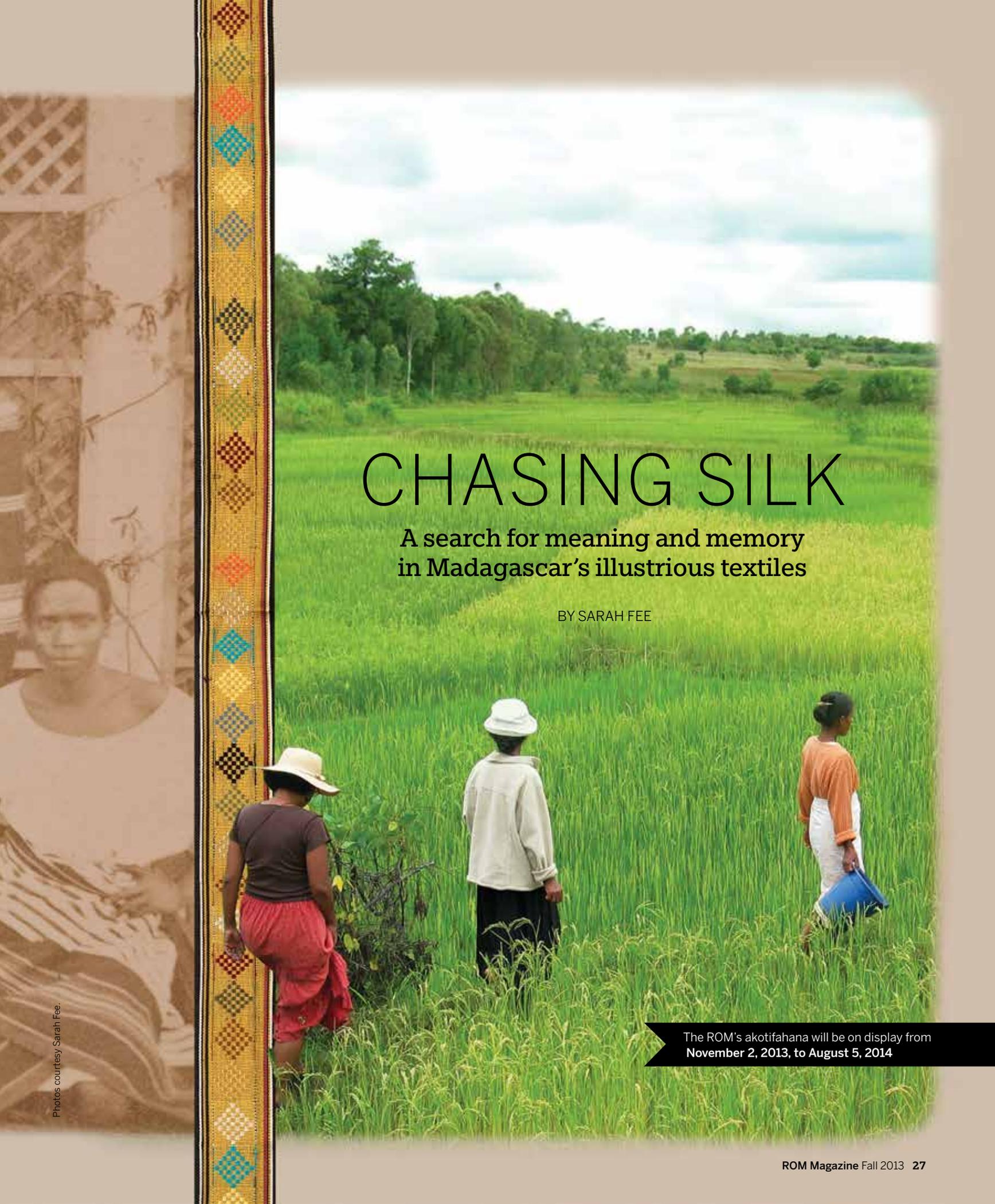




Malagasy men are dressed in akotifahana in this rare image dating from about 1865.

Opposite: Women in the central highlands of Madagascar head into local rice fields to gather iron-rich mud used in creating black dye, 2010.

Photo: Council for World Mission archive, SOAS Library, CWM/LMS/MA/PHOTO/02/002/161



CHASING SILK

A search for meaning and memory
in Madagascar's illustrious textiles

BY SARAH FEE

The ROM's akotifahana will be on display from
November 2, 2013, to August 5, 2014



Lush green, aqua blue, brilliant red...
rare, unique, exquisite, beautiful...
these words capture not only
Madagascar's famous natural landscape
but also the African island's
little-known textile arts.

