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To cite this article: Patrick Desplat (23 May 2024): Hidden schemes and suspicious constructions. Inversive moments of occult infrastructures in Madagascar, Religion, State & Society, DOI: [10.1080/09637494.2024.2353952](https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2024.2353952)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2024.2353952>



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Published online: 23 May 2024.



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# Hidden schemes and suspicious constructions. Inversive moments of occult infrastructures in Madagascar

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## ABSTRACT

This contribution explores rumours of dubious activities at coastal sites in Madagascar, investigating occult formations through their underlying infrastructures. By introducing the concept of 'occult infrastructure', it illuminates the socio-material arrangements enabling the flow of occult forces. Suspicious constructions, marked by technological innovations and symbolic displays of power and social status, embody tangible expressions of occult infrastructures. The contribution contends that the interplay between the enduring nature of these structures and the transient quality of occult rumours creates moments of inversion – a temporary overlap between the occult and the ordinary, resulting in brief revelations before receding into concealed realms. This alignment of temporal, discursive, and material elements within occult phenomena aims not to uncover a hidden scheme but to provide an additional layer of understanding to an ongoing narrative.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 June 2023



Accepted 7 May 2024

## KEYWORDS

Materiality; rumour; building; temporality; magic; neoliberalism

## Introduction

In 2014, a hideous rumour about organ trafficking caused widespread public concern for several days in Mahajanga, an Indian Ocean port city in Northwest Madagascar. A young woman had been abducted and now, having escaped her tormentors, was broadcasting her scandalous story of brutal seizure and bloody body parts on a local TV station. She claimed to have been held captive at a fenced compound located on a hill about 20 km away from the city centre along the main road to the capital Antananarivo. The site was well-known to passing-by urban citizens because of its four large, blinking aerial masts, but for the broad majority the purpose of the construction remained opaque. The news spread quickly. Within a few hours after the broadcast, people were engaged in heated discussions about the suspicious role and function of the compound and its proprietors. Was the suspected building indeed a front for a globally operating organ trafficking ring? What kind of information were the aerials on the compound transmitting? Who were the cruel preparators who abduct ordinary Malagasy? Were magical practices or even witchcraft involved?

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For several decades, scandals about organ trafficking, ritual murder, the theft of ancestors' bones or child abductions have increasingly captured the attention of the national media and fuelled gossip in Madagascar (Cole 2001; Freeman 2004; Gardini 2019; Somda 2014; Tilghman 2020). These occurrences are intrinsic to occult formations, which encompass a diverse array of structures, practices, or phenomena tied to hidden forces. These formations exhibit variations across historical and local contexts, with a particular emphasis on immoral activities and covert exploitation by global powers. Narratives suggest that human bodies or body parts are sold and converted into profitable commodities for wealthy global actors. For instance, according to the rumours, desperate individuals in Madagascar violate sacred tombs, stealing and selling ancestors' bones for wealth, allegedly used in the production of artificial diamonds or as medicine for global elites. Children, women, ancestors, and body parts are recurring themes, symbolising ancestral and reproductive powers. The imagination of their transformation and inclusion in a global market evokes fears and anxieties about local powerlessness and exploitation. While these scandals have been widely researched in Madagascar, previous analyses have given less attention to the enabling heterogeneous yet integrative material and environmental structures that make the notorious fluid and slippery nature of occult formations possible.

This contribution takes the rumours about dubious sites and shady activities as an entry point for 'thinking infrastructurally' (Chu 2014) about the 'occult'. Adopting an infrastructural perspective involves understanding the occult not simply as an ontological entity or a metaphor that explains social inequalities and global capitalism, but also departing from a narrow focus on the occult as a scandalous spectacle that evokes awe and distress. Through the concept of 'occult infrastructure', I seek to illuminate the intricate and context-specific arrangements of relationships, processes, and both tangible and intangible elements that facilitate the seamless functioning of occult formations. The effective dissemination of rumours pertaining to organ trafficking relies on enabling factors that structure the temporary disclosure of occult activities. At the heart of this network of clandestine operations is the site of the radio station, which exemplifies what I term 'suspicious construction'. These structures arouse uncertainty regarding their intended use, ownership, and financial origins, primarily due to technological novelties and their role as showcases of power and prestige.

However, occult infrastructures are more than just enabling technological and material compositions as they elucidate the mutual constitution of social relations and physical environments. In the case of Madagascar, the rising rumours surrounding the compound can be traced back to a social environment of doubt, which reflects the ambiguous relationship with powerful actors, particularly foreign entities, their companies, and the Malagasy intermediaries who work for them. Certain components of these complex socio-material arrangements play a more enabling role than others. The occult infrastructures associated with organ trafficking in Madagascar, for example, require concealed spaces and Malagasy perpetrators to operate seamlessly.

The meanings and relational compositions of occult infrastructures are plural and subject to change, representing an ongoing process with no definitive endpoint. The durability of these suspicious buildings and the ephemeral nature of occult rumours converge during inversive moments – a limited period when the occult briefly emerges into the mundane world, becomes exposed, and subsequently retreats into hidden and

secret realms. While occult infrastructures are analytically appealing during these moments of revelation and subsequent evaporation from the material world, they do not operate in a simple on/off manner. The underlying suspicion commonly persists over time and may not dissipate even if the rumours are proven false. An underlying atmosphere of distrust is difficult to dispel, as it constantly lingers in public reminders of what initially caused apprehension.

