cemetery is still in active use.

Thanks to the kind assistance of Janet Davis who is the Historic Preservation Planner for Frederick County, and who worked on a historic sites survey in 1991, I was able to learn a bit more about Wayman A.M.E. cemetery. With Ms. Davis' help I learned that this tract of land was purchased by the Trustees of the A.M.E. Church from John Cox for \$80 in 1868. Cox bought the land in 1845 from Isaac and Jacob Walker, executors of the last will and testament of John Walker, deceased. Walker purchased the land in 1817 from John Richie and Benjamin Biggs. I am now curious to know if any of the Mahomet family was renting land from any of these families before 1868. Davis suggested that though there is no documentary record of a church being there earlier, it does not exclude the possibility that there was one, that the land was used otherwise by the Mahomets, or that there may have been some connection between one of these families and the Mahomets. Why and how a free black family, or colored family, would arrange to buy land from any particular white family in Maryland at that time is worth pursuing.

Also of interest, Mahammitt also made frequent reference to what he called "farm schools." I have attempted to find out if this might not be a reference to one of the schools that the Rosenwald Foundation was funding in the first half of the last century. One of the most important questions to be answered in this research is: Which white people made up the network for Mahomet, which allowed him to settle comfortably in Maryland?

Apparently one of the major families which had investments and a political stake in the Madagascar trade was the Waters family of Massachusetts and Frederick, Maryland. The Waters family was present in Majunga (the company was Waters, West, Pingree and West) one of the most important ports of northwest Madagascar, as early as the first decades of the 19th century. Of course, a fact that is hardly known today is that the U.S. Department of State maintained a diplomatic mission at Majunga as early as 1803, which was also responsible for following trade and diplomatic dealings with the Sultan of Zanzibar. The Waters family was well known in Frederick, and no doubt some Washington, D.C. circles: two of the brothers owned a business which was situated on the old B & O canal that runs into Georgetown, Washington, D.C. today. It carried arms and machinery among other things. Another relative, George Waters, was known in Frederick as one of the city's more distinguished gentlemen and citizens with a great sense of civic duty.

In 1990, I visited Madagascar as part of a consultant team working on the country's new natural resource management plan. Taking time off after the assignment, I traveled to Majunga, and even hoped that I might get to see the town whose name meant "lots of crocodiles."

However, in addition to lacking time and financial resources, I also should have had a counterpart researcher from Madagascar who knew the terrain, could assist in screening out unnecessary informants, and help plot out critical issues for follow up. Due to these reasons and the fact that many people had heard of my arrival into town, little real fieldwork was carried out. I returned to Washington, reported back to my cousin Jeremiah in Baltimore, that I had “been there, done that,” and had actually returned alive and reasonably well.

In 1992, I moved to Senegal. Other research interests gained precedence, and I returned to studies of the Fulani, this time in Senegalese rural populations. Then two things happened. I encountered a student from the Comoros Islands during a visit to the Dakar campus of Suffolk University, and I was introduced via email to a researcher from Madagascar. In Dakar, the Comorien student, whose mother is from Madagascar, encouraged me to resume my research, and introduced her to other Comoriens who knew Comoros families descended from Malagasy immigrants of the 1820s. Motivated, I decided to go back over her notes from almost ten years earlier.

Around the same time, Bob Edgar a history professor at Howard University who specializes in southern Africa contacted my family in order to help a colleague from Madagascar. This colleague, a sort of ethno-historian, had come to the United States in order to do studies of Malagasy relations with North America. Among other subjects of inquiry, he wanted to follow up on people who were descendents of early Malagasy migrants. What ensued were several email exchanges. The material from the oral histories of Jeremiah Mahammitt was re-evaluated, which resulted in much sharper interpretations of the material from the 1980s interviews. Tehindrazanarivelo settled into his fellowship with the Library of Congress, where he pursued his historical study of the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic world.

In Senegal, I decided to re-committ to serious study of the presence of Malagasy in antebellum America. I began an email discussion list on the subject of Malagasy descent, and began searching genealogy sites on the internet where inquiries about Madagascar appeared on a regular basis. These inquiries appear in different settings; they may be under surname lists, African American geneology discussion lists, or on Africa lists.

Our Malagasy historian colleague, now residing in Canada and Majunga, collaborated with me in responding to queries on the e-list. By this time, several fascinating family stories had emerged. Just as interesting was the regular increase of list participants as word got out that such a list existed. The list had doubled over an 8 month period. Most recently, a former U.S. Ambassador to Madagascar has indicated a need for such a list, as people regularly posted queries to her while she was in office in Madagascar. Now that she is back in the States and has a

bit of time, she hopes to pursue this topic, which seems to continue to pick up interest and people as time goes on. Meanwhile, I have completed a book manuscript on the many families I have come in contact with over the years who share similar stories, and it's been submitted to an academic press.

