



From Ratsiraka to Ravalomanana

Changing Narratives of Prickly Pears in Dryland Madagascar

Karen Middleton



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/oceanindien/729>
DOI: 10.4000/oceanindien.729
ISSN: 2260-7730

Publisher

INALCO

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 January 2009
Number of pages: 47-83
ISBN: 978-2-85831-180-4
ISSN: 0246-0092

Electronic reference

Karen Middleton, "From Ratsiraka to Ravalomanana", *Études océan Indien* [Online], 42-43 | 2009, document 2, Online since 27 January 2012, connection on 30 June 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/oceanindien/729> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/oceanindien.729>

This text was automatically generated on 30 June 2021.



Études océan Indien est mis à disposition selon les termes de la Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale 4.0 International.

From Ratsiraka to Ravalomanana

Changing Narratives of Prickly Pears in Dryland Madagascar

Karen Middleton

Fieldwork has been generously supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (UK) (1981-1983), the Leverhulme Trust and Twenty-Seven Historical Foundation (1991), and the Nuffield Foundation and the Rhodes Trust (2002-2003). In Madagascar I am indebted to the Ministère de la Recherche scientifique et technologique pour le Développement, the University at Tuléar/Toliara, government officials in Beloha, Marolinta, and Tsihombe, and ANGAP workers at Cap Sainte Marie Special Reserve. Above all I should like to record my gratitude to the peoples of Karembola for their kind assistance over many years.

Introduction

- 1 I am walking the escarpment west of Anjedava in the Karembola region of southern Madagascar when my companion, a local man, points to a hamlet just south of our path. The hamlet is surrounded by prickly pear and to my mind replicates the traditional Karembola homestead as described extensively in colonial literature. I am therefore surprised to hear my companion dismiss it as “bad”.¹ Its inhabitants, he adds, are worthless good-for-nothings who have planted the *raketa* (prickly pear) with the sole intention of selling it to wealthy stock-owners when drought comes and fodder is in short supply. In this way, these “slaves” (*ondevo*) hoped to acquire goats, perhaps even cattle, of their own.
- 2 Two aspects of this intervention retain my attention. First, the strong disapproval my companion has expressed of the traditional local vernacular of the homestead. Secondly, the evident disquiet he feels at the idea of “slaves” who dare to grow *raketa* in the hope of bettering themselves. This sets me thinking more broadly about the indigenous symbolism of *raketa* and how it has changed. The cultivation of prickly pears is often portrayed as an essentially pragmatic response to the challenges of farming and herding in arid conditions yet this incident suggests that in Karembola the plant might be involved in far more complex issues of status and class conflict. Prickly

pear here seems to be implicated directly in a politics of rank, and this politics of rank would appear to be decipherable only by looking at Karembola ideologies of [re]production and exchange.

- 3 In this article I propose to explore this question with reference to indigenous valuations of four named varieties of prickly pear:

- Malagasy Cactus or *raketa gasy*, a variety introduced into Androy-Karembola-Mahafale via Tôlañaro (Fort Dauphin) in the late eighteenth century (almost certainly 1769). It went on to become a dominant, some say invasive, species in Karembola before being subjected in the 1920s to effective biological control.²
- *Raketa vazaha* or “foreign/white man’s cactus”/*raketa* from overseas, a spineless or nearly spineless variety which, most authorities say, was introduced into the region by French military officers in the early 1900s and whose extension became the subject of repeated, largely unsuccessful, state-sponsored programmes.³
- *Raketa saonjo* (alternatively *sonjo* or *soso*), a variety which began to spread in Karembola in the 1950s becoming by the early 1980s both the most common and the most popular prickly pear species there. Colonial records are vague and dissonant about its origins; some local oral evidence affirms that it was a hybrid born *in situ* of a cross between *raketa gasy* and *raketa vazaha* rather than an introduction.⁴
- *Raketa mena* or “red prickly pear”, a more recent arrival that has been expanding since at least the 1970s, more or less beneath the radar of the state. By 2001 infestations had become so obvious that the plant was denounced in a WWF-commissioned report as the primary threat to biodiversity and livelihoods in the Cap Sainte Marie region (ANGAP et al, n.d. [2001]).⁵

- 4 By drawing on ethnography collected in three localities of Karembola (Tranovaho, Anjedava, and Cap Sainte Marie (Tanjona Vohimena)) at intervals over a twenty-year period (1981 to 2003), I will explore some of the cultural meanings which surround these four species and show how these meanings have shifted over time. I shall relate these narrative shifts to broader debates around social value and personhood, use-value and commodification, in contexts of national political and economic developments. In particular, I want to explore the way *raketa* talk has shadowed and at times parodied parallel histories in the island: notably, the shift from state socialist to neo-liberal economics and the rise of biodiversity conservation over these two decades.

6

Context of Study

- 5 Karembola is located in dryland Madagascar roughly between the Menarandra River and Cap Sainte Marie (Tanjona Vohimena), between Androy and Mahafale.⁷ An average annual rainfall of 200-350 mm is often quoted, though high interannual variation in precipitation is more critical in defining the constraints and opportunities that Karembola farmers and herders face. The effects are felt in hand hoe agriculture, where low soil moisture often results in crop failure, and in livestock production, where there are often severe restrictions on fodder and water supply. This is not to say that the limitations inherent in a dryland ecology alone have made this one of the poorest and most marginalised regions of Madagascar. Long-term histories of political disadvantage and social exclusion have aggravated ecological constraints.

- 6 It is in this socio-ecological context that prickly pears (*Opuntia* spp.) can have useful applications. Not only do prickly pears survive in drier habitats but selected varieties can offer valuable resources to human societies faced with the uncertainties of farming or herding in high-risk environments. The fruits and cladodes (leaf pads) of some species can be harvested for human consumption, the succulent cladodes can be exploited to feed and water livestock, and the spinier varieties make stout hedging for garden plots and cattle pens (Barbera et al, 1995; Le Houérou, 1996). These uses partly account for the multiple global transfers of prickly pears that took place from the New World after 1495. It would be wrong, however, to suggest that introduced *Opuntia* have always been wholly beneficial. Some have become invasive, and the perceived costs to agriculture and stockfarming have given rise to campaigns of chemical and biological control in Madagascar, Australia, India, South Africa, and elsewhere. With respect to southern Madagascar, the additional argument has been increasingly made since the early 1990s that alien *Opuntia* introductions present a serious threat to a unique biodiversity of global value (Rauh, 1995: 55, 68; 1998: xi, 66).⁸⁹
- 7 The communities reported in this paper all practice mixed stockraising and cropping. Indeed, in contrast to externally derived imagery of Tandroy-Karembola-Mahafale as eternal pastoralists, I have always been struck by the high social value my informants gave to agriculture and the way they linked it to rank and nobility of race. Certainly, zebu cattle were highly valued as the quintessential sacrificial beast, the stipulated prestation in ceremonial exchange, and the indicator of status, generally providing market income only in drought years when they are sold to buy in food. But higher-ranking persons, people who are truly *masiñe* (“efficacious”, “blessed”), were also said to show prowess as food producers:
- 8 Prosperous, highborn people, *hazomanga* [ritually pure] people, produce crops, fill their granaries, make fattened, greased bodies. People who don’t hoe behave like dependants, deadbeats, skinny, weak.¹⁰
- 9 Cropping was mostly for subsistence, with limited market participation, though a few farmers devoted some land to cash crops, notably groundnut, and many more sold surpluses of field crops, often only to buy them back later in the year when their own supplies ran short. Household livestock holdings varied immensely, ranging from substantial mixed holdings of cattle and small ruminants through to holdings of a few goats or less. Beloha Prefecture was formerly a centre of mohair and wool production, and average per capita goat and sheep numbers tend to be greater, and cattle herds proportionately smaller, than those reported for Androy (CENRADERU, 1980).
- 10 Cultivated foods were supplemented by a wide range of hunted, trapped and gathered foods. In good years the consumption of such foods was mostly confined to children; as food became scarcer or more costly increasing numbers of adults would resort to them, depending on the resources available to the particular household. Local opportunities for income diversification were limited. Some cash income was derived from trading contraband tobacco on local circuits, and fish and gathered plant products (ricin, periwinkle) to regional markets for export; but excessive supply resulting from large scale entry of distressed people drives down prices at times when cash is scarce. Money is brought in by wage labour emigration to the agricultural concessions, the mining centres, and to the cities of Madagascar, where Karembola typically work as night watchmen and *pousse-pousse* pullers.

The re-ancestralization of Karembola c.1981-1983

- 11 I begin with popular narrative about *raketa gasy*, a plant that is insignificant, botanically speaking, in Karembola today. I do so because in the early 1980s recollections of the time this cactus died dominated communal narratives about the community and the state (Middleton, 1997, 1999). The story basically went as follows: Malagasy Cactus was a native plant, a divinely appointed ancestral staple. However, *vazaha* (“foreigner”, non-*gasy*; the term here refers specifically to French colonisers) hated it because the thorny labyrinths enabled subjects to resist wage labour and tax collectors by hiding and surviving on the fruit. To “pacify” the region, *vazaha* introduced a cochineal insect, a predator on Malagasy Cactus, with devastating effect. The loss of this plant, the story goes, resulted in regional depopulation as people and cattle either died in vast numbers or were scattered into diverse corners of the colony, many never to return. In effect, the event became the defining moment in Karembola history, scything time in two: first, there was “the time of Malagasy Cactus” (*tamy raketa gasy*), which was also “the time of the ancestors” (*tamy razan̄e*) or “*gasy* times” (*tamy gasy*), and then there was “foreign time” (*tamy vazaha*) after Malagasy Cactus died.
- 12 I dub this the “nationalist” version of Malagasy Cactus history because it overlaps significantly with versions that appeared in the Malagasy nationalist press soon after the event. The most marked difference between the two versions is that while the nationalist press of the early 1930s offered an essentially secular interpretation of the death of Malagasy Cactus as an event determined by colonial capitalism, my informants embedded the same history in a language of the sacred and the divine. When Karembola mourned the passing of Malagasy Cactus, they were not simply conducting an economic audit of the costs to herding and farming in a water-scarce ecology, though these considerations were obviously extremely important. Rather, they framed their discussion of the economics in terms of a world of invisible power (*asy*) and moral blame (*hakeo*), linking their loss to a land where all kinds of taboos were being broken with devastating results, a land where proper, fully powered *mpisoro* (priests) and *hazomanga* (altar stakes) could no longer be instated because their rightful owners were far away in Diego or Tuléar, leaving only “children” in the ancestral land.
- 13 In the ritual domain, informants associated this “broken land” with the elaboration of mortuary ritual and the aggrandizement of tombs. Multiplying tombs that expanded into social space, blurring the distinction between the living and the dead, expressed their sense of affliction as *gasy* living in a “foreign” land. Such enactments of despair and passivity needed to be taken with a pinch of salt, however, because, in reality, Karembola funerals in the early 1980s were vibrant arenas of action affording participants many opportunities to enhance their prestige and “refresh” their wealth. In effect, the whole economy was conceptualised as a cycle of (re)production in which decomposition/slaughter of the deceased’s body/cattle leads to the regeneration of “living” wealth (“worms”) through exchanges with relatives, affines and friends. By judicious management of their social capital, by balancing expenditure on tomb construction and mortuary feasts against incoming gifts, the bereaved could make a handsome profit and enhance their prestige. The adverse effects of labour migration that dominated the narrative of Malagasy Cactus were similarly partly compensated by the resulting income that enabled Karembola to reconstitute drought-destituted herds and to participate in ritual display/exchange at home.