In the 1800s weavers in Madagascar created great rectangular silk shawls striped in all the rainbow's many hues and sprinkled with enigmatic motifs. Called *akotifahana*, these woven masterpieces were the most luxurious and expensive cloth of the day, worn by nobility and presented by queens and kings to favoured subjects. Europeans of the late 19th century admiringly compared them to stained glass and the best Kashmir shawls.

Akotifahana are enormous, measuring about 2.5 by 1.5 metres and are unique among Malagasy textiles. They are made of shimmering Chinese silk, rather than native silk, in colours such as turquoise, magenta, scarlet, brown, and grape purple in contrast with the brick-red, black, white, and yellow of more ordinary textiles. Most distinctive, the mantles feature raised designs of stylized geometric shapes or plant-like forms and are often further embellished with special fringes, knotted and topped by a lateral woven band or a delicate tiered style.

Considered by many to be among the greatest most alluring of Africa's weaving traditions, akotifahana have been the subject of several scholarly studies. They are nevertheless the subject of key lingering questions. When did they first come into existence? Why do they look so different from other Malagasy textiles? Who made them and for whom?

Since 2009 I have been working to answer these questions in the most recent chapter of my 25-year study of Madagascar's textile arts.

Unraveling the cloth's stories ultimately took me back to Madagascar—where I apprenticed with contemporary highland silk weavers—as well as to England, France, Germany, and the U.S. I have scrutinized dusty trade records, ferreted out forgotten akotifahana in European museums, translated a neglected 19th-century Malagasy-language manuscript, commissioned scientific analyses of dyes, and in the doing have acquired some remarkable historic textiles for the ROM collection.

I learned that to truly understand akotifahana silk mantles, we need to look beyond Madagascar and indeed beyond Africa. Woven into these magnificent pieces are influences from India, Southern Arabia, Europe, even distant South America.

Beyond trade and geopolitics, another force at play in the making and wearing of akotifahana is something we in the 21st century can understand: fashion—the desire to create an up-to-date and distinctive persona in a fast-changing world. But the beauty of any textile is more than skin deep. More than any other types of material object, cloth and dress are windows onto a world, revealing economic, social, religious, and political histories along with intimate personal details, memories, and identities.

It is strange then that until very recently, textiles were not considered a respectable topic of study, and general Western biases



Madagascar remains a place both mysterious and exotic in the Western imagination—this despite the efforts of many scholars over the years to dispel the myths. An immense island, roughly the size of France, Madagascar broke and drifted from the African mainland about 65 million years ago. The resulting isolation produced the island's renowned biodiversity. More than 80 percent of its flora and fauna—including the lemur (a unique primate), giant frogs, and singular orchids—exist nowhere else on earth.

Still, rather than isolation, it is the opposite historical force that explains much of Malagasy human history. The island is situated at the crossroads of the Indian Ocean's numerous trade networks and busy sea lanes connecting Asia to Africa. For more than 4,000 years predictable monsoon winds have carried ships, people, and products throughout this region, including to Madagascar.

Linguists, anthropologists, and geneticists all largely agree that the first substantial human population came from present-day Indonesia some time around 500 CE, probably as part of the lucrative spice trade. Over time they were joined by Indian, Arab, and African settlers to produce a unique Indian Ocean society.

Earlier this year, archeologists added an intriguing twist to the story of the peopling of Madagascar, reporting the discovery of Neolithic stone tools on the island dating to 2000 BCE. While startling, the discovery simply underscores the longstanding interconnectedness of the island to the greater Indian Ocean world.

tended to dismiss textiles and fashion altogether as frivolous. Early anthropologists had a keen interest in non-Western dress, but it faded as the 20th century progressed. Art historians, for their part, largely focused on the “fine” arts, which meant sculpture or painting.

So as I was embarking on my anthropological career, I did not go looking for cloth. Instead, I feel now that it came looking for me.

In 1988, at age 23, I set off for Madagascar to study tomb art, the great stone and wooden monuments that the island’s men erect to honour their ancestors. By life-altering happenstance, I landed in one of the few remaining villages in southern Madagascar where women still weave cloth. Until the 1950s, throughout the island, women wove and dyed leaves, bark, cotton, and silk into striped rectangular wrappers that were draped around the body as dress and also used to cover revered ancestors for burial. By the 1980s, these traditions were mostly extinct, and handweaving existed only in isolated pockets scattered around the island. I had chanced upon one of them.