Occult infrastructures in Madagascar are part of a broader landscape of invisible powers. A substantial portion of the anthropological literature about Madagascar focuses on the on the 'ways of the ancestors' (*fomban-drazana*) and the social dynamics between the living and the dead (Bloch 1971; Lambek 2003; Middleton 1999; Sharp 1994). The dead maintain a significant presence in everyday life as they continue to influence the success, well-being, and status of their descendants. Ancestors communicate with the living through spirit possession or dreams; they exercise wrath and impose taboos. Other spiritual forms can influence the living, as seen in episodes of mass spirit possession in educational facilities, initiated by spirits themselves or through witchcraft by jealous lovers (Hardyman 1971, Sharp 1994). These events often intersect with practices and discourses related to the 'occult', such as rumours of organ trafficking or the theft of ancestors' bones. However, they all require specific sociomaterial conditions to enable their occurrence.<sup>1</sup> This contribution is based on approximately 16 months of fieldwork conducted between 2011 and 2014 among educated youth and their families in the port city of Mahajanga.<sup>2</sup> Initially focusing on failed migration projects, the research shifted towards examining discourses of envy and associated rumours of betrayal and poisoning (Desplat 2018, 2022a). Current narratives of organ trafficking align with these rumours as they are part of a broader set of urban concerns regarding the capabilities of other individuals. Rumours and conspiracy theories are part of everyday discourses in Madagascar, and the challenges of navigating fact and fiction has become a habitual practice that has normalised socio-economic crises over the last five decades. I first heard the rumour about the abducted girl in the radio compound in Mahajanga from several of my interlocuters in 2014. During that time, some of them tried to decipher the often-contradictory narratives through social media and further discussions (see also Desplat 2022a).

### Thinking occult formations infrastructurally

The term 'occult' derives from the Latin word 'occultus', meaning 'hidden', 'concealed', or 'secret'. It encompasses perceptions and concerns about hidden manoeuvres which may or may not have spiritual dimensions and which are responsible for harming others through the mobilisation of opaque and exclusive powers, networks, or connections.<sup>3</sup> Since the 1990s, occult formations have been a prominent field of research in the anthropology, spanning from discourses of witchcraft (Geschiere 1997), rumours of organ trafficking (Scheper-Hughes 1996) and occult economies (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). Within this analytical framework, rumours, and related outbursts of violence work as local explanations for rapid political and economic transformations that gave birth to a new economy, a fusion between cultural concepts and global capitalism. Modernity and the new market economy have brought rising inequalities as well as unimaginable and sudden riches for a minority through shadowy means. This situation has led to an

increased desire for using magical ways to attain riches, while accusations of using such means can be deadly.

Although this analysis has had a significant impact on subsequent investigations, interest in the occult has waned in recent years. One reason for this decline is the vagueness of the term 'occult'. Since the 1980s, it has been loosely applied to anything related to witchcraft and magic (Geschiere 1997, 14). Some scholars have even expanded the concept to include illicit business, dehumanising labour practices, organ trafficking, and financial scams (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; D'Angelo 2014; Niehaus 2005). However, the generic nature of the term and its tendency to sensationalise phenomena and associate them with the exotic have raised concerns about its analytical value (Meyer 2009; Ranger 2007; Ter Haar and Ellis 2009).

At the same time, using the occult has benefits. Historically, the term has been used to refer to a set of ideas, beliefs, and practices that fell outside the accepted realm of religious traditions and scientific materialism, including alchemy, magic and astrology (Tiryakian 1974). As such, the idea of the occult is per se not to delimit, and its strength lies in the transgression of boundaries since it does not need a bounded definition of religion as it works its ways in both inside out. The fluid and kaleidoscopic character of the occult is related to its power in seizing moments when the ordinary transforms into the extraordinary – and vice versa in often unexpected situations: a radio station suddenly materialises as front for a dangerous cabal dealing, a regular crossroad becomes a site for witches, and trustworthy urbanites turn suddenly into blood-thirsty perpetrators. Under other circumstances the occult returns to its hidden and secret form. Yet, under what conditions does part of an existing infrastructure become occult and how does the notion of occult infrastructures offer analytical benefits and contribute to a deeper understanding of ongoing dynamics?

Over the last decades, a multitude of approaches and directions engaged with infrastructures as systems that enable and facilitate the connectivity, flow, and movement of assemblages of people, goods, ideas, or power (see Kirby, in this collection). In this sense, infrastructures could be regarded as 'extended material assemblages that generate effects and structure social relations, either through engineered (i.e. planned and purposefully crafted) or non-engineered (i.e. unplanned and emergent) activities' (Harvey, Jensen, and Morita 2016, 5). The tangible and intangible integrated parts form an arrangement that make certain relations and practices possible.

Infrastructures not only support forms of social life or work but generate effects and structure social relations. Engineered and non-engineered infrastructures are shaped by multiple agents with competing interests and capacities. They can have unintended consequences or take on meanings and qualities that were not initially planned. The fragility of these socio-material arrangements lies in their relational complexity and the (non)intentionality of their creators.

The notion of 'infrastructural inversion' captures the brittle yet enabling nature of infrastructures (Bowker and Leigh Star 1999). Infrastructures are, at least in common thinking, under-the-radar entanglements, both embedded and hidden. Their visibility is typically associated with their breakdowns or failure to connect properly (Campbell 2012; Graham 2010; Schwenkel 2015). Collapsing infrastructures disclose the unfulfilled promises of progress and modernity, one of the main reasons why scholars initially became interested in inversion. However, many researchers maintain that a thorough analysis

should not only unearth infrastructures after their collapse but also investigate them in their undisturbed procedure. Indeed, Star and Ruhleder (1996) opt to shift the attention from the 'what' to the 'when'. The authors recognise the challenges to delimit infrastructure conceptually yet point to inversion as unfolding moments when depths of interdependencies of material, social, technical, or spatial components become visible.

More recently, the perception that infrastructure is invisible and concealed has been subjected to criticism (Larkin 2013). Infrastructures are often conspicuously present rather than obscured. However, when it comes to occult infrastructures, the concept of infrastructural inversion retains its significance. For instance, the radio station and its blinking aerials in Madagascar may be highly visible, yet their purpose and function were so enigmatic that their opaque significance gave rise to (imagined) material manifestations such as concealed underground cells beneath the visible structure. In this context, infrastructural inversion exemplifies a different arrangement than what early researchers proposed, revealing the less tangible configuration that enables occult practices. While certain components of an infrastructural assemblage are more apparent than others, the concealed elements play a vital role in facilitating occult activities.

