The prickly pear was first introduced to South East Madagascar in 1769 by French colonialists attempting to establish themselves in the old pirate port of Fort Dauphin.

Within two years, high rates of disease, internal political conflict, and resistance from local Malagasy people led the French to abandon the settlement.

Local Malagasy pastoralists found a great deal more use for the prickly pear, Raketa, as it was known, than they found for their would be colonial conquerors, and with cultivation the cactus spread all across the south.

When French troops returned over a hundred years later they found the prickly pear had made the region near impossible to penetrate.

It soon became an essential subsistence resource to the Tandroy, Karembola and Mahafale peoples, providing food and water to both farmers and their cattle.

Pastoralists often shaped the cactus plants into natural fences, enclosing cattle and aiding the protection and management of herds.
By the 20th century the prickly pear had become an established and essential part of life in the region.

But for Henri Perrier de la Bâthie, botanist, colonialist and agent of the French government, the cactus was nothing but a problem.

Perrier de la Bâthie and Marcel Olivier, Madagascar's brutal governor general, saw the Southern pastoralists as an impediment to further French projects in the South and sought drastic solutions.

How much easier and, above all, more profitable for the future of the whole colony, it would be to have them removed.

Interesting, Henri, I quite agree.

Perrier de la Bâthie, ever the botanist, knew the importance of the prickly pear to the region and understood that its eradication likely meant the human population would swiftly follow.

To achieve this end he employed the use of a powerful biological weapon, the tiny insect, cochineal.

The use of cochineal had been piloted in Australia as a means of controlling cactus propagation, with extreme effect. The results in Madagascar were no less devastating.

In November of 1924 a consignment of cultivated cochineal reached Toliara, southern Madagascar, care of Bâthie, and were released into the wild.
In a matter of just four years the cochineal had spread across the entire southern region, laying waste to the prickly pear, and causing untold disruption to the pastoral way of life.

Once livably land had now become a dry, dusty, bone yard, with starving cattle dying in unimaginable numbers, and with the cattle, soon followed the people. A killing famine swept Madagascar’s deep south.

Those spared starvation, were forced to flee the devastated land to look for new means of support. The destruction of pastoral life and mass migration had always been one of Perrier de la Bâthie and Olivier’s objectives.

Perrier de la Bâthie’s racialized critique of pastoralism, his pseudo-scientific approach and paternalistic language was part of a wider trend in colonial thinking which came to form the bedrock of a white-supremacist rhetoric of conservation and the “degradation myths” that still permeates neo-colonialist discourse in southern Madagascar. ‘Received wisdoms’ and sedimented knowledge travel through time, in this case to shape the coloniality of violent conservation and development policy and practice even today.

As for the prickly pear, some cochineal resistant strains persist, but the golden age of Raketa Gasy exists only in memory.

For the native to work, he has to have needs; but for him to have needs, he has to work. Only hunger will get the better of their apathy.

The influx of cheap, desperate labour to central Madagascar, aided French colonial plans.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


