

*Jenni Mölkänen*

## LECTIO PRÆCURSORIA

### *‘This is a good place’: Tsimihety Place Making, Knowledge Hierarchies and Intensifying Conservation Efforts in Rural Northeastern Madagascar*

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A lectio præcursoria is a short presentation read out loud by a doctoral candidate at the start of a public thesis examination in Finland. It introduces the key points or central argument of the thesis in a way that should make the ensuing discussion between the examinee and the examiner apprehensible to the audience, many of whom may be unfamiliar with the candidate’s research or even anthropological research in general.

Honored Custos, honored Opponent, members of the audience,

‘This is a good place’ said Willy, a Tsimihety rice and vanilla farmer, one of the main interlocutors for this PhD. He also worked as an ecotourism guide in the Marojejy National Park established in 1998 in rural northeastern Madagascar. He had started to build a new house, like seven other families including that of his cousin, on the small protruding peninsula with a small hill and forest next to a river gathering streams from the Marojejy mountains, and the road leading to the national park. ‘This is near the water, vanilla grows here, and the air is fresh. In addition, if the park develops, I live right next to the road and I can make a small kiosk’ he stated. The village where he had been living so far had started to show signs of decay; it was dusty and the water in the river was dirty. I argue that moving to a new place was nothing new to the swidden cultivators as their ancestral customs actually created expectations of movement and the establishing

of new places that expanded their ancestral lands (tanindrazana). Yet, because of Marojejy National Park, there was no more new forest that could be cleared for fields. What do people living in the vicinities of the park do when the national park restricts their movement?

At the same time, Madagascar is a good place for unique endemic species, such as over 100 species of lemurs, about 300 species of birds and more than 260 species of reptiles and amphibians each. The island also has a rich invertebrate fauna including earthworms, insects, spiders, and nonmarine molluscs. (Behrens and Barnes 2016.) At the time of the sixth mass extinction, Madagascar’s exceptional biodiversity is ever more valuable. From the 1990s onwards environmental conservation efforts in Madagascar have intensified and in 2013 the country has met the 10 % requirement of areas under protection promoted by the United Nations and the International Union for Conservation of Nature, and stated in the 2010 Convention on Biological Diversity (Corson 2014: 193). These environmental conservation

practices have attracted millions of dollars and euros from bi- and multilateral development and environmental conservation agencies (Kull 2014: 146).

Simultaneously, there is an interest towards land investments in countries like Madagascar. According to the World Bank estimations, Madagascar could expand its agricultural land by improving technology, infrastructure and institutions and by removing possible legal obstacles for large-scale farming developments (Deininger et al. 2011: 10–43, 90–91). Finally, most of Madagascar's people are subsistence farmers who get their livelihood from land.

In addition, the place was good for my PhD thesis. I wanted to know how the Tsimihety, the main ethnic focus group of this study, respond and live with the intensifying environmental conservation efforts. During the total of 13 months of fieldwork in 2011, 2012–13 and 2016, me and my daughter lived with a Tsimihety family. I was able to join in on their everyday life to observe and document rice and vanilla farming practices, household and ritual work (*asa*), important events, such as funerals, hierarchies, and differences between clan, village, and family members as well as with park administrators and visitors. The family, their relatives and friends and fellow villagers were not only informants but people who lived with us bearing but also being curious of our strangeness. Long-term fieldwork allowed me to pay attention to processes such as negotiations over changing living conditions, reorganizing funeral gifts, and building up debt relations with relatives or fellow villagers rather than microfinancing agencies. These observations, experiences, and reflections have allowed me to construct ethnographically how the Tsimihety interact and intertwine with these various processes and how they transform and are transformed by them. Finally, people nurtured

my daughter as if she was their own and I will always be more than grateful to them.

By focusing on three main themes, knowledge hierarchies, place making, and political-economic schemes and values, the thesis challenges simplifying narratives of the Tsimihety as an indigenous people living close to nature without modern technology, or as people who do not care about their environments but continue destroying the island's forests. The thesis shows how people actively make, maintain, and renew their places, social relations, and livelihoods in the context of the intensifying presence of foreigners and large scale conservation and development efforts.

Anthropologists have pointed out that environmental relations of a people, like the Tsimihety, do not only depend on their needs or problems in livelihoods but their specific social organization and symbolic world-view. In this research I show that the Tsimihety relations with their living places is a holistic political, social, and ethical question for themselves. By focusing on values, what people find meaningful or desired, I show how the Tsimihety live with and negotiate multiple hierarchical and powerful systems. More specifically, the thesis shows that Tsimihety place making is not only important for Tsimihety identity because of their past, but that place making is a continuing prospective process and important for their future.