The hidden nature of the occult corresponds to the imperceptible and unintentional facets of infrastructure, which operate in the hidden or background realms. Occult configurations are never uniform but always interconnected, reliant on arrangements encompassing spaces, time, and an extensive range of material and social resources. They serve as sites of contradictory interpretations and confrontations regarding their significance. As an occult infrastructure, these perspectives converge, and I am specifically examining the instance when the occult aligns its infrastructure to form a cohesive yet temporary assemblage of meaning, materiality, sociality, and power.

For example, in Zandeland an old granary collapsed, injuring people who were taking shelter under it (Evans-Pritchard (1937 1976)). The Azande attributed the collapse to termites, but the occult has been invoked to explain why the collapse occurred precisely when people sought shelter. The occult, in this case witchcraft, provided a missing link in understanding misfortune. Even though this example taught much about the rationality of the occult, the granary itself has been only problematised in passing. We do not know much about the construction apart of its function as a store and resting place or that it is a 'heavy structure made of beams and clay and may be stored with eleusine as well' (Evans-Pritchard (1937 1976), 22). An infrastructural perspective would ask why a granary enable witchcraft but not any other building? Are granaries prone to the powers of the occult and why? Perhaps the granary was overloaded with a good harvest and therefore caused envy among others who finally took action? Who owned the granary and who build it?

This contribution examines 'suspicious constructions', referring to buildings with uncertain purposes and ownership. These structures stand apart from others, as actors suspect hidden meanings or intentions behind their physical appearances. Unlike buildings where the occult is expected to manifest, such as roundabouts or cemeteries, suspicious constructions do not immediately disclose their concealed significance. Only when these meanings are revealed can the state of doubt dissipate and a proper assessment become possible. These buildings draw attention due to the integration or exhibition of innovative technologies. While suspicion persists, moments of inversion arise when suspicion momentarily transforms into overt mistrust and, at times, violence.

## Occult formations in Madagascar

Considering the dynamics of suspiciousness and associated social tensions, I argue that occult infrastructures are part of a range of unsettling phenomena that tend to emerge during periods of rapid expansion, socioeconomic changes, political crises, or technological innovation. They not only provide explanations for past misfortunes but also shed light on the current situation and anticipated future. In Madagascar, occult formations are linked to moral panic and even societal breakdown, wherein social concerns arise over vague issues of personal failure, inequalities, cultural loss, or economic decline. This engenders a generalised and widespread fear that the security, values, and well-being of both society and individuals are severely threatened.

One may question the veracity of these stories. When individuals are apprehended with bags of bones, who are the buyers? Is there truly an organised global network involved in organ and human trafficking? Or are these merely fantasies and urban legends designed to instil fear? Rumours surrounding organ trafficking and theft of ancestors' bones are not about factual accuracy or fiction but rather resonate with the belief that power operates clandestinely and necessitates suspicion (West and Sanders 2003). According to Ann Laura Stoler (1992, 154), rumours represent a 'key form of cultural knowledge that [...] shapes what people think they know, blurring the boundaries between witnessed events and those envisioned, between performed brutality and its potentiality'. Rumours can be interpreted as allegorical narratives and social commentaries addressing anxieties rooted in past experiences and future uncertainty. Indeed, rumours convey a message of caution and the avoidance of potential calamities. They align with the temporal trajectory of suspicion as anticipatory signals against surprise. The cautionary nature oriented towards the future generates a complex temporality that oscillates between past and future. Possibilities or even expectations of negative surprises necessitate views that misfortunes are already known. The temporal progress and regression of attitudes intertwine in an infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, revelation, and rediscovery. This constant interplay between secrecy and disclosure is significant, as rumours constantly evolve while retaining similar cores of meaning, experience, or knowledge.

Rumours help to explain current conditions of suffering in local metaphors. The *mpaka olona* ('thieves of people'), *mpaka taova* ('thieves of organs'), and *mpangalatra taolampaty* ('thieves of bones') are the perpetrators and beneficiaries of human suffering. They are believed to amass wealth through invisible powers and exploit others through opaque technologies. Sometimes they are reckless and desperate youth who desecrate graves and steal bones, while other times they are ordinary Malagasy individuals who have forged strong connections with powerful foreigners. These actors' powers are not necessarily magical but always remain impenetrable and inexplicable.

The overarching theme of these rumours is to shed light on the exploitative moment when powerful and socially distant individuals, often foreign strangers or westernised wealthy Malagasy, prey upon ordinary Malagasy. Many scholars studying the occult have asked why occult-related rumours have become so captivating and prevalent in this historical moment (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Sanders 2003). One answer is that emerging rumours of organ trafficking and other

immoral means of accumulating wealth resonate with ongoing political transformations and the growing inequalities in the face of perceived global capitalism, where Madagascar and its inhabitants are reduced to pawns that can be exploited while the country's resources are extracted.

Prior to the 2010s, the population living below the poverty line was already substantial, but the political crisis following the 2009 coup d'état pushed 92% of Malagasy people to live on less than \$2 a day, solidifying Madagascar's position as one of the world's poorest countries.<sup>4</sup> In urban contexts, the rise of unemployment and underemployment, coupled with the boom of the informal subsistence sector, exacerbated existing inequalities. Due to the freeze in international aid from multilateral donors, the country's economic policies shifted towards new sources of funding, including rosewood exports, mining exploration with foreign companies, and dubious land grabbing practices (Duffy 2007; Gingembre 2015; Ke and Zhi 2017).

The escalating exploitative forces blurred the once clear distinctions between the 'local' and 'global', or between 'moral' and 'immoral' accumulation. Local illicit trades rely on global networks of traffickers and traders, forming a complex entity that generates substantial wealth alongside deep socioeconomic inequalities (Ferguson 2006). Yet, the Malagasy government seemed to have little control over these operations, leading to further embezzlement and informal trafficking. Rumours of organ trafficking or theft of ancestors' bones are an extension of these operations. They all merge with narratives of exploitation and the shadowy practices of corruption and nepotism.

Simultaneously, one must exercise caution in reducing rumours about organ trafficking solely to local metaphors and discursive models of explanation. Malagasy individuals are aware of the existence of a global health industry and market for organs. Wealthy Malagasy seek healthcare abroad in countries like India or China, while a select few Malagasy hospitals provide services for organ transplants. Where legal services exist, most citizens are convinced that an illegal market for organ sales also thrives. These rumours are rooted in local perceptions but grounded in the realities of inequalities and biomedical technology. They speak to both fiction and facts.

