

A Parsi Community in Madagascar?

Research on British Archival Sources

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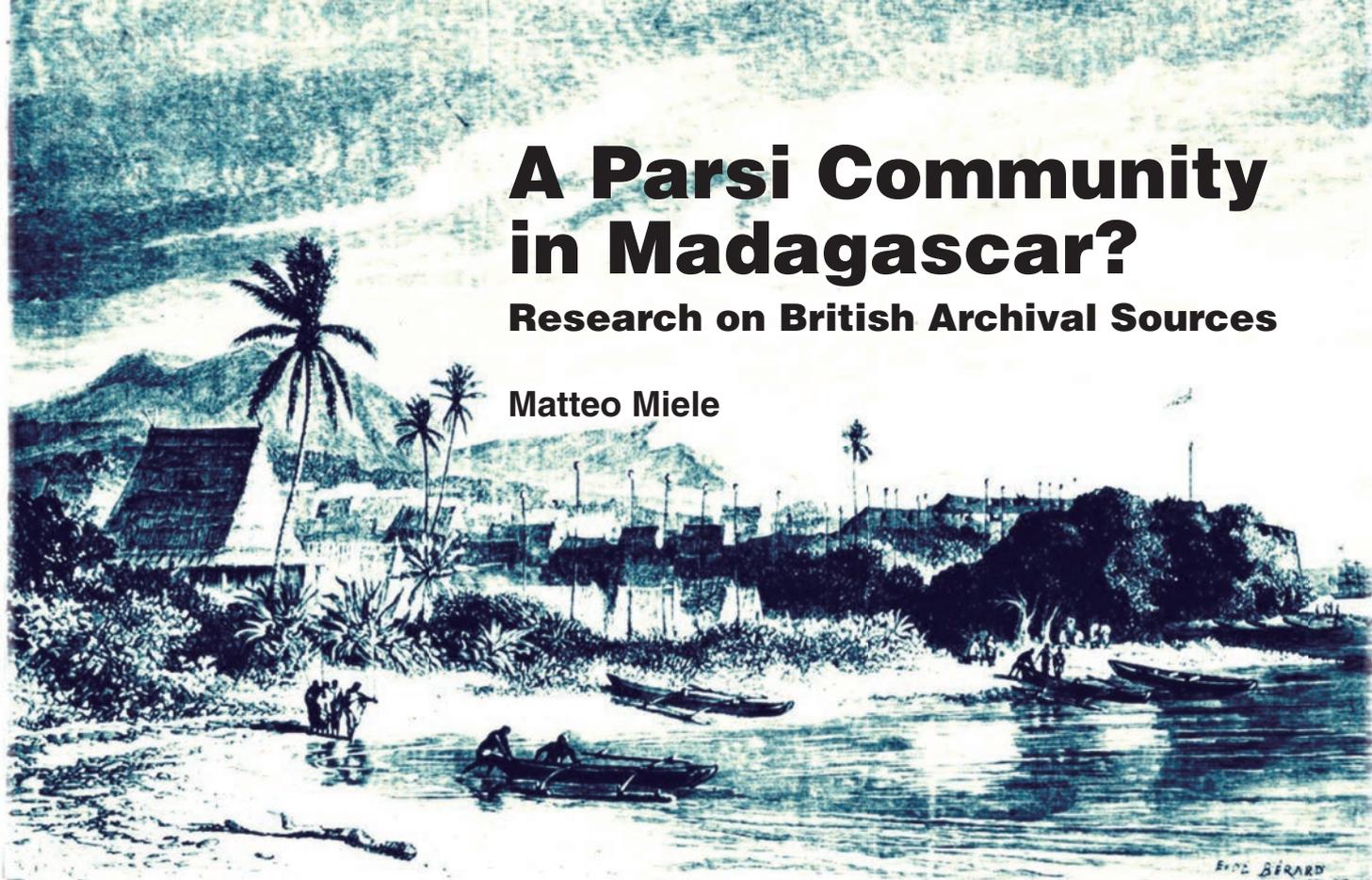


Fig.1 *Tamatave, vue de la mer* by Évremond de Bérard. Source: Charton, É. (ed.) 1861. *Le tour du monde: Nouveau journal des voyages*, Quatrième volume. Paris: L. Hachette et Cie, 325 (digitized by Google, <https://books.google.com/>), recolored.

Today, the Parsis of Iran and India are the world's largest communities of Zoroastrians. Zoroastrianism is based on the teachings of Zarathushtra, who is thought to have lived between 1700 and 1500 BCE (Boyce 2001: 18). The religion has been the most significant spiritual tradition of Persia for millennia, defining her identity, shaping the history of the ancient world, and inspiring historical developments in other religious traditions (Boyce and Grenet 1991: 361-490). Although the Arab invasion of the Sassanid Empire in the seventh century led to a slow decline of Zoroastrianism, like an underground river, the tradition continued to nourish the poetry, art, and social life of Persia and Central Asia. Many Zoroastrians left Iran during the early centuries of Muslim rule and took refuge on the coast of Gujarat (Williams 2009: 7). With some notable exceptions, the Parsis remained a discreet presence until the arrival of the East India Company in the seventeenth century, when they seized upon new opportunities to become part of the economic and cultural elite of India (Menant 1898: 360-477; Guha 1970; Dadabhoy 2008). Later, Parsi communities emerged outside the subcontinent following the contours of an expanding map of British imperial interests. Hong Kong, for example, became a preferred destination for many Parsis, who contributed significantly to the growth of the city (Hinnells 2005: 173-188).

