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Ethnohistory: Emerging Histories in Madagascar. Jeffrey C. Kaufinann, ed. *Ethnohistory*, special issue, vol. 48, nos. 1–2. Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 2001, 379 pp. $15.00, paper.

This volume is the latest avatar of a great tradition in the anthropology of Madagascar, which has for many years regularly produced innovative, theoretically insightful, even brilliant studies, which, however, in the end have almost no influence on the rest of anthropology because hardly anyone notices they exist.

I am not quite sure why this is. Perhaps it's because the academics who police disciplinary boundaries have never known quite what to do with Madagascar, a place which seems at once terribly insular-it is, after all, an island, and ecologically a universe all its own-and almost too cosmopolitan; while located

off the coast of Africa, its history is so completely rooted in the Old World economies of the Indian Ocean that the very Malagasy language comes from almost halfway around the world. Area studies programs lump it with Africa and then largely ignore it, since it doesn't really fit; projects studying Indian Ocean history ignore it in favor of mercantile cities; Austronesian studies (insofar as such a thing exists) see it as one extreme comer of a vast diffusion; in France, an emerging field of studies in the "Indian Ocean Island World" was destroyed by bureaucratic fiat in the 1980s; and simply having been a French colony renders Madagascar somewhat off the anglophone anthropological map. Those who are not interested in culture or history know it for its plants and animals and see it as a kind of ongoing ecological disaster; the human population mainly exists as villains in the plot.

This book, originally published as a special issue of the journal *Ethnohistory*, consists of an introduction (by the editor, Jeffrey Kaufmann), nine case studies, and all of four different "commentaries": by Maurice Bloch (from England), Michael Lambek (from Canada), Karl Eggert (from the United States), and Manasse Esoavelomandroso (from Madagascar). As one would expect, the essays all mix ethnographic and historical research, but they could be grouped, very roughly, into three sets of three.

The first set consists of three essays about plant life. Two involve the surprisingly passionate reactions of foreigners to Malagasy plant life, ranging from French hatred for, and campaigns to eradicate, the prickly pear cactus, which among other things provided massive fortification for local villages in the Malagasy southwest (Kaufmann), to the nineteenth-century fascination with the *ravinala*, or "traveler's palm," so called because it holds tappable reserves of water, imagined by Christian commentators as a kind of bleeding plant which represented both the body of Christ and the country's Christian martyrs-an image which lives on in contemporary

rhetoric which represents Madagascar as a bleeding ecological catastrophe, its eroded soil washing out to sea (Feeley-Harnik). The third, by the Malagasy ethnographer Jeanne Dina, is actually about a pole called the *hazomanga* ("blue wood" or "tree"), which becomes the center around which ancestrality is created among the Masikoro.

A second set of essays focuses on rituals: Pier Larson provides a meticulous reconstruction of the history of the highlands' famous *famadihana* rituals, involving the exhumation and rewrapping of the dead; Andrew Walsh writes about the changing political meanings of a mast-raising ceremony in the far north; and Leslie Sharp contributes "Youth, Land and Liberty" on independence-day ceremonies in the western city of Ambanja. The final set of essays centers on the construction of group identities (Mansare Marikandia on the changing meaning of the term "Vezo," applied to a fishing people of the west coast; Karen Middleton on the Karembola; Yount, Tsiazonera, and Tucker on the Mikea, renowned as a forest population of "hunter-gatherers"

But really, identity-and even more, the problematic nature of this concept is the common theme that runs through the entire collection. This is another way that Malagasy scholarship has always been ahead of the mainstream: terms like "tribe," "ethnicity," and now "identity" have tended to crumble in the face of Malagasy ethnography long before their philosophical underpinnings were challenged in the world as a whole. Similarly, to lecture an Afro-Asian population that has been absorbing people and ideas from India, France, China, Wales, and the Persian Gulf (to name a few) from the beginnings of its history, with the colonial period often seen locally as simply one interlude of intense foreign contact among many, about the importance of "hybridity" is patently absurd. Hybridity is assumed. The problem is how anyone ever manages to construct an image of "identities" fixed in some timeless past in the first place. These essays could be read together as one fas-

cinating study of the different ways that temporary group allegiances are patched together, using material idioms of flesh, bone, wood, and soil, along with complex integration of political loyalties (or the lack of them), ways of making a living, and ancestral taboos. Ethnonymns that appear in scholarly articles often turn out to be temporary markers pulled out of this incredibly complex mosaic in certain contexts that mean nothing at all in other ones. One often seems to encounter the kind of blood-and-soil imagery familiar from modern ethnonationalism, but here organized around sex instead of death, and hence with entirely different implications. Similarly, Malagasy have built a kind historical art of creating imaginary centers of power so as to establish pragmatic forms of autonomy in relation to them.

There is much to be learned here, about cosmopolitanism, the nature of history, identity, human possibilities … It would be nice to think that anyone was paying attention.