

Folklore, Aesthetics, and Cultural Imagination in Madagascar: An Artistic and Cultural Analysis of Malagasy Folklore

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Abstract: Malagasy folklore constitutes one of the most enduring cultural foundations of Madagascar and plays a crucial role in shaping the island's aesthetic traditions. Rooted in African and Indonesian cultural heritages, Malagasy folklore encompasses myths, oral narratives, music, dance, ritual practices, and visual arts that collectively express Malagasy understandings of beauty, the sublime, morality, and social harmony. This article examines how Malagasy folklore functions not merely as a set of traditional stories but as a dynamic aesthetic system that informs artistic production and cultural imagination in Madagascar. By analyzing key folkloric themes—including supernatural beliefs, ancestor veneration, nature symbolism, and musical performance—this study demonstrates how aesthetics in Madagascar emerge from lived cultural experience and collective memory. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship in folklore studies, aesthetics, and cultural anthropology, the article argues that Malagasy folklore provides an essential framework for interpreting Malagasy artistic expression across music, visual arts, architecture, literature, and performance. In doing so, it highlights the inseparable relationship between art, aesthetics, and cultural identity in Madagascar, while also acknowledging the hybrid influences introduced through colonial and global encounters. Ultimately, this study contributes to broader discussions of non-Western aesthetics by illustrating how folklore-based artistic traditions sustain cultural continuity and aesthetic meaning in Malagasy society.

Keywords: Malagasy Folklore; Aesthetics; Cultural Heritage; Art and Performance; Madagascar

1. Introduction

Aesthetics, as a branch of philosophy and cultural inquiry, seeks to understand how societies perceive, create, and evaluate beauty, meaning, and artistic expression. While Western aesthetic theory has long dominated academic discourse, non-Western traditions offer equally rich and complex frameworks rooted in lived experience and cultural memory. Madagascar provides a compelling case study in this regard. The island's aesthetics are deeply intertwined with Malagasy folklore, a body of oral traditions, myths, rituals, music, and artistic practices passed down through generations.

This article argues that Malagasy aesthetics can be most effectively understood through an examination of Malagasy folklore. Rather than treating folklore as a peripheral cultural practice, this study positions it as a central aesthetic system that informs artistic forms and social values. By tracing the influence of folklore on music, visual arts, storytelling, architecture, and ritual performance, the article demonstrates how aesthetics in Madagascar emerge from collective beliefs about nature, spirituality, ancestry, and community. The discussion proceeds by first outlining the cultural foundations of Malagasy folklore, followed by an analysis of its key aesthetic themes and artistic expressions, and concludes with a broader reflection on what Malagasy folklore reveals about aesthetics on the island.

2. Cultural Foundations of Malagasy Folklore

2.1 Historical and Cultural Origins

Humans first settled in Madagascar approximately two thousand years ago, primarily through migrations from Africa and Southeast Asia. These dual origins profoundly shaped Malagasy culture, language, and artistic traditions [1]. Over time, Malagasy society developed a distinctive cultural identity that blended African communal values with Indonesian cosmology and ritual practices. Folklore emerged

as one of the most important mechanisms for preserving and transmitting this hybrid heritage.

Malagasy folklore encompasses myths, legends, proverbs, songs, dances, and ritual narratives that articulate shared values and historical memory. Passed down primarily through oral tradition, folklore serves both aesthetic and social functions by educating, entertaining, and reinforcing moral norms [2]. As such, it forms the cultural bedrock upon which Malagasy artistic practices are built.

2.2 Folklore as an Aesthetic System

Beyond storytelling, folklore in Madagascar functions as a comprehensive aesthetic system. It shapes how beauty, harmony, fear, and the sublime are represented and experienced in everyday life. Folkloric narratives influence artistic motifs, musical structures, performance styles, and visual symbolism, embedding aesthetic meaning within cultural practice rather than abstract theory.