- 14 A similar point about symbolic and economic resurgence can be made more narrowly with respect to prickly pear. Since the 1920s successive administrations had put much effort into promoting new *Opuntia* varieties, and some of these had become crucial to local livelihoods. The spineless *raketa vazaha* had been promoted prior to the demise of Malagasy Cactus. With post-war FIDES metropolitan funding (*Fonds d'investissement pour le développement économique et social*/Investment Funds for Economic and Social Development), vast plantations of this variety were created under late colonial regional development schemes. Plantings continued under Philibert Tsiranana's so-called "neo-colonial" regime (1960-1972). According to most literature, these initiatives foundered because local peoples had little or no interest in making them work: the collective plantations threatened customary pasturing rights; the plantings relied on "forced" labour and took men from agricultural tasks at a time labour was scarce; and local people, who already resented the French administration for destroying Malagasy Cactus, now suspected it of alienating their land. Quite apart from the practical difficulties involved in cultivating this spineless cactus - it is fussy over soil conditions, and requires protection from inopportune grazing - there were inevitable cultural ambiguities associated with the colonial promotion of "alien" forms of prickly pear. In the early years of Tsiranana's Presidency, a group of Deputies from the Beloha/Androka region petitioned Parliament for the restoration of the "native" cactus. The "Ministère de l'Agriculture et de l'expansion rurale et du ravitaillement" rejected the petition but did agree to promote *raketa saonjo*, a new spiny variety that was already spreading in local communities by informal means. It was spiny enough to remind farmers-herders of the lost ancestral cactus but not so spiny and invasive as to be considered a potential nuisance by the state.
- 15 By the early 1980s the use of *raketa saonjo* as a human food and as a fodder had acquired the routinized look of customary behaviour. Men grilled the cladodes over open fires to remove the spines in readiness for the cattle; women rolled the fruit underfoot to remove the irritant "hairs" (glochids) which might otherwise become embedded in fingers, lips or tongue - much as the pre-cochineal literature described (Decary, 1930: 128, 181). With *raketa* hedging planted extensively along paths, around cattle pens and garden plots, the landscapes of old Karembola had been partly recreated. Knowing how to manage and exploit spiny cactus was once again an aspect of local knowledge and adaptation, part of what it meant to be Karembola, distinguishing "children of locality" from *vazaha*.
- 16 To the extent that its exploitation called for local knowledge and the application of ancestral techniques that had once applied to Malagasy Cactus, *raketa sonjo* had undergone a degree of vernacularization. This was less true of *raketambazaha* (foreign or colonial cactus). Spineless, fussy over soil conditions, more obviously different from Malagasy Cactus, it required new knowledge, acquired planting and handling techniques. It did not slot readily into ancestral practice: it was too easily grazed to serve as hedging or a stand alone fodder on the range. In addition, the fruit was impracticable as a human staple/famine food because of the deadly constipation which results when the fruit is consumed in large quantities. To eat it safely, you needed surplus, plenty of other foods in the granary, or, ideally, the money to be able to purchase mangoes that are imported from Mahafale at roughly the same time as the *raketambazaha* season in Karembola. Nevertheless, as a form of conspicuous consumption associated with foreigners and surplus production, by the early 1980s

raketambazaha eating had acquired positive status implications in the local context. Its favourable evaluation was particularly striking, given that in former decades cattle had (allegedly) refused to eat the cladodes, people refused to eat the fruit, and herders planted it only under duress.¹¹

- 17 Interestingly, many informants stated that *raketa sonjo* had originated in *raketambazaha*, though they offered different versions of exactly how this occurred. Some subscribed to the idea of reversion: spiny cladodes - *raketa sonjo* - had appeared on spineless cactus plants. Others described a process of hybridization: spineless *raketambazaha* had crossed with dying specimens of “Malagasy Cactus” to produce this new spiny form. It is tempting to read these narratives as metaphors for the experience of cultural *métissage*. The metaphor is most obvious in the version which holds *raketa sonjo* to be the product of a union between a “native” and an “exotic” cactus pear. But the alternative version (where *raketambazaha* “gave birth” to spiny *sonjo* without crossing with “Malagasy Cactus”) also implies a kind of hybridity since this foreign or European cactus “gave birth” in Madagascar, making *sonjo* a “child of the land” (*anatane*). Either way, the positive attitudes towards *raketa sonjo* and *raketa vazaha* were suggestive of a general acceptance of hybrid cultural forms, the one associated with a “traditional” subsistence economy; the other with surplus production incorporating elements of *vazaha*-ness.¹²
- 18 I have alluded to the “re-ancestralization” of Karembola in the early 1980s. Yet a degree of symbolic tension between ancestral and non-ancestral types of *raketa* was necessary to the integrity of the master narrative of Karembola history as the death of Malagasy Cactus with its defining rupture between *vazaha* present and *gasy* past. Thus, informants always listed *raketa* (variety unspecified) as an “ancestral food” (*hanendrazan*). This made sense because *raketa* was indeed a food, in many ways *the* food, the ancestors ate in “Malagasy times”. But informants then qualified this by noting that in *gasy* times the ancestors typically ate *raketa gasy* while “children” today ate “newly arrived” varieties (*raketa vao niavy*). In short, *raketa* discourse in the early 1980s evinced a complex, contextual symbolism whereby, rather than constituting simple binary contrasts, “new” and “ancestral” cactus were both alike and unlike.¹³
- 19 Ambivalent (rather than negative) attitudes to “newcomer” *raketa* varieties reflected a broader ambivalence in how people in the early 1980s remembered the colonial period. Certainly, informants dwelt on the cruelty of *vazaha*, recalling how *vazaha* had killed, enslaved, and humiliated *gasy* people, especially *gasy* men. Yet they regularly expressed an admiration for perceived *vazaha* qualities: wisdom, knowledge, and cleanliness (by 1981 cloth and soap had become scarce). Typically informants described *vazaha* as enlightened, knowing creatures who had “calmed the land” and enabled *gasy* to flourish and mature (cf. Cole and Middleton, 2001). One particular theme that was to become increasingly pronounced over the next twenty years was that *vazaha* “take care of Tandroy when they suffer”. *Vazaha* had knocked away their very sustenance by killing Malagasy Cactus, but since then they had been feeding them whenever harvests failed. This contradictory view of colonial power as both enabling and destructive meant that rural Karembola could both commemorate the spitefulness of *vazaha* in killing Malagasy Cactus while also praising the life-sustaining qualities of new *vazaha*/hybrid varieties of prickly pear.
- 20 Even Malagasy Cactus was drawn into this transformative symbolism. For example, many an informant fell into raptures “remembering” a time when a cow fed on

Malagasy Cactus gave milk enough to fill two large gourds (unheard of today), enabling millet and manioc to be regularly cooked in milk or served with curds and whey. But, they often added, “in those days the Tandroy were like cattle, ignorant, dirty. They didn’t grow crops, they didn’t wear clothes, all they did was eat *raketa* in the woods and fight”. On the whole, informants emphasised the superiority of the ancestral era to the post-eradication present but there was always this counterpoint to their narrative. Just as *vazaha* and their cacti were not wholly bad, so too *gasy* people and *raketa gasy* were not wholly good.¹⁴

- 21 Yet - and here we come to *raketa*’s engagement in a politics of rank - to say that informants saw their new varieties of prickly pear as life-sustaining would also be too simple because my informants frowned on high *raketa* dependency as a way of life. Only the very poor, I was repeatedly told, “eat nothing but *raketa*”, “rubbish people, destitute people who don’t support themselves, don’t accomplish things”. The ideal diet as stipulated by informants was based on *diversity*: manioc, maize, sweet potato, millet, pumpkins, melons, squash, beans and peas, supplemented by curdled milk and (in due proportion) prickly pears. Excessive *raketa* eating was considered typical of low-born, accursed, deracinated people (typically, slaves, vagrants, and thieves), lazy good-for-nothings who failed to make their families flourish through hard work. In the then current discourse of primordial identities, this kind of behaviour was generally ascribed to a person’s ancestry and/or his or her “fate” or “destiny” (*anjara’e*).
- 22 These ritual condemnations of cactus dependency tapped into many of the symbolic oppositions that were critical to Karembola selfconceptualizations, viz., between virtuous settled farmers-herders and rootless wanderers, between people of high ancestry and people of low. In effect *raketa* consumption had a fluid position in indigenous political discourse. In the context of adequate to surplus production, it was a morally undetermined food, neither good nor bad. No one felt any sense of shame in eating *saonjo* away from the village if they would be eating cooked food at home. But excessive consumption was morally and politically devaluing. In the past, famine-driven migrations had been the basis of a politico-symbolic hierarchy when hungry people sought refuge with others as dependants, and even now the occasional “lost” person (the term *motso* means both “lost” and “deracinated”, and describes a sort of a social death) still turned up, and was stereotypically discovered eating *raketa* on village *terroir*.¹⁵
- 23 Like many traditional rural Malagasy, Karembola placed high value on reproductive prowess, that is, on families that expand and endure through time. In the Karembola context, these enduring families were specifically idiomised as agnatic descent groups (*tana*, hamlets), which engage in agonistic contests to construct reputation and fame. Although the prestige system, this “politics of tournaments of value”, to adopt Appadurai’s turn of phrase (Appadurai, 1986: 50), was based most obviously on the display/exchange/slaughter of livestock, transactions in vegetable foods also played an important part in political constructions of rank. This is because local political standing depended on the ability to host feasts and to maintain extensive networks of ceremonial exchange, which in turn involves maintaining above average levels of crop and livestock production. The ideal held by most Karembola was to belong to an expanding ancestry with land and herds, and to be part of a married couple with a house and settled social life, producing enough food to feed their family and raising enough stock to be able to participate with honour in ritual exchange and display.

