
By Christian Kull

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*Contest for Land in Madagascar: Environment, Ancestors, and Development.*


The infamous and failed Daewoo ‘land grab’ – which contributed to the 2009 downfall of Madagascar’s president – bookends this edited volume, which seeks to place such events into a broader historical, anthropological, and conceptual context. While the mention of Daewoo and the book’s title suggest a relatively tight focus on recent tensions between outsiders and locals over flashpoint land uses such as conservation, mining, and agriculture, the book instead assembles an eclectic yet fascinating set of chapters. In its own words, the book aims “to examine land as a subjective, ontological reality for Malagasy people ... [L]and for the Malagasy is of particular importance as it straddles the boundaries between the here and now, and the hereafter” (p.2). The chapters (or most of them) contribute to showing how local and national understandings of land – centered on social relations, ancestors, and history – make international treatments highly problematic.

As the book’s argument rests heavily on the links of the Malagasy to the land through their ancestors, the first substantive chapter (by Himla Soodyall and colleagues) interrogates who these ancestors are. It reports, in an accessible narrative, the science of human genetics, confirming the complexity of the African and Indonesian admixture that is at the root of today’s population. Victor Raharijaona and Susan Kus then investigate the concepts of land (tany) and polity (fanjakana) through a useful exegesis of these concepts and associated historical texts from the period of Andrianampoinimerina. They demonstrate how political discourse is used to create, justify, and resist claims to power and land.

Two chapters address the 19th century. Gwyn Campbell presents a richly illustrated historical analysis, demonstrating that the Merina state’s economic policies strongly contributed to deforestation in the Antananarivo-Tamatave corridor. He shows that forests as far as today’s Ambatovy nickel mine were heavily exploited in the past for construction, fuel, lime, and potash, thus reminding us that large-scale economic interventions in land have a deep history. In a fascinating but tangential contribution, Thomas Anderson shows how European illustrations of lemurs represent two competing schools of thought. Earlier naturalists emphasized strangeness and anomaly, while later ones stressed relatedness and familiarity,
which, Anderson argues, contributed to making Madagascar’s environment explicable, legible, and thus controllable.

Land tenure modernization formed a crucial policy context for the Daewoo deal. Sandra Evers provides an important and useful overview of the island’s customary and legal property systems, with a particular focus on the *Programme National Foncier* (PNF) land registration program, introduced in 2004. While the PNF was meant to bring clarity to a contested sphere, she shows it was misunderstood, impartially implemented, not enforced, and could not deal with fundamental cultural claims that land comes from the ancestors. The chapter that follows, by Karen Middleton, critiques the PNF for its blueprint approach that saw land registration as a panacea for agricultural development and environmental conservation. She demonstrates, in the case of the drylands of far southern Madagascar, that tenure incentives have complex, contradictory and contingent outcomes that will not, by themselves, solve the island’s sustainable development problems.

Mining often sparks rapid and contested change in social-ecological relations. Andrew Walsh recounts a decade long boom and bust story in an artisanal sapphire mining village in the north. He emphasizes how both old-timers and new residents make their home in a place of profound change. Caroline Seagle’s essay is a strongly theoretical consideration of the discursive and material situations that shape large-scale mining interventions. While somewhat light on the empirical aspects of the two projects considered (Rio Tinto’s ilmenite operation and the Ambatovy nickel operation), Seagle deftly highlights contradictions and hidden issues in how these projects frame their social and environmental engagements.

The final chapter is the best investigation to date of the Daewoo issue. Based on media analysis and interviews, Venusia Vinciguerra pieces together a clear and level-headed analysis of the debate and its role in the subsequent *coup d’état*. She highlights how cultural notions of ancestral attachment to land – a sensitive leverage point for many Malagasy – as well as a lack of transparency contributed to the fierce debate and associated protests. This is a fitting conclusion to the volume, whose strength is in its juxtaposition of a diversity of substantive chapters.

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