LANGUAGE & CULTURE

The Malagasy language is one of the two official languages of Madagascar—Malagasy and French. Unlike the other languages spoken in the African region, it is closer to Malayo-Polynesian family rather than to African language families. The Malagasy language shares some common words and meanings with several Indonesian languages. For example, *vahiny* means "a stranger" in Malagasy, while *vahini* means "a girl" in Tahitian Polynesian. One of the explanations for this affinity is that Malayo-Indonesian males came first to the island, and females joined the settlement later as guests or strangers.

Despite a wide variety of regional dialects, Malagasy is considered one language because the dialects are mutually intelligible. Malagasy words are formed by the addition of prefixes and suffixes to roots of basic meaning. This kind of word formation makes many Malagasy words relatively longer than other languages. In particular, names are notoriously long, but the last syllables are usually lightly accented.

The Malagasy people are labelled according to their kinship, age and status. They are divided into a number of *karazana* (large kin groups), and then each *karazana* is divided into *fianakaviana* (family). Members of *fianakaviana* are tied in with strong loyalty and affection. In Madagascar, the older you are, the more respected you are. It draws on their respect and memory for the dead. Because the old are nearer to the dead, they are respected. Although the Malagasy worship the dead, they put more emphasis on the relationship between the dead and the living rather than on the afterlife. Another charateristic of the Malagasy culture is its social strata. People are divided into nobles, commoners, and slaves (or descendants of slaves). The traces of distinction between former freemen and former slaves still remain in some parts of Malagasy culture.

STUDYING MALAGASY IN THE U.S.

Below is a list of some universities in the United States that currently offer Malagasy. For more information, please contact the National African Language Resource Center, or check the NALRC web site at http://african.lss.wisc.edu/nalrc.

Michigan State University
University of California, Berkeley

NATIONAL AFRICAN LANGUAGE RESOURCE CENTER (NALRC)

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University of Wisconsin-Madison
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MALAGASY

MALAGASY WOMAN MAKING BANANA FRITTERS

NATIONAL AFRICAN LANGUAGE RESOURCE CENTER (NALRC)

WHY STUDY MALAGASY?

Malagasy is spoken throughout Madagascar. It is one of the two official languages on this island. In comparison with other African languages, Malagasy is very unique in some points. First, it is the only indigenous language spoken in Madagascar. While the other African countries are struggling with various languages and dialects even in one nation, Madagascar is unusually unified by Malagasy. Another characteristic is that Malagasy is closer to the Malayo-Polynesian languages rather than to other African languages. Because Madagascar is located near the African continent, it would be logical to assume that its language belongs to African language families. However, investigation reveals that it is more closely related to the Malayo-Polynesian languages. Those peculiar characteristics of Malagasy will be worth exploring for those who are intested in linguistics and anthropology.

As reflected in its language, Madagascar has a very unique blend of African and Asian landscapes and cultures. The zebu cattle-raising regions of the south and west resemble those of East Africa while irrigated and terraced rice fields in the central highlands remind travelers of Southeast Asia. The combinations of African and Asian scenic views are unique enough to attract travelers from all over the world.

The wide variety of natural resources are attractive to scientists of several areas such as botany, biology and zoology. Madagascar has been totally isolated for millions of years since its breakup from the African mainland. Thus, it is proud of the uniqueness and rarity of many of its plants and animal species. It has been said that the plants and animals discovered in Madagascar exist only on the island, and cannot be found anywhere else on earth. The number of species of orchids almost reach 900. Instead of typical African mammals such as elephants, rhinoceros, giraffes, and zebras, sixty-six indigenous land mammals inhabit the "alternate world" or "world apart of Madagascar."

WHO SPEAKS MALAGASY?

PEOPLE AND HISTORY

Malagasy is estimated to be spoken by 13 million people, most of whom live on Madagascar. Madagascar is the world's fourth largest island, after Greenland, New Guinea and Borneo. It is located 250 miles off the south-east coast of Africa and it extends 1,000 miles in length and 360 miles at its largest width.

As in other cultures, the debate over the origins of the Malagasy people is still going on. According to one theory, the Indonesians migrated along the coast of south Asia, across the Arabian Peninsula into the east coast of Africa and finally across the Mozambique Channel into Madagascar. Drawing on the diversity of the peoples on Madagascar, another theory suggests that the Indonesians arrived first and settled down in the central highlands, and that other African peoples followed them later.

Until the Merina ethnic group emerged as the most powerful kingdom in the nineteenth century, Madagascar had been divided into small political units. By 1806 Andriananmpoinimerina (1797-1810) conquered other kingdoms and united them. His son Radama I (1816-28) played off competing British and French interests in Madagascar and extended the Merina kingdom over the entire island. After he passed away, the French finally ended Malagasy rulers' attempts to thwart foreign influence and colonialize Madagascar in 1894. Through the Malagasy people's continuous efforts to liberate their country from the French, they obtained complete independence on June 26, 1960. Since then, Madagascar has suffered from several political upheavals. Amid those upheavals, Marc Ravalomanana was elected to a five-year term as president by popular vote in 2001. Although the nation is faced with numerous economic and political obstacles, the Malagasy people hope that the new government will bring a better world to Madagascar.

Rickshaw ride at Antsirabe, near the capital city, Antananarivo.

A Malagasy child is enjoying Mofomenakely, local food.

People in traditional Malagasy costumes.