Moreover, the violence involved is real, as evidenced by incidents of dead children and attacks on people and property associated with the suspected perpetrators. These are buildings that are believed to 'hide' something. They could include state-owned structures such as police stations where people are suspected of being hidden (and protected) by the authorities. Other types of buildings more openly facilitate occult formations. For example, a mortuary suspected of involvement in organ trafficking or an unfinished migrant house that has become a modern ruin due to the collapse of monetary flow from abroad. Why do certain buildings so vividly enable occult formations? It is because people harbour affective suspicions that amplify prevailing uncertainties about the future. To further illustrate how we can conceive of the occult in an infrastructural manner, let us revisit the radio station briefly mentioned in the introduction. It serves as an excellent example of the ephemeral moments of the occult in relation to the durability of buildings, revealing two different forms of temporality that occasionally align and create a seamless amalgamation for a limited period before reverting to their previous states, often retaining their suspicious aura for the public.



## Scandals, suspicious constructions, and moments of inversion. A radio station in Mahajanga

Mahajanga, a bustling port town with a population of approximately 250,000, is situated on the Indian Ocean and blends Malagasy culture with influences from the region's historical ties to the Indian Ocean and its French colonial past. The city is renowned for its coconut-lined seaside promenade, known locally as *le bord* or the waterfront, which serves as a focal point for social interaction, leisure activities, and consumption. It has earned a reputation as a place where people engage in endless revelry, fostering an atmosphere of conviviality. The waterfront, symbolising leisure and well-being, became the epicentre of a rapidly spreading rumour.

On a hot and humid afternoon in October 2014, I met Givesto, a student of natural sciences, in a residential neighbourhood. After engaging in casual conversation, he inquired if I had heard the recent rumour concerning a woman who had recounted her abduction on a local TV station. According to the narrative, an 18-year-old woman had been kidnapped on a Saturday night and reappeared three days later after being held captive in a cellar located within a secure radio station.<sup>5</sup> Apparently, she encountered a young Malagasy man at the seaside promenade, suspected of using either drugs or his charismatic demeanour to seduce her.<sup>6</sup> Hearsay suggested that the man owned a luxurious car and had invited the woman for a drive around the city. After several rounds within the city limits, he directed their journey on the main road towards a fenced compound located in a rural area, characterised by large aerial masts arranged in a circular formation and connected by a network-like structure.<sup>7</sup>

The fenced compound is familiar to most residents of Mahajanga, as daily buses to the capital pass by it. Its imposing construction, featuring long, blinking aerials, consistently invites comments and speculation regarding its purpose. Givesto mentioned that nobody knows who built or owns the compound, and its function remains a mystery as it does not emit any discernible signals. The blinking aerials, reminiscent of beacons guiding air traffic near the nearby airport, further deepen the intrigue. Givesto's mother, employed in the state civil service, added another layer of suspicion, suggesting that the building's owners pay exorbitant taxes, implying that their activities either necessitate strict state control or that they use their wealth to evade scrutiny and continue their enigmatic pursuits. Givesto also heard gossip that the building is owned by white individuals, possibly Americans, and that it functions not as a conventional radio station but as a hub for 'communication', hinting at the transmission of classified information.

The assumptions regarding a foreign-owned building turned out to be partially correct. However, the broadcasted narrative of the abduction on a local TV station filled the knowledge gap regarding dubious activities with unprecedented details. While inside the building, the 18-year-old woman reported that she found herself in a room where other Malagasy individuals were already hanging from the roof by shackles. To her horror, she discovered a large pool of blood containing severed heads. After two days, she managed to free herself from the chains and sought an escape route. Following a tunnel covered in blood, she ran as fast as she could until she reached an exit leading to a nearby field. Exhausted, she promptly lost consciousness but regained it soon after, before immediately proceeding to the local TV station in Mahajanga to recount the horrific ordeal.

Givesto concluded his account with doubts regarding the woman's credibility, suggesting that she may have lied and that her story seemed too fantastical. He questioned her motives as she approached the local TV station before informing the police. Was she seeking fame? Or perhaps she had genuinely been abducted, and the radio station was indeed involved in organ trafficking? Do these underground chambers truly exist?

These and other questions were addressed through a series of reports in national newspapers that picked up the story.<sup>8</sup> According to these reports, the woman returned to the radio station accompanied by the police and journalists. Upon their arrival at the station's gate, they encountered an angry crowd of Malagasy individuals who had assembled to demand justice. They threatened to set fire to the compound unless they were allowed to enter and verify the accusations they had heard on TV. The police managed to pacify the crowd and requested the young woman to clarify her allegations once again. However, in front of the gathered people and the gate, the woman provided contradictory accounts of the events and locations involved. Suddenly, she declared that the radio station in question was not the correct place. Instead, she claimed to have been held captive at another nearby location, an intersection close to a cemetery.<sup>9</sup> Subsequently, the woman, accompanied by journalists and police officers, proceeded to the new site. Yet, upon arrival, she renounced her story.

While media reports thus dismantled the woman's account as a mere fabrication, journalists turned their attention to the radio station building itself. They revealed that the station was indeed owned by a US-operated radio company intending to broadcast a Christian radio program. Known as 'Madagascar World Voice', the radio station was non-operational, and its construction had been ongoing for approximately eight years but delayed due to storm damage and burglaries. A journalist noted that the same radio station had faced accusations of human trafficking two years prior, although no evidence was found, resulting in the dismissal of the case.<sup>10</sup> The rumour resurfaced in 2014 after the local TV station broadcasted a story about the woman's abduction. Other reports mentioned that the radio station was finally inaugurated and began broadcasting in 2016, a decade after the construction had commenced. It is owned by 'World Christian Broadcasting', a Christian organisation based in Nashville, Tennessee. The shortwave station in Mahajanga aims to reach a wide geographical area encompassing Europe, Africa, and the Middle/Near East with its Christian radio program. The nearby hill overlooking the Indian Ocean was chosen as an ideal location for this endeavour.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Inversive moments and the tangible and intangible arrangements of an occult infrastructure***

A great deal of activity surrounded the rumour, and its circulation marked a moment of inversion. In Malagasy, inversion carries inherently ambiguous meanings. In a neutral sense, it can be translated as *vadika*, meaning 'turn' or 'reverse'. The act of 'turning something over' is referred to as *famadihana*, a term used for the funerary ritual in Madagascar known as the 'second burial'. During this ritual, ancestors' bones are turned as they are brought out of tombs, wrapped in new cloth, and then reburied. However, the *famadihana* is also used to name betrayal.<sup>12</sup> It signifies a shift from being a trustworthy and upright person to becoming corrupt and fraudulent. Betrayal requires the prior

existence of a bond of trust that is now broken, leading to feelings of resentment, mistrust, doubt, or suspicion.