Next, I will provide examples that are relevant in understanding the present-day processes in these particular places that the Tsimihety find good.

European and North American scientific efforts have been central in establishing Madagascar a conservation hot spot with its 'megabiodiversity'. How Madagascar's unique nature and more specifically its lemurs have been recognized by European scientists has changed historically. The 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century

European seafarers, settlers, botanists, and trade company representatives brought stories of the island's exotic natural beauty back to Europe and contributed to the romantic myth of a wild Africa, laying the roots for the conservation movement (Kull 2014: 149). Based on these stories, in 1735, Linneaus, whose species' naming system is still used today, placed Madagascar's lemurs in the order of primates together with human beings, as he did not find any anatomical observable differences between them and their forms of reproduction. However, Linneaus described a fixed order created by the Christian God, the Great Chain of Being (*Scala naturae* in Latin) learned from Aristotle (384–322 BC) (see, e.g., Lovejoy 1936), emphasising the continuity of the same species.

The continuity of same kinds of forms and their interconnections on the world scale was witnessed by Alexander von Humboldt, a German geographer who invented the concept of nature during his American expeditions at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (1799–1804). When trekking in Ecuador, the expedition group was able to see different vegetation zones and altitudes (Wulfe 2015: 88) that the late 20<sup>th</sup> century natural scientists also recorded in Marojejy.

Moreover, the global scale of botany separated those who discovered and documented 'new' species from those who presided over the centers, such as universities and botanical gardens, in which these species were accumulated and stored for purposes of research and education (Müller-Wille 2001: 36–37). This is how science and scientific knowledge accumulated in certain places with specific people creating hierarchies of knowledge. Moreover, indigenous and folk knowledge were erased from scientific reports. (Latour 1987: 219–57; Lowe 2006.)

Linneaus promoted the idea that scientific knowledge should support nation-building by furthering national prosperity by means of systematic resource allocation (Müller-Wille 2003: 155). Indeed, the imperial French state occupying Madagascar from 1896 to 1960 emphasised its civilizing mission and imperial economy and expected the Malagasy to become tax paying subjects who should improve their wasteful resource use. These kinds of epistemological but also political and economic histories show that the definition of nature is always related to social and political understandings and contexts. They are relevant in understanding environmental conservation efforts today that have reproduced European and North American visions of nature in Madagascar.

The Marojejy National Park was established in 1998 in order to make the park economically sustainable. The park area was defined by a scientific inventory conducted by the US and the World Wildlife Fund as well as Malagasy scientists and experts. Despite the Integrated Conservation and Development Programs (ICDPs), introduced by the World Wildlife Fund in mid-1980s combining conservation and development and the National Environmental Action Plans (NEAPs) implemented in 1990s and directed by the World Bank (Kull 2014: 151–154; Corson 2016: 67–68) emphasized the need for co-management and collaboration with the local people, the people living in the vicinities of the park were not allowed to access the park area.

In the thesis I show that ecotourism practices expected a particular kind of nature: a pristine and pure nature without human traces. Moreover, ecotourism projects presumed that the Tsimihety would provide a labor pool, meaning that they would start selling their labor

time in return for a salary, emphasizing another interest of the transnational development organisations: the creation of markets. Finally, the park was actually built to fulfill tourists' expectations with a visitor information center, information signs, pathways, camps with cooking and sleeping facilities, and a scenery terrace where one could admire the primary forest and a waterfall, named after Jean-Henri Humbert, a French botanist who had conducted five months fieldwork in Marojejy and was influential in creating the first nature reserves in Madagascar.

The Tsimihety knowledge about environment has been created through a history of settlement over generations, practical engagement and work with materials, soils and plants, and is passed from one generation to the next. In ecotourism, the Tsimihety knowledge serves tourists as the guides are able to find species in the environments. In addition, guides constantly observe whether tourists are able to walk the steep paths and help them by looking after them, placing the Tsimihety into manual and care workers.

In these joint efforts, the Tsimihety became more aware of differences than similarities, let alone the win-wins of ecotourism. They were puzzled how it is possible that the *vazaha*, the white-skinned strangers, have so much money that they could afford plane tickets and own the latest technology (see also Mölkänen 2019). They also pondered what tourists saw when they looked at the lemurs that they used to hunt over generations. Moreover, the park reminded them of colonial experiences as the Tsimihety were aware that the clever people abroad knew how to take advantage of Madagascar's forests. These observations show that the Tsimihety good places involved heterogenous and powerful dynamics.

