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Rosewood occidentalism and orientalism in Madagascar

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ABSTRACT

As both a lucrative timber commodity and endangered species, rosewood ties the forests of Madagascar to the far ends of the globe. While the United States and Europe fund rosewood conservation, logging exports to China fuel a growing demand for classical furniture dating back to the Ming Dynasty. Conflicting demands for rosewood are often portrayed in terms of an East-West tension. Indeed, accounts of many global conservation resources, including ivory, rhino horn, tiger parts, and shark fin, fit this portrayal. In breaking with these accounts, I analyze global demands for rosewood in terms of two overlapping conservation and commodity assemblages. Both global assemblages have reterritorialized the forest of northeastern Madagascar. Via NGO offices in the United States, the conservation assemblage delineates vast tracts of forest for protection and identifies the communities that are to be its managers. Via rosewood importers in China, the commodity assemblage drives thousands of loggers into these protected forests in search of rosewood. Yet, rather than representing irreconcilable vantages, these global assemblages demonstrate a fundamental congruence. Both conservation and commodity assemblages blur global rationalities with situated cultural elements, creating the illusion of either a universal science uncorrupted by culture, or a cultural eminence uncorrupted by capitalism. Analyzing rosewood in terms of assemblage reveals not the stark contrast of an increasingly bifurcating global order, but rather an emergent space of global connectivity that complicates binary understandings of East and West, while simultaneously speaking to the reality of these geopolitical imaginaries.

1. Introduction

There are two types of trails in Masoala National Park, the largest national park in Madagascar located in the northeastern corner of the island. One trail is for the tourists. On this trail, Malagasy guides lead foreigners on multi-day hikes through tough terrain. When the foreigners ask to see endangered rosewood trees, the guides obligingly pass by a solitary tree growing at the base of the trail, 30 years old and still too small for commercial exploitation. The tree – covered in thick bark that hides its splendid rose-colored core – is unremarkable. Tourists nod and continue along the trail. Not far away lies the other trail of Masoala National Park. This trail is for rosewood loggers. Here, century-old trees are felled with bright red splinters scattered at the stump. They are dragged through forest and river – dangerous feats that often leave loggers injured or dead.

These two trails in the Malagasy forest – that for the tourist and that for the logger – demonstrate how, mainly in the past two decades, the forests of northeastern Madagascar have become intricately connected to either end of the world in very different but interrelated ways. Rosewood is both a lucrative commodity when cut and polished and an endangered species recently popularized in conservation circles due to its systematic logging in the wake of Madagascar's 2009 *coup d'état*. Rosewood conservation and logging have both intensified since the coup, resulting in the fervent creation of conservation territories alongside precipitous logging increases within these territories. Rosewood logs are now exported exclusively to China, fueling a resurgent demand for classically-styled luxury furniture that recalls the country's rich cultural history. At the other end of the globe, American conservationists champion Madagascar as a vital biodiversity hotspot, and rosewood is one of the species prioritized for conservation in an attempt to combat the Chinese-driven "rosewood massacre" (Schuurman and Lowry, 2009).

Experiencing the gravity of these contrasting global demands, rosewood in Madagascar has become a *kakazo malaza* – a famous tree – but famous in strange ways. It represents two very different things for two very different collectives, neither of which are particularly Malagasy. Indeed, my friend Sylvano,[1] who has been on both trails in Masoala National Park – as logger and as guide – has asked me, why all this interest in rosewood? What will the *chinois* do with the logs they are buying and what will the *vazaha* (foreigners, typically white) do with the forest they are conserving? In Madagascar, as in most places subject to the global whims of *olo ivelany* (the people outside), the world can be a strange place.

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[1] A pseudonym used to protect informant identity.

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Commodity and conservation demands placed on Malagasy rosewood are, at the global level, typically portrayed in terms of an East-West tension. Implicit in this portrayal is the competition between Western conservation and Eastern décor – the "realities" of conservation science and the contingencies of "exotic" taste. Rosewood is a powerful symbol of this tension. Rosewood has become the world's most trafficked group of endangered species, accounting for a third of all seizures by value – more than that attributed to ivory, rhino horn, and tigers put together (UNODC, 2016, p. 16).[2] Malagasy rosewood accounts for about 60% of total rosewood seizures (UNODC, 2016, p. 38). China is by far the largest importer of all of these heavily trafficked endangered species – especially rosewood. Indeed, Chinese demand for rosewood and other endangered species has become an iconic point of contention for conservationists in their struggle to save biodiversity the world over.

Analyzing rosewood through the lens of assemblage, this article problematizes the opposition on which this East-West tension is based. Assemblage is a conceptual tool meant to account for the multiplicity and contingency that characterizes the world, thereby countering analytical approaches that understand the world in terms of essentialized wholes. In this article, I analyze rosewood as simultaneously operating within two overlapping global assemblages: (1) the *conservation assemblage*, stretching from NGO headquarters in the United States to the rosewood forests of northeastern Madagascar, and (2) the *commodity assemblage*, transporting the felled trees within these forests to their final Chinese destinations. The analysis is based on my experience living in northeastern Madagascar as a Peace Corps volunteer in 2010 and the beginning of 2011, and conducting fieldwork in the same location during the summer of 2014 and 2015. During my fieldwork in Madagascar, I interviewed rosewood loggers and traders, conservation agents, and residents living in the region. The analysis is also based on fieldwork conducted in Shanghai, China during the winter of 2014 and 2015. During my fieldwork in China, I interviewed rosewood importers, furniture makers, and urban Chinese families who have recently purchased rosewood furniture or maintain a family heirloom.