- 24 In the early 1980s rice (which cannot be grown in Karembola and at that time was nationally in short supply) was the ritual vegetable food of choice, and purchased with money raised through the sale of surplus crops and/or stock. *Raketa sonjo* by contrast was typically eaten in mundane day-to-day contexts, alone or in small groups. Prickly pears to my knowledge were never planted as *tone*, trees that commemorate ancestors, local spirits, or settlement founders. Nor were they among the crops that villagers presented to their *mpisoro* (priest) in “first fruits” rituals. In fact, despite its economic importance, I never saw *raketa sonjo* fruit figure in any of the formal contexts (sacrifice, funerals, marriage feasts) in which Karembola transacted status hierarchy or celebrated the socially reproductive processes that create enduring, expanding ancestries.¹⁶ In effect, one might say that there were two transactional orders: a sphere of subsistence activity, on the one hand, concerned with reproducing the individual and the individual household; and a ritual domain, on the other hand, concerned with the longer-term reproduction of a transcendent ancestral order (cf. Parry and Bloch, 1989). And although prickly pear fruit (in due proportion) was one of those tributary influences that helped build ancestries (people and cattle), a symbolic barrier kept it strictly away from the ritual domain and confined it to the subsistence domain.
- 25 These contrasts between transcendent ancestry and everyday practical survival as they pertained to *raketa* consumption were in turn associated with ideas about local hierarchy. We can picture this as a series of dichotomies linking political and consumptory orders: nobility: slaves:: high rank: low rank:: cooked foods: raw foods:: cultivated foods: wild foods:: ritual: subsistence. *Hazomanga* people ate but did not rely on prickly pear.
- 26 In so far as prickly pear was embedded in a politics of rank, it was part of the broader re-traditionalization of Karembola in the early 1980s. It was a way of restoring not only a lost economy but also a lost polity. As a result, local narrative about prickly pear offered a complex commentary on
- 27 Karembola society, imaging a community based on hierarchy as well as identity, on divergent destinies as well as shared history. Informants glossed over important social difference in the way “people before” experienced the death of Malagasy Cactus by narrating it as a collective trauma¹⁷, but reinstated social difference at the heart of their accounts of contemporary *raketa* species through deprecatory references to poor people who subsist on prickly pear.
- 28 I have described some of the internal inconsistencies in *raketa* discourses of the early 1980s but it is also worth considering how these local social and moral projects related to the projects of the Malagasy socialist state. To the extent that the death of Malagasy Cactus was narrated as a collective trauma, it could be considered a typical cultural production of the Ratsiraka era. But insofar as Karembola ideologies of production and exchange were concerned with reimagining a hierarchical society based on primordial identities, they were in conflict with the stated objectives of the 1975 Malagasy Socialist Revolution. On the surface, the conflict was not obvious. AREMA (“Antokin’ny Revolisiona Malagasy/Avant-garde de la Révolution Malgache”, vanguard of the Malagasy Revolution, the national political party during the Second Republic) seemed well-entrenched in this region, and references to “we the *fokonolona*” (“community”, “collective”, Ratsiraka’s chosen instrument for his paradoxical policy of “top-down” selfgovernment or *centralisme démocratique* (Ratsiraka, 1975: 34-39, 42; cf. Covell, 1987) saturated public discourse. But in private most Karembola continued to maintain

archaic idioms of ancestry and rank. And one way of systematically subverting the new “socialist” order was through unremitting references to poor people (idiomised as base ancestries) who ate nothing but prickly pear.

- 29 I would suggest further that one reason why Karembola continued to renarrate the decades-old tragedy of Malagasy Cactus was because it offered an oblique way of critiquing the socialist regime. At first such an interpretation seems counter-intuitive because the death of Malagasy Cactus, narrated as an act of imperialist aggression, was so obviously in keeping with the anti-*vazaha* rhetoric of the Ratsiraka state. Keen to claim a genuine independence for itself in contrast to the so-called “false independence” under Tsiranana, this was a regime that actively encouraged its citizens to recover memories of colonial suffering (cf. Raison-Jourde, 1989; Cole, 2003). The truth, however, was that, six years into Ratsiraka’s government my informants appeared to perceive no real difference between it and earlier regimes. On the contrary, they prefaced their interactions with government officials with expressions of abject subservience: “the land belongs to *vazaha*; we’re like cattle: we can only nod in agreement when *vazaha* speak”. (The term *vazaha* here designates educated Malagasy from other parts of the island, typically government officials.) Such selfdeprecation mocked the idea of Ratsiraka’s Madagascar as a place where Malagasy “self-govern” and perpetuated a sense of still belonging in the state under duress.
- 30 By the early 1980s it was already clear to most Karembola that the Second Republic was *not* going to restore *gasy* to their former prosperity but had actually deprived them of the basic *vazaha* goods they remembered enjoying under Tsiranana (soap, cloth, and radio batteries). Few Karembola still bought into the idea of a second independence. Despite a rhetoric of decentralization (Ratsiraka, 1975: 18-19), Ratsiraka saw Malagasy peasantry as incapable of carrying through the Socialist Revolution without close direction (Ratsiraka, 1975: 34-39, 42; cf. Covell, 1987). Thus, the master narrative of Malagasy Cactus remained as apposite a commentary on governance and economy in the early 1980s as it had been under colonial rule.

Anjedava, 1991

- 31 Turning to data collected ten years later in Anjedava, a village community some 40 kilometres to the west, we find that, while the master narrative of Malagasy Cactus was still being learned and transmitted, to most villagers issues around prickly pears in the present were of more immediate symbolic and practical concern. Informants reported worrying trends in the local production and consumption of prickly pears which they situated in broader cultural understandings of moral, political and environmental decline.
- 32 In the intervening decade, a growing financial crisis in Madagascar had led to radical changes in the direction of government policies, notably, the introduction of free market economics and the imposition of structural adjustment programmes, with increasing interventions by the World Bank and IMF/FMI. These politico-economic trends had been accompanied by Madagascar’s emergence as a “mega*bio+diversity country” (Mittermeier, 1988; Myers, 1986) and had resulted in Madagascar’s first National Environmental Action Plan (NEAP) involving close collaboration between the Malagasy government, local NGOs and key international players, including the World Bank and USAID (Richard and O’Connor, 1997: 410-1; Wright, 1997: 384-5). At the time

of fieldwork stronger nature conservation initiatives had had minimal impact in the Anjedava region. In Spring 1991 a more immediate concern in Anjedava was the prolonged drought that began the year before and would culminate in a grave famine by September, when at least 830,000 in “Androy” were going hungry, according to the UN World Food Programme (WFP/ Programme Alimentaire Mondial/PAM).¹⁸

- 33 Attitudes to “Malagasy Cactus” seemed familiar. Thus, most Hazohandatse I met in 1991 believed it had been an indigenous plant. The red clay soils around the village had been favourable to the species. The very name - Anjedava - alludes to the long, twisting paths (*jilava*) bordered by Malagasy Cactus that had once snaked around the settlement. And as in Karembola ten years earlier, conversations continued to reference the colonial period as if it were still present, and encounters with state officials evoked the same professions of submission: “the land belongs to *vazaha*: we nod our heads to whatever they propose”. Yet, while narrations seemed similar, there were significant differences in emphasis and tone. It seemed to me that, while the loss of Malagasy Cactus was regretted, Hazohandatse were more concerned to tell me of dangers associated with prickly pears in the present than with recalling the trauma that followed when Malagasy Cactus died.
- 34 Declining rainfall was now the dominant theme in local discourse. Villagers believed that incidents of drought were becoming more frequent, and that life was more of a struggle as a result. Fierce winds were said to be aggravating the problem, dessicating seedlings and breaking the stems of maize and millet plants before the grain was ripe. For Karembola in the early 1980s drought and its consequences (crop failure, stock loss) had been one among a plethora of afflictions (*haoreañe*) that people suffer because of moral blame: these might included anything from losing one’s money on the way to market or getting stung by bees through childlessness or sickness to bereavement and death. By contrast informants in 1991 seemed to give a more specifically environmental definition to the concept of “a dead and ruined land” (*tane mate, tane robake*). I would not want to exaggerate the differences. Even in the early 1980s people had mentioned declining rainfall and poor harvests as aspects of their distance/alienation from ancestral space/time. It seemed to me, however, that where informants in the early 1980s had taken some pride in their “thirsty” land - aridity was an innate property of Karembola territory and coping with it was what distinguished them as Karembola from outsiders - informants a decade later consistently identified a long-term trend of aridification and stressed their inability to cope.
- 35 In contrast to the early 1980s when informants portrayed themselves as returning to ancestral ways of working the land, informants now reported many negative trends in local farming practice. These included shortening fallows, the loss of “ancient” woodland, a “modern” and not entirely welcome mania for *raketa sonjo* planting, and invasion by a “bandit” prickly pear. As many villagers saw it, Hazohandatse were behaving increasingly like *vazaha*: breaking landscape taboos by clearing sacred forest, showing disrespect for traditional authority, and transgressing burial customs and incest taboos. More particularly, they claimed that they were deviating from “horticultural custom” by cultivating foreign cacti in “new”, non-ancestral ways, and, more strikingly still, that *raketa* dependency was ballooning out of control. As in the early 1980s, informants associated excessive cactuseating with devalued persons such as “bandits”, refugees, and slaves. The difference between past and present, Hazohandatse felt, was that whereas in the past food insecurity had been a periodic

event affecting particular *hakeo*-stricken individuals, it was now becoming a quasi-permanent condition afflicting everyone. Even nobility had lost its *asy* and teetered on the edge of destitution, “eating *raketa* like slaves”.¹⁹ Thus to an ecological calamity was added a political crisis.

