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Beňovský on Madagascar: the self-fashioning and knowledge production of a Central European actor in the French colonial empire

One goal of this conference is to check if Central European actors in imperial domains had a way of perceiving things, of presenting themselves, and of producing knowledge that differed from those of the imperial elite coming from the centre of the colonial empire. In my paper, I will concentrate on the case of Móric Beňovský (in Polish Maurycy Beniowski), an Upper Hungarian nobleman who was commissioned in 1772 by the French king to create a colony in northern Madagascar. The story of Beňovský is especially interesting in the sense that it represents the rare case of a Central European who was in a leading position and had a great influence on colonial policy. In the French empire, administrators and commanders of colonies were, in the eighteenth-century at least, almost always Frenchmen, even if right after the creation of the East India Company foreigners such as Dutch or Persians had played a great role.¹ Beňovský's life differed indeed greatly from that of other colonial administrators. He had fled Upper Hungary after having killed his uncle, fought in the War of the Confederation of Bar, been taken prisoner by the Russians, and deported to Kamchatka. From this East Asian peninsula, he had fled to Macao and entered the service of the French king. In Versailles, he was asked to found an establishment on Madagascar, develop peaceful relationships with indigenous elites, and commerce with the local population. Contrary to these instructions, coming with voluntary troops of different, mainly French and central and east European origins, Beňovský soon tried to conquer the region, which ended in a disaster. In addition, Beňovský was a confidence trickster: he made up wars and victories, and claimed to have created roads or settlements which in reality did not exist, and to have turned the Malagasy into proto-French people. Although his life was surely adventurous enough, he presented fanciful narratives about his experiences and deeds, permanently self-fashioning himself in a creative way.²

The case of Beňovský contrasts with the way scholars usually write the history of colonial knowledge. Historians pay much attention to the participation of Central European, especially

¹ See the documents on the early phase of the *Compagnie des Indes* founded by Colbert: Archives nationales d'Outre-mer (thereafter ANOM), C 5^A 1. See also E. de Flacourt, *Histoire de la Grande Isle de Madagascar* (Paris, 2007), S. 305, 365, 404.

² The two best monographies about Beňovský present an overview about facts and numerous examples of his lies: P. Cultru, *Un Empereur de Madagascar au XVIIIe siècle. Benyowszky* (Paris, 1906); L. Orłowski, *Maurycy August Beniowski* (Warszawa, 1961).

German, scholars to the great scientific expeditions of the Age of Enlightenment.³ They concentrate on the production of knowledges which can be taken seriously today, at least as a certain stadium in the history of sciences.⁴ This tendency to concentrate on science history is not a specificity of scholarship about Central Europeans, but has to do with broader patterns of interpretation. The history of knowledge production in the colonial framework often postulates implicitly that imperial expansion and knowledge production had mutually reinforcing effects.⁵ However, most recently, Charles and Cheney showed that this assumption is questionable. Studying the French case, they argue that the knowledge produced was mostly not taken into consideration by central administration, that patronage relationships restricted the information flows, and that new knowledges were partly disturbing for the colonial system.⁶ More generally, the concentration on scientific and useful knowledge implies normative bias. The concept of ‘knowledge’ should have nothing to do with the quality of information. It is a category useful for analysing social constructions of reality. It only describes those descriptions of reality that people believe to be adequate.⁷ For these reasons, it is essential not to look only at the production of scientific knowledge which proved useful because “serious”.

This paper seeks to answer to the question whether Beňovský’s Upper Hungarian origins contributed to shape his policy and knowledge production, that is orientated it in a way differing than the French colonizers. Did Beňovský used specific Central Europeans interpretation patterns or was he more influenced by French and generally European worldviews? Did his marked tendency to fictionalize his life was linked to the logics of French colonial administration or to his position as a foreigner in it? In other words: concentrating on the case of Beňovský, do we learn something about Central Europe or rather something about the French empire and, more generally, European culture?

³ D. H. Nicholson, *The Forsters and the Botany of the Second Cook Expedition* (Ruggel, 2004); See esp. *Russland, der Ferne Osten und die Deutschen*, Heinz Duchhardt (ed.) (Göttingen, 2009) and the following editions: Carl Heinrich Merck, *Das sibirisch-amerikanische Tagebuch aus den Jahren 1788-1791*, Dittmar Dahlmann, Anna Friesen and Diana Ordubadi (eds.) (Göttingen, 2009); Iogann-Gotlib Georgi [Johann-Gottlieb Georgi], *Opisanie vseh obitajuščich v Rossijskom gosudarstve narodov, ich žitejskich obrjadov, obyknovenij, odežd, žilišč, upražnenij, zabav, veroispovedanij i drugih dostopamjatnostej* (St. Petersburg, 2005).

