

Osterhoudt, Sarah R. 2017. *Vanilla landscapes: meaning, memory, and the cultivation of place in Madagascar*. *Advances in Economic Botany, Volume 18*. Bronx, NY: New York Botanical Gardens Press. ISBN 978-0-89327-548-8. \$39.99 (paperback); \$5.99 (e-book).

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In this remarkable blend of ethnography, landscape history, and economic botany, Sarah Osterhoudt invites readers to understand the 'happy landscapes' of carefully cultivated vanilla-producing agroforests in northeast Madagascar. Drawing on the author's five years in the coastal village of Imorona over a twelve-year period, this is also a unique and extended study in landscape epistemology and narration. It explores how local residents of various social positions, external conservation/development agents, a resident anthropologist, and biophysical scientists each come to know and to describe the culturally imbued land and forests of Madagascar.

The book gives an up-close socio-political history of productive landscapes. While limited transportation infrastructure makes the region remote, it also has centuries of connection to long-distance commodity exchange for their forest products, chiefly vanilla (*Vanilla planifolia*) and cloves (*Syzygium aromaticum*). The composition of trees and other plants is highly varied, dynamic, and responsive to factors including family fruit preferences to expanding market opportunities. Forest fields are not standardized or fixed, but interactive, reflecting the interests and character of individual cultivators; Chapter 3 describes a special excitement of the author and her field assistants as in awe they toured the well-crafted agroforest of an older man renowned for his exceptional farming skills.

This is neither a story of peasant farmers seeking to escape lives of agrarian drudgery, nor an idealized tale of rural life. Imorona agroforests are subject to seasonal vagaries of weather and global commodity prices, but they are also by and large successful, and something which nearly all villagers envision as part of their future lives and livelihoods. While noting the vigorous physical nature of cultivating agroforests and the livelihood challenges local residents face, Osterhoudt's analysis explains *why and how* Imorona residents have attachments to their fields. Vanilla agroforests are agrarian landscapes producing crops for subsistence and for international markets, but these forested fields are also enculturated places of memory—personal, colonial, economic, social, religious, and historical. Individual trees are planted in commemoration of guests or cherished events. One's own life history of planting particular crops or trees is interwoven with memory of harsh past realities of forced labor or resistance to colonial mandates. Garden arrangements are considered with both the past and the future in mind: much more than just food-producing spaces, fields are places to honor and to remember one's ancestors, and to consider how one will also keep careful watch over one's agroforest fields after death.

The book challenges the reader to see from different perspectives, but also to consider matters of scale. Environmental stories, more often of "forests" on a global scale, rarely considering how a farmer can acutely feel the loss of a single tree that has deep personal, familial connections for that individual. By guiding us through the agroforests "tree-by-tree", this book humanizes the villagers as individuals whose daily life work is forest care, even as it re-humanizes the landscape of tropical forests to include forest residents as integral to their ecological composition and change.

Chapter 1 details two local ways of telling local history, each with its own type of expertise, style, norms, social context, and associated behaviors. Chapter 2 examines how historical memories, particularly of subjects socially uncomfortable to discuss, are connected to physical contents and aspects of their fields. Chapter 3 extends Chapter 1's parallel storytelling to anthropology and economic botany, written as a research report with alternating sections in the distinct style of each discipline. In this way, graphs and charts are interspersed with ethnographic accounts that illuminate species richness, diversity of function, importance values, and field establishment and management—in a way that is rarely seen. The side-by-side, but non-integrated sections cause readers to consider how our disciplinary norms and scientific habits both channel and constrain our knowing.

Chapter 4 explores complex relationships among ancestral and spiritual realms, care of land, and moral behavior in the community. In Chapter 5, the interests and approaches of how extra-local conservation and development projects mobilize these concepts of moral landscapes in ways that demonstrate and promote their own paradigms. Chapter 6 discusses implications of this research for

landscape interventions, illustrating that "for environmental landscapes to be truly sustainable they must not only be ecologically diverse and economically viable, but also culturally meaningful" (p. 21).

Students and experienced teachers of anthropology will particularly appreciate the up-close insights into the ethnographic experience and process throughout the book. Osterhoudt's time in Imorona spans 2005 to the present, and she chronicles how her interactions with people and landscapes changed over time as she developed proficiency in language, expanded her social circles, and learned to recognize trees and to pollinate vanilla flowers. She describes with just enough detail how modifying the wording of a common question (from how people used trees, to what work the trees did, p. 72) led to an important, unexpected change in responses from farmers, allowing her to hear a much wider array of their own understanding of their trees' place and roles in the landscape. Readers have an empathetic glimpse into her life with friends who are also research participants. Village residents humored her while taking botanical measurements, and they carefully planned how to teach her the necessary life skills of living in Imorona and participating in their agroforests' care.

This book could serve as a course text in a variety of classes. It provides a positive case study in political ecology or ethnobotany/economic botany. It would also be appropriate in anthropology, especially for field research, as well as for interdisciplinary methods courses that compare qualitative and quantitative approaches. For environmental studies, this book contributes to nuanced interdisciplinary discussions on deforestation, conservation/development interventions, or smallholder farmer advocacy; students get an unusual, parallel glimpse at the methods, interests, and communication patterns of various actors involved in debates and action over tropical landscapes. By treating the perspectives and interests of various actors separately in some places, and illustrating their close interconnection elsewhere in the text, this book offers unusually rich and accessible ways for readers to imagine ourselves in the context, and to reflect on our own (culturally and disciplinarily imbued) epistemologies regarding place, and where they take us.

The text includes several well-chosen photographs in each chapter, and two appendices listing names and uses for 97 tree and 73 herbaceous species found in seven Imorona vanilla agroforestry gardens. The hard copy has somewhat small font; some readers may benefit from text adjustment in the very affordable electronic versions.

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