

## BOOK REVIEW

Tasha Rijke-Epstein. *Children of the Soil: The Power of Built Form in Urban Madagascar*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023. 376 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-4780-2529-0.

### Part of Review forum on “Children of the Soil: The Power of Built Form in Urban Madagascar”

I am deeply grateful to Ademide Adelus-Adeluyi, Claudia Gastrow, and Lynn Thomas for taking the time to engage critically and generously with my book, as well as Pedro Monaville for organizing this forum. The work of each of these outstanding scholars in African studies has influenced my thinking, and below I address their thoughtful critiques and suggest pathways for future research.

All of the reviewers comment on the book’s framing around materiality and the more-than-human, and the ways they illuminate processes of urban belonging in the port city of Mahajanga. This framing emerged from sustained conversations with those from whom I was privileged to learn over the course of extended field research, especially the descendants of mixed Comorian-Malagasy families that comprise the key protagonists of *Children of the Soil*. Early on in the research, I was invited to join a women’s association (*fikambanana*) that was run primarily by women hailing from Comorian-Malagasy families; as I began to inquire about their family histories, they emphasized how buildings and materials were central in their ancestors’ efforts to integrate and negotiate urban inclusion. Those conversations led to one of the book’s key methodological interventions to think about built forms as archives, layered with histories that were selectively curated and reworked by city inhabitants. This method brings approaches honed in architectural and art history, and archaeology, to bear on key questions in urban histories of Africa on belonging, race and ethnicity, and labor.


Yet reading built forms as archives is not without its challenges. Adelus-Adeluyi notes that the book offers a “skillful method for engaging carefully with people on their own lived terms,” that risks leaving in the shadows interior, less visible forms of inhabitation. Like the documentary archive, built forms contain silences and partial glimpses into past lives that are nevertheless worthy of rigorous interrogation. In the book, I address architectural gaps by bringing into a single holistic frame never-built, ephemeral and durably constructed forms to capture city dwellers’ political strategies. At the same time, domestic, intimate spaces are at the book’s heart. Most of my ethnographic research was anchored in people’s homes, where elder women described how their families provided care across generations, navigated vulnerabilities, and cultivated the political and socioeconomic capital so crucial to their positioning as *zanatany* (natives,

literally “children of the soil”) over time. I agree with Adelusi-Adeluyi that more attention to interior worlds would have enriched the study, but owing to editorial constraints I chose to foreground the interior practices that my research collaborators emphasized as particularly important to *zanatany* ways of being—namely enduring ritual practices through which inhabitants transformed their homes in moments of birth, marriage, and death. While oral and documentary accounts provide insights into these practices in the recent past, the patchiness of sources constrained the firm claims I could make about these shifting practices in the deep past. These practices exceeded the scope of French colonial control and purview, yet it was precisely in intimate spaces that claims of belonging were sharply articulated and disputed—tragically in the 1976–77 violent expulsion of Comorian-Malagasy (known locally as the *rotaka*).

Claudia Gastrow questions how the book contributes to understanding indigeneity within African studies. As I examined belonging in urban spaces, I started to wonder about how the local nativist idiom *zanatany* shifted over time. Was this concept from the deep past, or did it emerge with French colonial divide and rule policies, or postcolonial notions of citizenship? *Zanatany* circulated at least from the mid-nineteenth century, and eventually subsumed another important ethnonym *Antaloatra* or “people of the sea” that long denoted mixed ancestry including Malagasy islanders and Islamic seafaring merchants hailing from across the Indian Ocean. Striking was the terrestrial shift in nativist idioms over time from “of the sea” to “of the soil.” With the rise of global capitalism in the nineteenth century, followed by (post)colonial rule in the twentieth century that brought new categories of citizenship to the fore, Comorian-Malagasy particularly rooted their claims to belonging in land. They invested increasing energy into landed relationships in the city that necessitated respectful negotiation with the spirit world, while retaining diasporic ties across the archipelago. Comorian-Malagasy understood the littoral between Comoros and Madagascar as a site of relationality, even as it was gradually delineated by nationalist borders in the 1960s. My book argues for more nuanced understandings of political inclusion as within *and* beyond land—as a set of material, physical and discursive practices, frequently bound up with more-than-human beings. By attending to meaningful categories of belonging, African studies scholars have much to contribute to global debates on indigeneity that often hinge on continental categories and dichotomized framings. Further research across the African continent and Indian and Atlantic oceanic worlds, promises to shed more light on people’s diverse lived politics of belonging through material, ecological, and more than human realms.

Lynn Thomas questions the limited treatment of the postcolonial in *Children of the Soil* and her observation is legitimate. In my early visions for the book, I imagined foregrounding the 1976–77 *rotaka*, which revealed the fragility of entrenched claims to indigeneity. Yet the expulsion’s spectacular violence seemed to overdetermine readings of earlier pasts when categories of belonging were no less contested, such as the violent invasion of the city in 1824 by rival Merina military troops that unleashed new power struggles. Following the expulsion, Comorian-Malagasy families gradually returned and sought to reclaim their properties, with varying degrees of success. Diplomatic relations

between Madagascar and Comoros stabilized, and diasporic families rebuilt their ties across the archipelago and their urban affiliations, even while their belonging to the Malagasy nation-state was (and remains) uncertain amidst rising nationalist rhetoric. *Children of the Soil* affirms that material, ecological elements have long undergirded conceptions of homelands, race and ethnicity, and belonging, and that those same elements have been the mediums through which competing groups have renegotiated the bounds of possible political formations. One lesson for Madagascar and beyond, I argue in the book, is that projects of political inclusion carry moral obligations to honor the presence of those already-there (the living, the dead, and the spirit world), and that the seeds of liberation are sown in relations of continuous reciprocity. The history of *zananany* suggests that future prospects of political flourishing depend as much on stewarding and sharing symbolic, earthly, and economic capital as on radical mutuality.

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