⁴ H. F. Vermeulen, *Before Boas: The Genesis of Ethnography and Ethnology in the German Enlightenment* (Lincoln, 2015).

⁵ L. Charles and P. Cheney, ‘The colonial machine dismantled: Knowledge and empire in the French Atlantic’, *Past and Present*, 219 (2013), 127–63, esp. 128–30. To the publications listed by Charles and Cheney, I would like to add: B. Steiner, *Colberts Afrika. Eine Wissens- und Begegnungsgeschichte in Afrika im Zeitalter Ludwigs XIV.* (Oldenbourg, 2014).

⁶ Charles and Cheney, ‘The colonial machine dismantled’.

⁷ T. Luckmann and P. L. Berger, *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Harmondsworth, 1991).

Colonialism: the appropriation of a French Enlightenment discourse

To understand Beňovský's writing, it is essential to look back at the French colonisation attempts on Madagascar in the years preceding his arrival. Between 1769 and 1772, the French had already tried to create a colony on the Great Island – as Madagascar is often called: the count of Maudave had tried to rebuild the former colony of Fort-Dauphin in the southeast of the island. After the defeats of the Seven Years' War, France was searching for new colonies to compensate its losses in India. It was Maudave, a former governor of Karaikal, who had proposed Madagascar as a basis for a new French Empire in the East Indies.⁸ This was in some way surprising, because by the middle of the eighteenth century, Madagascar had acquired a very negative image in the French public sphere. As a result of the French failure to colonise southeast Madagascar in the seventeenth century, the Abbé Prévost, De Barry, Rousselot de Surgy, Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, and the first two editions of Raynal's *Philosophical History of the Two Indies* unanimously denounced the island for its sterility, the insalubrity of its climate, and the perfidy, stupidity and laziness of its inhabitants.⁹ Expansion on Madagascar did not appear to be an objective of imperial policy. This notwithstanding, in 1767, Maudave succeeded in winning the support of the Minister of the Navy for his colonisation project. To reach this goal, he created a new, overwhelmingly positive image of the Great Island. The French count, who at that time had never been to Madagascar, did not gather new empirical data. He instead read selectively the most important seventeenth-century book on the Great Island, Flacourt's *Histoire de la Grande Isle de Madagascar* (1661). In his own plea for a colonisation of Madagascar, Flacourt had described the island as one of the richest parts of the earth, and the Malagasy as a people asking for French civilisation, laws and religion.¹⁰ Maudave developed these *topoi* further. In his view, the Malagasy were not wild, but only 'half wild', and they indeed longed for civilisation and order.¹¹ For this reason, he argued, they would willingly accept French rule. The 'natural' authority held by the French

⁸ B. Foury, 'Maudave et la colonisation de Madagascar (1^{ère} partie)', *Revue d'histoire des colonies*, 41 (1955), 343-404.

⁹ Abbé Prévost (ed.), *Histoire générale des Voyages [...]*, vol. 8 (Paris, 1750), 551-627; De Barry, *Lettre de M. De Barry à M. G. de l'Académie des sciences, concernant l'état actuel des mœurs, usages, commerce, cérémonies et musiques des habitans de l'Isle de Malegache* (Paris, 1764); Rousselot de Surgy, *Mélanges interessans et curieux ou Abrégé d'histoire naturelle, morale, civile et politiques de l'Asie, de l'Afrique et des Terres Polaires* (Paris, 1765), 138-39; 'Madagascar', in *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers [...]*, vol. 9 (Neufchastel, 1765), 839-40; Guillaume Thomas Raynal, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (Amsterdam, 1770), 6 vols., vol. 2, book 4, 4-10; Raynal, *Histoire des deux Indes* (La Haye, 1774), 5 vols., vol. 2, book 4, 9-16.

¹⁰ Flacourt, *Histoire de la Grande Isle*, 103-04, 420-37.

