

# The danger of misunderstanding 'culture'

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## ABSTRACT

Most conservationists working in Madagascar recognise that if conservation goals are to be achieved, conservation bodies have to work together with, rather than against, local people. One important aspect of this is taking local 'culture' into account. However, what is understood by 'culture' in such contexts tends to be extremely partial as 'culture' is almost always limited to taboos (*fady*). The article discusses the danger of such a narrow view suggesting that 'culture' is infinitely more complex and subtle than its immediately apparent surface. I argue that if conservationists' commitment to take 'culture' seriously is genuine, it must also apply to those cultural phenomena that are in conflict with conservation programmes. This applies in particular to rural Malagasy people's desire to have many descendants; a desire which is linked to their fundamental understanding of what represents a meaningful life.

## RÉSUMÉ

La plupart de ceux qui travaillent dans des institutions dédiées à la protection de la nature se rendent bien compte que s'ils veulent réussir dans leur entreprise ils doivent travailler avec, et non contre, la population locale. Pour cela il est important de tenir compte de la 'culture'. Néanmoins, ce qu'ils englobent dans le terme 'culture' est fort limité et le plus souvent réduit aux seuls tabous (*fady*). L'article considère les dangers qu'une telle limitation implique et démontre que la culture est quelque chose d'infiniment plus complexe et subtile que ce qui apparaît en surface. Je ne doute pas de la bonne foi des protecteurs de la nature qui veulent tenir compte de la culture mais je tiens ici à souligner qu'ils doivent aussi accepter l'existence d'aspects culturels qui vont à l'encontre de leur programme, car déclarer vouloir travailler avec les habitants ne serait qu'une parade s'il en était autrement. Mon analyse porte sur l'ensemble des aspects liés au désir d'avoir une progéniture nombreuse pour les populations rurales malgaches. Être humain consiste avant tout à avoir de bonnes relations et définir une morale entre les membres de générations différentes d'une famille, dans le passé, le présent et le futur, car c'est cela que d'avoir une famille. Ces relations sont créées et maintenues de diverses manières au quotidien et dans la vie rituelle mais plus particulièrement au niveau des enfants car ils représentent la bénédiction ancestrale et comme ils relient les vivants et les morts, ils créent le lien entre le passé, le présent et l'avenir du groupe de parenté. Ainsi si les

protecteurs de la nature veulent être crédibles dans leur désir de prendre en compte la 'culture' malgache, ils ne peuvent pas limiter leur approche à la reconnaissance de tabous sans reconnaître d'autres aspects de la culture malgache comme le désir d'avoir une progéniture nombreuse qui ne s'accorde généralement pas avec le programme actuelle de protection de la nature.

**KEYWORDS:** Culture, taboo, Masoala, population growth, concepts of life, Madagascar.

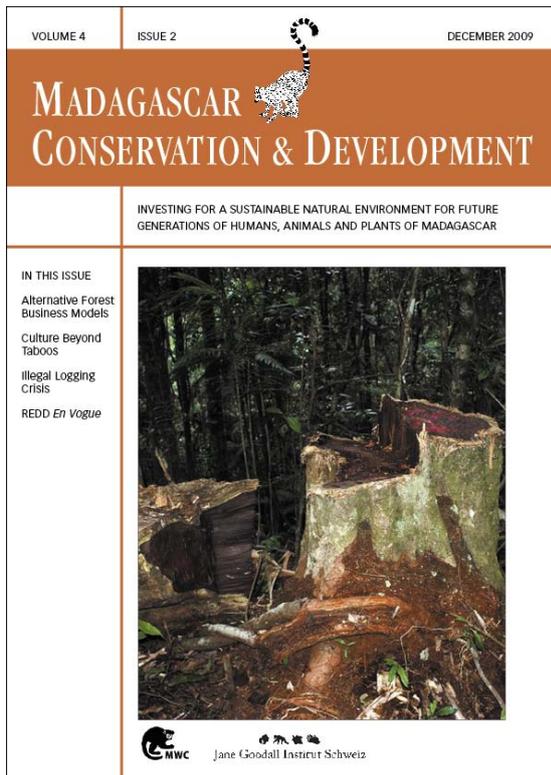
**MOTS CLEF :** culture, tabou, Masoala, croissance démographique, conceptualisation de la vie, Madagascar.

