

# CHAIR DE LA TERRE, OEIL DE L'EAU...

## Paysanneries et recompositions de campagnes en Imerina (Madagascar)

by Hervé Rakoto Ramiarantsoa

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The flesh of the earth, the water's eye: these lyrical peasant expressions for the topsoil and rice paddy springs form a fitting title to this engaging analysis of agrarian life in highland Madagascar. Hervé Rakoto Ramiarantsoa's ethnoagronomic study approaches rural life on the peasants' own, nuanced terms, and as a result, offers the reader a richly detailed monograph with several noteworthy conclusions. Most significantly, Rakoto documents peasant efforts at erosion and fertility management, as well as a phenomenal market-driven boom in reforestation. These findings, placed in the context of population growth, contradict much prevailing environmental rhetoric about the "degraded and barren" Malagasy highlands.

Based on a dissertation in human geography, *Chair de la Terre* combines the approaches of agroecology, ethnogeography, and agrarian history to study farming systems and social change in three different sub-regions of Imerina, the central highlands of Madagascar: Imamo to the west of the capital, Vakiniadiana to the east, and Anjozorobe to the north. The first section describes the natural environment of these tropical highlands from the point of view of both the scientist and peasant. Rakoto's expert geomorphic and pedologic analysis is followed by a lengthy presentation of peasant categories (including the symbolic and spiritual) for soils, slopes, water regimes, climate periods, and plants. This ethno-agronomic analysis is a valuable contribution to the technically-dominated literature on Malagasy agricultural systems.

In the second section Rakoto explores the history of the case study regions and presents a detailed analysis of the current agrarian system (tenure and labor arrangements, crop strategies and calendars, household budgets, markets, soil management). Building on this material, Rakoto then presents his model of historical

landscape change in the central highlands. Labeled *mérinisation* for the regional ethnic group (the Merina), this Boserupian model is driven by demographic pressure within a context of Merina rice-based culture. Irrigated rice cultivation expands upstream and nibbles at the valley sides, while the hillsides and hills are intensified from pastures and sloping fields to terraced plots of diverse crops and fruit trees. The peasants themselves confirm the model to Rakoto - he quotes an elder's comment that intensification is the "natural progression of things" depending on land and labor availability (p. 222). Unfortunately, however, despite Rakoto's attention to the history of Merina settlement, the *mérinisation* model does not address this factor - land and labor availability - beyond a simple consideration of demographic growth.

The final section explores recent changes in regional agrarian systems, though not before taking a closer look at the economic and financial crisis which strangled Madagascar in the 1980s. Agrarian adaptations mentioned include non-agricultural income diversification, milk production, woodlots, and cash cropping. In the case study in eastern Imerina, eucalyptus forest now covers 70 percent of land which only 50 years ago was barren grassland! Rakoto shows how this phenomenal reforestation, driven chiefly by the urban charcoal market, has also been pushed by colonial policies and land tenure issues. In western Imerina, on the other hand, an equally surprising boom of pineapple cultivation characterized the past decade. In just a short period, pineapples came to occupy more than 50 percent of croplands at a surprising distance from the major roads. In both cases, an intricate system of collectors and transporters has developed to deliver the crops to the capital for profit. Throughout, Rakoto stresses the ecological and economic logic of peasant actions at the expense of political-economic or structural explanations.

One of the most useful themes in this book is the intricate logic and planning of the smallholding peasants, especially with regards to soil management. In contrast to many colonial or environmental views, Rakoto paints a picture of smart farmers who are landscape builders (*bâtisseurs de paysages*, p. 217) instead of destroyers and degraders. Soil fertility is carefully managed with a variety of inputs, and erosion is fought with ditches and benching. These efforts increase in areas with higher population densities. As such, Rakoto adds an empirical case to support the controversial thesis of "more people, less erosion" proposed by Tiffen *et al.* (1994). The evidence is rather convincing, especially as the eastern case study - home to higher populations and better soil protection - is actually a region less prone to erosion in the first place. The peasants use their experiential knowledge of their environment in order to minimize risk, thus managing their landscape in accordance with the current economic, political, social, and demographic contexts.

A second major theme in this monograph, regionalism, will not satisfy the reader as much. In his conclusion, Rakoto states that the evolution of each study region is born of its own natural, social, and economic milieu, with *mérinité* as a unifying theme (p. 308). Unfortunately, this pervasive atheoretical emphasis on regions as "factors" to explain differences in the case studies leaves latent other crucial factors hinted at in the text, such as marginalization, political economy, market forces, and ecological context.

The value of this book, then, resides for the general audience in its presentation of peasant knowledge and initiative (especially in soil management), Boserupian agrarian change, and market-induced land use strategies like reforestation or cash-crops.

Unfortunately, Rakoto misses a chance to address the complementarity of Boserupian and market-based theories of agrarian change, never mind that he glosses over the major issues of class structure, social inequalities, and political economic context that are vital to any understanding of agrarian change in Madagascar (e.g. Jarosz 1990). While the volume regrettably lacks an index, for those specifically interested in the agriculture and society of highland Madagascar, *Chair de la Terre* is a treasure-trove laden with high quality information not to be missed.

**Sources:**

Jarosz, L. (1990). Rice on Shares: Agrarian Change and the Development of Sharecropping in Alaotra, Madagascar. Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.

Tiffen, M., Mortimore, M. and Gichuki, F. (1994). *More People, Less Erosion*. John Wiley and Sons, Chichester.