

**“Once a honey pot is discovered, all the fools rush in”:
Apiculture Knowhow and Technology in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Madagascar
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Abstract

In the last decade, beekeeping has emerged as a critical focus of livelihood development projects across Africa and the Indian Ocean, as a means of mitigating economic precarity and navigating the intensifying unpredictability of climate conditions. Yet less is known about historical apiculture techniques, technologies, and inter-generational knowledge practices of beekeeping through which communities have managed their relationships to honey bee colonies and the ecosystems in which they dwelled. This paper situates bee-keeping in a long historical framework, by exploring the lesser-known history of apiculture techniques and modes of innovation through encounters with incoming technologies (Mavhunga 2014) in Madagascar during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Located at the heart of the longstanding trade routes cross-crossing the southwestern Indian Ocean, Madagascar was an important producer of beeswax throughout the nineteenth century. By the 1880s, Malagasy beekeepers intensified production of the endemic Malagasy honey bee (*Apis mellifera unicolor*) and transformed Madagascar into the world’s third largest exporter of beeswax, supplying leather, candle, and textile industries in Europe and North America. Following French colonial conquest, and the rise of plantations and cash crops, Malagasy beekeepers persisted with apiculture as a critical element in diversified local economies, and selectively engaged with colonial-era attempts to incorporate industrial beekeeping, apiculture tools, and movable hives. Inspired by a rich body of historical scholarship on technologies in use across the continent, I chronicle how forests were simultaneously home to apiculture experimentation and sites where concepts of secrecy, labor, and expertise were debated (Chirikure 2017; Aderinto 2018; Osseo-Asare, 2019; Twagira 2020; D’Avignon 2020; Grace 2021). Although the precise origins of Malagasy beekeeping are not known, this paper follows the trajectory of materials—bees, beehives, wax, and honey—and written words—proverbs, dictionaries, colonial reports, and ethnographic accounts—to chart how Malagasy beekeepers drew on and innovated knowledge regimes and met the challenges of imperial encroachment, colonialism, and global capitalism.