The rumour about organ trafficking in Mahajanga captures this shift, portraying the 'betrayal' of the man with the car and the Malagasy guards from the radio station. The announcement of the abduction also exposed the 'true' purpose of the radio station as a secret location for human organ transfers. The reports unveiled hidden underground structures that were not visible from outside the fenced compound, which otherwise emanated an aura of technological innovation. This revelation filled the knowledge gap that had surrounded the radio station for some time, as it had been the centre of rumours about immoral trafficking practices in the past.

To understand this moment of inversion, it is important to consider the context. The incident occurred during the night, a time associated with witches and nocturnal violence in Malagasy culture. Fear of the dark is a significant constraint in Madagascar (Gardini 2020), and nightlife in Mahajanga is confined to a few specific areas such as nightclubs or the seaside promenade. The rumour about what took place in the radio station highlights that even places of leisure are no longer perceived as secure. The night is potentially dangerous.

Certain spaces are also considered as potential threatening. While the urban space of Mahajanga may be perceived as relatively safe compared to other large cities, entities such as witches, evil spirits, and shapeshifters are believed to be more likely to roam rural areas. Roads connect these different spaces, but the vector from danger to safety is not bidirectional. For example, an abduction during the daytime from a rural area to a location in the city would not be convincing as an occult rumour since such entities are believed not to exist in urban areas.

Why did this radio station initially arouse suspicion, and how did it enable the perception of the occult within its infrastructure? Exploring meanings, materiality, and the construction of places provides insight into answering this question. The sociologist Thomas Gieryn (2000, 468) proposes that we apprehend places by asking ourselves how certain locations come into being and what they accomplish. Places are socially constituted through practices, cognitive models, and material manifestations. They simultaneously structure and sometimes divide social life. Gieryn argues that the social processes of place-making and their consequences for social agency should be central to analysing places. Places are both performative acts and structuring orders, serving as a medium through which social life is shaped.

Buildings, such as the radio station, become places. The urban and rural landscape of Mahajanga is dotted with built structures delimited by walls and fences, including neighbourhoods, administrative districts, villages, and individual constructions. These buildings shape people's understandings and actions, offering opportunities and constraints. The material and the social are closely intertwined, with buildings acquiring specific cultural meanings that can evolve over time. Buildings 'are particularly good for assessing how "things" affect social outcomes, changes, or processes because buildings are multivalent' (Dean 2017, 2).

The radio station in Mahajanga was engulfed in doubt and suspicion because multiple assumptions of the public merged into a questionable perception of obscurity. The four blinking aerial masts projected a sense of modernity as technological devices, but the nature of the signals they transmitted remained unclear. Moreover, the masts were

enclosed within a compound with a secured gate, triggering suspicions about the secrets kept from ordinary and curious Malagasy individuals. The rumour that the station belonged to foreigners, likely US-Americans, further solidified the growing scepticism surrounding the place.

Westerners, or *vahaza* in Malagasy, are viewed in highly ambivalent terms. On the one hand, they are admired for their lifestyle, resources, social networks, and knowledge. Many Malagasy women actively seek to marry a *vazaha* to migrate abroad and secure their future and that of their families (Cole 2014). On the other hand, western strangers are seen as rude, aggressive, and disrespectful. They are suspected of having an individualistic and exploitative ethos, and thus perceived as menacing.

US-Americans are a category of westerners that are hard to define for many Majungais. While French and Italian tourists or Asian work migrants are commonly seen in Mahajanga, US citizens constitute a minority among visitors, yet they are highly visible. Most residents might be familiar with US Peace Corps members and the American Cultural Centre in the city. However, public opinion about US-Americans is largely shaped by hearsay, such as the belief that they once stole dinosaur bones discovered near Mahajanga for display in US American museums.<sup>13</sup> This claim is significant in relation to the rumours about the radio station because its narrative aligns with other stories of exploitation and extraction, such as organ trafficking or the theft of ancestors' bones. Mistrust does not easily revert to trust.

The radio station in Mahajanga embodies exclusion, constraints, and an air of eerie activities. It possesses an inherent affinity with the occult due to suspicions surrounding its functionality, materiality, and ownership. As a construction, the radio station was highly visible, impossible to ignore, yet its true nature remained elusive. The rumour about organ trafficking became an inverse point where the knowledge gap about the station's ownership and purpose became 'transparent'; it was thus a moment of exposure and revelation.

Blinking aeriels on a fenced-off compound, suspected cellars owned by US citizens, and the alleged involvement of a Malagasy 'traitor' who abducted a vulnerable woman during the night in a car on rural roads are integral elements of the socio-material arrangement of occult infrastructures. However, certain components are more enabling than others. On the one hand, the revelation of the compound's hidden cellars, which are uncommon in Madagascar, and a secret tunnel that concealed the true meaning of the radio station, reinforced the weight of the accusations. The existence of underground dungeons served as ultimate proof of hidden occult activities. Concealed spaces are necessary for rumours about organ trafficking to thrive. On the other hand, the visible aeriels and the involved telecommunication infrastructure added an important layer of suspicion to the radio station. While they contributed to the overall meaning, they did not necessarily enable the formation of the occult as much as hidden and secretive spaces, along with powerful actors.