¹¹ ANOM, Dépôt des fortifications des colonies (thereafter DFC), 88, n°40 (fol. 1), n°26 (fol. 5).

meant that a violent conquest would not be necessary; it would be easy, he maintained, to turn the Malagasy into Frenchmen using the soft power of civilisation.¹²

Maudave's assimilationist utopia resumed the French tradition of *francisation*, a policy implemented previously in Canada during the seventeenth century.¹³ At the same time, Maudave's argument incorporated new concepts of mankind's progress in history that had emerged in the 1750s and 1760s.¹⁴ Even before stadial theories had been formulated,¹⁵ Maudave deduced the 'soft' Malagasy character from their way of subsistence – which he believed was pastoral –,¹⁶ and thought they were destined, as all men, to adopt a European way of life and work. He championed the pleas of some physiocrats for a civilising policy towards the 'savages',¹⁷ and was even perhaps the very first French author to formulate the idea of a 'civilising mission'.¹⁸ Thus, Maudave's colonisation plan resulted from a broad and abstract 'philosophical' discourse. Indeed, Maudave was an admirer of Voltaire.¹⁹ He followed the philosopher's distinction between religion and superstition, and played down the significance of religious practices for the local society. Because they were in his eyes superstitions, local beliefs and practices were doomed to disappear.²⁰

Maudave, who arrived in September 1768 in Tôlanaro (Fort-Dauphin) – the French outpost in southeast Madagascar – was not successful. Maudave proved politically impotent and isolated in the region. Trade was interrupted, and diseases ravaged the French colonial establishment. In February 1771, Maudave's expansion project was abandoned and his

¹² Musée d'histoire naturelle (thereafter MHN), Ms. 888, p. 27; ANOM, DFC, 88, n°28, fol. 3. See also MHN, Ms. 888, pp. 14, 56; ANOM, C 5^A 2, n°12, fol. 11.

¹³ Saliha Belmessous, 'Assimilation and Racialism in Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century French Colonial Policy', *American Historical Review*, 110/2 (April 2005), 322–49.

¹⁴ Jean Starobinski, *Le Remède dans le mal. Critique et légitimation de l'artifice à l'âge des Lumières* (Paris, 1989), 12–21; Pierre Michel, 'Barbarie, Civilisation, Vandalisme', in Rolf Reichardt and Eberhard Schmitt (eds.), *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich, 1680–1820* (München, 1988), 7–49.

¹⁵ Karl Löwith, *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen. Die theologischen Voraussetzungen der Geschichtsphilosophie* (Stuttgart, 1953 [6th edition 1973]), 95–98; John Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man* (London, 1970), 195; R. Mortier, "'Lumière" et "Lumières". Histoire d'une image et d'une idée, in R. Mortier, *Clartés et ombres au siècle des Lumières. Etudes sur les XVIIIe siècle littéraire* (Genève, 1969), 13–59, here 35–36; David Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven, 1990), 8, 228, 246; Silvia Sebastiani, *The Scottish Enlightenment: Race, Gender, and the Limits of Progress* (New York, 2013).

¹⁶ ANOM, DFC, 88, n°26, fol. 5.

¹⁷ In 1763, Abbé Baudeau, a French physiocrat, had already proposed both the civilisation of Louisiana's Indians and the creation of Madagascar into a 'second home country' for freed slaves whom the French state would turn into civilised citizens: [Nicolas Baudeau,] 'Des colonies françaises aux Indes occidentales', *Éphémérides du citoyen ou Chroniques de l'esprit national*, vol. 5 (1766), 17–78, here 60; Nicolas Baudeau, *Idées d'un Citoyen sur la puissance du Roi et le commerce de la Nation dans l'Orient* (Amsterdam, 1763), 16–28.

¹⁸ ANOM, DFC, 88, n°40, 38.

¹⁹ Voltaire, *Correspondence and related documents (Œuvres complètes vols. 85-135)*, ed. Theodore Besterman (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1968-1977), vol. 43 (August-September 1760), 126, 167-8; *ibid.*, vol. 44 (October-December 1760), 17-19, 27-8, 254.

²⁰ E. g. *ibid.*, 25; ANOM, C 5^A 3, No. 47, fol. 18.

principles considered unrealistic by the ministry of the Navy.²¹ Nonetheless, after his arrival on Madagascar in 1773, Beňovský soon claimed to have succeeded in doing what Maudave had intended: the establishment of French rule thanks to a just policy and the prestige of civilization. Only five weeks after his arrival on the northeast Malagasy coast, on 22 March 1774, Beňovský wrote to the Minister of the Navy that he had founded a new fort called Louisbourg, and built houses, compounds, warehouses, fortifications, a pier and wells. He also allegedly had drained the swamps around Louisbourg.²² According to him, the regional indigenous ‘chiefs’ had pledged allegiance to the French king.²³ Five months later, Beňovský recounted how he had established a new inland town.²⁴ All the ‘subjected’ chiefs and their peoples were enthusiastic about living under so soft and so just a rule. They already had given up their violent and barbaric customs.²⁵ Beňovský related how he had brought about peace in the region. According to his story, the troops of two Malagasy princes stood face to face, each on one side of a river when he came with a boat and delivered a speech to both sides. Thanks to his moral authority, he was able to reconcile the enemies.²⁶ In 1775, Beňovský declared that he had submitted the whole of north Madagascar to French rule without major fights. The subjected area was even supposed to include the powerful Sakalava kingdom of Boina, the most important port city of the Northwest coast. The French, he declared, could now conscript 15,000 men into their army, if they wished to do so.²⁷

