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Rosewood democracy in the political forests of Madagascar

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ABSTRACT

Rosewood in Madagascar is both a lucrative timber commodity and a group of threatened and endangered tree species primarily limited to the country's last remaining northeastern forests. Since 2000, trade in rosewood has been on the rise due to escalating demand in China. Despite international conservation efforts to curtail the trade, the collapse of the Malagasy government via a military-backed *coup d'état* in 2009 triggered an outbreak of illegal logging in the country's northeastern protected areas. Since the coup, thousands of shipping containers of rosewood have been exported overseas, making multi-millionaires of an elite few in the northeast and profoundly reconfiguring the country's geographies of power. Using an ethnographic approach to analyze political economic transformations, this article takes readers from the hundreds of logging camps scattered throughout the protected areas of northeastern Madagascar to the upper echelons of a rosewood political economy that spans the highest powers in the capital city. In the article, I argue that revenues generated during Madagascar's rosewood logging outbreak, combined with the country's return to electoral politics at the end of 2013, have together facilitated the political ascendancy of an elite group of rosewood traders from northeastern Madagascar. Through a process that I refer to as "rosewood democracy," these rosewood traders have been voted into central offices in Madagascar's Fourth Republic, ultimately demonstrating how democratic institutions that are supposed to foster equality are captured to sustain long-standing patterns of inequality.

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1. Introduction

The day I arrived in Madagascar to begin my second stint of fieldwork in 2015 was the same day the recent Presidential elect Hery Rajaonarimampianina was impeached by Parliament. When I reached my primary field site in northeastern Madagascar four days later, I found out why. The upside of the political unrest (*tombontsoa ny grève*), residents of the northeast told me, was the reopening of the rosewood trade (*misokatra andramena*). These residents insisted that not only would rosewood logging benefit from the recent political turmoil in the capital, but that money generated through the trade was in fact financing the unrest. Reporters investigating the trade make a deeper allegation – that rosewood money has been financing both the country's presidential elections and the political unrest that inevitably follows since at least 2000². In reading through these reports and speaking to

individuals close to the trade, it has become clear to me that the rosewood trade contributes to a certain brand of "rosewood democracy" – characterized by pre-electoral boom and post-electoral bust – that has become one of the defining features of the country's political scene for the past two decades³.

Taking readers from the hundreds of logging camps scattered throughout the protected areas of northeastern Madagascar to the upper echelons of a rosewood political economy that spans the highest powers in the capital city, this article tells the story of rosewood democracy since the beginning of the new millennium. It details the rise of an elite group of local rosewood traders (referred to herein as the "operators" or the "rosewood elite") from

¹ This article is by the same author who has previously published under the pseudonym [Oliver Remy \(2017\)](#). In both instances, the author's identity is obscured to protect respondents.

² These reports, discussed throughout the paper, include [Shuurman and Lowry \(2009\)](#), [Randriamalala and Liu \(2010\)](#), [Global Witness and EIA \(2009 and 2010\)](#), [World Bank \(2010\)](#), [Randriamalala \(2012, 2013\)](#), and [EIA, \(2014a, 2014b\)](#), along with a number of news articles from the Malagasy press.

³ [Randriamalala and Liu \(2010\)](#) make more or less this same observation when they write that, "we can already conclude that rosewood now regularly finances a type of Malagasy 'democracy'" (28, translated from French). [Randriamalala \(2012\)](#) refers to this as "*la bolabolacratie*," joining the French word "*démocratie*" and the regional word for rosewood logs, "*bolabola*." [Shuurman and Lowry \(2009\)](#) also allude to this phenomenon: "Given that logging of precious timber has been problematic for many decades in Madagascar, one could question whether political turmoil is the main spark that sets off pillaging of valuable timber from protected areas, or alternatively whether the drive to exploit valuable and sought-after resources such as rosewood on legally public land might contribute to political turmoil" (101).

northeastern Madagascar, some of whom have leveraged their millions made from the trade to become elected as members of Madagascar's Fourth Republic in 2013. The article demonstrates that although the rosewood trade has been a part of the Malagasy economy since before the country's colonization in the late 19th Century, only since the collapse of the Malagasy government via a military-backed *coup d'état* in 2009 has there been such an outbreak of logging, dramatically changing the daily lives of the residents in northeastern Madagascar as well as the overall political geography of the country.

My data is ethnographic and textual. From the field, I have compiled maps of the shifting rosewood routes; prices and their changes over time; and stories of rosewood tragedies, fortunes, and fame. I have triangulated this information, to the extent possible, with Malagasy news articles from the online archives of *L'Express*, *La Gazette*, *Madagascar Tribune*, among others. I demonstrate a series of alternating permissions and prohibitions on rosewood export that has come to be the hallmark of the trade since 2000. At the local level, the boom and bust generated from these alternating regulations has overwhelmed the region with successive waves of abundance and dearth. At the national level, contradictory regulations generate an atmosphere of legal confusion that facilitates a clandestine economy in which few at the top can be deemed culpable for their actions. Taken together, I argue that both the local and national dynamics of the trade contribute to a type of rosewood democracy that has permitted the highest economic actors within this regional economy to enter the central government as a shadowy faction, reminiscent of Reno's "shadow state" (1995, 1998, 2000).

