



## NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

### **Narrative Section of a Successful Application**

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <https://www.neh.gov/grants/research/fellowships> for instructions.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: Children of the Soil: The Politics of Built Forms, Labor, and Anticipatory Landscapes in Urban Madagascar

Institution: Vanderbilt University

Project Director: Tasha Rijke-Epstein

Grant Program: Fellowships

***Children of the Soil:  
The Politics of Built Forms, Labor, and Anticipatory Landscapes in Urban Madagascar***

During the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, tens of thousands of Comorians, East Africans, and South Asians traveled across the Indian Ocean to northwest Madagascar as laborers, merchants, Islamic leaders, and students. Among them, migrants from Comoros proved particularly adept at integrating themselves into existing Malagasy families and creating new kinship, trade and religious networks that spanned the Mozambique Channel. As subjects of Sakalava monarchies and then French colonial regimes, they navigated complex cosmologies and labyrinth-like bureaucratic systems designed to cultivate loyalty and secure labor. Central to new migrants' efforts to manage political upheaval and shifting economic sands were the sedimented, lasting built forms they constructed—their homes, mosques, and infrastructural systems. Some Comorian migrants labored, along with prison workers and other migrant groups, in fraught sewage removal work. Sanitation work afforded them financial capital and enabled them construction of homes, but also raised public suspicion about their moral character. Built forms were not only material expressions of urban inclusion and economic mechanisms for accumulating capital; they were also anticipatory devices—through which Comorian migrants established new conditions of possibility and imagined futures for their mixed Comorian-Malagasy progeny (*zanatany*, children of the soil).

*Children of the Soil* argues that African cities are best understood as dynamic fields in which competing actors forged possibilities for political action through ecological and aesthetic built forms. Situating building practices and material forms within a *longue durée* historical frame across two centuries, it documents how Africans (first Sakalava, then Comorians and mixed Comorian-Malagasy) were the primary fashioners of the city long before European encroachment. Mining an extensive archive of material culture, documentary and oral sources, photographs, and ethnographic observations, this project tracks how Comorian migrants drew on the earthly things that abounded—limestone found in strata formed over centuries, thatch from resilient palm species, and corrugated metal forged from subterranean iron alloys—to emplace themselves in the city. Biographies of homes offer remarkable windows into the strategies of newcomers to acquire land, their economizing practices and credit networks, and their aspirations for inter-generational longevity in the city. Photographs reveal the preservation of trans-oceanic familial ties, as well as aesthetic borrowings of mosque and house designs from the Comorian Archipelago and beyond. Oral accounts provide rare glimpses into the vulnerabilities and moral dilemmas associated with stigmatized waste labor that emerged with colonial sanitation interventions. Built forms were not only mediums for everyday living, they were also the means through which *zanatany* articulated their attachments to the city.

African building dreams and urban designs have largely hovered beneath the scholarly gaze. We have a substantial body of scholarship examining African cities as critical nodes in imperial webs, characterized by colonial economic domination, and sites for growing anti-colonial and nationalist movements. With some notable exceptions, the material, architectural worlds of city dwellers have been largely subordinated in favor of studies on political mobilization, literacy, and consumption practices. Although the vast literature on colonial urban planning and African urban life has produced important insights, this tendency towards sidelining the aesthetic and technical projects of ordinary urban dwellers has perils. Scholars tend to think of urban landscapes as theatrical backgrounds, on which the dramas of labor struggles, migration, and communal life unfold. We know surprisingly little about how urban builders have designed their homes and religious structures and selected building materials. We know even less about how city dwellers have negotiated their political and economic conditions and conceptualized their futures *through* the built forms they inhabit.