Basically, though not without contradictions,²⁸ Benyovsky told the story of a soft, humane and civilising imperial expansion. One of his greatest achievements was allegedly the suppression of infanticide. According to the commander of Louisbourg, the Malagasy would kill all the babies born on days considered as bringing misfortune, those born with a congenital malformation, and those whose first teeth appeared in the upper jaw. In order to suppress this barbaric custom, Beňovský’s wife allegedly gathered all the women of the

²¹ The best source for understanding what happened is Maudave’s diary, held at the *Museum d’histoire naturelle* (MHN), Ms. 888. See also B. Foury, ‘Maudave et la Colonisation de Madagascar (première partie)’, *Revue d’Histoire des Colonies*, 42 (1955), 343–404; B. Foury, ‘Maudave et la colonisation de Madagascar (deuxième partie)’, *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-mer*, 43 (1956), 14–81. On the reaction of the Minister of the Navy to Maudave’s failure see Boynes’ letter to Ternay and Maillart, 19th March 1773: ANOM, DFC, XVII/mémoires/88, nr. 42, fol. 1.

²² ANOM, C 5^A 4, n°55, fol. 1.

²³ ANOM, C 5^A 4, n°55, fols. 1–2.

²⁴ ANOM, C 5^A 4, n°35, 105.

²⁵ ANOM, C 5^A 4, n°36, 47, 48, 49.

²⁶ Archives du Ministère des Affaires étrangères (thereafter MAE), Asie 4, n°50, fols. 110–15.

²⁷ ANOM, C 5^A 5, n°26, 28, 41; MAE, Asie 4, n°57, fols. 131–32.

²⁸ Quite contradictory to his own story of a peaceful expansion, Benyovszky also told stories of glorious wars in which he allegedly demonstrated an incredible courage. See for example ANOM, DFC, 88, n°59.

region and expounded to them on the cruelty of this tradition. The women, touched in their heart by this speech, exerted pressure on their husbands, and the law was changed.²⁹

Beňovský may have had two major sources of inspiration: the patriotic literature about war heroes which was strongly influenced by classical republicanism in the Enlightenment era³⁰ and the numerous novels inspired by Defoe's famous *Robinson Crusoe*. Beňovský's narrative shared several characteristics with the Robinsonades: citations from supposed documents and mentions of concrete places and names to create an 'effect of reality'; the hero's lonely life on a distant island; the central role of the hero's efforts and suffering; and the building of civilization by a single man. The Robinsonades were marked by imperial and masculine fantasies,³¹ and, as Beňovský, blurred the distinction between fiction and report.³²

Of course, his accounts were totally imaginary, as inspectors Guillaume Léonard de Bellecombe and Étienne Claude Chevreau revealed in 1776. Beňovský never built more than a few small wooden forts, which quickly deteriorated. He led unspectacular little wars against local chiefs from the lesser branches of the Sakalava dynasty. His troops were hungry and ill, and the whole region was devastated.³³ However, for a few years, Beňovský's fanciful reports seemed credible to the French government. When the Minister of the Navy finally dispatched inspectors, it was not because he had any serious doubts about Beňovský's accounts, but only to check if northeast Madagascar was really salubrious enough to send settlers.³⁴

Furthermore, even after his lies were discovered, Beňovský was magnificently rewarded after his arrival in Versailles in May 1777. Contrary to Maudave, who had been comparatively sincere, he received honours and money for his fairy tales. Although the Minister of the Navy, Sartine, was well informed about his lies and misdeeds,³⁵ he received the Croix de Saint-Louis, and that – against the rules – after only a few years of service.³⁶ In addition, the French king gave him during the next months the enormous sum of 143,000

²⁹ ANOM, C 5^A 5, n°36.

³⁰ On the image of patriotic heroes in the eighteenth century: Ronald G. Asch, *Herbst des Helden. Modelle des Heroischen und heroische Lebensentwürfe in England und Frankreich von den Religionskriegen bis zum Zeitalter der Aufklärung. Ein Essay* (Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag, 2016), 20, 126-33; Simon Schama, *Der zaudernde Citoyen. Rückschritt und Fortschritt in der Französischen Revolution* (München: Kindler, 1989), 43.

