LAND COMPETITION AND HUMAN-ENVIRONMENT RELATIONS IN MADAGASCAR

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Ny tany vadiben-Janahary: mihary ny velona, manotrona ny maty
("The earth is God's chief wife: she maintains the living and guards the dead")
Malagasy proverb (Houlder 1929, pt.1: 6).

On 17 March 2009, after a bitter three-month power struggle, a military-backed coup toppled the incumbent Marc Ravalomanana and replaced him with a hitherto unknown 34-year-old ex-disc jockey named Andry Rajoelina as President of Madagascar. Rajoelina, during his prior two year tenure as mayor of Antananarivo, claimed that Ravalomanana had put up Madagascar “for sale” on the international market, pointing to a purported land deal with Daewoo Logistics which would have earmarked approximately 1.3 million hectares of land to palm oil and maize (Teyssier et al. 2009/2010, Vinciguerra in this volume). He sensed that the land issue was a tinder box he could ignite through a populist campaign which could serve as justification for a seizure of power. He further charged that Ravalomanana’s one-dimensional economic development agenda failed to offer a social plan likely to improve the lot of the population (Burnod 2009; Randrianja 2012), over 70 per cent of whom live below the poverty threshold (World Bank 2012; Sarrasin 2006: 389).

Rajoelina’s meteoric rise to power and politicisation of the land issue marked a fundamental turning point in Madagascar’s history. Despite being a home-brewed revolution, the Daewoo affair dragged the country into the ideological arena of ‘land-grab’ politics, which already involved

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1 This work results from research and a conference generously funded by the Canada Research Chairs Fund, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Beatty Memorial Lectures Committee (McGill University), the Maxwell Cummings Distinguished Lectureship Committee, the Provost’s Office (McGill University), the Dean, Faculty of Medicine (McGill University), Department of Human Genetics (McGill University), the International Institute for Advanced Studies (McGill University), and the Indian Ocean World Centre (McGill University). We also thank the authors and peer-reviewers of this volume for their valuable feedback. We are grateful to Natalja Laurey for her assistance in formatting this manuscript.
investors ranging from Wall Street, China and India to international conservationist groups. Whether Rajoelina's intentions were local or wider in scope, his campaign ensured that Madagascar would henceforth be front and centre of international debates on land and environmental issues that highlighted the island as variously a biodiversity hot-spot, zone of neo-colonialism, and 'green grab' victim. In the swirl of this hot political debate, there was a real risk that polemic would gain the ascendancy over discussion.

These events underscore the significance of this volume, which aims to examine land as a subjective, ontological reality for Malagasy people within the context of the historical, economic and cultural factors influencing the way they view land. For the Malagasy, large land acquisitions, endemic poverty, health and sovereignty loom large, as they do for many other peoples, notably on the African continent. However, land for the Malagasy is of particular importance as it also straddles the boundaries between the here and now, and the hereafter. This is what makes Madagascar significant as a terrain to understand the extent to which international and local treatments of land can be problematic. The assessment of multinational mining companies, state corporations acting as proxies for their respective governments, hedge fund companies or conservation groups is very much rooted in realpolitik and the achievement of policy aims over clear timelines. It is the aim of this book then to examine a more comprehensive range of human-environment interactions within the increasingly fierce climate of competition for land.

This book tracks key aspects of human-environment interactions, particularly focusing on the contemporary dynamics of World Bank-inspired land titling and other land projects. By 2009, over three million hectares of Madagascar's arable land was subject to foreign direct investment (FDI) aimed at promoting tourist, mining, infrastructural and agricultural projects (Uellenberg 2009). The 1999 enactment of new mining legislation has opened Madagascar to large-scale mineral investment (Sarrasin 2006). Despite Rajoelina's rhetoric and the abandonment of Daewoo's agricultural venture, the number of high-impact land projects in the country, particularly in mining (Andrianirina – Ratsialonana et al., 2011; Evers et al. 2011) have grown. Such developments were accelerated by the de-regulation of the Malagasy economy, guided by World Bank policies to open up the Malagasy economy for foreign investment while simultaneously offering Malagasy rural dwellers incentives to invest in land through offering them ‘tenure security’ (see Evers and Middleton chapters). NGOs started up and funded land titling projects throughout