As I embarked on my career, I did not go looking for cloth.... I feel now that it came looking for me

As a budding anthropologist, I found that helping women in their daily work was the best way to integrate myself into the community. And cloth-making was an important part of this work. So I threw myself into it. By the time I left southern Madagascar 18 months later, I had learned to spin cotton, boil up kettles of dyes from red bark, and weave burial shrouds using a loom made of polished sticks. Equally important, I had come to understand a little of what life was and is like for the women engaged in this difficult work. All these experiences conspired to permanently draw me into the world of textiles and to pursue it as an academic career.

Initially, my PhD supervisor was not so keen as me, perhaps adhering to the prejudice that cloth was an insufficiently serious academic subject. Luckily, by the early 1990s, that attitude was changing: feminist anthropologists and textile scholars had published on the critical importance of textiles in the economic, ritual,



The colours in this 130-year-old cloth from the ROM collection are natural except for the red and green, synthetics that can be precisely dated to 1884. To create motifs like this one (inset), weavers lay in a supplemental weft thread over the ground weave.

Processing Chinese silk is the most time-consuming task in making akotifahana. It takes days to wash the yarn, wind it into hanks and onto spools, twist the warp threads, and, finally, prepare separate thick yarns for weft and motifs. Ambohidrabiby, 2010.



and social lives of peoples from Samoa to Sicily. They recognized that people of all ages and cultures use cloth to create relationships as well as individual and group identities. They saw that beyond dress, textiles were also an essential offering made at the time of birth, coming-of-age, marriage, as political tribute, to seal diplomatic relations, and often, at funerals, to swath the deceased in the layers of fine fabrics that assure their place in the afterlife. (I eventually learned that in Madagascar families may spend as much on burial cloth as they do on the great tombs I had originally intended to study.)



Studying akotifahana required a trip to the island's central highlands, the mountainous area surrounding the capital city, Antananarivo

I returned to southern Madagascar in 1992 for a further three years, continuing my study of cloth's role in Malagasy culture. Following the classic anthropology model of the time, I worked hard to document a small community of (ostensibly) isolated cattle herders, who were creating what were considered "traditional" cloths that changed little over time. But again the theoretical ground was shaking. Globalization had made scholars sensitive to interconnections, to the movements of people and



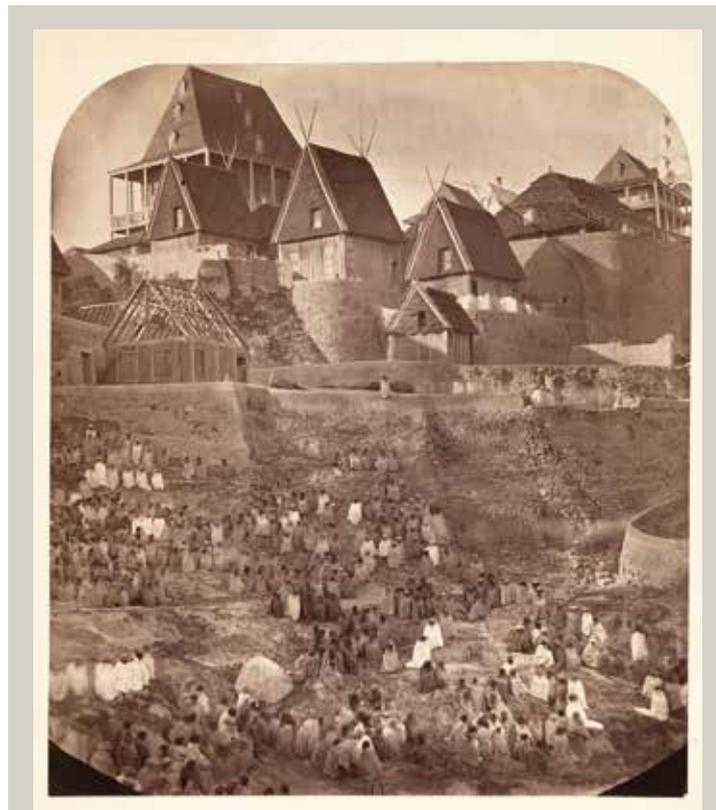
goods, present and past. Those focusing on material objects had further recognized that rather than corrupting “authentic” crafts, integrating foreign elements and influences was a longstanding practice of artists most everywhere.