## THERE IS MORE TO 'CULTURE' THAN TABOOS

Conservationists working in Madagascar seem to have come to an agreement that if conservation is to succeed, conservation bodies have to work together with local people. One important aspect of this is taking local 'culture' into account. Few are those who would nowadays argue against this paradigm. To a social scientist such as myself, however, the conservationists' use of 'culture' is highly problematic because it reveals a partial and misleading understanding of what it means to acknowledge and to integrate 'culture'.

In the conservation literature that addresses the problem of biodiversity conservation in Madagascar, taking 'culture' into account is regularly equated with integrating local taboos (*fady*) into conservation programmes, although, of course, this applies more strongly to some studies than to others. The tendency to reduce 'culture' to *fady* includes numerous references to so-called 'sacred forests' where in many cases taboos against cutting vegetation or killing animals apply. I would like to add here in brackets that 'sacred forest' is a problematic and misleading translation of *ala fady* for two reasons. First, it is taboo to cut the vegetation in such a place not because of the vegetation but because it is taboo to disturb the ancestors that rest inside the *ala fady*. Second, one should be wary of thinking of Malagasy ancestors in terms of 'sacredness' in the European sense. Rather than being 'supernatural' beings or subjects of religious veneration, people in Madagascar think of ancestors in ways that are strongly connected to how they think of elders (Bloch 2002).

Although 'culture' is never explicitly reduced to taboos, whenever an argument is made for integrating 'local culture' for the sake of conservation it almost always and almost exclu-



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sively concerns taboos. This was evident, for example, during a conference on 'Society, Natural Resources and Development in Madagascar' held at the University of East Anglia in the spring of 2007 during which a number of speakers emphasised in one breath how it was imperative for conservationists to be sensitive to 'local culture' and to learn about and take into account *fady* in order to win villagers over to conservation objectives (see also Mannle et al. 2008). The near equation of 'integrating culture' with 'integrating taboos' is also evident, for instance, in several contributions made to this journal. In these, authors make references to 'tradition' and 'culture' by, on the one hand, pointing to the value of taboos for conservation (Rabearivony et al. 2008, Rahaingodrahety et al. 2008) and, on the other hand, by lamenting the (increasing) lack of respect for local *fady* by migrants or local people themselves and the detrimental effect that this has on the environment (Patel 2007, Rasolofoson et al. 2007). Hardly any mention of 'culture' is otherwise made in the conservation literature.

When I talk of 'conservation literature', I refer to studies on biodiversity conservation in Madagascar by non-social scientists who discuss a phenomenon, 'culture', that is typically the realm of the social sciences. This breach of disciplinary boundaries is of course highly desirable and I do not in any way want to suggest that non-social scientists would do better to leave 'culture' out. However, a deeper understanding of what 'culture' is is necessary if 'culture' is not to be used merely as a means to an end. Thus I would like to have this essay understood as a social scientific contribution to an interdisciplinary discussion.

Conservationists' interest in taboos is understandable. By definition, taboos give information about things one must not do. As conservation programmes in Madagascar are primarily aimed at preventing Malagasy people from doing certain things, such as eating lemurs or bats or felling trees, taboos seem to provide a perfect, culturally anchored tool for getting the message across. This is undoubtedly true in certain contexts. However, the compatibility between certain taboos and conservation objectives in Madagascar creates an unfortunate tendency among conservationists to prioritize taboos over other aspects of life in Madagascar that are equally part of 'culture'.