- 36 Perhaps because declining harvests were thought to be undermining hierarchy by driving everyone into *raketa* dependency, there was greater ambivalence about the status of *raketa* as a food. Whereas informants ten years earlier had listed *saonjo* fruits among the “ancestral” staples and “proper foods” with other cultivars, villagers now more often classed them as *hatsa* or *tindroke*, with wild-growing emergency foods (fruits, tubers, birds, and small mammals) that people look for in the woods when agricultural systems failed. Such symbolism, which put the plant outside the domain of human endeavour into wild, uncultivated space (*amonto*), was reinforced by perceived differences between the properties of “hot” and “cold” foods. Essentially, *raketa* was classed as a “cold” food, with watermelons and cucumbers, food that is eaten raw, on the hoof, generally outside the village, during the day when the sun is high in the sky. Normally, only the destitute ate *raketa* of an evening. Most Hazohandatse returning to the village after sundown expected to eat a “proper meal” of hot, cooked food (maize, manioc,...). Similar conceptualizations had been present in the early 1980s but the articulation of short-term and long-term strategies for growing ancestries had been less problematic then. Despite the scarcity of consumer goods and rampant price inflation, rural Karembola had been managing their fiction of a ranked society rather well. Ten years on, radical changes in the direction of government policies, notably, the withdrawal of state subsidies, the decline of Malagasy socialism, the introduction of free market economics and the imposition of structural adjustment programmes, had dramatically increased the availability of consumer goods in the island but had pauperized many rural communities. More specifically, fieldwork was conducted in drought conditions at a time of increasing hardship in the run up to the 1991/1992 famine. It is also possible that there had been more long-term environmental decline.²⁰ Whatever the reasons, with a food that was once a staple for the destitute and/or the ritually dependant becoming everybody’s staple, informants seemed determined to maintain *raketa*’s symbolic opposition as a short-term subsistence food to cherished longer-term values of status and wealth creation by stressing their reluctance to store the fruit in their granaries overnight.
- 37 The reconceptualisation of prickly pear as *tindroke* was also linked with a self-reported shift in *raketa* planting away from sites of concentrated human activity. Whereas Karembola had linked *raketa* intimately to lived-in social places, villagers at Anjedava cited a reluctance to plant the traditional multi-purpose cactus hedging around garden-plots and hamlets, explaining that they didn’t like to have *raketa sonjo* too close to where people lived or worked because the “fearsome spines” could easily take out an eye or make a person lame. In strong winds the “hairs” blew onto people, causing eye infections and wounds. Conversely, when the wind died down, conditions inside a prickly pear enclosure became too hot to bear. For similar reasons informants took a dim view of the traditional “hamlet within the *raketa*”. Instead of desiring the prickly pear-enclosed spaces practised by their ancestors, people now valued clarity in and around their homesteads: they wanted things to be “open”, not “dark” and “full of trees”.
- 38 Instead a preference was expressed for planting *raketa sonjo* on firefalls in the woods.

- 39 Perceived as pre-eminently *vazaha* practice, this was supposed to be more productive since soils where tall trees had been fired would crop sooner and the young cladodes were less likely to be nibbled by village goats. Yet it was typical of the retrograde dynamic in which Hazohandatse imagined themselves to be imprisoned that the longer-term costs of these innovations were thought to negate any short-term benefits. Not only had “first rate land” (*fanjaka tane*), which ought to be earmarked for maize or millet, been “wasted” on prickly pears, but native woodland, a vital part of the socio-ecosystem that provides browse and shade for livestock, woodfuel, timber, fibres, herbal remedies, and foods, was being lost. The practice aroused particular moral opprobrium when, with the connivance of “Eaux et Forêts”, wayward individuals (usually, the landhungry poor) broke longstanding taboos by clearing plots in sacred ancient woodland. Informants saw these “modern” trends in *raketa*-planting as symptomatic of the way *vazaha* had desacralized the landscape: “ ‘Today there are no prohibitions’, the *vazaha* tell us, ‘for it’s a foreign land!’ ”. Another aspect of *vazaha* rule that was driving the practice of *raketa tavy* was the fact that the *vazaha* who settled land disputes (generally the local *garde de forêt*) only recognised rights in cleared and cultivated land. This was driving many land-rich villagers to put tracts of forest down to *raketa* in order to maintain visible long-term ownership in patrimonial fallows against landshort farmers who “laid claim to land to which they were not entitled and then appealed to the state when judgement went against them in local courts”.²¹ Another allegedly “modern” form of *raketa*-planting involved the creation of “proto-paddocks”. This embryonic enclosure movement was seen as overturning long-standing traditions of common access grazing land.
- 40 In short, far from “newcomer” prickly pears having become more “ancestral” since the early 1980s, there was now greater uncertainty about how they fitted into local cultural traditions than before. Whereas informants in the early 1980s had seemed at ease with their *vazaha* or hybrid cacti and the proxy ancestry they had secured, informants in 1991 associated these new varieties with impending political and environmental disaster.
- 41 Nothing better captures this sense of approaching apocalypse than discourse on a recently arrived and fast-spreading *Opuntia*. Known locally as *raketa mena* (“red prickly pear”) on account of the fruit colour, it was considered the most opportunistic of all the prickly pears they had known. While there appears to be no specific indigenous category that translates directly as the English term “weed”, informants deployed a range of verbs and adjectives when speaking about *raketa mena* to convey the idea of a plant with “bad habits” that was spreading without human assistance, and becoming a nuisance, a pest they couldn’t control. In a culture which still subscribed to the value of primordial identities, where ancestry was assumed to dictate the habits or character (*fomba’e*) of a person or thing, uncertainty over its provenance only increased anxiety about the plant. Apparently unrelated to the familiar *raketa* species, *raketa mena* was termed a “bandit”, a “stranger”, rootless, dangerous, and sinister. Bristling with long yellow spines, it was one of the few plants that could regenerate on “hot”, stony terrain around the village where heavy grazing by goats otherwise allowed only a few unpalatable indigenous weed species to survive. It was the very antithesis of the productive prickly pear: its barbed spines caused fatal swellings, the cladodes made a dangerous fodder, and the fruit was poorly rated as a human food, though in 1991 as other food supplies dwindled, it was eaten in increasing quantities, first by children,

whose swollen bellies bore telltale red stains, and then by adults. The plant's only virtue was that it made a superb hedge "that even keeps *sokake* [*Geochelone radiata*, the supersize endemic tortoise+ from getting at our crops"; but this was a double-edged virtue because the plant's widespread use as hedging was also assisting it to spread.

- 42 For Hazohandatse in the last year of the Second Republic the habits of this unsourced *raketa* were an augury of harder times to come. While early 1980s imagery of *raketa* had placed them in a profoundly socialized landscape of subsistence and surplus production, by 1991 the encroachment by *raketa mena* into social spaces, together with the movement of *raketa sonjo* plantings away from social spaces onto forest burns, was recasting prickly pear as an anti-social plant. Whereas in the early 1980s informants had associated a heavy-but-not-too-heavy reliance on *raketa* (generic) with the partial recovery of a lost ancestral economy, practices around the production and consumption of *raketa* (generic) were now portrayed as negations of tradition and linked with declining productivity, land degradation and poverty. In some ways *raketa mena* epitomised these negative processes and was symbolically opposed to *raketa sonjo*. But at another level both symbolised current dilemmas - it was only a matter of degrees. Both varieties helped "to stave off hunger" but heavy and increasing reliance on them was indicative of a "ruined land", of people caught in deepening cycles of drought and famine. This paradox was captured in a popular dictum: "*raketa* makes us live; *raketa* also kills". Chaotic and beneficial, an instrument for survival, an instrument of death, species meanings underwent contextual negotiation as they were combined and recombined to describe political and ecological transformations that Hazohandatse feared would end in their own extinction.
- 43 It is the light of the perceived imminent collapse of hierarchy under the ecological and political impacts of *vazaha* values that we can understand my companion's reaction to the audacious "slaves" who had planted *raketa* with the intention of selling it on to stock owners. Despite the increasing tendency to associate *raketa* discursively with wild spaces, *raketa saonjo* was in practice still an owned and limited resource which acquired a rising market value in times of fodder/fruit scarcity. The prolonged drought in 1991 had already forced many larger stockowners to buy in extra supplies of *raketa* to feed their herds at some expense (typical payments were five thousand Malagasy francs or a cow-with-calf). It was this perceived vulnerability of richer farmers to growing drought incidence that the good-for-nothing inhabitants of "the hamlet within the *raketa*" sought to exploit.
- 44 Producing *raketa* for fodder, turning it into money and cattle, and ultimately into prestige, were all perfectly legitimate activities (Karembola have seldom expressed disquiet about material acquisition or the pursuit of monetary gain) but not when undertaken by "slaves". It was acceptable for "slaves" to subsist on *raketa*. Indeed, the monotonous consumption of *raketa* was a wholly appropriate moral activity for the lower orders that usefully confirmed the enduring relevance of indigenous idioms of hierarchy in a "foreign land".²² But when people of slave descent grow prickly pear with an eye to speculating on escalating drought incidence, they forget their proper place in the accepted status hierarchy and confirm that they are "worthless men who show no respect".²³
- 45 It is tempting to postulate a symbolic link between the growing impunity of *ondevo* to offend against status hierarchy and the wildness now ascribed to prickly pear. So long as prickly pear was confined to the shortterm sphere concerned with the basic viability

of the individual household, and subordinated to the reproduction of the hierarchical order, it was beneficial; but with prickly pear now figuring in *vazaha*-backed challenges to the hereditary land rights of local élites, it had become something of a wild card jeopardizing the material bases of hierarchy.

- 46 An interesting contrast can be drawn with the early 1980s when villagers who subsisted on prickly pear were despised, but their practice did not impact on other stakeholders' interests. The varieties then available served the rich (fodder and fruit) and the poor (fruit-consumers) equally well, and their uses were largely compatible because it was labour, not land, that was scarce. By contrast, in 1991 *raketa* planting involved incipient conflicts over resource use between poor and rich. These conflicts took place within the context of a broader debate about the relative importance of primordial identity (ancestry) over performance in the here-and-now in establishing personal worth.

“ We’re all capitalists now! ”

- 47 The subtle representational shifts that had taken place between the early 1980s and the early 1990s required careful unpicking partly because the narrative of Malagasy Cactus remained recognizably the same. Returning to the field in 2002-2003, I was genuinely shocked to discover that, while the basic storyline about the French killing Malagasy Cactus persisted, not everybody saw this intervention as bad. People now disputed all aspects of the story: whether “Malagasy Cactus” had been invasive; whether the French had been right to kill it; whether local people had also desired its eradication; and, perhaps most startling of all, whether anyone had actually died or suffered as a result. In less than a generation, widely shared memory and interpretation of events had given way to surprisingly diverse narrative about the past.
- 48 Two key developments had contributed to these renarrations: an acrimonious controversy that had erupted over *raketa mena*²⁴; and a popular discourse on *vazaha* and foreign investment in the context of recent elections that made the nationalist narrative of Malagasy Cactus appear (to many people) less resonant than before.
- 49 In the intervening years, the shift from socialist to neo-liberal economics and the rise of biodiversity discourse had continued. Increasingly vocal opposition to Ratsiraka had brought about the appointment of a transitional government in late 1992. Following a brief interlude under Zafy Albert who was removed from office in 1996, Ratsiraka was re-elected to the Presidency in 1997, only to cede power in 2001 to Marc Ravalomanana, a pro-*vazaha* candidate committed to free market solutions and foreign investment. Inbetween times, the so-called “spiny dry forest” of Androy-Karembola-Mahafale had been defined as a global conservation priority on account of its exceptional endemism and degree of threat. With [eco]tourism projected to be a major earner of foreign exchange for the national economy (World Bank, 1990; McNeely et al, 1990), the '90s had seen intensified “conservation” controls in the “Réserve Spéciale du Cap Sainte Marie”, the only nature reserve located in Karembola but one which had been more or less neglected since its creation in 1962 (Nicoll & Langrand, 1989, 123-5). By 2002, these interventions were impacting negatively on resource use in communities bordering the reserve, while offering little in the way of improved economic and social conditions to compensate.
- 50 The anti-prickly pear lobby had remained relatively silent in Ratsiraka's Second Republic. Ecosystem inventories of Madagascar published in the 1980s generally gloss

over the issue of naturalised *Opuntia* in the Malagasy Deep South (Jenkins, 1987; Nicoll & Langrand, 1989, 124, 178). However, the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, and the subsequent Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) to which Madagascar was a signatory, had defined exotic plants as one of the most serious threats to global biodiversity. This had emboldened conservationists to articulate opposition to introduced *Opuntia* on the grounds of their alleged impacts on “southern *Didiereaceae-Euphorbia* bush” (Rauh, 1995, 55; Rauh, 1998, xi). The WWF [World Wide Fund for Nature] was targeting *raketa mena* in particular for its impacts on biodiversity within Cap Sainte Marie Special Reserve and on subsistence farming on the periphery of the Reserve (ANGAP et al, n.d. [2001]; Randriamampianina et al, 2002). The integration of development and environmental concerns had become a stated priority for key stakeholders in Madagascar, and a campaign against *raketa mena*, which benefited from some local support, appeared to offer the WWF a way of delivering on this. Ravalomanana, the newly elected President, was underscoring his expectation that environmental NGOs would make an important contribution, alongside foreign investment and the private sector, to achieving millenium goals of poverty eradication and economic growth.

