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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Bridges through Conservation Development

Review by Jeremy Trombley

Beyond the Lens of Conservation: Malagasy and Swiss Imaginations of One Another

by Eva Keller

Berghahn Books, 2015

Eva Keller's *Beyond the Lens of Conservation* is an interesting study of the relationship between Malagasy and Swiss people by way of their mutual connection to Masoala National Park in Madagascar. There has been a lot of ethnographic research done on the unequal relationship between North and South, particularly as it relates to conservation, but this book takes a somewhat different approach. By looking at the way that people from both Switzerland and Madagascar understand one another by way of this national park and its sister exhibit at the Zurich Zoo, the author is able to examine the way that conservation projects mediate peoples' perceptions of one another over great distances.

In the Zurich Zoo, there is a large exhibit featuring lemurs, tortoises, and other animals native to Madagascar's Masoala National Park. The exhibit also features references to the indigenous peoples who live in or near the park, and the scientific expeditions to learn about the park and its unique wildlife. This exhibit provides many Swiss with their most direct experience of Madagascar, and it's through it and other cultural references that Keller examines the Swiss perspective on the people and place of Madagascar. Keller begins her book with a thorough "virtual tour" of the exhibit – allowing us to see it from her perspective as she wanders among the tourists and trees where elusive lemurs and other animals reside. The image that we get from this exhibit is of a familiar story. Madagascar, aside from a brief display at the beginning, a few easily missed references in the exhibit itself, and at the end, is depicted as relatively devoid of human occupation. Instead of a nation rich with both human and

natural diversity, Madagascar comes across as a vast natural wilderness untouched by human influence – that is, until the health of the forest comes into question. The final portion of the exhibit – also easily bypassed – provides a detailed depiction of the Masoala locals as villains satisfying their selfish desire for profit by destroying the forest upon which they and the health of the planet depend.

According to Keller, these views are reinforced by two major popular cultural narratives – the story of the globe-trotting parrot Globi and his adventures in Madagascar, and the Dreamworks Animation film *Madagascar*. In both stories, the island nation is portrayed as either devoid of human presence or the people are depicted as ignorant and selfish destroyers of the natural world. This perspective justifies Swiss intervention in Madagascar to save the Masoala forest from the locals who would, in this view, destroy it.

All of this leads Keller to what she refers to as the “coconut schema.” Instead of recognizing the unique culture and history of Madagascar, the Swiss people she spoke with – including several classes of students – fit them into a universal “native” schema that could be applied to any indigenous people. In this framework, the Malagasy are impoverished, backward, and primitive, and must be taught how to live sustainably with the forest. The project of protecting Masoala, then, becomes a moral project of preserving a threatened landscape, rather than a meaningful engagement with the people of Madagascar themselves.

The second part of the book focuses on life in and around Masoala for the Malagasy. It begins with a history of the park and how it was created, followed by an analysis of the effects that the creation of the park had on people who live in the area. Primarily, the park affects land use by preventing access to certain regions and forcing people to request permits to conduct routine activities. This put a severe burden on the people there, and has resulted in a great deal of tension between the local population and the agency that oversees the park. Keller demonstrates these tensions through an examination of the “banana ethos” and the “moon ethos” – drawing from a Malagasy myth. In the banana ethos, which the Malagasy hold, the value of life is in building a strong connection to the land a growing community of kinship. The moon ethos, on the other hand, is held by conservationists who see the growing population not as a benefit to the expansion of kin, but as overpopulation and potentially increasing the destruction of the forest. Keller describes this interaction of contradictory ways of viewing life as generating friction (drawing on Anna Tsing’s notion of the term as the uneven and awkward aspects of interaction across difference) between the two groups.

From the perspective of the Malagasy, the Masoala park represents an intrusion of the state and of foreigners into their everyday lives. It has resulted in the loss of cultivable land, prevents the expansion of kin groups by limiting the land available for future generations, and interferes with their burial practices by preventing them from accessing the burial sites of their ancestors. Keller illustrates these effects with a number of anecdotes such as the story of a burial site on an island called, “The Island of The Wanderer.” After the island was listed as part of the “hard core” of the park, and foreign tourists were seen kayaking to it, the Malagasy in the area felt forced to move the burial to protect their ancestors. This left them feeling defeated, and anxious about the future.

Ultimately, Keller argues, the park has interrupted a long process among the Malagasy of trying to overcome the legacy of colonialism and slavery on the island. Many of the Malagasy in the park region are descendants of former slaves. Their humanity – in the form of access to land for their own descendants, and to connect with their ancestors – has been stripped away. The Masoala peninsula provided these people with the opportunity to recover what had been lost. The creation of the park, and the resulting restrictions on accessing the land have halted this recovery process.

Returning to her analysis of Swiss perceptions of Madagascar, Keller suggests that, instead of bringing the people of the two nations together, the park has driven them further apart by creating further tensions and antagonisms. Although both groups perceive one another through conflated generalizations – the Swiss through the coconut schema, and the Malagasy through the image of the *vazaha* or foreigner – Keller argues that there is a significant difference between these two generalizations. The first is based on a generic type, lacking any historical or political dimension – a “native” from any continent could just as easily stand in for any other “native.” The second, on the other hand, is based on the direct historical and political relationship that the Malagasy have had with Europeans and other foreigners in both the past and the present. She describes these different perspectives as a “broken bridge,” but offers no suggestions for how to fix it.

Here it might have been useful to raise the other aspect of Anna Tsing’s concept of friction. What’s most interesting about Tsing’s work is not that friction prevents interaction across difference – though in some cases it no doubt does – but that friction is the condition of possibility for relationships to be formed. Friction, for Tsing, is productive. It might, in light of Keller’s analysis, be worth imagining the productive possibilities that the friction between the Swiss who visit the Zurich Zoo exhibit and the Malagasy who live near Masoala park might produce.

The only other substantive critique I have is that the cultural models approach is not well developed in the text. There is little explanation of how the models are identified and validated. People unfamiliar with Holland and Quinn's work or the method of cultural models more generally might not grasp the process based on the limited methodological description provided. Although supported by ethnographic examples (e.g. quotes, and descriptions provided by the author), this lack of methodological explanation makes the cultural models aspect of the research seem comparatively thin. Additionally, I would advise a general caution with all approaches based on schema theory. Because the methodology selects for schemas that are the most generally applicable within a community, there is often little room for nuance and variation. It is possible that many Swiss, including the zoo staff, are very reflexive about the Masoala exhibit, but this may not come out in interviews, and could get overshadowed by the dominant discourse of the zoo and the exhibit. That is a general critique of schema theory, though, and not an issue with Keller's work specifically.

Overall, I found the book to be very engaging and enlightening. The unique approach of studying the relationships between two regions by way of the forest and its sister zoo exhibit provided a rich account of how the people of these two regions view one another and the kinds of relationships that emerge from the interaction. It is a worthwhile addition to the literature on inequality and conservation, and provides many interesting and engaging ideas that can be built upon in further research.

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