Throughout my fieldwork in both Madagascar and China, as I learned more about processes of rosewood conservation and commoditization, I grew increasingly aware of their hidden similarities. These similarities – the situated ethics each assemblage recalls and the global rationalities that send the assemblages all over the world – belie popular accounts of the global opposition inherent in rosewood conservation and trade. By locating rosewood within its broader configurations of culture, capitalism, science, and the state, this article utilizes an assemblage approach to dissect the seemingly divergent global demands for rosewood. The goal is to expose the strategic essentialisms – occidentalisms and orientalisms – that have increasingly found their way into global conservation dilemmas.

Sections 2 and 3 of the article lay out the conceptual framework for my analysis. Section 2 uses Deleuze and Guattari's characterization of an assemblage as rhizomatic – as opposed to arborescent – in order to set the stage for analyzing rosewood as a rhizome and not a tree. Section 3 displaces this framework to the global level by outlining Ong and Collier's (2005) definition of the global and the situated. Section 4 utilizes the conceptual framing outlined in Sections 2 and 3 to dissect the conservation and commodity assemblages in terms of their global and situated elements. Each assemblage blurs situated cultural elements with global rationalities in order to ordain the worth of rosewood. The result is the fallacious appearance of either a universal science uncorrupted by culture (in the case of the conservation assemblage), or a cultural eminence uncorrupted by capitalism (in the case of the commodity assemblage). Section 5 follows these global assemblages as they meet in the forests of northeastern Madagascar, reterritorializing the situated Malagasy terrain. The article concludes with implications for emerging global dynamics.

2. Rhizomatic rosewood

For the conservation planner delimiting National Parks in northeastern Madagascar via offices in the United States, rosewood is an endangered tree to be accommodated within conservation areas to the greatest extent possible. In contrast, for the furniture connoisseur in Shanghai who looks quite favorably upon the progressive transformation of century-old trees into ornate classical furniture, rosewood is a cultural icon that materializes the greatness of a nation. These two essentializations – rosewood as an endangered species of the soil and rosewood as a polished product of cultural eminence – can each be characterized, following Deleuze and Guattari (1980), as "arborescent." Arborescence, or "tree logic," follows a linear chronology that underlines an assumed unity in things, their origin, and their conclusion. The metaphor is based on the image of a tree stretching from root to bud as a unified organic whole. Rather than apprehending the world in terms of provisional concepts that map its emergence and flow, arborescent thinking imposes superficial unities that imbue the perceived world with false concreteness. This is the tendency with rosewood. Symbolizing either the untouched tropical world or its rightful and crafty domination, the "natural" and "cultural" histories of rosewood respectively stretch from root to bud, obscuring the multiplicity beneath.

But Deleuze and Guattari are "tired of trees" (15). Instead, they advance a rhizomatic understanding of the world. Analyzing rosewood as a rhizome and not a tree exposes the strategic essentialisms that manifest in both sides of the contemporary rosewood debate. In Deleuzian terms, that is to say, rosewood = (n − 1). Rosewood is not the arborescent unity of representation operating in its own empty dimension (the "1" to be subtracted), but rather the multiplicity beneath (the "n" often obscured): rosewood furniture inspired by the classical dynastic tradition is now manufactured in China on an industrial scale for domestic consumption.[3] Because of China's booming investment climate, the wood serves both as a timeless cultural icon and a very timely investment opportunity. With price increases of up to 500% since 2005, demand for rosewood in China has reached unprecedented heights and the country now looks to Africa for a fresh supply (Wenbin and Xiufang, 2013). Madagascar, with its humid climate and weak state, provides the most lucrative opportunity. Malagasy rosewood fetches $40,000 per m^3 in Chinese markets or $1.50 per kilogram hauled from the bush in Madagascar.[4] It is also, however, critically endangered and now grows only in the country's protected areas, which have been drastically undermined as a result of precipitous logging and export to China.

Rhizomatic rosewood is, as all rhizomes are, contingent – not constitutive. Rosewood does not have *intrinsic properties* (e.g., rosewood as "natural" or "cultural"), but only *capacities to interact* which are contingently exercised depending on the wider constellation of elements with which they associate (e.g., rosewood as cultural icon, turned investment commodity, turned endangered species, turned *kakazo malaza*, and so forth). As a rhizome, rosewood's connections result not in organic wholes (what Deleuze and Guattari would consider arborescent unities), but heterogeneous aggregations – or, *assemblages*.

Assemblages, at their most basic level, are defined as "wholes characterized by relations of exteriority" (DeLanda, 2006, p. 10). In

[2] This is based on seizure data from World WISE (see UNODC, 2016, Fig. 3), which is not perfectly representative of actual trafficking patterns (see UNODC, 2016, p. 14).

[3] Only a small percentage of rosewood imported to China is exported after manufacture. For example, in 2012, exported rosewood products only accounted for 0.01% of total imported logs (Wenbin and Xiufang, 2013, p. 13).

[4] The price in the timber markets of China is an estimate based on Wenbin and Xiufang (2013) and field interviews with timber traders in Shanghai in 2015. The price in the forests of Madagascar is a rough estimate based on the literature (Global Witness and EIA, 2010; Randriamalala and Liu, 2010) and field interviews with loggers conducted in 2014 and 2015.