In the case of occult infrastructures, buildings often reveal their true nature as sites of schemes, illicit trade, or organ trafficking. Inversion denotes the moment when suspicions about a practice, people, or place transition into a revelation of hidden knowledge. However, the exposure is not absolute, as it can switch back after some time. In the case of the radio station, the rumour was quickly deconstructed and reconfigured with new information through various newspaper reports. While the American ownership was

confirmed, the story of the abducted woman was debunked as a fabrication. Police intervention aimed to maintain order, prevent violence among the gathering crowds, and shed light on the circumstances surrounding the woman's allegations.

However, the details of the woman's disappearance and whereabouts were not disclosed, and no investigation was conducted regarding the existence or absence of underground rooms at the radio station's compound. These unanswered questions are likely to keep some individuals doubtful about the information provided by the newspapers. It is probable that many Malagasy will maintain their suspicion, as they often distrust both state institutions and the media.

### **Suspicious constructions in historical perspective. Rumours about migrant houses in French colonial time and beyond**

Occult infrastructures have a history and the rumour surrounding organ trafficking at the radio station in Mahajanga serves as a contemporary manifestation of similar socio-material configurations that have persisted over time. The present-day 'bone stealers' or 'organ traffickers' can be traced back to earlier iconic figures such as the 'heart', 'blood', or 'liver' thieves who targeted Malagasy individuals, particularly children, to amass great wealth (Bloch 1971; Cole 2001; Freeman 2004, 2013; Gintzburger 1983; Jarosz 1994; Thomas 2002). These figures likely emerged during the early presence of British missionaries in highland Madagascar from the mid-nineteenth century onwards and continue to resonate due to the complex and ambiguous dynamics between Europeans and Malagasy. According to the narrative, Europeans clandestinely harvest organs, including the heart, under the cover of darkness to sustain themselves, thereby augmenting their own power through immoral means at the expense of Malagasy victims. This storyline is particularly striking in its connection to modern tales of organ trafficking, where Malagasy individuals are portrayed as victims of occult forces, their organs becoming entwined within an inaccessible network of reciprocity and power.

Over time, these narratives have expanded to encompass wealthy and westernised Malagasy individuals who are perceived to have acquired similar power to Europeans and allegedly exploit ordinary Malagasy people. In the Malagasy context, the term *vadika* denoting inversion marks a betrayal that now includes 'ordinary citizens' who collaborate with foreigners, thereby profiting from power and resources while facilitating networks of extraction and exploitation.

In certain variations of the rumour, powerful Malagasy figures, likely politicians, are believed to nourish a mystical creature known as the *biby olona* or 'man-beast', a centaur-like entity, to obtain the power to govern and exploit the less fortunate (Freeman 2004; Gintzburger 1983; Jarosz 1994). The narrative surrounding this mystical figure is significant for understanding the historical roots of occult infrastructures since it involves keeping the creature concealed behind high fences within the compounds of influential individuals. Even today, many Malagasy people recall rumours of occult activities associated with President Ratsiraka (1972–1990) who governed Madagascar during the socialist period. According to the narrative, the 'man-beast' bestowed power upon Ratsiraka, and the creature remained hidden from ordinary citizens within the newly constructed presidential palace in the capital city of Antananarivo.

When Europeans or powerful Malagasy individuals transform body parts into wealth, they rely on their technological knowledge and the ability to conceal their activities. The corresponding buildings become extensions of these powers, visible symbols that not only exhibit status, power, and wealth but also mask the realities hidden behind their fences and walls. Betrayal and the clandestine nature of activities within fortified spaces lie at the core of occult infrastructures. ‘Suspicious constructions’ can be traced back to migrant houses, which have generated communal tensions by drawing attention to rising status disparities. Poorer villagers accuse the owners of these new buildings of employing occult forces, including organ theft, to amass the wealth necessary for their construction.

These conflicts emerged during the period of French colonisation (1896–1960), as the colonial power introduced gradual transformations in status attainment, consumption, and wealth. The shift from subsistence production to wage labour had a profound impact on individual status, as older hierarchies based on seniority, ancestry, and rank were increasingly complemented, and at times surpassed, by material prosperity and money. Attracted by employment and educational opportunities, rural Malagasy migrants arrived in urban centres, engaging in salaried work for the French colonial state or as manual labourers. Some migrants were able to establish independent businesses and position themselves as entrepreneurs. Initially, migration was intended to be temporary, with the goal of eventually returning to one’s ancestral land (Deschamps 1959). One way to showcase acquired wealth was through the construction of houses in their home villages.

Various anthropologists engaged with migrant houses as the epitome of social differentiation and unknown wealth that causes enormous anxiety in various regional and temporal contexts (Feeley-Harnik 1980; Freeman 2013; Thomas 1995). In Madagascar, domestic houses symbolise social status and intertwine with marriage and the establishment of independent households. Marriages produce children, and the house represents the tangible manifestation of a fruitful union (Bloch 1995). Traditional houses on the island varied in their architecture, often constructed from wood or mud, featuring one or two rooms and a hearth. Higher-ranking individuals possessed larger houses, some elevated from the ground or distinguished by fencing to denote their elevated status.

French colonisation brought about changes in architectural landscapes. The *politique de l’habitat* (Decary 1957), a colonial housing policy, aimed to modernise both public and private housing by implementing a cohesive French construction style. This new style was introduced by migrants in urban areas who incorporated innovative construction materials facilitated by French economic networks, including cement, paint, corrugated iron, and European-style furnishings such as tables and chairs.

These new houses diverged significantly from existing architectural norms and represented a novel form of social distinction rooted in modernity and colonial-inspired values. They no longer signified collective endeavours but individual achievements. As ‘conspicuous constructions’ (Thomas 1998), they became emblematic of a new way of life, symbolising the power of money and wage labour. Consequently, they became controversial points of contention, introducing shifts in social relations that ultimately culminated in accusations of occult practices. From an infrastructural perspective, the rise of occult formations is propelled by the reconfiguration of spaces that demarcate a private realm inaccessible to the public.