*Children of the Soil* illustrates that African families have been the critical designers, builders, and shapers of cities, strongly influencing urban design and spatial layout. By doing so, it provides a historically-situated theoretical framework to explain how building *materials* shaped urban lives and cultures, and how conceptual categories constrained what counted as legitimate and desirable built forms. This study extends a rich historiography on African urban creativity towards built worlds to show that the

material, and not just the discursive, have been central to articulations of belonging, political claim-making, and dreams of the future. Foregrounding material forms as archival sources reveals how people infuse architectural inscriptions with emotional resonance. Affective attachments, rendered material in buildings, accrues over time and enables people to forge certain social collectivities—in ways that eschew classical analytical categories of structure and agency, center and periphery, modernity and progress. Built forms in Mahajanga were for many migrants affective devices, informed by labor, longing and anticipation of generations to come, through which *zanatany* constituted their emotive ties to the city.

This project is more than just a history of buildings and material culture. It also seeks to show how such a history can make a theoretical intervention to our histories and ethnographies of cultural exchange. It does this by tracing the genealogy of the idiom of *zanatany*—which defies easy categorizations of autochthony, *créolité*, or cosmopolitanism—in built forms, as well as newspaper accounts, colonial records, and ethnographic observations. Interrogating the category of *zanatany* across time reveals how belonging is intrinsically anchored in spatial *transformation*, rather than in occupancy or nativist rhetoric. It additionally advances our understanding of the emotional dimensions of ownership, moving beyond economic terms in which property is often framed by scholars. This project contributes to an emergent, growing history of urban, technological and architectural practice in Africa by documenting how political, moral and labor regimes were constituted in material forms of architecture and city systems. In exposing African urban spaces as dynamic sites of historical creative production and material reworking by ordinary inhabitants, forged in the crucible of global and regional forces, this book challenges widespread, dystopic portrayals of African cities as modernist failures.

*Children of the Soil* includes seven substantive chapters: (1) Thatch: The Politics of Ephemerality (1750s-1800s), (2) Fire: Forging Territory in Troubled Times (1810s-1880s), (3) Mud: Creeping Colonialism, Labor and the City of Paths (1883-1910s), (4) Limestone: Building Mosques and the Making of Property (ca. 1900s-1930s), (5) Flesh: Growing the Zanatany Generation (1920s-1950s), (6) Metal (Tôle): Building the Zanatany City (7) Water and Waste: The Promise and Perils of Infrastructural Engagement. Following an introduction, Chapter One offers a deep history of Mahajanga and the ways in which the city's founding and transformation in the late eighteenth century emerged from major ecological, political and migratory shifts in the region. Under Sakalava Queen Ravahiny (ca. 1770s-1810s), diverse groups exercised autonomy to cultivate their own social, ritual, and economic networks. Chapter Two traces the colonization of the city by highland King Radama, following the invasion of his military forces in 1825-26. Highland administrators appropriated key sites in the city which were central to Sakalava monarchal rule. Urban dwellers adopted varying spatial strategies and reworked architectural and domestic practices following yet another colonial invasion later in the nineteenth century—by France.

Chapters Three and Four contend with how French colonial authorities sought to reshape the city, and how migrants advanced competing conceptions of urbanism. French colonial officials activated particular economic, ecological, and political conditions in Comoros that drove elite young men to seek fortunes elsewhere. Comorians, for their part, found grounds for experimenting with labor migration as a strategy for garnering wages, achieving adult status, and managing the temporality of their life cycle. Chapter Four narrates Mahajanga's past through the concept of obduracy to reveal how both city officials and migrants from Comores tirelessly worked to entrench their designs for the city. Durable mosque construction articulated a conception of property grounded in affective ties to fellow adherents and a capacious temporal frame linking them to Sufi communities past and future. Chapter Five describes how marriage between Comorian men and Malagasy women served as a key strategy through which *zanatany* families could accrue capital and ultimately (re)build dwellings. These relationships gave rise to a new generation, known as *zanatany*, who would indelibly shape the city's cultural and economic landscape in the decades to come. Chapter Six shows how Comorian and *zanatany* homes took durable forms and how houses shaped the everyday dwelling of their inhabitants, serving as repositories of past memories and containers of hopeful aspirations for the future. *Zanatany* houses were brought into being through acts of burial, interment of precious bodily liquids, and the melding together of the living and the dead with the physical structure of the home. Chapter Seven chronicles how the material design of water provision and waste removal systems shaped different groups' capacities to acquire political control, economic mobility,