Rather than assuming power autocratically, Madagascar's rosewood elite have been voted in by their regional constituency in the northeast. As symbols of the potential prosperity the market may bring, they have gained support from constituents all along the rosewood trail, from the inland villages to the coastal cities. My analysis of rosewood democracy is thus approached broadly, in terms of not only the political ascendancy of a regional rosewood elite, but also the voting public that supported their ascent through democratic consensus. Analyzing both groups in unison, Madagascar's rosewood democracy reveals how democratic institutions can facilitate the rise of a profiteering local elite, given highly uneven geographies of power.

The following section briefly lays out the concepts of Peluso and Vandergeest's (2001) "political forest" and Reno's "shadow state" that will guide my account of rosewood democracy. Following this theoretical framing, the third section discusses the boom and bust dynamic that has defined everyday life along the rosewood trail. This section portrays the experience of workers and residents in the northeast who have come to serve as the democratic constituency of the rising rosewood elite. The fourth section then chronicles the rise of this group of elites through the recent history of the rosewood economy and its political perturbations since the new millennium. This section demonstrates that not only did elite rosewood operators in the northeast initially capture state leaders to secure the intermittent opening of the export market after the coup, but that also, since the latest election, the operators have themselves entered the government, securing direct involvement with national rosewood policies. Shifting from a position of external state capture to one of internal control – from part of a once marginal economy to a shadowy faction within the post-coup regime – the rosewood operators have thus set in motion a pivotal transformation in national politics that the international community has yet to fully appreciate.

2. Shadows in the political forest

The "political forest" provides fertile ground for understanding

present day rosewood politics in Madagascar. In coining the term, Peluso and Vandergeest (2001) contest the "forest" as a universal or purely ecological category. They instead demonstrate how the designation of land as official forest is a deeply political process that makes the forest, both materially and discursively, as much as it finds it growing out there in the world. Whether as colonial era forest-making or bureaucratic "empires of forestry" instituted after independence (Vandergeest & Peluso, 2006), state authority over forest land gradually became normalized in different countries throughout the world. Large swaths of land were transformed into political forests. Forest-making, thus conceived, is a form of state-making, an extension of state control.

This is, of course, not to say that such attempts at control are always, or even mostly, successful. State endeavors to commandeer the land and its resources have been met by disregard and down-right sabotage by forest communities throughout the world⁴. Yet, in the most successful cases of politicization, the forest proves a great tool for nation-building. Initial awareness of this newly created political domain gradually escalates into a mutually reinforcing development of state and forest. Through the forest, the state transforms from a far-off appendage whose machinations remain aloof and inconsequential into a looming authority that lays claim to what might very well be understood as one's own backyard.

The forests of Madagascar have long been subject to such politicization. Prior to colonization, the Merina monarchy of the central highlands claimed certain ownership rights over forests in Madagascar, likely as a means of controlling resources and preventing rebellion (Kull, 2004; Corson, 2016). Around the time of colonization in the late nineteenth century, comprehensive forest regulations were established, progressively eroding local control and further establishing the forest as a political domain (Corson, 2016; Jarosz, 1996). In the northeastern forests, the colonial administration prioritized the export of rosewood and other precious hardwoods, exporting from the region tens of thousands of tons of hardwoods (Petit & Jacob, 1964; Keller, 2008).

Timber exports from the northeast gradually declined after Madagascar's independence in 1960 (Olson, 1984) and loggers formerly working for the colonial regime returned to their villages (Keller, 2008). Post-colonial isolationist policies dominated the 1970s, further reducing export-oriented logging, until near economic collapse forced a severely weakened Malagasy government to accept an International Monetary Fund and World Bank-sponsored structural adjustment plan in the mid-1980s. This ushered in an era of what Corson (2011) refers to as "neoliberal territorialization," through which international conservation interests, in conjunction with the Malagasy state, asserted control over vast tracts of land via the creation of protected areas. In the northeast, this led to the establishment of Masoala and Marojejy National Parks (in 1997 and 1998, respectively) and Makira Natural Park (launched in 2001, formally established in 2012). These parks are the site of the majority of illicit rosewood logging today. While the creation of these Parks was intended to bolster local management of forest resources, in many ways their exclusionary policies have continued the colonial tradition of expropriating resources from local control (Marcus, 2001; Sodikoff, 2012; Keller, 2015).

From the Merina monarchy, to the French colonial regime, to the neoliberal administration operating in conjunction with international conservation interests, the history of forest politics in Madagascar demonstrates, in line with the political forest thesis, how the forest and its resources can be used as a means of expropriating local control and consolidating state power. But as Le Billon

⁴ See Thompson (1975) for a seminal account and Kull (2002) for an account pertaining to Madagascar.

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