- 51 The WWF had, however, overplayed its hand in claiming that its position on *raketa mena* coincided with community opinion. Certainly most villagers I interviewed agreed that *raketa mena* was infesting fields and grazing lands with negative impacts on agro-pastoral productivity. However, local opinion was deeply divided over what should happen to the plant. Some (generally, more affluent community members) called for its total eradication. But others (generally the poor) protested that, at a time of food insecurity, *raketa mena* fruit, and it alone, was keeping them alive. Debate was particularly heated because, during discussions with community leaders, *vazaha* (personnel from WWF, ANGAP, and FOFIFA, the three organizations collaborating on the issue)²⁵ had apparently promised to introduce insects to kill the plant.
- 52 As a result of this controversy, it had become almost impossible for local informants to narrate the story of Malagasy Cactus without inserting a meta-commentary that drew comparisons and/or contrasts to *raketa mena*. (This meta-commentary covered anything from the botanical characteristics and economic value of the two species to what might be predicted about the consequences of *raketa mena* eradication on the basis of what happened when Malagasy Cactus died.) With the WWF seeking the authority and the funding to push forward a programme of eradication/control for *raketa mena*, men and women, even those who had experienced Malagasy Cactus in person, were developing new Malagasy Cactus narrative as arguments in contemporary debates. While it would be wrong to over-generalize, broadly speaking the story had been appropriated and re-narrated to serve the conflicting political and economic interests of rich and poor.
- 53 Yet at another level, when compared to the rhetoric of the 1980s and 1990s, there were, or seemed to be, deeper shifts in cultural understandings of personhood, work and status that revealed much common ground between the protagonists. Few informants now expressed any longing for some golden era associated with *raketa gasy*; their nostalgia was overwhelmingly for the colonial period when, as one man explained, the French did their best “to get us to prosper with all kinds of schemes, butter beans, rubber, things which if they had succeeded would be keeping us alive today”. Even the collective *raketa vazaha* plantations of the 1950s through to the 1970s, once indicted as exemplifying the “forced labour” or “slavery” people had suffered under colonialism,

were now portrayed by many informants as good. Insisting that people in Karembola had been paid for their labour and that ownership of the plantations had devolved onto local collectivities, many informants mourned the failure of these communal undertakings, attributing it to the *selfishness* of wealthier cattle-owners who “ruined” what was intended to feed ordinary people (*hane vahoake*) by allowing their stock to graze the plantations without regard for sustainability over the long-term.

- 54 In many ways, this nostalgia for state-driven collective labour seemed to belong more to the Ratsiraka era than to Ravalomanana’s Madagascar.²⁶ And indeed another narrative circulating in 2002-03 was more in keeping with the Ravalomanana ethos. The question had arisen of whether the World Food Programme/Programme Alimentaire Mondiale could be persuaded to sponsor *raketa* planting under its “Food for Work” programmes; to date participants in these schemes had mostly worked on improving footpaths, waterpoints, and schools. Many informants were adamant: while they or others would willingly prepare the soil and plant cladodes in exchange for butter beans and maize if they were hungry, the plantations would be unsustainable in the long term because “Tandroy today are capitalist” and would only invest their (additional) labour on “private” on-farm plots.
- 55 In short, there were two conflicting narratives about prickly pear circulating in 2002-2003. The one pedalled the value of state-driven, state-imposed collective endeavour as epitomised in the ideal of the lost *raketa vazaha* plantations of the colonial and “neo-colonial” periods that would nowadays be carrying the population through drought and famine if only local élites had not exploited the resource for their own advantage with complete disregard to community needs. The other bought into the rhetoric of private enterprise as epitomised by the (late colonial period) ideal of the individually owned *raketa vazaha* plot, hedged against appropriation by others (the antithesis of common grazing) and profitable for its owner, though always at risk of being ruined by *raketa mena* (a “bandit” valued only by good-for-nothings) and by careless herders who allow their stock to roam. We can see these two ideals as replicating in miniature a clash of philosophies, and possible routes for Madagascar.
- 56 Whether they were for or against *raketa mena*, both sides believed in the transformative agency of *vazaha*, a belief still founded on (now very confused) memory of the Malagasy Cactus campaign. But, and here they deviated from the sentiments of the “nationalist” narrative of Malagasy Cactus, both sides were strongly pro-*vazaha* (the term *vazaha* in this context now reverting to its original meaning of people from outside Madagascar). All protagonists believed that *vazaha*-sourced benefits were readily available and would flow freely into the Karembola economy if only national and regional politicians could be stopped from diverting the benefits into their own pockets. No one I spoke to referenced the colonial period as if it were still present; maintaining a distinction between selfless (non-Malagasy) *vazaha* (European, Japanese...) and grasping Malagasy élites was now the dominant concern.
- 57 The pro-*vazaha* rhetoric reflected more general trends in Madagascar as the relative isolation and deprivation of the socialist era gave way to the economic liberalisation of the 1990s. However, in changing attitudes in the extreme south, the 1991-1992 famine had been particularly transformative because it had spurred *vazaha* interventions in this region on an unprecedented scale. Emergency food relief, followed up by development projects, provided by a multitude of agencies, had encouraged local people to see *vazaha* as a source of wealth. Community leaders now regularly declared

that they were “looking for a partner” from *outside* Madagascar, be it in the form of a large-scale European Union initiative or a smaller NGO project.

- 58 There had been concomitant shifts in attitudes to *raketa vazaha* and *raketa sonjo*. In contrast to the 1980s when these “modern” varieties had been both compared to and contrasted with the lost “ancestral” cactus, informants now unreservedly classed both as “ancestral”, on a par with Malagasy Cactus. Both were described as plants that “make things flourish”, foods that “truly nourish”, “people’s true food”. Indeed, some informants, mainly those who were using a re-narrated history of Malagasy Cactus to argue for *raketa mena* eradication, portrayed these “ancestral-*vazaha*” varieties as superior to *raketa gasy* itself.
- 59 The extended discourse on *sonjo* and *vazaha* as a channel for expressing a wider discomfort about *métissage* that had been current in the 1980s through the 1990s had dissipated. Whereas for Hazohandatse c.1991 *raketa mena*, *raketa soso* and *raketa vazaha* had all symbolised, to varying degrees and in different ways, perceived dilemmas of poverty and impotency in a foreign land, any negativity was now projected wholly onto *raketa mena* the “bandit”. Viewed as a completely alien *raketa* devoid of local ties, *raketa mena* was seen (even by the poor who depended on it to survive) as socially destructive: luring people by its short-term benefits into practices that would end ultimately in a barren land.
- 60 As ever, ideas about prickly pear consumption were linked to social value. But it was now excessive *raketa mena* eating that denoted low rank. The wealthy described those who depended on *raketa mena* as lazy, impecunious, and profligate: “They don’t keep livestock, raise fowl, they don’t bother with cultivating land. All they do is pick wild *raketa mena*”. The verb used *-mitsindroke* (to harvest wild fruit and tubers) - was also used to refer to harvesting *raketa sonjo* in the woods. Yet *raketa saonjo* consumption had very distinct political connotations to *raketa mena* consumption. There had been a significant shift in cultural perceptions since the 1980s and 1990s. A heavy consumption of *raketa saonjo* was now perfectly acceptable regardless of a person’s status and resource availability. *Raketa mena* dependency had become the indicator of inferior rank. As one informant noted:
- 61 Even if harvests are good, we still eat vast quantities of *saonjo*. Everyone’s completely sated with field crops, but they’re still out in the woods eating *saonjo*. Whereas in a good year *raketa mena* has no value. No one eats it; it just falls to ground.
- 62 *Raketa saonjo* was now so “ancestral” that in communities nearer to Tôlañaro (Fort Dauphin) it was (mistakenly) known as *raketa gasy*.²⁷ As for *raketa vazaha*, which had formerly trailed *raketa sonjo* in moral evaluation, informants could not praise it highly enough. Its name invariably headed the species lists I collected, and informants’ only regret was that they could not plant or maintain enough. It - more than any other variety - was contrasted favourably with the dastardly *raketa mena* as “good, smooth, spineless. It’s an ancestral plant!” Like Malagasy Cactus and *raketa saonjo* before it, *raketa vazaha* had been finally “ancestralized”. But whereas Malagasy Cactus and *raketa sonjo* were ciphers of a subsistence economy - both were conceptualised as satisfying basic human needs for food, water, shelter, and good health - *raketa vazaha* was all about commoditization. The fruit had long involved a form of conspicuous consumption. But it was now highly rated from the producer angle as a cash crop. As such, it was emphatically contrasted to *raketa sonjo* which was generally portrayed as

tindroke that people guzzle to their hearts' content in the woods. Both plants were believed to foster health and prosperity but by symbolically contrastive routes.²⁸

