H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Rita Stevens.** *Madagascar.* Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999. 111 pp. $19.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7910-4762-0.

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MADAGASCAR

Stevens's book is intended as a brief summary of Madagascar and the Malagasy society, and is for primary school classroom use. She provides information on Madagascar's geography, history, culture, economy, and government in a rather interesting, readable style. Nonetheless, there are several concerns about how the Malagasy people are represented that lead me to question the suitability of using this book in the classroom without considerable caution.

First, while Stevens gives far more attention to the people of Madagascar than to the island's flora and fauna, a refreshing representation, she consistently represents them in stereotypical views as bound to tradition, unfamiliar with the modern world, and more likely to act on superstition than on reason. For example, she indicates that Malagasy "find it impossible" to act against fady (taboos) (p. 78), despite the fact that Malagasy continually modify or disregard fady if it serves their economic, political, or personal objectives. She suggests they foolishly sacrifice cattle with no regard for their economic value, despite the fact that much of the rural economy is based on pastoral production, cattle are used to prepare fields for irrigated rice production, and many people buy and sell cattle to augment their income. These and other representations render the Malagasy as bound to irrational cultural restrictions, rather than as the astute farmers and business people they, in fact, are.

Second, she greatly underestimates the African influence in Madagascar, giving far more attention to the Asian influence on the island. This has been an unfortunate representation of the island in much of the earlier literature concerning Malagasy culture, but more recent research and writing has reflected the very significant contribution of African Bantu traders and migrants in shaping the island's culture and language. Moreover, the majority of Malagasy are not the fine-featured Asian descendants that Stevens and others depict; they are more likely to have an African phenotype. The over-emphasis on Asian influence is represented in other ways as well, which tend to generalize many features of the highland Merina groups with the whole of the island. For example, she represents the Merina practice of famadihana, or reburial, as an island custom, when in fact, it is a relatively recent custom of the highlands. While this representation in and of itself is not a significant problem, the continuing representation of the Malagasy and their culture as Asian or Indonesian, and the customs of highlanders as customs of the whole of the island, does become problematic.

Of greater concern is the continual representation of French colonial control as a positive period in Madagascar's history, and resistance to it a reflection of Malagasy ignorance or stubborn alle-

giance to nationalism. For example, she consistently describes leaders who resisted European influence as ineffectual, violent, and economically disastrous, while those who allied with Europeans are regarded as benevolent, productive, and wise. Malagasy are "warriors," (p. 39) "fierce warriors," (p. 40) "bent on conquering their neighbors," (p. 40), while the French "stamped out" "an armed revolution," (p. 45) "undertook a systematic program to modernize Madagascar," (p. 45) and "quickly put down" insurrections (p. 45). "By the time [French colonial governor] Gallieni left the island in 1905, Madagascar was peaceful -- and very French" (p. 45). Such language encourages children to view European control over indigenous peoples and their lands as something benign, if not akin to parental love, and it further reinforces images of Africans as violent and savage, in need of external control.

In this same vein, Stevens represents the French as introducing education, but does not mention that students were forbidden from speaking their own languages or learning their own histories; she indicates that the French abolished slavery, but does not mention that Madagascar was sought by the French as a source for cattle and crops to feed the indentured slave plantations of the Mascarenes, or that the French encouraged the domestic slave industry in Madagascar. She represents the colonial government as concerned about environmental protection, while protestors "deliberately burned down many of the forests" (pp. 89, 90). She makes no mention of timber concessions the colonial government made to French industrialists, nor the French appropriation of Malagasy land for its own industrial expansion. These omissions continually support the image of European rule as beneficial, and the Malagasy as in need of such interventions.

While describing colonial rule as a period of economic prosperity, she writes "Despite these changes, some of the Malagasy were still not content to remain tied to France" [p. 49] implying that their discontent was more a matter of unreasonable expectations than legitimate concern with the appropriation of their land and labor. She refers to the violent suppression of the resistance movement as "a failed revolt," in which "more than 11,000 people on both sides were killed" (p. 50). The "failed revolt" of 1947 was one of the most horrendous slaughters of native people in the history of global colonial rule, with losses to the native population vastly disproportionate to those of the colonial rulers. While it may well be inappropriate to detail the atrocity for classroom use, to dismiss it so glibly and as a loss to "both sides" is very unsettling.

While consistently representing colonial rule as period of economic and domestic prosperity, Stevens makes no mention of the forced labor, land appropriation, rising social inequality, or social oppression associated with colonial rule. Again, it would be unreasonable to expect much detail of this period in a social studies reader for primary school children, but some representation of the very real and tragic history of colonialism in shaping people's contemporary concerns would be legitimate.

Finally, there remain a number of errors throughout the book, which in and of themselves are not significant, but taken as a whole, it leads one to wonder how much research she did to prepare for the book. Medicine is not free, as she indicates; most people do not believe that educating boys is more important than girls; automobiles are not rare, and many if not most people have ridden in them; and fuel for heating is not unnecessary due to the warm climate, but is instead a very real concern for people living in a climate that often cools to near or even below freezing, and must rely upon coal or woodfuel from the forests for cooking and heating.

In closing, I would add that despite the many flaws of the book, there are not many teaching tools available for classroom use that show the people of Madagascar. Most children in the United

States will learn about Madagascar, if they learn of it at all, as an island of lemurs with great biodiversity that needs to be saved. They are unlikely to find any information about the people. For that reason, I would recommend the book as a refreshing compliment to any environmental lessons featuring Madagascar. It could be used to engage students in discussion of the people who live among the island's biodiversity. On the other hand, I would recommend such use only if the teacher were familiar with some of the basic issues surrounding the colonial legacy in indigenous societies. Contextualized in this way, and used with caution, the book should inspire discussion and thought. Without such context and caution, however, I am afraid the book would reinforce racist stereotypes of Africans and indigenous peoples.