³¹ Richard Philipps, *Mapping Men and Empir.: A Geography of Adventure* (London: Routledge, 1997); Éric Fougère, *Les Voyages et l'Ancre. Représentation de l'espace insulaire à l'âge classique et aux Lumières (1615-1797)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995).

³² Martin Green, *The Robinson Crusoe Story* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990); Inga Pohlmann, *Robinsons Erben. Zum Paradigmenwechsel in der französischen Robinsonade* (Konstanz: Hartung-Gorre, 1991); Arthur Blaim, *Failed Dynamics: The English Robinsonade of the Eighteenth Century* (Lublin: Uniwersytet Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Wydział Humanistyczny, 1987); Philipps, *Geography of Adventure*, introduction and first chapter; Fougère, *Les Voyages*, 51-61, 190-8.

³³ ANOM, C 5^A 4, n°126; C 5^A 7, n°16, 17, 24, 32-58, 61-64.

³⁴ ANOM, C 5^A 6, n°32, n°39.

³⁵ ANOM, C 5^A 8, n°134.

³⁶ ANOM, C 5^A 8, n°3, 29, 30, 45; Orłowski, *Beniowski*, 163

livres, which Beňovský pretended to have spent for France on Madagascar. Of course, the commander of Louisbourg had not a single document proving his assertions.³⁷ He was nevertheless named *brigadier* and received, additionally to his yearly wage of 6,000 *livres*, a pension of 4,000 *livres*.³⁸ As Beňovský left the service of the French king, the ministry continued to pay him his pension, again contrary to the habit of French administration.³⁹ In 1779, he reclaimed once more money from the king, saying that he had ruined himself for France, and received an additional 22,000 *livres*.⁴⁰ In 1783, Beňovský asked for a further 200,000 *livres*. One of the ministerial employees supported this demand, saying that the French king indeed owed a lot to the former commander of Louisbourg. He had, so recounted the employee, gained the friendship of all Malagasy kings without firing a single shot, and thanks to his generosity and knowledge of Malagasy language and customs, he had been respected and loved by the natives.⁴¹ Even if Beňovský was not successful with this last reclamation, such a comment shows that, apparently, the letters of the Upper Hungarian nobleman were much more broadly received than the reports of the inspectors. What is more, even if not everybody was duped by Beňovský – and the Minister of the Navy Sartine obviously was not –, the behaviour of the French government tells us that it appeared more important to reward a servant of the king who had ‘sacrificed’ years and ‘suffered’ on a distant island than it was to judge whether the servant had given reliable intelligence about the places, peoples and events under his command.

How did Beňovský appear credible for several years? First, his narratives were inspired, to a large extent, by Maudave.⁴² He narrativised Maudave’s discourse about soft colonial expansion through civilising policy. For example, while Maudave had announced he would put an end to the practice of infanticide, Benyovsky declared that he had done so and made up a story showing how. Second, Beňovský tried to monopolise the information flow from Madagascar. He forbade his soldiers and employees to write anything about the situation in the Great Island, and confiscated their letters.⁴³ He used also his inland *palissade* to isolate people who might tell the truth to the navy officers who came a few times each year to Louisbourg.⁴⁴ Third, the French commander on Madagascar made up evidence. He devised

³⁷ ANOM, C 5^A 6, n°8; C 5^A 7, n°2 and 3; C 5^A 8, n°53, 63, 66, 95, 124; C 5^A 8bis, n°164; Orłowski, *Beniowski*, 163.

³⁸ ANOM, C 5^A 8, n°133, 142.

³⁹ ANOM, C 5^A 8, n°148.

⁴⁰ ANOM, C 5^A 8bis, n°158–64.

⁴¹ ANOM, C 5^A 8bis, n°186.

⁴² ANOM, C 5^A 2, n°12, fol. 14; MHN, Ms. 888, 49.

⁴³ ANOM, C 5^A 4, n°90, fol. 1; ANOM, B 155, fol. 24.