- 63 In contrast to the deep sense of foreboding that had coloured attitudes in 1991, the tone informants adopted when they talked about *raketambazaha* commodification was strikingly upbeat. Whereas Hazohandatsé had focused on ominous developments in *raketa* planting driven by economic necessity, people now seemed to be celebrating the possibility of new economic directions in response to market incentives.²⁹ *Raketa vazaha* cultivation on the deeply manured soils of former cattle pens (advocated by the colonial extension services since the 1950s but whose difficulties had formerly captured local people's sense of impotency as *gasy* in a foreign land) in many ways exemplified the new self-definition: "Tandroy are all capitalists now".
- 64 Yet the truth was that only a tiny number of farmer-herders in 2002-3 actually produced *raketa vazaha* for sale. Livelihoods remained precarious. The economic reality of complexities and challenges faced by most rural Karembola in the early twenty-first century was more truthfully encapsulated in the *raketa saonjo-raketa mena* pairing. Existence was still about eating *saonjo* harvested for free in the woods. Those losing the battle against *raketa mena* in their paddocks and garden plots outnumbered, and by far, the few who maintained a fine *raketa vazaha* orchard. There had been no agrarian revolution: the majority of households had not made the shift from subsistence food production to cash cropping; many relied on the WFP/PAM when subsistence agriculture failed. As for ceremonial exchanges, a grinding poverty meant that by 2002 increasing numbers of hamlets were no longer building tombs and had not done so for some years. The mortuary rituals that in the 1980s and early 1990s had provided the opportunity for ordinary people to try their hand at "refreshing" their wealth (only the very poor had been precluded from participation), were now out of reach for all but the very rich.
- 65 No one glossed the fact that *raketambazaha* was more demanding to cultivate than other varieties, more demanding than ever now that the plots required constant weeding to keep them free of *raketa mena* which rapidly infests former stock-pens. Only a few households in the region had sufficient labour, or managed their available labour well enough, to maintain a fine *raketa vazaha* plot producing fruit to sell. But in many ways *raketambazaha* production was idealised precisely because it epitomised the virtues of hard work, skilful management of household labour, successful entrepreneurship and its perceived reward, cash income. The successful *raketambazaha* producer coupled local knowledge of ecological conditions with *vazaha*-type market knowledge. He or she was a person who knew how to sell scarce produce in a rising market, unlike the majority of farmers who sold their surplus produce too cheaply when food was plenty and then had to sell their cattle at depressed prices at times of food scarcity in order to buy it back. It typified the self-reliant, self-contained household which demonstrates its worth by cash cropping, and no longer has to depend on manipulating corpses, and the multiple kinship links corpses embody, in order "to see wealth" through ritual exchange.³⁰ The successful *raketambazaha* producer was the indigenized Karembola version of Ravalomanana's "capitalist".
- 66 Jennifer Cole suggests that one effect of neoliberal economics in urban Tamatave (East Coast Madagascar) has been to make the relationship between short-term transactions and long term cycles of reproduction increasingly problematic as new social hierarchies based more on money than ancestry emerge in response to the

opportunities brought by recent economic changes (Cole, 2003). With its concomitants of market production, the decline of collective control over natural resources, and individualization in economic behaviour, the emergence of *raketa vazaha* producers in Karembola seemed to raise similar questions about the symbolic articulation of money and ancestry. Yet, in contrast to the hostility shown to “slaves” in Anjedava whose attempts to commodify *raketa* threatened the social order, the trading activities of the *raketambazaha* producer couples I studied appeared to be generally admired. No one expressed to me the opinion that their profit-oriented behaviour was morally problematic or disruptive of community bonds. The fact is that in Karembola cash in itself is not seen as inherently opposed to “traditional”, ancestry-based modes of reproduction.

- 67 It only becomes problematic when the socially ascendant use it in transformational ways.³¹ And from the socio-demographic data I collected it appeared that the few households engaged in *raketambazaha* commodification in 2002 were not associated with the emergence of new social hierarchies. Their immunity to social criticism reflected their secure membership in “aristocratic” descent lines as much as general moral approval of the successful private entrepreneur. In other words, while the way informants enthused about growing *raketambazaha* for sale could lead one mistakenly to think that *raketambazaha* commodification had become a route to social mobility, this was not in fact the case.³² Karembola élites have been remarkably successful in consolidating their positions by exploiting new political and economic opportunities, including those offered by multiple types of *clientelism* with international/parastatal disaster relief and nature conservation agencies (WFP/PAM, WWF, ANGAP, etc).³³
- 68 The idealised and rather self-deceptive self-identification of all Karembola as emergent capitalists *appeared* to chime with the Ravalomanana ethos, but was difficult to square with the reality of life as experienced by most men and women in Karembola today. And indeed if one looked more closely at what informants were saying, ideas were deeply divided on what “capitalism” and greater co-operation with *vazaha* actually meant. Some, mainly those in favour of *raketa mena* eradication who saw *vazaha* and their instrumental knowledge as vital allies in the eradication of a weed that was beyond their own capability to control, were indeed affirming faith in the power of market solutions coupled with an *indigenous* capitalism to enrich people and redress food insecurity. For instance, when I asked whether *raketa mena* eradication would result in a famine as happened in the 1930s after *raketa gasy* died, many insisted that the situation today would be altogether different because “in those days there were no markets at Soamanitse and Marovato whereas nowadays there’s money, transport, you can buy in food”. But others, especially poorer villagers, saw *vazaha* (rather like *raketa mena*) more as providers of food aid and other acts of charity when local food security systems failed.
- 69 *Raketambazaha* commoditization as a phenomenon of neo-liberal economics existed more as discourse than practice. And as a discourse on neo-liberalism it was conjoined to an equally rapturous but better-founded discourse on *raketa saonjo* as wild, gathered food. The rise of the ideal of the *raketambazaha* producer might encapsulate the slow surrender of “socialist” goals to neo-liberalism, a process that culminated in Ravalomanana’s ascendancy in 2001. Yet *raketa saonjo*, a “wonderful food” harvested in the wood, restated the value of non-commodity forms.³⁴ This discursive parity between *raketa saonjo* and *raketambazaha*, as two completely different conceptualizations of

economy, in a sense encapsulated policy options as they were envisioned for the Deep South. Agricultural production to satisfy Madagascar's basic needs had been a stated primary objective of the 1975 Revolution (Ratsiraka, 1975: 55-57, 60, 72, 102). This had never been achieved yet Ravalomanana stood for more than the satisfaction of finite wants and the restoration of self-sufficiency. Just as 1980s narrative around prickly pear could be seen as both Ratsiraka-authorized text and unauthorised critique, so too the narratives of the early 2000s can be seen as toying equivocally, even parodically, with the ideas of private enterprise that had brought Ravalomanana to power.³⁵ Despite having presided over the introduction of free market economics in the 1980s, Ratsiraka had been reconfigured as one of the "good, enlightened *vazaha* who piggy-back Tandroy" (*mibabe*) in times of need. He was now widely praised for bringing water and food aid to the Karembola region. Judgement on Ravalomanana was temporarily suspended. He was a "newcomer" whose *fomba* was unknown, much as *raketa mena* had been in 1991. Villagers were still uncertain what his ascendancy to power would mean for them.³⁶

Some Reflections

- 70 The cultivation of prickly pears is often portrayed as an essentially pragmatic response to the challenges of farming and herding in arid conditions. Such approaches, while clearly offering vital insights, can produce an essentialist, somewhat unvarying, picture of *raketa* practice and *raketa* discourse that takes insufficient account of time or locality.³⁷ It can also assume a consensus within local communities that may not exist. This essay has shown how moral evaluations of *raketa*, far from devolving solely onto purely practical issues, were finely nuanced for species and for historical period, and intimately linked to understandings of the political order and environmental change. The values and meanings ascribed to prickly pears were not inherent, immutable, or wholly objective, but rather judgements made about them by subjects in the context of political and economic interest informed by culturally constructed notions of production, consumption, and exchange.³⁸
- 71 In all three communities, the ways in which *raketa* varieties are symbolically represented took on performative meaning in the context of contested moral and political claims involving ideological and material conflicts both within local communities and between local communities and the nation state. These ideological and material conflicts have been reconfigured over the two decades in response to political and economic trends.
- 72 Open dissent was missing from narrative I collected in the early 1980s. There was social dissonance in the references to filthy *raketa*-eating *gasy* in the past and to good-for-nothings who subsisted on cactus in the present, but these were not elaborated as conflict between community members in the present. Practical engagement with *raketa* in the present was unproblematic: Malagasy Cactus was dead, *raketa mena* was not yet a pest putting livelihoods at risk, and with respect to *raketa sonjo* the interests of the poor and the rich were not in direct conflict. On the contrary, it suited popular opinion, at a time when Karembola political philosophy remained fiercely hierarchical but references to *ondevo* could not be freely voiced, to be able to point at destitutes who survived on cactus fruit. These living embodiments of worthlessness became, as it were, tangible proof of a partly imagined hierarchy based on descent. With land in seemingly

inexhaustible supply, *Opuntia* species were not implicated in contested access to land. The master narrative of Malagasy Cactus was critical to collective and personal self-conceptualization but the conflicts it narrated had become more allegorical or mythical than actual, at best metaphors for current battles with Ratsiraka regime. Despite evident disparities of wealth and opportunity between individual households, this could be a consensual memory because community conflicts over labour, land and livestock did not turn around prickly pears.

- 73 By 2002-3 *raketa* varieties and *raketa* histories were once again directly embroiled in battles for survival, with the poor championing *raketa mena* and the more affluent championing its eradication expressing typically antagonistic interests. By contrast to the 1980s, when the wealthy welcomed the presence of poor people (idiomised as base ancestries) who ate nothing but prickly pear because it confirmed the validity of hierarchical ideology and their own position within it, the wealthy now resented those who ate nothing but *raketa mena* because the latter's practice conferred social use value on a plant that was impacting negatively on their own productivity. And in so far as superior rank was based on productive prowess and ritual performance based largely on productive prowess, the value the poor conferred on *raketa mena* was undermining the material base of privilege. The idea of a collective trauma experienced in the 1920s when Malagasy Cactus died, so pronounced in the early 1980s, had been fractured as diverse factions used Malagasy Cactus narrative to promote competing interests.
- 74 1991 can be seen as a transitional period when the narrative of Malagasy Cactus had become less relevant in the light of more pressing dilemmas around modern *raketa* varieties but those current dilemmas had not yet led people to revisit the master narrative and harness it to serving their internal disputes. Sorry tales of *raketa* past and present that evoked a sense of historic loss and imminent catastrophe were still embedded in a broader politics of generic identity, partly masking those occasions when stands of prickly pear figured in land disputes.
- 75 In all three communities the ways people thought about *raketa* varieties had some connection to the specific material conditions of production in which they were embedded, most notably the ecological and social-economic relations that condition land and labour supply. While this is a complex issue which needs further investigation, I loosely hypothesise a shift from the consensual positive attitude to *raketa* that characterised a lowdensity agro-pastoral system in the early 1980s through the more critical conceptualizations of *raketa* in Anjedava 1991 at a time when growing scarcity of land was accelerating "class" conflict, to the deep contestation of opinion in Cap Sainte Marie 2002-2003 where, due to various factors, including both encroachment by the nature reserve and infestation by *raketa mena*, land supply had become a critical problem.
- 76 These *raketa* histories also appeared to reference changing constructions of personhood. In all three settings people were conscious of socio-economic diversity; but the idea of Tandroy as "capitalist" rewarded for effort in the present rather than qualities conferred by the past, together with the increased tendency to describe social difference more in terms of contrasts between "rich" and "poor", the "worthy" and "worthless", the "industrious" and the "lazy", than between *roandria* and *ondevo*, the vocabulary of hereditary rank, implies that there was by 2002 a greater acceptance of social mobility than before. Supporting evidence for a shift from primordial to more fluid identities might be found in the general secularization or westernization of

popular discourse. Mystifying models of spiritual power (*hakeo, asy,...*) which had dominated everyday conversation in the early 1980s and 1990s were now less frequently vocalized in public. For example, instead of describing *raketa mena* as an intervention of supernatural powers in the world of the living against which they were impotent to act, villagers in 2002-2003 generally verbalised the infestations as a grave but essentially secular and potentially reversible predicament which could be overcome with the instrumental knowledge that *vazaha* typically provide.