For instance, older houses with wooden or mud walls lacked soundproofing, and the absence of fences invited passers-by to catch glimpses of others’ domestic lives,

particularly after dark when the illumination revealed the inner spaces of buildings. Conversations through these wooden walls were possible and common. In certain regions of Madagascar, it was believed that doors should not be closed during the day (Thomas 1995, 350–1). For instance, among the Sakalava people during the 1970s, social norms dictated spending most daylight hours outside the house and in the company of others. Being inside the house during waking hours was considered a ‘sign of evil intent’ (Feeley-Harnik 1980, 568).

The new cement walls rendered these forms of communication obsolete, while fences restricted proximity to the house. Although fences were commonplace in urban settings, in rural areas, they signified concealment and were viewed as antithetical to the norms of openness and sharing. In the collective imagination of the village, walls and fences imposed constraints on what should be shared. They enclosed individuals and goods that were expected to be integrated into the broader social order. Consequently, houses were sometimes seen as the material embodiment of personal interests (Feeley-Harnik 1980, 579). Secrecy and separation, as manifested through walls and fences, indicated, at best, a lack of generosity and a suspicious pursuit of distinction and power over equals, and at worst, witchcraft or sorcery (Feeley-Harnik 1980, 581).

Villagers perceived the new houses as an appropriation of European lifestyles, marking the owner’s alignment with a modern world beyond the confines of the village. Building and residing in these houses labelled the owner as ‘modern’ or ‘progressive’. Malagasy individuals often accused migrants of deviating from the ‘way of the ancestors’ (*fomban-drazana*) and instead following the ‘way of outsiders/Europeans’ (*fomban-bazaha*). Migrant houses were considered the property of people who were perceived as being more individualistic and less community-oriented, resembling the Europeans themselves (Thomas 1998, 438). These accusations reflected concerns that migrants were not only imitating Europeans but also becoming them, living as urban citizens far from their ancestral lands, with no intention of returning.

The process of becoming and being ‘modern’ possessed an inherently ambivalent quality. For villagers, migrants transformed into wealthy individuals who radiated new status and power, potentially becoming sources of fear. In this context, rumours regarding heart or organ theft could be interpreted as levelling mechanisms, although they ultimately failed to achieve their intended purpose as migrants gradually ceased returning home. In certain regions of Madagascar, individuals continued constructing houses in their villages, yet most of these houses remained vacant (Freeman 2013).

Migrant houses exemplify the role of buildings in the emergence of occult formations, including witchcraft accusations and organ theft. These houses share a sense of awe regarding technological possibilities, power dynamics, and inequalities with the radio station. They both attract and catalyse rumours, conspiracy theories, and occult fears. They are rooted in the same combination of facts and fantasies and are part of the realm of ‘suspicious constructions’. Some Malagasy suspect that these architectural structures hold hidden meanings and harbour occult forces. After all, how else could such extravagant and modern constructions come into existence?

## Conclusion

In her invitation to explore infrastructures ethnographically, Susan Leigh Star reveals that this sort of study investigates 'boring things' that are 'singularly unexciting' because they 'appear as lists of numbers and technical specifications, or as hidden mechanisms subtending those processes more familiar to social scientists' (Star 1999, 377). However, the hidden dungeons of an unfinished radio station serving as a site for organ harvesting or the newly constructed compound of a local politician concealing a powerful creature are anything but dull or technical. As socio-material assemblages, they are morally reprehensible and provoke public outrage.

This contribution initially introduced these rumours as part of occult formations that can be understood within the context of escalating poverty, inequalities, socio-economic hardships, and the pervasive contradictions between local and global powers in Madagascar. The concept of the 'occult' is not without flaws, as it runs the risk of conceptual slipperiness. It is challenging to demarcate the boundaries of what the occult encompasses, where it originates, and where it terminates. Rumours concerning organ trafficking, as well as discourses on witchcraft or the theft of ancestral remains, fulfil the criteria of occult formations and are connected to global extraction networks and emerging technologies.

Occult infrastructures provide a generative lens for examining the sites and dynamics of human relationships that transcend space and time. Infrastructures associated with the occult represent specific configurations that not only sustain but also enable the manifestation of 'hidden' forces. An examination of occult infrastructures diminishes the scandalous elements without disregarding them, focusing instead on the built environment as an integral part of novel technologies and power networks. I closely examined how 'hidden' forces and 'underlying' infrastructures, in this case enduring constructions, formed a cohesive unity of occult materiality, a kind of assemblage that exists only for a limited period before its components recede into the background of public attention. An expensive car becomes an enticing lure in ensnaring innocent victims in an evil plot, a mundane crossroad might become fraught with witchcraft, and an unfinished radio station could suddenly serve as a facade for a dangerous clandestine group engaged in abductions and human trafficking. Here, the slippery and fluid nature of the occult assumes centrality as it marks crucial moments of inversion when the hidden reveals itself to the world.

To approach occult formations from an infrastructural standpoint, I employed the concept of 'suspicious constructions' to investigate the facilitating role of the built environment in relation to occult forces. Unlike places where people anticipate and expect the materialisation of occult forces, buildings, such as the radio station or migrant houses, are sites that engender doubt regarding their purpose, ownership, or funding. The opacity of these structures is only unveiled through vague rumours or direct accusations that transform suspicion into certainty.

The rumour surrounding the radio station was influenced by past experiences in which the emergence of new technologies and knowledge, coupled with exclusion from power and wealth, engendered similar speculations concerning migrant houses. In both cases, human organs were taken and transformed into a commodity. However, due to different historical circumstances, covert schemes gradually evolved. In the past, Malagasy claimed that organs were consumed by the perpetrators, be they Europeans or wealthy Malagasy, or fed to a 'man-beast' to acquire power. In contemporary Madagascar, with the existence



of a global health industry and a market for organ transplantation, the rumour shifted towards illegal trafficking practices. Organs are no longer consumed but rather 'fed' into a system of global circulation.