The almost exclusive focus on *fady* produces a limited picture of what a commitment to taking 'culture' seriously implies. Obviously, taboos are an important aspect of Malagasy society but they are only one element, and a relatively minor one, of the complex totality that is normally referred to as 'culture'. *Fady* can easily be found out about and noticed even by a casual observer, but they mean little when isolated from the wider cultural context of which they form a part. I will not attempt a definition of 'culture' here not only because this would be an inappropriate place to do so but also because the very complexity of what is referred to by the word 'culture' has meant that defining it has been notoriously difficult. One thing, however, that social scientists agree on is that much, if not most, of 'culture' is not explicit (cf. Geertz 1973). Thus 'culture' cannot be reduced to those of its aspects that can easily be elicited from local people such as what kinds of *fady* exist in a particular place. 'Culture' is infinitely more complex and subtle as the work of several generations of anthropologists amply demonstrates. Thus conservationists' commitment to respect local 'culture' and to work with, rather than against, it should

be understood in a much broader sense than is usually the case. Moreover, if this commitment is to be genuine, it must also apply to those aspects of Malagasy 'culture', which are in conflict with conservationist programmes. Otherwise the commitment to work with local people is merely self-serving. Consider the following brief illustration of what taking 'culture' into account will inevitably imply (for a much more detailed account and discussion of the argument summarised below, see Keller 2008). The following account is based on a total of twenty-nine months of social anthropological fieldwork carried out on the Masoala peninsula and in the area of Maroantsetra (see Keller 2005, 2008, 2009).

#### WHAT CONSTITUTES A MEANINGFUL LIFE?

At the end of a long conversation that my research assistant Paul and I had with an old woman and two of her sons during the course of my recent fieldwork on the Masoala peninsula, we came to talk about the joy the Malagasy feel when they have produced many descendants. Rounding off the conversation, Paul recounted the following myth: "The Creator asked the Malagasy whether they preferred to die the way a banana plant dies or the way the moon dies. The Malagasy chose the banana plant because after it dies many new banana plants will still grow from its base. But when the moon dies it leaves no children behind." The myth was met with pleasure by those listening because of how well it captured what everyone felt. The banana tree, although it only lives for a short period of time, produces many new shoots that grow right out of their parent plant, sprouting around it while it is still alive and continuing to grow even after it has died. The moon, in contrast, although it is eternal and never truly dies, does not grow and does not produce new life. "The moon of February is still exactly the same in March, in April and in May; it's still just one single moon," Paul added. "The moon has no children. Or", looking with a smile on his face at his audience, he ended, "has anyone ever heard of a child of the moon, or of its brother?" "No, there isn't any such thing," said the old lady laughing.

As my own work and that of other anthropologists shows (e.g. Southall 1986, Feeley-Harnik 1991: 51-56, Bloch 1993, Astuti 2000), the desire to have many descendants is almost universal in rural Madagascar. The reasons for this are subtle and complex and population growth cannot be reduced to a strategy aimed at economic or social security in old age as is often assumed, much less can it be explained by local people's lack of formal education. Rather, rural Malagasy people's wish to have numerous descendants is intimately linked to their understanding of what, at a very fundamental level, represents a successful and meaningful life.

It is important to note that the concept of descendants in Madagascar (*taranaka*) includes not only one's own children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and so on but also the children, grandchildren etc. of all of one's brothers, sisters and cousins. All these people, together with all those who have generated them and those who will come after them, constitute a kin group. A kin group thus includes ancestors, their presently living and their future descendants. And it is the relations between these different generations of relatives that, in rural Madagascar, primarily constitute a person's identity and place in society. Thus kinship (*fihavanana*) – a notion that, however, involves much more than genealogy referring, in particular, to moral ties and obligations – is at the core of what