3. Supernatural Beliefs and Aesthetic Expression

3.1 Ancestor Veneration and the Sublime

One of the most significant elements of Malagasy folklore is the reverence for ancestors. Ancestors are believed to continue influencing the lives of the living, offering protection, guidance, and moral oversight [3]. This belief manifests aesthetically in tomb architecture, ritual objects, ceremonial dances, and visual symbolism. The grandeur and ornamentation of ancestral monuments reflect a cultural aesthetic that associates beauty with respect, continuity, and spiritual power.

The aesthetic experience associated with ancestor worship often approaches the sublime, evoking awe and transcendence. Ritual performances and sacred spaces are designed to inspire reverence and emotional intensity, reinforcing the spiritual dimensions of Malagasy aesthetics.

To further illustrate the aesthetic dimension of ancestor veneration, Figure 1 provides a visual example of ancestral architecture in Madagascar.



Figure 1: Ancestral tomb architecture in Madagascar. Taken from www.urlaub-auf-madagascar.com

These structures materialize the relationship between spirituality, memory, and the sublime, translating intangible beliefs into enduring aesthetic forms.

3.2 Mythical Creatures and Nature Symbolism

Malagasy folklore also abounds with supernatural beings and mythical creatures, such as giants, dragons, and forest spirits [4]. These figures frequently appear in visual arts, dance performances, and literary narratives. Their aesthetic significance lies in their symbolic relationship to nature, as many are believed to protect forests, rivers, and wildlife.

This close association between mythology and the natural environment has produced an aesthetic tradition deeply inspired by flora and fauna. Traditional woodcarving, weaving, and mask-making often incorporate animal and plant motifs drawn from folklore, reinforcing the idea that beauty is inseparable from ecological harmony.

As illustrated in Figure 2, traditional Malagasy wood carvings visually encode folkloric beliefs through animal and plant motifs. These material forms translate mythological narratives and ecological values into tangible aesthetic expressions.



Figure 2: A Chameleon made by a Malagasy woodcarver. Picture taken by Alain Rasolo

4. Music, Performance, and Folkloric Aesthetics

4.1 Music as Cultural Expression

Music occupies a central position in Malagasy folklore and aesthetic life. Traditional music is performed during rituals, festivals, funerals, and communal gatherings, serving both expressive and narrative functions [5]. Instruments such as the valiha, kabosy, tsapintsara, drums, and wind instruments create distinctive soundscapes that mirror natural rhythms and emotional states.

Musical aesthetics in Madagascar emphasize communal participation, emotional resonance, and storytelling. Songs often recount historical events, moral lessons, or mythological tales, transforming music into an auditory form of folklore.

4.2 Dance and Ritual Performance

Dance performances further embody Malagasy aesthetic values through controlled movements,

symbolic gestures, and rhythmic coordination. These performances are rarely purely decorative; instead, they convey cultural knowledge, spiritual beliefs, and social relationships. The aesthetic appeal of dance lies in its ability to unite visual beauty, bodily expression, and collective meaning.

5. Folklore, Visual Arts, and Literary Expression

5.1 Aesthetic Meaning and Symbolism in Folkloric Art

Beyond serving decorative or narrative purposes, folkloric imagery in Malagasy visual arts functions as a system of aesthetic meaning. Symbols drawn from myths—such as animals, ancestral figures, and sacred plants—operate as visual languages through which moral values, cosmological beliefs, and social hierarchies are expressed. From an aesthetic perspective, beauty in Malagasy art is not defined by formal symmetry alone but by symbolic resonance and cultural legibility. An object or image is considered aesthetically powerful when it successfully communicates shared cultural knowledge and spiritual significance. This culturally grounded understanding of beauty challenges Western aesthetic frameworks that prioritize individual perception over collective meaning.

5.2 Visual Arts and Material Culture

Malagasy visual arts draw heavily on folkloric themes and symbols. Handcrafted objects, textiles, masks, and architectural designs frequently depict scenes from myths and legends [6]. Bright colors, intricate patterns, and symbolic imagery reflect a cultural aesthetic that values expressiveness and narrative depth.