A widow's letter

Among the far-flung Parsi communities established during the colonial period, those in Zanzibar and

present-day Kenya are perhaps the most well-known (Hinnells 2005: 245-313). By comparison, we know almost nothing about a presence of Parsis in Madagascar. Indeed, John R. Hinnells's essential text on Zoroastrian communities in the world (Hinnells 2005) does not discuss them. Yet, in 1898, Delphine Menant mentions the presence in Madagascar of two partners of Dadabhoy & Co., the largest Parsi firm in London (Menant 1898: 404). My current work on Foreign Office documents kept at The National Archives in Kew, London has revealed two possibly earlier Parsi arrivals to the island. Letters from the widow and daughter of Pestonjee Manekjee Tatee, a Parsi priest from Surat, indicate that he died in Tamatave in February 1880. In March 1882 the women wrote a letter to James Braithwaite Peile, former acting municipal commissioner in Bombay,¹ seeking his help to secure their inheritance. Other letters followed, but that first missive provides interesting information about Pestonjee Manekjee Tatee's migration and his activities in Tamatave, as well as the arrival of the widow's brother on the island:

A Parsee priest, named Pestonjee Manekjee, a native subject of Her Majesty and an inhabitant of Surat, went to the Island of Mauritius, in the first instance, and afterwards to Madagascar, for purposes of trade in a small way. [...] His last letter was dated only a few months before his death, which, we have been given to understand, took place on or about the 12th February,

1880.

3. Understanding that he had left some property, consisting among other sundry things of about four or six houses or bungalows, worth between 2,000 and 3,000 rupees, in Tamatave, which he used to rent out to European gentlemen, and in the absence of any testamentary disposition of his property by the deceased under his hand, such as is recognized by the Parsee Act of Succession No. 21 of 1865, or the Indian Succession Act No. 10 of 1865, or by the general law of nations. We, the Undersigned, who are respectively the widow and daughter (the only child) of the deceased, were much exercised in our minds as to the way in which, as the only rightful heirs, under the Parsee Act No. 21 of 1865, section 6, and the Indian Succession Act No. 10 of 1865, we should secure to ourselves the said property of our deceased relative. The Island of Madagascar being such an out-of-the-way and far-distant place, having little or no intercourse with persons residing in Surat, aggravated as our position was, in consequence of our being solitary, helpless, poor widows, ignorant of the world and its ways, we were reduced to utter despair, when fortunately the full brother of one of us, Koonverbai, went out, as the servant of some other persons, to this very place of Tamatave.”²

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The purpose of this short piece is not to follow the dramatic legal story of the Tatee family. Although the letters do not indicate a resolution to their case, they do allow us to hypothesize regarding a Zoroastrian community in Madagascar. The presence of Parsis in Tamatave was certainly not as significant and numerous as that of other Indian Ocean settlements. Pestonjee Manekjee Tatee’s widow and daughter wrote of “little or no intercourse with persons residing in Surat,” but we cannot exclude the presence of other Parsis. Yet, with the unearthing

of these letters, we can now document the presence of a Parsi priest in Tamatave at least as early as the 1870s and the arrival of Koonverbai’s brother (“as the servant of some other persons,” presumably other Parsis) at the beginning of the following decade. These facts, coupled with Delphine Menant’s account of Parsis in Madagascar at the end of the nineteenth century, lead us to think that these were perhaps not isolated cases. More research is required to confirm the history, scale, and nature of Parsi presence in Madagascar. Such work could, moreover, be illuminatingly situated within the broader context of British imperial interests across the broader Indian Ocean world.

Notes

- ¹ The India List and India Office List for 1905, compiled from official records by direction of the Secretary of State for India in Council, London 1905, p. 585.
- ² The National Archives, Kew, London, FO 403/28, Enclosure 3 in No. 64, Koonverbai, Widow, and Nawazbai, Daughter, of the late Pestonjee Manekjee Tatee, to Mr. Peile, March 23, 1882, p. 55.

Archival Sources

This article is based on my work on Foreign Office documents kept at The National Archives, Kew, London. A more detailed paper will be published in the coming months in an academic journal.

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Fig.2 Une case de chef, à Tamatave, port de Madagascar by Évremond de Bérard. Source: Charton, É. (ed.) 1861. *Le tour du monde: Nouveau journal des voyages*. Quatrième volume. Paris: L. Hachette et C^o, 321. (Digitized by Google, <https://books.google.com/>, and recolored).