Studying akotifahana cloth was my own first-hand journey into exploring these forces. It represented as well my first research foray into the central highlands of Madagascar, the mountainous area surrounding the capital city of Antananarivo, home today to some 2 million people. Inhabited by the Merina people, one of the island’s many ethnic groups, this land of terraced rice fields and tall brick-red houses holds an outsized place in the island’s history, having produced a line of kings and queens who, from 1780, came to rule over most of the island. The Merina were the exclusive weavers and wearers of akotifahana, one of the cloth’s many peculiarities.

For all its beauty and cultural value, akotifahana cloth left very few traces in the historic record. In the 19th century, authors wrote little about it, and only a few known images exist. Pieces in museums are generally undocumented. Observers in the 20th century therefore had little to go on, encouraging more than one to wax romantic or exotic. Some modern authors (and weavers) proposed the cloth’s motifs encoded political rank or were ancient religious symbols. An oft-repeated—and as I found, wholly unsubstantiated—study proclaimed certain motifs represent “trees of life” surrounded by “guardian birds.” Others asserted the cloths were “royal,” worn by the sovereign or made at royal workshops. Yet other authors saw in the bright colours evidence of the influence of British artisans who worked in Imerina from 1820.

Sorting out these disparate propositions required an extended journey to the primary sources, as well as deploying all the tools in the kit of art history and anthropology. It began with research trips to archives in London for a close study of writings by the missionaries and artisans of the London Missionary Society (LMS), who, invited by King Radama I, were active in highland Madagascar from 1817 to 1838, and again after 1863. This work revealed three important findings: a British weaver sent to the island to mechanize and transform the industry failed quickly and ceased working; by 1820, Merina weavers were already employing brightly coloured Chinese silk sold to them by Arab traders; political rank was no longer being marked by wearing handwoven cloth but by imported fabrics and engraved medals.

In the Malagasy Royal Archives, I read through the wardrobe registers of Malagasy queens and the meticulous daily journals of court activities. None divulged any evidence of royal silk weaving guilds or the royals’ wearing of handwoven brocaded silks. Merina kings and queens indeed made gifts of akotifahana—together with



Madagascar treasures at the ROM

The ROM owns some of the world’s oldest photographs and dated pieces of Malagasy cloth, generously donated by the Canadian descendants of the British missionary, the Reverend William Ellis (1794–1872). Representing the London Missionary Society, Ellis visited Madagascar in the 1850s and ‘60s. As custom dictated, he was presented with gifts of cloth by the royal court when he left the island. That is probably how he acquired a remarkable blue wild silk shawl patterned with thousands of silver-coloured beads.

Ellis was among the very first photographers to work in highland Madagascar, including Antananarivo.

The capital city of Antananarivo, circa 1863, photographed by William Ellis.

many other kinds of handwoven and imported cloth—to foreign allies and favoured subjects, but not in accordance with rank. Intriguing as they may have sounded, royal and political associations for the akotifahana thus seemed unlikely, as did any British influence on early akotifahana design.

Further proof—a sort of research smoking gun—I found in the 1870 writings of a Merina man known to posterity only as the *Ombiasy* (“the Diviner”). Textile researchers, myself included, had long overlooked this important source. Aided by Malagasy colleagues and weavers, I managed to translate the difficult technical passages and was rewarded with a wealth of information on dyeing and weaving from that time. According to the *Ombiasy*, the



In recent years, akotifahana makers have returned to 19th century motifs and colour patterns as exemplified in this sumptuous piece woven in Antananarivo in 2010.

striping of cloth was its main design element and the brocaded motifs mere *haingo*, that is, decorative embellishments. Further, the weaver was free in the choice of colours and motifs, which she or her clients combined as they saw fit: “whatever a person desires.” Motifs were inspired by objects from daily life, as well as imported goods, so rather than rigidly marking rank or religion, the cloths were improvised individual creations.