- 77 This new language of social mobility was, however, deceptive because as we have seen there had been a retrenchment of elite power. Most local community leaders (*Komity, Presiday,...*) were wealthy men from superior lineages who had gained these positions because of their skill in combining a secular discourse that was accessible to *vazaha* with a “traditionalist” discourse intended for internal consumption that drew on values of ancestry and references to the past.³⁹

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ANGAP-FOFIFA-WWF (n.d.) [2001] *Rapport de Mission à Cap Ste Marie* (du 03 au 06 mai 2001) et *Propositions des Actions Futures*. Unpublished Report.
- APPADURAI A., ed., 1986 *The social life of things*. Commodities in cultural perspective. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- BARBERA G., INGLESE P. & PIMIENTO-BARRIOS E., 1995 *Agro-ecology, cultivation and uses of cactus pear*. FAO Plant Production and Protection paper 132. Rome: FAO.
- COLE J., 2003 “Narratives and moral projects: generational memories of the Malagasy 1947 rebellion”, *Ethos*, 31(1), pp. 95-126.
- COLE J. & MIDDLETON K., 2001 “Rethinking ancestors and colonial power in Madagascar”, *Africa*, 71(1), pp. 1-37.
- COVELL M., 1987 *Madagascar. Politics, Economics and Society*. London and New York: Frances Pinter.
- DECARY R., 1921 “Monographie du District de Tsihombe”, *Bulletin économique de Madagascar*, 18(2), pp. 41-73.
- DECARY R., 1930 *L'Androy (Extrême Sud de Madagascar). Essai de Monographie Régionale*, vol. 1. Paris : Société d'Éditions Géographiques, Maritimes et Coloniales.
- DREGNE H., 1970 *Arid Lands in Transition*. Publication 90. Washington, D.C.: American Association for the Advancement of Science.
- FLACOURT E. de, 1995 [1661] *Histoire de la Grande Isle Madagascar*. Ed. C. Allibert. Paris: INALCO/Karthala.
- JENKINS M., ed., 1987 *Madagascar, an environmental profile*. Gland, Switzerland and Cambridge, U.K: IUCN.
- KAUFMANN J., 2000. “Forget the Numbers: The Case of a Madagascar Famine”, *History in Africa*, 27, pp. 143-157.

- LE HOUÉROU H., 1996 "The role of cacti (*Opuntia* spp.) in Erosion Control, Land Reclamation, Rehabilitation and Agricultural Development in the Mediterranean Basin", *Journal of Arid Environments* 33, pp. 135-159.
- MAINGUET M., 1994 *Desertification. Natural background and human mismanagement*. Berlin: Springer-Verlag.
- MCNEELY J., MILLER K., REID W., MITTERMEIER R., WERNER T., 1990 *Conserving the World's Biological Diversity*, Gland, Switzerland and Washington, D.C.: IUCN, WRI, CI, WWF-US, the World Bank.
- MIDDLETON K., 1999 "Who Killed 'Malagasy Cactus'? Science, Environment and Colonialism in Southern Madagascar (1924-1930)", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 25(2), pp. 215-248.
- MIDDLETON K., 1997 "Circumcision, Death, and Strangers", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 27(4), pp. 341-373.
- MIDDLETON K., 2002 "Ancestral incests and postcolonial subjectivities in Karembola (Madagascar)", in: R. Werbner, ed., *Postcolonial Subjectivities in Africa*. London & New York: Zed Books, pp. 191-224.
- MIDDLETON K., n.d. [2003] *Red Prickly Pear, Poverty Eradication and the WWF*, unpublished report.
- MORTIMORE M., 1998 *Roots in the African Dust. Sustaining the Sub-Saharan Drylands*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
- NICOLL M. & LANGRAND O., 1989 *Madagascar : Revue de la Conservation et des aires protégées*. Gland, Suisse: WWF.
- PARRY J., BLOCH M., 1989 "Introduction: Money and the morality of exchange", in: J. Parry & M. Bloch, eds., *Money and the Morality of Exchange*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-32.
- RABESANDRATANA R., 1984 "Flora of the Malagasy Southwest", in: A. Jolly, P. Oberlé, R. Albignac, eds., *Key Environments: Madagascar*. Oxford : Pergamon Press, pp. 55-74.
- RAISON-JOURDE F., 1989 « Une rébellion en quête de statut : 1947 à Madagascar », *Revue de la Bibliothèque nationale*, 34, pp. 24-32.
- RANDRIAMAMPANINA J. A., SOLOSIEVA, RAJAONARISON J., 2002 *Rapport de Mission dans le Sud* (synthèse) (du 26 novembre au 6 décembre 2001 et du 21 août au 4 septembre 2002). FOFIFA DRA Antananarivo/FOFIFA Centre Régional du Sud et Sud-Ouest Toliara/WWF Fort Dauphin/ANGAP Direction Régionale de Toliara. Unpublished Report September 2002.
- RATSIRAKA D., 1975 *Ny Boky Mena. Charte de la Révolution socialiste malgache tous azimuts*. Antananarivo: Imprimerie d'ouvrages éducatifs.
- RAUH W., 1995 and 1998 *Succulent and Xerophytic Plants of Madagascar*. Mill Valley, California: Strawberry Press.
- THE WORLD BANK 1990 *Madagascar Environment Program Appraisal*, Report No. 8348-MAG. Agriculture Sector Operations Division, South Central and Indian Ocean Department Africa Region.
- VERIN P., 1997 « Une vision de l'extrême sud de Madagascar en 1866 d'après le témoignage d'Alfred Grandidier », in : C. Allibert, ed., *Autour d'Étienne de Flacourt*. Paris : INALCO, pp. 223-230.

NOTES

1. Tanañe ampo raket'ao, raty tanañe
2. The botanical identity of *raketa gasy* has been the subject of much confusion. A review of the literature (60 references) shows that the species has been known by at least eight different names (and more when naming at sub-varietal level is taken into account). Since 1947 there has been a marked movement (but with notable exceptions e.g., Vérin, 1997 : 226 n.1 ; Kaufmann, 2000 : 143 n. 5) towards the view that the proper determination is *Opuntia monacantha* Haw. However, the grounds for such determination are seldom published or else when examined show inconsistencies which I propose to detail elsewhere.
3. *Raketa vazaha* was commonly described in the early literature as *Opuntia inermis* or *Cactus inermis* (see e.g., Decary, 1921: 71) but is probably a variety of *Opuntia ficus-indica* (L.) Mill., cultivars of which enjoy great popularity in Mediterranean-rim countries and beyond. However it is not entirely certain to my mind that the *raketa vazaha* that eventually became popular after the 1950s was the same variety as the *raketa vazaha* that was introduced in the early 1900s. Synonymy would help to account for the striking turnabout in local attitudes to this plant but pose further questions for taxonomy.
4. *Raketa sonjo* is almost certainly a (spiny variety) cultivar of *Opuntia ficus-indica*, though again the literature is far from showing the unanimity one might hope. Succulent and xerophyte expert Werner Rauh (1995 : 55), for instance, seems to view it as *Opuntia monacantha* i.e., a reoccurrence of —Malagasy Cactus||, which it is not.
5. The taxonomy of *raketa mena* is definitely confused and requires further investigation. In 2002 two reports had recently identified the plant as *Opuntia stricta* (ANGAP et al, n.d [2001]:1) or *Opuntia stricta* Haworth (Randriamampianina et al, 2002). Yet on making further enquiry, I found that individual researchers at the three collaborating organisations (WWF, ANGAP, and FOFIFA) were applying this determination to what were clearly morphologically distinct plants. This confusion was partly explicable in that there were at least two kinds of invasive *raketa mena* with (in 2002) distinct geographies (Middleton n.d. [2003] discusses this confusion and its implications for invasive species reporting and biological control programmes). In general, while I recognize that it would be useful for readers to have the scientific names for the varieties of prickly pear discussed in this article, I am reluctant to make definitive pronouncements given the current confusion in a literature too often dependent on citation chains. The more I have looked into *Opuntia* taxonomy with Karembola informants, the more complex I have found the matter to be.
6. In many ways, stories told about Malagasy Cactus are the lynchpin of the article. Memory of this lost cactus has helped to define people's experiences with newer *raketa* varieties and has in turn been shaped by them. Thus, the meaning attributed to any of the four species only makes fully sense if we examine their historical trajectories in tandem. Each defines the others in the context of value systems that address not only economic constraints and opportunities but also notions of self-worth and personhood in a changing world.
7. Despite a distinct history as an interstitial region since at least the seventeenth century (see e.g., Flacourt, 1995 [1661]: 114, 137, 168), Karembola territory and Karembola ethnicity are often subsumed under the better-known terms “Androy” and “[An]tandroy”.
8. Although the communities reported in this paper share a broadly similar habitat of recognizable biodiversity (typically succulents and xerophytes), sub-regional species composition varies partly as a function of topography and soil profile (see Battistini, 1964; Rabesandratana, 1984; Rauh, 1995, 1998).
9. Although the construction of large capacity pluvium, together with the pipeline that the Japanese installed from the Menarandra, have improved water supplies for domestic household use in many parts of Karembola, alternative sources are still required to water stock.
10. Malimana, Anjedava, 1991

