

Environnement et pratiques paysannes à Madagascar

by

Florent Lasry, Chantal Blanc-Pamard, Pierre Milleville, Samuel Razanaka, and Michel Grouzis

Florent Lasry, Chantal Blanc-Pamard, Pierre Milleville, Samuel Razanaka, and Michel Grouzis (eds.) 2005. *Environnement et pratiques paysannes à Madagascar*. Paris: IRD Éditions (Institut de recherche pour le développement) and CNRE (Centre National de Recherches sur l'Environnement). CD-Rom multimedia publication, including texts, atlas, photos, tables, figures, movie, glossary. ISBN 2-7099-1571-5. 35 €.

Book review by Christian A. Kull, School of Geography and Environmental Science, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

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Multidisciplinary research in a multimedia format: is this the way of the future? In *Environnement et pratiques paysannes à Madagascar*, a team of French and Malagasy geographers, ecologists, and agronomists present their findings on the dynamics of agrarian and environmental change in southwestern Madagascar. They document and explain a trend of agricultural colonization and rapid deforestation in the Mikea forest, driven by an export market for maize. This finding, and the detailed assessments of rural land use strategies and agro-ecological change that accompany it, are important and useful, yet this work also offers an opportunity to evaluate the benefits of multidisciplinary team-based research and to comment on the possibilities embedded in multimedia publication formats.

The dry forests and savannas near the port of Toliary are home to the Masikoro people. Over the past few decades, forests have been converted to fields along a fast-moving pioneer front. Masikoro farmers slash and burn the forest, cultivate maize for five or more years until nutrients are exhausted and weeds proliferate, then move on, abandoning the field to pasture. Dry forest is permanently lost.

Environnement et pratiques paysannes à Madagascar summarizes detailed investigations into this process, mostly in the *commune rurale* of Analamisampy, some 100 km north of Toliary. Different sections of the CD-Rom detail the environmental and historical context, the story of pioneer settlement and land access, the local farming strategies, and the agronomy and ecology of the forest-clearing maize cultivation. Additional sections, based on research in field sites to the east of Toliary, characterize the economy of forest products and the ecology of grazing and fire in savanna zones. Most impressive for geographers is the reconstruction of the history of deforestation. A series of well-drafted maps succinctly tells the story of forest conversion to 'batsaky' maize cultivation and then pasture.

The study excels in its close-up analysis of the farming and resource dynamics of the forest frontier. What it lacks is a better integration with broader context. For example, we are told that a market for maize drives the deforestation trend, but analysis of this commodity chain

essentially stops at the local weekly market. Who are the middlemen and the exporters, what is the story on the consumption side (on La Réunion, it is hinted), how and why has demand changed over the years, and why has it led to maize cultivation in this particular place at this particular time? Similarly, the regional history of migration, colonization, other cash crop booms (like lima beans and cotton) are mentioned but not well integrated into the story of frontier deforestation. Are, for instance, wealthy cotton-growers financing the expansion into the forest?

The results of the collaborative project presented in this CD-Rom are certainly more than the sum of their individual parts, due to obvious sharing of ideas and cross-fertilization between researchers and their disciplines. Unfortunately, however, *Environnement et pratiques paysannes à Madagascar* lacks an integrative overview or summary. One can only find one in an article included among the supplementary materials (Blanc-Pamard et al. 2005). This omission aside, the results demonstrate the potential of collaborative multidisciplinary research projects. French research funding encourages expatriate research staff from IRD (the Institute of Research for Development, formerly ORSTOM) to work with teams of high caliber researchers from French and host country universities and institutes. This particular study involved a dozen researchers and sponsored two dozen student theses.

The multimedia format enhances the presentation of the research results. The numerous high quality maps and photos are hyperlinked from the text, as well as available for direct browsing. A short movie, titled *Le Maïs et la Cendre* (Maize and Ashes), adds life and color to the story of maize-driven deforestation. A library of aerial photos, taken in 2001 from a motorized paraglider, provides birds-eye views of the dynamic landscape. Finally, the CD-Rom contains printable PDFs of the text and numerous other publications. The outcome is flexible, allows one to quickly zero in on topics of interest, and permits full use of non-textual forms of evidence and documentation. A missed opportunity, however, is the lack of translations into Malagasy or English. For those who read French, and anyone interested in a different way to present research into contemporary environmental transformations, this work is highly recommended.

References cited:

Blanc-Pamard, C., P. Milleville, M. Grouzis, F. Lasry, S. Razanaka 2005. Une alliance de disciplines sur une question environnementale: la déforestation en forêt des Mikea (Sud-Ouest de Madagascar). *Natures Sciences Sociétés* 13: 7-20.