⁴⁴ ANOM, DFC, 88, n°43.

letters allegedly written by his officers or his interpreter.⁴⁵ He wrote lists of ‘submitted chiefs’, sent fake protocols of the officers’ council, and the texts of treaties he pretended to have concluded with Malagasy princes.⁴⁶ What is more, he let his cartographer draw maps of imaginary housing estates, forts and roads.⁴⁷

Although Beňovský was very creative in his narratives, the fundamental cultural patterns he used were not specifically Central European. Rather, they had much to do with Enlightenment and in particular with the way some French authors wrote about Madagascar. The knowledge he produced was framed by an Enlightenment discourse about European superiority, and was not influenced by his Upper Hungarian origins. Furthermore, he did not present himself as an Upper Hungarian, but rather as a faithful servant of the French king, who suffered for the glory of the sovereign.⁴⁸

Adventure: a foreigner in European empires

Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that Beňovský’s discursive strategies were special. This had nothing to do with his Central European origins, but might be partly related to his position as a petty noble from another country. As a foreigner from rather humble origins who had fled his country, Beňovský had no support through family networks. In order to draw attention to his person, he had to present himself as an extraordinary personality. As he and his family were almost totally unknown in France, he had also the possibility to invent himself anew. On his arrival in Macao, he had already developed a new version of his life story. He asserted to have been sent by Empress Maria Theresa to Poland in order to defend Catholicism against the Russian, whereas he was probably a Protestant.⁴⁹ He also contended to have fought in the Mediterranean under the banner of the Order of the Knights of St. John, and to have learned navigation there, whereas he had learned to steer a ship in Hamburg.⁵⁰ Beňovský also added a sentimental touch to his life story: according to his narrative, he had fled Kamchatka with the governor’s daughter, who loved him, but had died on his arrival in China. The Upper Hungarian nobleman even organised a mock burial ceremony for the girl, but the Dominican monks found out that the corpse in the coffin was that of a man.⁵¹ On the whole, Beňovský’s

⁴⁵ MAE, Asie 4, n°20, fols. 58–9; ANOM, C 5^A 4, n°34, fol. 3.

⁴⁶ MAE, Asie 4, n°52, 57, 58; ANOM, C 5^A 5, n°38, 76; C 5^A 6, n°11.

⁴⁷ ANOM, C 5^A 4, n°13, 46; BnF, MF, NAF n°9413, fol. 346; MAE Asie 4, n°49, 74.

⁴⁸ „Mémoire sur l’expédition de Madagascar“ von Benyovszky: ANOM, C 5^A 3, Nr. 14, p. 31-32, 37, 39, 46, 59-61, 75 95-96, 103-104.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 11-113.

⁵⁰ Ebd., S. 11-113.

⁵¹ Orłowski, *Beniowski*, 108-13.

discursive strategy was successful: he was soon considered as an unusual man having gathered experience “with the savage” and was employed by the minister of the Navy for these reasons.⁵²

Beňovský’s fanciful reports on his activities on Madagascar were thus a continuation of the only strategy he could follow to make a career in the French state. In the eighteenth century, the administration usually did not appoint foreigners to leading functions. Ministers chose people they knew or who were integrated into well-established patronage networks.⁵³ However, Beňovský’s discursive strategy also showed its limits. Although the former commander of Louisbourg was richly rewarded for his services on Madagascar, the French administration was not willing anymore to give him another leading position in the colonial world.⁵⁴ Beňovský thus tried to be employed by other imperial powers, especially Britain. In London, he presented himself as the sovereign of a Malagasy state that sought Britain’s protection.⁵⁵ For this reason, he refashioned his narrative about his Madagascar experience, although it was already strongly fanciful: for the British reading public, he wrote his memoirs, which soon became a bestseller. With this book, he probably hoped to win influential people to his cause and gain British support like the adventurer Theodor Neuhoff, who had been patronized by the British government after claiming to be king of Corsica.⁵⁶ Beňovský’s acquaintance Jean Hyacinthe de Magellan,⁵⁷ a Portuguese natural philosopher and fellow of the Royal Society in London, was critical because Magellan translated the text into English and saw that it was published.

The memoirs differ in several ways from the narrative Beňovský had written for the French Minister of the Navy. In his memoirs, Beňovský boasted again about the number of his enemies and the greatness of his success, and developed further the conspiracy theory that the governor and *intendant* of the Mascarenes had tried to sabotage the colony.⁵⁸ However, he

⁵² Letter of Boynes to Maillart and Ternay, 19th March 1773: ANOM, DFC, XVII/mémoires/88, no. 42, fol. 2; untitled (except „Carton n°10, n°41“): ANOM, Séries géographiques, MAD 150 207, fol. 3.

⁵³ For example, it was not the expert Valgny who was tasked with the creation of a colony on Madagascar, but Maudave, who had never seen this island before. The reason was that Maudave knew the minister Choiseul-Praslin since he was a young man, as Choiseul-Praslin himself writes: ANOM, DFC, XVII/mémoires/88, no. 31, fol. 1.