5.3 Literature and Film

Folklore has also influenced Malagasy literary and cinematic traditions. Many literary works adapt folktales or incorporate supernatural elements rooted in oral tradition. Similarly, films set in Madagascar often draw on folkloric imagery and narratives, shaping visual aesthetics that emphasize mystery, spirituality, and natural beauty.

6. Folklore, Social Life, and Healing

6.1 Folklore as an Embodied Social Aesthetic

In Malagasy society, folklore functions as an embodied aesthetic practice embedded in everyday social life. Unlike artistic traditions that separate art from daily experience, Malagasy folklore integrates storytelling, music, and dance into communal activities such as ceremonies, festivals, and rites of passage. These practices engage the body, emotions, and senses, creating aesthetic experiences that are simultaneously social and artistic. Participation, rather than passive observation, is central to the Malagasy understanding of aesthetic value.

From an aesthetic perspective, the beauty of folkloric practices lies in their capacity to generate harmony within the community. Rhythm, repetition, and coordinated movement create a sense of balance that mirrors ideal social relationships. Through these embodied forms, aesthetics become a lived experience that reinforces collective identity and social cohesion.

6.2 Healing, Emotion, and Aesthetic Experience

Folklore also plays a crucial role in traditional healing practices in Madagascar, revealing another dimension of Malagasy aesthetics. Music, dance, and storytelling are frequently employed as therapeutic tools to address emotional distress, spiritual imbalance, and social conflict. Rather than focusing solely on physical symptoms, these healing practices emphasize emotional restoration and communal support.

From an aesthetic standpoint, healing rituals transform suffering into meaningful experience through symbolic performance. Sounds, movements, and narratives create an atmosphere in which individuals can reinterpret pain within a shared cultural framework. This process highlights an aesthetic logic centered on emotional resonance and symbolic meaning rather than visual pleasure alone.

6.3 Folklore, Fihavanana, and Social Harmony

A key concept in Malagasy social life is *fihavanana*, which emphasizes reconciliation, mutual respect, and communal responsibility [7]. Folklore plays an essential role in sustaining this ideal through narrative practices that encourage empathy and moral reflection. During conflict resolution processes, storytelling allows individuals to express grievances indirectly, reducing confrontation and facilitating understanding.

The aesthetic dimension of *fihavanana* lies in its emphasis on balance and harmony. Stories, proverbs, and ritual performances structure emotional expression in ways that promote social equilibrium. In this sense, aesthetics in Malagasy culture are inseparable from ethical practice, demonstrating how beauty, meaning, and social order are deeply interconnected.

7. Malagasy Folklore and Aesthetic Theory

7.1 Folklore as a Culturally Embedded Aesthetic Framework

Western aesthetic theory has often emphasized individual perception, formal beauty, and detached contemplation. In contrast, Malagasy folklore reveals an aesthetic framework that is deeply embedded in collective life, ethical relations, and spiritual belief. In Madagascar, aesthetics are not understood as an abstract category separate from everyday experience but as a lived cultural process shaped by social interaction and ancestral continuity. Folklore functions as a primary medium through which aesthetic values are produced, transmitted, and evaluated.

From this perspective, beauty is inseparable from meaning. An artistic object, musical performance, or ritual act is considered aesthetically valuable not solely because of its visual or auditory qualities, but because it successfully embodies shared cultural knowledge. Folklore provides the symbolic vocabulary through which this embodiment becomes possible. Myths, legends, and oral narratives establish the interpretive framework that allows audiences to recognize aesthetic significance in artistic forms.

7.2 Collective Experience and Aesthetic Judgment

Malagasy aesthetics prioritize collective experience over individual taste. Folkloric performances—whether musical, narrative, or ritual—are typically communal events that emphasize participation and shared emotional response. Aesthetic judgment, therefore, emerges through social consensus rather than private reflection. This communal orientation challenges dominant Western models of aesthetics and suggests an alternative understanding in which beauty is evaluated through its capacity to foster social harmony and reinforce communal bonds.