Regarding migrant houses, the notion of infrastructure is more ambiguous. Initially, these buildings were seen as sites of occult forces as newfound wealth, derived from migrants' wages, entered village life, symbolising European power and status. Simultaneously, these structures also incorporated the occult through their introduction of privacy via walls and fences. The material distinction concealed aspects of social life that were once shared. Unknown spaces behind walls and fences aroused suspicion of hidden activities. Thus, the concealed 'man-beast' that requires nourishment with human organs represents an early expression of today's occult infrastructures as enabling socio-material arrangements. The innovation of secluded individual spaces through inventive material means of walls and fences situated the now-revealed occult. 'Suspicious constructions' became evidence of its existence.

Occult infrastructures demonstrate that occult forces can materialise in unexpected and unpredictable ways. Indeed, the use of the contested term 'occult' is fruitful only when emphasising its inherently 'hidden' and 'secret' qualities that necessitate manifestation to unleash their powers. Moments of inversion shed light on the ephemeral, precarious, and sometimes improvisational processes through which meaning is (re)created.

However, the certainties gained regarding occult infrastructures are transient and often short-lived. While some people respond to emerging rumours with violence and destruction, others question the veracity of the rumour itself. The power of rumours lies in the fact that people are not bound by agreed-upon facts. Rumours cannot be falsified or proven; one can either doubt or believe them. The contradictory meanings associated with occult infrastructures are integral to their temporality, as they may rapidly acquire mobilising force or dissolve and become part of the past, perhaps even as entertaining stories. A crucial element of occult infrastructures and the corresponding suspicions are the social tensions arising from divergent interests and competing attitudes towards buildings: for some, they harbour occult forces, while for others, they are simply an unfinished radio station or newly constructed houses to inhabit. The imbalances of status and evident socio-economic inequalities that inform these competitions and divergent views are at stake.

Occult infrastructures are more than a mere concealed backdrop waiting to be unveiled. Engaging with occult infrastructures involves not only moments of inversion but also the polyvalent meanings attributed to the collaboration between hidden forces, human actors, and material objects. Specifically, they embody an ambivalence in moral terms, as they can switch between productive and destructive interpretations and effects. Scrutinising occult infrastructures is not about unearthing a hidden drama but about adding another layer of understanding to an ongoing drama.

## Notes

1. Occult infrastructure differs from the notion of 'haunted infrastructure' (Schwenkel 2017) as the latter scrutinises how ghosts and urban infrastructure collide and facilitate or disrupt urban development. Here, religious ruins contest state power, urban growth and foreign presence across time and space. The involved suspicious constructions in Madagascar do not contest political regimes but instead symbolise political power and status.

2. I spent most of my time in fieldwork with youths between 18 and 30, but I also included members of their households and extended families, their teachers and often friends in my interviews. By the end, I had interviewed 42 people of which five became key interlocutors over the period of my research. During the time of writing up this contribution, I am still in contact with several Malagasy from Mahajanga through WhatsApp, Facebook, and email.

In the absence of formal ethical boards in Germany, I hereby declare that this research adheres to: the Research Ethics Guidelines for Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences Journals published by Taylor & Francis and the Frankfurt Declaration of Ethics in Social and Cultural Anthropology issued by the German Association of Social and Cultural Anthropology (GASCA).

3. I am deeply indebted to Matteo Benussi for this excellent definition of the occult.
4. In 2017 the world atlas has put Madagascar on position ten: <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-poorest-countries-in-the-world.html> (last accessed 15 December 2017).
5. Apparently, she disappeared on 29 November and went to the local TV station on 3 December.
6. Givesto's suggestion resonates with a journal article: <https://lexpress.mg/blog/actualites/mahajanga-le-chef-de-region-dement-le-rapt-dune-fille-22898> (last accessed 7 December 2014).
7. Similar to what has been termed 'suspicious constructions', roads symbolise both the promise of progress and the spectre of danger. Adeline Masquelier aptly characterises this duality as the 'profoundly contradictory nature of roads' (2002, 381). These roads are not mere physical infrastructure; they embody a multifaceted economy of violence and power. Within this context, narratives emerge that centre on violence and terror, such as the illicit trafficking of body parts or gruesome attacks by road spirits. These stories consistently underscore a common theme: roads, designed to connect people and communities, sometimes lead to death. However, it is worth noting that this contribution refrains from placing primary emphasis on roads. While they undeniably form part of the empirical infrastructure of the radio station within the occult context, in other narratives, such as those involving organ trafficking and structures representing power, roads are not considered integral to enabling material conditions.
8. <https://lexpress.mg/blog/actualites/mahajanga-le-chef-de-region-dement-le-rapt-dune-fille-22898>; <http://www.lexpressmada.com/blog/actualites/mahajangaunestationderadioaccuseatort23138>; [http://www.laverite.mg/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=3855:psychose%ADa%ADmahajanga%ADune%ADhistoire%ADa%ADfaire%ADDormir%ADdebut%AD&catid=3:societe](http://www.laverite.mg/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3855:psychose%ADa%ADmahajanga%ADune%ADhistoire%ADa%ADfaire%ADDormir%ADdebut%AD&catid=3:societe) (last accessed 5 January 2015).
9. Intersections and cemeteries are places that are often believed to host witches or evil spirits. To point to such places would imply occult forces at work.
10. <http://www.lexpressmada.com/blog/actualites/mahajangaunestationderadioaccuseatort23138> (last accessed 5 January 2015).
11. <https://swling.com/blog/2016/04/madagascar-world-voice-now-broadcasting-on-shortwave/> (last accessed 21 July 2019).
12. Another expression to describe betrayal would be *fivadiham-pitokisana* ('abuse of trust').
13. Since the beginning of 1993, US-funded research teams engaged in fossil excavations about 50 km away from Mahajanga close to the road that passes by the radio station. The Mahajanga Basin Project (MBP) has been a collaboration between US and Malagasy university and facilities.

## Acknowledgements

This contribution has been part of a research project on envy discourses in Madagascar. I am grateful to all my Malagasy friends and interlocutors for explaining to me the various ways of coping with the challenges of navigating facts and fiction. I also would like to thank Ben Kirby, Matteo Benussi and Souleymane Diallo for critically reading my first drafts.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by the DFG (German Research Council) under Grant [SCHU 219941374].

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