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Denis Regnier, University of Global Health Equity, Rwanda

An incomplete emancipation: Unintended consequences of colonial abolition in Madagascar

Abstract:

The legacy of slavery is a crucial social issue in some, if not all, Malagasy societies. To understand why this is the case, I argue that we need to analyze the nature and impact of the 1896 colonial abolition in Madagascar. Using as an example the case of the Betsileo, a Malagasy group inhabiting the southern central highlands, I suggest that colonial abolition has had unintended and often overlooked consequences. For most Betsileo, the abolition decree did not have the power of precolonial cleansing rituals, which were performed at the time of manumission and used to reintegrate former slaves into a network of kinsmen or, at the very least, into the wider society of 'free' and 'clean' men and women. Since these powerful rituals did not take place, the slaves who were liberated by the French could not be cleansed and reintegrated into free society. In the immediate aftermath of the abolition, they were therefore regarded as incompletely freed, and they remained viewed as persons with an inferior status. People continued to call them slaves. Far from fading away over time, this social displacement, and the creation of a new social category – the category of people who are still slaves even though slavery does not exist anymore – have become increasingly entrenched in the decades following emancipation, leading to a type of 'social essentialism'. More than a century later, stigmatization and discrimination remain extremely strong in Betsileo society since the descendants of the slaves who were emancipated in 1896 are still viewed as 'incomplete', 'unclean' and 'dirty' persons.

Bio:

Denis Regnier is Assistant Professor and Head of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Global Health Equity in Rwanda. A social anthropologist by training, he has conducted extensive research in Madagascar as well as occasional research in French Polynesia and Rwanda. He is the author of *Slavery and Essentialism in Highland Madagascar: Ethnography, History, Cognition* (Routledge, 2021), co-editor of a volume entitled *Family Violence and Social Change in the Pacific Islands* (Routledge, forthcoming), and section editor for the *Palgrave Encyclopedia of Health Humanities* (edited by P. Crawford and P. Kadetz, Springer Nature).