and moral credibility. The material configuration of the city's colonial-era waste system enacted persistent, enduring forms of harm and suffering in post-independence times. A brief epilogue connects the history of contested belonging and city space in Mahajanga to the 1976-77 *rotaka*, a moment of rupture that revealed the perils of *zanatany* belonging. The independence of Madagascar in 1960 and Comoros in 1974 signaled the end not only of certain forms of circulation between Comoros and Madagascar (and within Comoros), but also certain claims to belonging—including that of *zanatany* in Mahajanga. It highlights the book's contribution to deepening our understanding of decolonization in the southern Indian Ocean basin and beyond.

Anchored in a two century span, *Children of the Soil* de-centers colonial textuality and orality as the primary sites of historical knowledge production, by foregrounding the forms people built, the materials they selected, and the activities they undertook in urban spaces from the city's earliest times. Sources for this project are wide-ranging, including collections at the Centre d'archives d'outre mer in France, London Missionary Society Archives, the National Archives in Madagascar, and several family and private collections in Mahajanga. During 30 months of archival research and ethnographic study in Madagascar and France (2011-2014), I compiled an extensive archive and ethnographic observations that serve as the evidential body for the book. Deeds, maps, photographs, correspondence and municipal records, archaeological evidence, material culture, and oral accounts detail the competing conceptions of urbanism among officials and sectors of Mahajanga's population over the city's *longue durée*.

Internal funding from Vanderbilt University allowed me to return to the National Archives in Madagascar in summer 2019, where I encountered a treasure trove of nineteenth century written reports and correspondence, authored by Malagasy administrators from the 1820s (when highland monarchs conquered the coastal city of Mahajanga) to 1890s (when French colonial authorities were encroaching). These unpublished, undigitized documents illuminate the micro-political struggles over urban sites, the selective use of building materials among inhabitants, and the strategic provision of rebuilding aid following massive fires and unrest, on the part of highland colonizers in Mahajanga throughout the nineteenth century. They provide important insights into how city dwellers drew on built forms to negotiate colonial occupation from highlanders and economic constraints with the slowing of overseas trade relations, long before French military troops arrived.

These documents are critical to this project, not only because of their relevant content but also owing to the unique perspectives they reveal. They are among preciously few precolonial source collections found across the entire continent and region that are authored entirely by African historical actors. They chronicle the efforts of the highland-based kingdom to conquer coastal regions, and include rich descriptions of ritual practices, encounters with competing monarchal authorities and encroaching Europeans, as well as economic exchanges across the island. They are extremely challenging as source materials, however, owing to the nineteenth century calligraphic script and grammatical conventions, and consequently they have been underutilized by historians. Should I receive a NEH fellowship, I plan to process this material in winter of 2021 and incorporate it into the manuscript.

With the aid of a twelve-month NEH fellowship, coupled with half-pay from Vanderbilt University, I will devote the year to completing the manuscript. Most of my fieldwork and archival research is complete, and I have already drafted four chapters of the book. I am applying for the NEH because I need the time off to organize over one thousand pages of documents from Madagascar, to write the remaining three chapters and also make another trip to Madagascar if need be. In spring 2021, after processing the new research material, I will revise the remaining chapters and write the introduction and epilogue. I anticipate having a complete and revised draft of the manuscript by December 2021. Duke University Press, Indiana University Press, and Ohio University Press have expressed interest thus far.

Drawing on an eclectic source base, and historical, ethnographic, linguistic, and archaeological methods, *Children of the Soil* is highly interdisciplinary. Likewise, the book will be directed towards a diverse audience of scholars of African studies, history and anthropology, urban and architectural studies, and science and technology studies. The wide temporal coverage and focus on spatial processes in the city will provide students with a deeper understanding of the broad changes in urban life influenced by migration, labor practices, and forms of colonial and postcolonial governance.

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