⁵⁴ Orłowski, *Beniowski*, S. 208.

⁵⁵ ANOM, C 5^A 8bis, No. 184, 185, 193; Orłowski, *Maurycy August Beniowski*, 208-9.

⁵⁶ ANOM, C 5^A 8bis, No. 184.

⁵⁷ ANOM, C 5^A 8bis, No. 235; Móric Beňovský, *Des Grafen Moritz August von Beniowski Reisen durch Sibirien und Kamtschatka über Japan und China nach Europa. Nebst einem Auszuge seiner übrigen Lebensgeschichte. Aus dem Englischen übersetzt, mit Anmerkungen von Johann Reinhold Forster, Professor der Naturgeschichte und Mineralogie in Halle, Mitglied der königlichen preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, mit Kupfern* (Berlin: Voß, 1790), iii.

⁵⁸ On the play with numbers in Beňovský’s memoirs: Paule Vacher, *Contribution à l’histoire de l’établissement français fondé à Madagascar, par le baron de Benyovszky (1772-1776). D’après de nouvelles sources manuscrites* (Aix-en-Provence: CMAf MMSH, 2006), 17-20.

now portrayed himself as an independent actor who concluded treaties in his own name. The French government, he wrote, had asked him to subdue the island through force, but he had disobeyed and chosen to use ‘soft’ means.⁵⁹ He had been successful, he continued, but the Minister of the Navy sent inspectors to arrest him and regain control over the island. Beňovský contended to have received proudly his would-be captors and quit the service of the French king.⁶⁰

The climax of the memoirs’ narrative is reached when the natives choose Beňovský as an ‘ampansacabe’ or ‘king of the kings’ of Madagascar. Once again, Beňovský may have had the idea about this election reading one of Maudave’s texts: in his diary, Maudave asserted that the Malagasy did not consider him as a Frenchman, but as ‘the son of a mighty chief from the north [of Madagascar]’ who was raised in France.⁶¹ Probably inspired by this detail, Beňovský invented the title ‘ampansacabe’ during the redaction of his memoirs in the early 1780s.⁶² His version was similar to Maudave’s: an old Malagasy woman had spread the rumor that he was an offspring of the reigning dynasty, and the natives elected him as an ‘ampancasabe’ in a formal assembly.⁶³ The enthronement allegedly took place shortly before the inspectors came to arrest him. Beňovský describes in great detail the impressive ceremonies, consisting of a military parade, speeches, blood oaths and homage, and women dancing.⁶⁴ In the framework of a second range of ceremonies lasting three days and containing among other elements a vow made by women dancing in the moonlight, the new king introduces a state constitution and created a government and laws.⁶⁵ One of the chiefs of the region recognizes in a speech to his fellow countrymen that before that ‘we lived like wild beasts. One moment we killed our brothers, the next they killed us. Weakened and divided, we were the victim of the strongest, we were evil and deaf, we did not hear the voice of justice.’⁶⁶

Beňovský’s election as king embodies a basic precept from theories of natural law. As he explains how and why he became king, Beňovský simultaneously describes the emergence of the Malagasy from a natural state and the creation of civil life through a social contract.

⁵⁹ Móric Beňovský, *Voyages et mémoires de Maurice-Auguste, Comte de Benyowsky, magnat des royaumes d’Hongrie et de Pologne etc. etc., contenant ses opérations militaires en Pologne, son exil au Kamchatka, son évacion et son voyage à travers l’océan pacifique, au Japon, à Formose, à Canton en Chine et les détails de l’établissement qu’il fut chargé par le ministère françois de former à Madagascar*. vol. 2 (Paris: Buisson, 1791), 440-1.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 14-23.

⁶¹ MHN, Ms. 3001, Journal de Maudave, 51.

⁶² Orłowski, *Maurycy August Beniowski*, 162-208.

⁶³ Beňovský, *Voyages et mémoires*, 308-9.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 417-19, 424-29.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 444-61.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 446-7.

Beňovský's memoirs are therefore especially reminiscent of Rousseau's vision: the wild Malagasy did not live in innocence, but in a degenerated state of anarchy. Recognizing their misery, however, the Malagasy elected a Lycurgus – a historical figure that Rousseau very much admired – to rule over them, but with their consent.⁶⁷ At the people's will, Beňovský claimed, he had suppressed the slave trade.⁶⁸ Thus the memoirs were not merely a document meant to gain British patronage; they were also a more complete example of 'enlightened' colonialism, adding elements from *philosophie* to the robinsonade Beňovský had written originally for the French Minister of the Navy.