11. The pro-Malagasy Cactus tradition from the 1920s through to the 1960s had consistently portrayed this variety as a symbol of colonial betrayal. It saw the promise made by proeradication campaigners that *raketa vazaha* would replace and be a great improvement on Malagasy Cactus as nothing more than a sop to public sensitivities put about by a deeply duplicitous colonial regime. Little of this narrative remained in the early 1980s.
12. The spread of *raketa sonjo* had facilitated an extension of *raketambazaha* by enabling farmers to protect the plantings with a spiny hedge.
13. Moral evaluations of new *raketa* varieties were significantly more complex and ambivalent than those reported from the Androka region (Mahafale) c.1995 by Kaufmann (2000). Kaufmann stresses the sense of continuity in local perceptions of *raketa* production and consumption. Such story-telling, which downplays cultural *métissage* and stresses the unbrokenness of history, would appear to be in keeping with other reported local opinion from Androka, viz., that the demise of Malagasy Cactus had minimal impact. Karembola discourse on new varieties of prickly pear was more complex on two counts. First, because it constantly juggled the idea of partial restoration as represented by the adoption of new varieties with the master narrative that represents the death of Malagasy Cactus as an earthshattering break, and secondly, because moral evaluations of these species were complicated by contrasts between ritual and subsistence domains, contrasts which were in turn associated with distinctions between the poor/low ancestry and rich/high rank.
14. The *kokolampo*, localised —nature spirits|| that also accompanied the ancestors from time immemorial, were regularly said to prefer and practice the —cleanliness|| of *vazaha* and *vazaha fomba* to filthy *gasy*. Such reflections formed part of a broader discourse on the appropriateness of hybrid forms of behaviour that was current in these years (Middleton, 2002).
15. *Raketa* dependency was held to be manifest proof of the *hakeo* (moral blame) the disinherited carry from the past; such persons were either excluded from ritual celebrating ancestral transcendence on account of their poverty or else were symbolically “marked” as inferior in the rituals concerned. Bodily conditions such as thirst and hunger were key metaphors for base rank.
16. I initially assumed that these non-ancestral varieties of prickly pear were seen as incompatible with the sacred domain of ancestral authority - until elderly informants told me that the same exclusions had applied to Malagasy Cactus too. It was common practice to plant thorny Saonjo around abandoned prayer-posts (fallen *hazomanga*) and ghost-houses (*tranon-dolo*), “taboo land you fear to tread”, and in such contexts cactus stands do become *masiñe* (sacred, efficacious, vested with taboo power) through proximity to and association with powerful things. But these are sites symbolic of historical decline rather than of ongoing reproduction.
17. While this is not the place to rehearse the archival evidence, it is clear that the death of Malagasy Cactus affected local people unevenly, depending partly on resource access, itself a function of locality, rank, gender, and age.
18. Because of the national political and economic crisis, the region was not declared a disaster zone until July 1992.
19. The contribution of *raketa sonjo* to the local economy probably had not grown significantly over the intervening decade, but interpretations and explanations of its use value had changed significantly.
20. There are striking congruities between the narratives I collected in the early 1990s and the so-called —received wisdoms|| that dominated western development discourse around that time viz., that African smallholders were recklessly destroying their natural resources by inappropriate land use (Cloudsley-Thompson, 1984; Mainguet, 1994; UNEP, 1992, 1993; Dregne et al, 1991). This is not however the place to review the evidence on regional trends in drought incidence and forest cover, let alone attempt a model of food insecurity that weighs ecological against socio-economic factors.

21. *Raketa saonjo* was the preferred species for this purpose, being easy to propagate, exempt from taboos on sowing/planting fruit trees; and accepted as proof of cultivation (possession) by the state.
22. Significantly, my companion referred to them as *ondevo* rather than, say, as the descendants of former slaves. Although manumission had been proclaimed in Madagascar in 1896, ideas about slaves and dependants still constituted key terms in Karembola political discourse.
23. No one mentioned the possibility that these “slaves” might then try to shed their moral blame by turning their newly acquired livestock into status through socially approved channels of competitive expenditure, but this may have been a fear.
24. This *raketa mena* was not the *raketa mena* of Anjedava 1991, which is known in the Cap Sainte Marie region as *raketa mandrerake* or *raketa befati* (see Middleton, n.d. [2003]).
25. ANGAP (—Association Nationale pour la Gestion des Aires Protégées||/National Association for the Management of Protected Areas) is a parastatal agency charged with managing natural parks and reserves in Madagascar while FOFIFA (“Foibe Fikarohana momba ny Fambolena”) is a Malagasy government department concerned with agronomic research.
26. In fact, informants were expressing affection for the collectivism sponsored by Tsiranana and before that by the French colonial state. For all its emphasis on *coopérativisation agricole* (Ratsiraka, 1975: 64-66, 74), the Ratsiraka government more or less abandoned collective plantations in Karembola.
27. Interviews with fellow taxi-brousse travellers and with residents of towns en route from Tôlanaro to Tsihombe, 1/12/2002. This confusion has crept into scientific literature, notably Rauh (1995: 55).
28. For a contemporary but somewhat different East Coast Malagasy discourse on *vazaha* as source of wealth, especially consumer goods, see Cole, 2003. Cole reports that the young people she interviewed in Tamatave thought that their inability to realise their desires for all that is European produced bastard, degenerate social forms —cultural mixing|| (*métissage*). For them, *vita gasy* (—made in Madagascar||) was synonymous with —second rate||. My informants aspired (for the most part unsuccessfully) to be producers and consumers of *raketa vazaha* [European cactus] but the hybrid or *métis saonjo* (“made in Madagascar”) was considered far from —second rate||.
29. In contrast to the Toliara region where prickly pear fruits are traded across substantial distances in commercial networks, the Karembola trade had been up to then on a petty scale —a basket here, a bowl there, a small pile on the ground.
30. *Raketambazaha* producing households enjoyed a certain local renown, in the fruiting season attracting clients from a considerable radius. Travelling as far as Ampanihy and Marolinta to market their produce, they in turn had a range wider than most villagers.
31. *Raketambazaha* commodification was not for instance symbolised as household-based activity that threatened traditional processes of ancestral reproduction; there was no need to “wash” the cash gained through these transactions in order to make it acceptable in sacred contexts (cf. Parry and Bloch, 1989). In the 1980s, money, unlike prickly pears, was widely acceptable in ritual contexts, provided it was used in ways that reinforced the status of existing élites.
32. Although the very poor can make one-off gains by selling *raketa* during drought periods, they generally fail (for various reasons) to break through the critical barrier of capital accumulation that is needed for sustained status advancement. Without enough livestock in the “bank” to cover aggressive ritual expenditure and the everyday risks that deplete herds, they slip back into a position where they have to sell the stock, and even their *raketa*, in order to raise the money to buy in basic foods.
33. The authors of the reports on *raketa mena* had overlooked its critical role in food security precisely because they consulted primarily with rural élites.

34. *Raketa sonjo*, and even *raketa mena*, can become objects of commoditization under food scarcity. The difference is that *raketa vazaha* is commoditized even in good years - because it is a "specialized" or "luxury good" rather than "primary" or "bulk" commodity. Supply is limited by productive difficulties, and consumption by bodily constraints.

35. Elements of popular discourse seemed to underscore the fragility of this market-based vision of the future. For example, *raketambazaha* was greedy for good land, ideally empty stock-pens of which there were sadly now plenty available because livestock numbers had declined dramatically.

36. According to the first count of the vote [December 2002], Ravalomanana's candidate did not win in this constituency; within a few days, this verdict had been overturned, allegedly on instruction from Antananarivo. Ravalomanana remained in power until early 2009 when increasing disillusionment with his free market policies (exemplified above all in the well-published Daewoo land grab) led to protests that, skilfully exploited by the mayor of Antananarivo, led to his (current) departure. In this paper I have been concerned to report on data collected to 2003, and have avoided analyses that would second-guess the future in the light of more recent political events in Madagascar.

37. For example, Decary's elaborations upon the local proverb of "kinship" between Tandroy and *raketa* [*gasy*] (Decary, 1930: 127), and, more recently, Kaufmann's (2000) concept of "cactus pastoralism".

38. Gender is an important aspect of this question but is too complex to discuss here. Generally, although most routine cactus-related tasks are gendered, Karembola men and women share rank interests because production and exchange are household based.

39. Community leaders (*Presiday*, *Komity*) are drawn from among the general category of *ondatibe*, middle-aged male family or lineage heads. However, while all male elders and/or lineage heads are *ondatibe* in theory, the public arena, including and perhaps especially occasions that involve interactions with *vazaha*, is dominated by wealthy men from elite lineages who gain prominence and influence through ceremonial and marriage networks. The office of *mpisoro* (clan or lineage priest, often held by an elderly, sometimes bedridden, man) is more ritual than political, with spiritual rather than temporal power - unless the holder is still young enough to combine the function with active political agency and presence in community affairs as orator, marriage broker, and feast-sponsor/participant.

ABSTRACTS

Prickly pears from the New World have had a long and chequered history in the drylands of southern Madagascar since the late eighteenth century when the first variety was introduced. Yet for much of this period relatively poor data sets make it difficult to recover indigenous perceptions of these plants. This paper explores local attitudes to prickly pears over a more modest timespan by drawing on ethnographic data recorded in the Karembola region at intervals over a twenty year period (1981-2003). Focusing on changing evaluations of four named varieties, the paper shows how local attitudes to prickly pear varieties cannot be understood without understanding the political and symbolic ideologies of social reproduction and exchange in which they are embedded. Relating key narrative shifts to broader debates around social value and personhood, use-value and commodification, foreigners and biodiversity, the article highlights a Ravalomanana-type discourse on the self as emergent capitalist, a self-identification

which was difficult to square with the reality of life as experienced by most Karembola in 2002-2003.

Plusieurs espèces de cactus (*Opuntia*), originaires du Nouveau Monde, ont été introduites dans l'extrême sud de Madagascar à travers les siècles depuis la première introduction faite en 1769. Pourtant, les attitudes indigènes malgaches envers ces plantes exotiques pendant toute cette durée sont curieusement ignorées, à cause de données disponibles très limitées. Cet article propose d'étudier l'évolution des représentations locales sur un espace de temps plus modeste à partir d'un recueil de données ethnographiques rassemblées en pays Karembola par intervalles entre 1981 et 2003. Mettant à jour les transformations subies au cours de cette vingtaine d'années par les évaluations indigènes de quatre variétés bien précisées, l'article démontre comment les idées émises par les Karembola sur leurs cactus, loin d'être réductibles aux considérations exclusivement pragmatiques, ne se font comprendre qu'avec recours aux idéologies politiques et symboliques dans lesquelles elles se sont enchâssées. Rattachant les modifications essentielles des narrations aux débats plus larges concernant la valeur sociale, y compris le pouvoir et la hiérarchie, la reproduction et l'échange, la production d'usage et la marchandisation, ainsi que la revalorisation de la biodiversité et la signification des étrangers, l'analyse met en évidence un discours local émergent sur la personne imaginée comme capitaliste. Cette identification de soi-même, quoique rappelant fortement le discours populaire national qui a poussé vers le pouvoir Ravalomanana en 2002, était difficile à concilier avec les réalités de l'existence comme elle était vécue par la plupart des Karembola en 2002-2003.

INDEX

Keywords: Alien Plants, Anthropology, Karembola, Plants and Civilization, Prickly, Southern Madagascar

Subjects: anthropologie

Mots-clés: cactus, plantes allochtones, plantes et civilisation, carambole

Geographical index: Madagascar