Tehindrazanarivelo, the historian working at the Library of Congress and a Pastor, was willing to assist in bringing people together so that they could share their family histories in person. The of us scholars began planning a meeting that would bring together Americans of Malagasy descent, a few scholars on the subject who were in the area, Malagasy nationals living in the metropolitan Washington area, and some representatives of the Embassy of Madagascar. He called on his colleagues at the Library of Congress for support and assistance in setting up the one day gathering. The Library of Congress Africa division graciously offered to host the meeting. The Embassy offered to host a reception that evening for the participants.

I present this story in the interest of sharing a project that started out as not more than a rather suspect family story and has blossomed into a serious research topic that involves important events and people from America's 19th and 18th century past. The project became at the same time more personal and more public than I ever anticipated. This research has been ongoing for the last one year, and has led to a much bigger field of data and more theoretical issues than were anticipated when I first conceptualized the project. Much of this is due to the data itself. What we thought would be a small pool of data has proved to be much larger. I started out with some ten American families which claimed Malagasy descent (including my own), and the arrival of the ancestors of these families covered a wide range: from the 1720s to the 1870s. There were several notable factors which impacted on the scope of the study. One was the (surprisingly) verifiable nature of much of the incoming data from my two case studies: the Mahomets and a family in Virginia. The other was the self-selection of subjects that followed when our interests were posted on the internet. Once it became clear that we were dealing with a much larger and more complex population than anticipated, it encouraged more focussed and deeper research. It became clear that what I was faced with was a qualitative difference in data not because most of the information never existed before, but because of the way we had framed our questions and research problems.

The project benefited from collaborative research between two researchers: an African American who is a social anthropologist (myself), and a Malagasy national, Tehindrazanarivelo, who is a historian, pastor, and ethnologist. It also benefited from the earlier research work of my aunt Sheila Thomas, who, it is worth noting, had plenty of journalistic and communications

experience that she brought to the table. Her instincts and curiosity are what got the ball rolling in the first place.

The meeting we organized on September 1, 2001 at the Library of Congress Africa Division conference room proved to be a truly historical encounter. Approximately 30 people attended, about half of whom were from the email discussion list (representing about a third of those on the list). People traveled from as far away as St. Petersburg, Florida and Boston, Massachusetts. Descendants of Malagasy slaves as well as free immigrants were represented in the group. The Embassy of Madagascar, as well as the Malagasy Cultural Alliance, were also represented.

The meeting was conducted informally. Library staff welcomed the group and supplied various publications for perusal. The morning session was largely taken up with a short history of how the project had developed and how the organizers hoped the project would evolve. They emphasized the fact that the project was devoted to discovery for all participants, and that no information would be disclosed in any publication without their approval. Participants introduced themselves and shared a short version of their family oral histories.

People descended from slave ancestors pressed the group for more information on how to begin tracking down the ancestor's arrival, and to track forward in time from that point to current generations. A representative from the African American Genealogy Association was present and shared some tips on this sort of research. A very lively discussion ensued regarding the nature of slavery, and the concept of slaves in the Malagasy cultural universe. Malagasy nationals explained the concept of *very* (being a slave, being lost; forgotten). A poignant exchange took place as people struggled with the concept of a Malagasy free person as slave. What made a slave? At what point was a captive a slave? For whom did the identity change? Did the captive perceive herself as slave or captive? Did captivity equal slavery?

Intense discussion also surrounded questions of how the departure of captives was perceived in Malagasy communities in Madagascar during the slavery period. Did people not search for lost relatives? Was there no conscious acknowledgement of lost ancestors? Was there a generalized amnesia regarding slavery in Madagascar?

According to Jeremiah's narrative, in the third generation someone in the family returned to Madagascar, but was disappointed. He said things had changed too much for him to go back.

Tehindrazanarivelo was able to combine and apply his experience as historian and as a community pastor. He chose the example of the national popularity of two songs which indirectly referred to the losses incurred in slavery and the importance of Malagasy solidarity in times of tragedy and crisis. This was definitely the most difficult and sensitive portion of the



encounter. If no accusations or rejections occurred, it can be traced to the willingness and availability (as in the sense of the French term “*disponibilite*”) of a Malagasy national to answer and engage this subject. It was also due to the *contrapunto* fact which everyone there knew: that among all the ancestors from Africa, it was these ancestors from Madagascar who had survived in family memories, and that among African Americans, somehow, those with ancestors from Madagascar retained enough to sit down and talk about where they were from. This obvious reality strengthened the sense of connectedness of all participants. It can be said that all were somewhat humbled by the strength of this culture which emphasizes the ancestors. Was it not this ancestral “debt,” the duty to remember, that had brought us together?