In this context, rhythm, repetition, and narrative structure serve as key aesthetic principles. These elements organize experience in ways that mirror social ideals of balance and continuity. Folklore thus acts as both an artistic and ethical guide, shaping aesthetic preferences while reinforcing norms of cooperation, respect, and reciprocity.

7.3 The Sublime, the Spiritual, and the Natural World

Malagasy folklore also expands aesthetic theory by integrating the sublime into everyday cultural practice. Encounters with ancestral spirits, sacred landscapes, and supernatural beings evoke feelings of awe, fear, and reverence that transcend ordinary sensory pleasure. These experiences align with philosophical discussions of the sublime, yet they are grounded in practical ritual contexts rather than abstract speculation.

Nature plays a central role in this aesthetic worldview. Forests, rivers, animals, and plants are not passive backdrops but active participants in cultural imagination. Folkloric narratives attribute agency and moral significance to natural elements, producing an aesthetic sensibility that values ecological harmony. Artistic representations inspired by these narratives reinforce the idea that beauty arises from respectful coexistence with the environment.

7.4 Aesthetic Continuity in a Changing Cultural Context

Despite historical transformations brought about by colonialism and globalization, Malagasy folklore continues to sustain aesthetic continuity. While new artistic forms and external influences have entered

Madagascar, folkloric aesthetics adapt rather than disappear. Traditional symbols and narratives are reinterpreted in contemporary music, visual art, and film, demonstrating the flexibility of folklore as an aesthetic foundation.

This adaptability underscores a key contribution of Malagasy folklore to aesthetic theory: aesthetics are not static ideals but dynamic cultural processes. Folklore enables Malagasy society to negotiate change while preserving core aesthetic values rooted in ancestry, community, and nature. As such, Malagasy folklore offers a model for understanding aesthetics as culturally situated, historically responsive, and socially embedded.

8. Conclusion

Malagasy folklore provides a vital lens through which to understand aesthetics in Madagascar, revealing an aesthetic system grounded in collective memory, spirituality, and ecological awareness. Rather than conceptualizing aesthetics as an abstract philosophical category, Malagasy culture situates aesthetic experience within lived social practice. Folklore articulates what is considered beautiful, meaningful, and emotionally powerful through stories, sounds, movements, and symbols that resonate across generations.

Importantly, Malagasy folklore demonstrates that aesthetics are inseparable from ethics and social life. Concepts such as ancestor reverence, harmony with nature, and communal responsibility shape aesthetic judgment and artistic production alike. Music, dance, and visual arts are valued not merely for sensory pleasure but for their ability to sustain social bonds, transmit cultural values, and evoke shared emotional responses.

Although European colonial influence and globalization have introduced new artistic forms and aesthetic ideals, Malagasy aesthetics continue to be anchored in African and Indonesian cultural foundations. Folklore remains a dynamic force that adapts to historical change while preserving core aesthetic principles. By examining Malagasy folklore as an aesthetic framework, this study contributes to broader discussions of non-Western aesthetics and underscores the importance of culturally embedded approaches to art and beauty. Ultimately, Malagasy folklore illustrates how aesthetics function not only as a theory of art but as a lived cultural practice that shapes identity, community, and the human experience of meaning.

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Malagasy folklore provides a vital lens through which to understand aesthetics in Madagascar. Rooted in ancestral reverence, supernatural belief, and close relationships with nature, folklore informs artistic expression across music, visual arts, literature, performance, and ritual life. Rather than existing as isolated traditions, these folkloric forms collectively shape a culturally embedded aesthetic system that reflects Malagasy identity and values.

Despite the influence of European colonialism and global cultural exchanges, Malagasy aesthetics

remain deeply grounded in African and Indonesian cultural foundations. Folklore continues to sustain aesthetic meaning by connecting art to collective memory, ecological awareness, and spiritual belief. By examining Malagasy folklore as an aesthetic framework, this study highlights the importance of culturally specific approaches to aesthetics and contributes to broader discussions of art, culture, and identity in non-Western contexts.

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