

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Colleen J. McElroy. *Over the Lip of the World: Among the Storytellers of Madagascar*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999. xxxiv + 216 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-97824-6.

Reviewed by Cathy Mosely (Storyteller and Independent Scholar)

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When I heard about *Over the Lip of the World* I was intrigued; it is rare enough to hear about Madagascar, and even more rare to hear anything about the stories of the land. I wondered, "What type of stories would I be shown? What would the book tell me of this little heard-of land?"

Colleen McElroy opens the book by explaining that her investigations into the oral traditions of Madagascar began as a Fulbright research project, and that she focused her research on those oral traditions currently being practiced in various parts of the island. Although she doesn't cover all the performing arts, she does include some song-poems and other performance pieces. She also states that she gave an account of her travels to give a sense of the storytellers who offered these tales, and the land from which they came.

The book is broken down into an introduction, an overview of the linguistics of the island, and nine chapters on the various regions McElroy traveled to.

In the "Introduction" McElroy endeavors to set the stage for her travels through an ancient and complex land by giving a brief overview of its geography and history. She also explains the various types of stories ("angano") she chose: "tapasiry," which are tales of proper conduct, and "tantara," which are myths about the origins of things and the relationships between humans and the divine. Because McElroy wanted to explore Madagascar's living oral traditions, she sets the stage for how these stories fit into the daily and religious worlds of the people of the island.

The next section and bibliography are entitled, "The Tapestry of Languages in Translation." The subsections include "Phonology: Some Elements of Sounds in Malagasy," "Morphology: Patterns of Words in Malagasy," "Syntax: Word Order in Sentences and Phrases," and "Semantics: Some Elements of Meaning and Metaphor in Malagasy."

The nine remaining chapters chronicle the author's travels; each opens with a description of the setting and

the teller, and offers stories from each teller. The selections begin with creation tales and move to the works of twentieth-century Malagasy poets.

McElroy focuses on stories that give a sense of the natural, often untouched, wonders of Madagascar. One tale she chooses is from Antsiranana and is entitled, "Rafara-Girl of the Waters." This is a tale of a water spirit, Rafara, who is won as a bride, then nearly lost. Even in print you can still hear the longing of her husband, Andriambohoaka, when he cries out,

"Rafara, child-of-the-waters, Come back. Come back, I say. Your husband is sad. Your child is miserable." (p. 82)

For this estranged husband and child there is a happy ending; the rulers of the water accept Rafara's mortal family, and let them travel safely beneath the waves.

Colleen McElroy shows her own considerable talent as a poet as she describes the interplay between the stories, the people, and the land (McElroy has published six books of poetry and two short story collections). And she very vividly illuminates the strong connection between the Malagasy people and their ancestors. All of this is enriched by the lovely photography that is scattered throughout the book. And yet, for all of the book's power, I found myself wondering "is this all?"

The author did achieve her stated goal – she did a powerful job of making the oral traditions of Madagascar come alive. Yet the rhythm and organization of the book were erratic. Madagascar is such a remote place that I would have welcomed less commentary on the author's transportation, and more on the historical and sociological background of the people. I also would have appreciated a glossary, or at least more footnotes, since there are names and terms that were hard to decipher, even when placed within context.

I welcome *Over the Lip of the World* as a fascinating introduction to a little-known corner of the world, with a rich oral tradition, but I hope that one day there will be more in-depth books on the topic.

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