### **Lessons Learned?**

Newly arrived from Niger where I’d been studying Fulbe social organization, I saw with “fresh” eyes something that otherwise may have escaped me. When I attended a family reunion in Frederick, not only was I a relative outsider to the community (in spite of kinship ties), I was also in a state of relative “cultural distance” from African Americans in general by virtue of having been abroad for a few years. This allowed me to transfer a certain “ethnographic comportment” and “ethnographic viewpoint” in which she had been immersed for more than a year while abroad. So striking was the seating and social comportment at the reunion that I initially decided that I was probably imagining things, or projecting from Niger to Frederick.<sup>8</sup>

For an ethnologist and historian from Madagascar, it may have been equally unsettling to encounter a family issued from an early 19th century émigré who descended from the same region and milieu as some of his own ancestors. There was, therefore, an element of “us-ness” in the entire endeavor. If anything, it made the researchers *supra*-aware of the sensitivity of their subject. There were historical implications that were unavoidably present for the people participating in the Library of Congress discussions, and for the researchers themselves. Who were one’s people in relation to the others’ ancestors? Did they know each other? Were they related in any way, by blood or custom? For those of slave ancestry for example, *who sold who* in a literal sense, was a question which emerged although couched in less inflammatory terms. The issue of what ethnic groups or cultural groups arrived in which migratory waves, was as important, though, as people compared family stories and habits. Confronting the reality that many of those who were free may have been of families who exported slaves, or at least had slaves in Madagascar, was important, but so was the amazing fact that we were there talking about this and other topics, at all.

We were talking about a diaspora created over the last 150 to 200 years. And another interesting factor: this older diaspora encountered people who are part of a new diaspora, people who have arrived to the U.S. in the last fifty years. What do these two groups have to say to each other, if anything? What is their *meaning* to each other? The story itself is transnational: it follows the trade routes which carried British subjects, from Britain and from the Americas, far away to the western Indian Ocean. Oral histories of early immigrants consistently make reference to American captains and merchant friends who helped them settle in America. There is the question of the Waters family and their role in establishing networks from Majunga in the mid-nineteenth century. And, there are the descendents of slaves who arrived to Virginia find their surnames echoed all along the Tidewater area where the buyers of those slaves lived. Indeed, many of these names appear often enough in the British Foreign Ministry records in the tangled web of Indian Ocean commerce and foreign policy of the period.

On a more personal and certainly on an individual level, I am fascinated at the turn of events and the ironic twists which led me in this research. From fieldwork studies of Fulani tattoos of crocodiles, I learned how to look for the crocodiles in my own backyard.

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1 During the same field work period we visited Wolfstown and came across a local genealogist who had Maryland state census volumes. In her collection we saw the record of the marriage of Margaret Mahomet to Isaac Whiting. As Margaret was married before to someone named Stephen Hagan (she appears briefly in his household in 1850 census), we were also interested to find an earlier entry of a person named Ammishaddy Hagan, also in Frederick, who was married there in the late 1700s. This name resembles names in the western Indian Ocean, and may indicate an earlier immigrant from the region, perhaps Gudjerati, i.e. (Amar Shehadi, Omar Shadi).

2 The name Jeremiah Mahomet, which is found in the census of Frederick many times in various generations, may originate from a Malagasy word. It may be a distortion of the Malagasy title “Andrian” which is used in much the same way as “Sir” was used in England for peers. The name may have been Andriamaya, Andriamara, Andriamayi, or Andriamaha. His name may have been, for example, Andriamara Ali Mahomet.

3 Sakalave, or Saklava, an ethnic group in northwestern and southwestern Madagascar, creators of the Menabe and Boina kingdoms, 17th through 19th centuries

4 He was from Lynchburg, Virginia, the son of Maria Gladman Lewis and William Lewis, both free coloreds, of Lynchburg, VA, born around 1848. His father died when he was about two years old. His mother Maria re-married a few years later, and he and his older brother Claiborne were adopted by their stepfather, Henry Gregory, also a free colored. Gregory moved when they boys were still in grade school to New Bedford, Massachusetts. In New Bedford he became friends with Fredrick Douglass.

5 T. M. Gregory became a civil activist, appearing at a black men's conference on race issues in Cincinnati in 1883 in Douglas' company.

6 According to census records, Margaret was 24 in 1850. That year's census also shows us another household in Hagerstown, of Josiah Mahammitt, 24; his wife Mary, who had 2 daughters, and Jerry

Mahammitt, who was 17 at the time. There is also Isiah Mahomet listed in the 1851 marriage records for Hagerstown, who marries a Margaret Cain in Washington County, MD. Also in the Frederick census of 1850, there is a Jerry Mahomet of 50 years of age, with a wife, Sarah, who is 48 years old. This Sarah is the same person as “Serena” who is listed below. Is she Jane? We don’t know. “Jerry Mahomet” is probably the same Mahomet who emigrated from Baltimore.

7 With the assistance of Diane Mahammitt of Frederick from an elderly family friend, Rosie Scott Mathews. She and Nettie Mahammitt, her contemporary, describe something of the home life of the family in Frederick.

8 Wilson-Fall, field notes, 1985.

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