Subsequent analysis of physical cloths supported the Ombiasy. Tragically Madagascar lost its entire collection of 19th-century akotifahana in a fire that destroyed the Queen’s palace museum in 1995. I was able though to locate and study several dozen samples in museums and private collections in Europe and the U.S. ... and Canada! Soon after I was hired as a curator at the ROM in 2009, I discovered a pristine akotifahana in our storage drawers, donated by descendants of missionary George Cousins and dateable to around 1884. Now, four years later, the ROM owns 10 exquisite 19th-century examples, which I acquired from a variety of sources: small town auctions in France, exclusive New York dealers, and the generous donation of an Ontario family. These additions have made the ROM’s akotifahana collection North America’s largest.

Studying this wide pool reveals what a single piece cannot: an incredible range in colours and pattern combinations. No two pieces are alike.

The ROM’s expanded collection of historic akotifahana further helped to reveal how such variety was achieved. We sent several samples to the Canadian Conservation Institute in Ottawa for dye analysis. The results were a revelation: weavers utilized not only local natural dyes and a very few synthetic colorants, but also natural dyes originating from as far away as South America—cochineal and brazilwood—sometimes mixing all three types to create a vast range of brilliant hues.

I located three remaining weavers in 2010. The elders shared with me their grandmothers’ designs, some of which matched what we have in the Museum!

There remained one hypothesis to confirm: the identity of 19th-century akotifahana weavers. Unlike their male artisan counterparts, Merina female weavers were not part of official guilds and never appeared in written documents. In the 1980s, however, several scholars had gathered oral histories linking akotifahana weaving to two noble clans—the Andriandranando and Andrianamboninolona—who reside just a few kilometres east of Antananarivo. In 2010, thanks to a ROM research grant, I was able to locate the three remaining—now elderly—Andriandranando weavers in this region who shared with me their grandmothers’ designs, some of which matched ROM Museum samples! Like the Ombiasy, these women insisted that the motifs were *haingo*, purely aesthetic embellishments drawn from the imagination of their makers.

Akotifahana weaving has all but disappeared from its historic seat in Andriandranando territory, but since the 1970s it has been taken up in other places. One new source of contemporary akotifahana weaving is Lamba Sarl, an atelier established in Antananarivo in the 1980s by Briton Simon Peers to make cloths inspired by historic designs. Several of their recent works are made entirely of spider's silk indigenous to the island. But the heartland of today's akotifahana weaving remains rural villages to the north of Antananarivo. There I was able to apprentice to a household of two sisters and their elderly mother. I learned and filmed the many complex, time-consuming steps in the cloth's making, from boiling silk skeins for hours over smoky fires, to spinning multiple great spindles to ply the delicate golden thread, to forming the intricate motifs that are the cloth's distinctive hallmarks.

My research had taken me a long way in showing what historic akotifahana were *not*. So what then, were they?

The accumulated evidence was leading me to the inevitable conclusion that the cloth style was a secular elite fashion that endured from perhaps 1830 to 1880. And it was a fashion very much born of the wider Indian Ocean. After all, increased trade in the region from the late 18th century produced the wealth that provided expendable income for a growing sector of Imerina's population. It also accelerated urbanization. Both trends fuelled desire for new shawl

fashions to match the splendour and brilliance of the European dress that royals and select state personnel had recently adopted.

And at that very moment, Arab traders from Oman were bringing the new ingredients to Madagascar. Controlling the rich silk supplies of the Persian Gulf, they funnelled some into Oman's own weaving industries, and exported the balance to their new East African commercial sphere, including Madagascar. Omani Arabs also gained a presence at the Merina court, their turbans and wrappers providing new striping patterns and colours to emulate. But influences in the colour and designs of akotifahana cannot be traced to a single origin. Rather, Merina weavers drew design inspiration from a wide range of sources, which likely included Indian trade cloth and British embroidery. In selectively choosing from among the many fibres, dyes, and objects that touched their shores, these weavers—and their clients—created an unmistakably unique, and uniquely Malagasy, artform. ◦

TO LEARN MORE:

Sarah Fee. "The Shape of Fashion: The silk brocades of 19th c. highland Madagascar." *African Arts* Autumn, 2013. 46(3):26–39.

John Mack. *Malagasy Textiles*. London: Shire Publications. 1989.

Simon Peers. "Malagasy Lamba. Silk Weaving among the Merina of Madagascar." *Hali Magazine*. 1997. 95:82–85, 116.



Sarah Fee with four generations of akotifahana weavers. 2010.



Photo by Dr. Bako Rasoarifetra.

Explore the rich heritage of textiles and fashion from around the world in the ROM's Patricia Harris Gallery of Textiles & Costume.