I discuss in the thesis how people make sense of these processes and dynamics in their social and cultural terms. The Tsimihety valued movement occurring between different places, like between homes and fields, visiting relatives and looking for possibilities in new places. When dead, one was expected to be moved by one's descendants to a clan's ancestral tomb that could be located in a different village than the place where one had lived and died. In contrast to movement, as anthropologists have pointed out, places settled people: working in rice fields, nurturing children and relatives, and building houses and tombs rooted people into places (Bloch 1995; Keller 2008) and social relations and expressed one's moral standing that was relevant for becoming an ancestor, a socially acknowledged and respected person. However, as new land and available forest is now-a-days mainly in the park area, the land is not gained by those who are able to work the most and clear the forest but those who have access to money and are able to buy and rent land. I argue that it is not sufficient to analyse environmental conservation efforts only as ways for capitalist practices but to note people's cultural concepts, practices, and values, highlighting how people themselves make sense of these processes and how they value them.

Moreover, the ways the Tsimihety relate to places and animals challenges the notion of pure pristine nature highlighted in ecotourism. In the Tsimihety definition 'some animals were more suitable than others'. For example, Dady's, Willy's mother's, clan regarded crocodiles as kin because the crocodiles lived in the same places and came to look for the same food as humans (meat) looking sociable. On the contrary, lemurs, defined critically endangered by conservation biologists, could be hunted by the Tsimihety, which created tensions with actors in

environmental conservation. For the Tsimihety the main distinction between lemurs and the Tsimihety were the places they lived; lemurs in the forest and human beings in villages where they could cultivate land. Indeed, the Tsimihety were not born into full humanity but had to be socialised through acts of nurture, commensality, working together, and rituals. Working for too long periods in the park raised concerns among the elders and parents as younger generations were not able to contribute to rice farming that was regarded ancestral work and maintained one's sociality, revealing that ecotourism was not only an economic question but also a social, existential, and ethical one.

In the spirit of large scale political-economic schemes, in 2005 the Malagasy state passed a new land legislation, encouraging land privatization and enabling large-scale land investments. However, the Tsimihety had their own forms of documentation. Boky Mena, Red Book, also known as Malagasy Charter originally gathered together the speeches of President Ratsiraka during 1970s and his visions of a new Malagasy republic based on peasant policies and decolonization. Among the Tsimihety Boky Mena did not contain speeches but marked different funeral gifts given by those who shared the same living space with the deceased one (usually the village), those who lived somewhere else but had a relation through birth to the place of death (*zanakampielezana*), or those who could give because of their friendship or business (*tatibato*). These relations also define the Tsimihety space and territory that is different from the villages, districts, and regions established by the Malagasy state. I argue that Boky Mena is a documentation of Tsimihety social and land relations and defines their values and autonomy maintained, for instance, in funeral rituals. The fixed contributions emphasize egalitarian values:

Every adult person in the village was expected to contribute the same amount of money and rice for a funeral. The Tsimihety framed this as an exchange because ultimately death occurred to everyone.

At the same time, Boky Mena produces calculative and census information on the number of clans. The book challenges the idea that the Tsimihety only avoid or resist the state but reveals that people have avoided a certain kind of state, such as a violent and commanding one. The Tsimihety have welcomed state or foreign projects that have improved their living or have been compatible with their customs, values, and future plans, such as vanilla cultivation, which provides monetary income, can be cultivated on swidden fallows, and allows engaging with potentially powerful people and dynamics outside of one's kin and village spheres.

Finally, I point out that the Tsimihety have not subjected themselves to a new kind of political order despite of the intensifying presence and actions of national and transnational conservation and development; instead, they have maintained and negotiated their ancestral ways. In 2015, different clans had taken the initiative to increase the Boky Mena contributions, because the costs of living, as well as funerals had become higher. The clans in the village regulated the timing of the Boky Mena contributions in order to facilitate people participating in giving practices without becoming indebted.

Madagascar's livable biosphere faces challenges. I propose that instead of imposing orders, schemes, and plans, decision makers, researchers, environmental conservation and development agents, and funders should engage in dialogue with the Tsimihety and their ways of living, and to include their reflections and observations in scientific reports, development

schemes and practices schemes, and political agendas, and to not dismiss people's way of living as irrational, wasteful, or careless. It is not only the good life of the Tsimihety but the life of lemurs, crocodiles, and vanilla plants, to mention only a few, and practices of research, environmental conservation, agriculture tourism, and vanilla industry that these good places support.

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JENNI MÖLKÄNEN, PhD  
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL  
ANTHROPOLOGY  
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI  
[jenni.molkanen@helsinki.fi](mailto:jenni.molkanen@helsinki.fi)