it means to be a human being. Therefore, the purpose of life, as people in Masoala, for example, understand it, is to continue and to strengthen the relations between the different generations of people who together constitute a kin group. These relations are maintained and created in many ways in daily and in ritual life but in particular through the generation of children. The birth of a healthy child is a sign that the ancestors are satisfied and that they have therefore blessed their descendants with a new life; when ancestors are angry they may deprive their descendants of children. Children also ensure that the good relations between living and dead relatives will continue in the future. Because on the one hand, they will communicate with, and care for, their ancestors – those who were already dead when they were born and those who will become ancestors during their lifetime. This happens, for example, by sacrificing cattle for the ancestors or by asking for their blessing before undertaking particular types of agricultural work or when setting off on a journey. On the other hand, children will generate new children who will further continue the moral relationships between past, present and future generations. Children thus link the present to the past and to the future. The success of the relationships among kin does not necessarily depend on every couple having lots of children and it is indeed not the case that all families have or even want many. In the three villages in the district of Maroantsetra where I have worked since 1998, many women and men had only two or three children while others had eight or more and some none. People's desire to have many descendants – and, as we have seen, these include far more people than one's own children and grandchildren – is not measurable or quantifiable and it does not follow a simple logic of 'the more, the better' (cf. Feeley-Harnik 1995). However, from the perspective of an ethos that is oriented towards the fruitful continuation of the relations between relatives of different generations, dead and alive, every new human life is a positive event that strengthens these ties and therefore growth is good. It is because, for people in a place like Masoala, a successful life is one that makes kin groups prosper and preferably grow that the Malagasy chose the fate of the banana plant and not the moon's static eternity. In a rural society, however, a kin group's successful growth not only depends on the birth of children but also, equally importantly, on a family's ability to provide them with land on which they can create a livelihood and continue the productive process of life. This land is referred to in Masoala, as in other parts of Madagascar, as *tany fivelomana* – from the root *velona* (to be alive) – which means not only 'land for subsistence' but also 'land for life' in the sense of enabling the process of continuation and growth discussed above (Abinal and Malzac 1993: 824).

None of this, of course, means or implies that 'culture' is fixed or static, on the contrary. As is true of all human societies, Malagasy 'culture' is dynamic, processual and thus in constant flux. Nonetheless, there are, at a given time, outstandingly important cultural markers such as rural Malagasy people's conceptualisation of a meaningful and moral life as being based on the good relations between dead and living kin.

In the case of the Masoala peninsula, the Masoala National Park that was established in 1997 already severely restricts local people's access to land now and, unless things change dramatically, will do so even more in the future when the next generations will not be permitted to turn forest or secondary

growth into *tany fivelomana*. In the villages where I work, the park is therefore perceived by local farmers as a threat to the successful continuation of the good relations between relatives of past, present and future generations. This makes people feel, as many have said to me, 'defeated' (*resy zahay*) in the very purpose of life. From this perspective it is rather ironic that ANGAP, now called Madagascar National Parks, should have chosen as its new slogan the phrase 'For Life'.

The 'ethos of growth', including ideas about children, land, rice, kinship, ancestral blessing, progress, prosperity and a great many other things, is never explicated by local people in a way comparable to what I have just done. Rather it is embedded and implicit in countless actions and practices, remarks, reflections, bodily gestures and emotions that occur in the course of daily life. The 'ethos of growth' is a crucial aspect of contemporary 'culture' to be found beneath that which is explicit, visible and easily discovered, such as what kinds of *fady* people have in a particular place.

## IMPLICATIONS

If conservationists' commitment to work with, rather than against, local people and to take their 'culture' into account is sincere, then 'culture' must be acknowledged not only when it happens to suit conservation objectives as in the case of taboos against eating certain kinds of lemurs or cutting trees in particular places. Rather, 'culture' must be recognised in a much more encompassing sense, including people's desire to have many children and their need for land. What exactly this will imply in the context of conservation activities is another issue that is not the topic of this essay which, rather than proposing any particular solutions to the problems discussed, is intended to provide food for thought. If only things such as *fady* and 'sacred forests' are promoted as valuable 'culture' in the conservation literature, this may give rise to the suspicion that what we are really dealing with is an unsettling attempt to use 'culture' simply in order to better sell to the Malagasy what they might, in fact, not want.

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