Beňovský, a European phenomenon

Beňovský's narrative failed to gain the support of the British government, but he did succeed in convincing private men in London and Baltimore to invest in a company that would use his position as an 'ampancasabe' to facilitate slave trading.⁶⁹ In October 1784, a ship left Baltimore with Beňovský and 61 other persons on board, heading for the Great Island.⁷⁰ In July 1785, Beňovský and his companions tried to settle in northern Madagascar, but were attacked by troops of the Sakalava king of Boina.⁷¹ They managed to flee and to attack a small trading post belonging to the French on the northeast coast.⁷² Beňovský, pretending to be sovereign, began to build a village in the region which he had formerly ruled for the French, and – so provoked – the governor of the Mascarenes sent a military expedition to stop him. Beňovský was killed in the French attack in 1786 and died a weapon in his hand as a self-nominated 'king of the kings' of Madagascar.⁷³

Even in the last phase of his colonial career, the imaginary used by Beňovský had not been typical of Central Europe. One cannot see a special identity or cultural influence coming from his Upper Hungarian origins. However, his marginal social position both enabled and almost forced him to be especially creative and imaginative in order to make career. His case gives some insights into the mechanisms of patronage, knowledge production, and decision-making in the French empire, rather than on Central Europe and its inhabitants.

⁶⁷ Denise Leduc-Fayette, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et le mythe de l'antiquité* (Paris: Vrin, 1974), 71-101.

⁶⁸ Beňovský, *Voyages et mémoires*, 456.

⁶⁹ Orłowski, *Beniowski*, 162-215; ANOM, C 5^A 8bis, No. 209, f. 2; *ibid.*, No. 239, f. 1; contract between Beňovský and the merchants Zollickoffer and Messonier, 5th September 1784: ANOM, C 5^A 8bis, No. 190.

⁷⁰ Orłowski, *Maurycy August Beniowski*, 216.

⁷¹ ANOM, C 5^A 8bis, No. 202 and 239, fol. 1-5.

⁷² ANOM, C 5^A 8bis, No. 203, fol. 1.

⁷³ ANOM, C 5^A 8bis, No. 213, fol. 4; ANOM, DFC, XVII/mémoires/88, No. 97, fol. 5-6.

Beňovský did not produce a specific Central European knowledge on Madagascar. On the contrary, he used the French Enlightenment narrative about universal progress in history to present his policy as a soft policy of persuasion and civilization of the Malagasy, like his predecessor Maudave had done. But contrary to Maudave, Beňovský's narratives departed more and more from his real experience on Madagascar. He made up wars and victories, and claimed to have created roads or settlements which in reality did not exist, and to have turned the Malagasy into proto-French people. He used media in a very innovative way, and nearly succeeded in monopolizing information about Madagascar.

However fantastic these information were, they were taken seriously by French administration and constituted thus soon a real knowledge. French administration planned soon to launch the colonization of northern Madagascar on a bigger scale. To be sure, a few years later, it became clear that Beňovský was a liar. However, this had not the consequences one could expect. Large-scale colonization of Madagascar was abandoned for a while, but Beňovský was richly rewarded by the minister and his knowledge not fundamentally put into question. This case shows that the dominant logics in knowledge production was neither scientific nor bureaucratic, but a courtly one. Furthermore, the epistemic setting of French administration (especially due to the specific media which it used) permitted the instauration of knowledge that did animate to French expansion endeavours, but did not help to develop realistic projects.

After having quitted the service of the French king, Beňovský used literature in order to get employed. The fact that the story he presented could seem realistic to his contemporaries, as among others the comments of his memoirs by Johann Reinhold Forster and his son Georg show,⁷⁴ tells a lot about European imagination in the age of Enlightenment. For the European public, the superiority of civilisation was such that it seemed probable that 'barbarians' would freely submit themselves to a civilised man and expect from him to receive law and order. Beňovský's memoirs give thus important insights into Enlightenment worldviews. Although of Upper Hungarian origins, Beňovský was above all a European phenomenon.

⁷⁴ Benyovszky, *Reisen*, here the introduction by Johann Reinhold Forster; G. Forster, *Sämtliche Schriften, Tagebücher, Briefe. Kleine Schriften zur Völker- und Länderkunde*, bearbeitet von Horst Fiedler, Klaus-Georg Popp, Annerose Schneider, Christian Suckow (Berlin, 1985), 29-44.