

Ritual politics, precedence and skill among the Vezo of Madagascar (Dr. Frank Muttenger)

The research aims to understand the human causes of, and adaptive responses to changes in coral reef ecosystems in southwest Madagascar. It investigates how local strategies of diversification and intensification of marine foraging have shaped, and are constrained by, convention and ritual. The overt conventions regulating reef and lagoon tenure near permanent settlements, and expanding seasonal migrations to forage unusually distant resource frontiers, realize a longstanding organisational pattern and group-ideal of mobility. Fieldwork to date has elicited the local understandings of the causal efficacy of foraging practices and ritual skills held to sustain local livelihoods. These include the fishing magic and spirit blessings, bestowed during trance, which are seen as a means to achieve success in seasonal foraging trips; and temporary closures of small reef-flat areas enacted and enforced by local communities, as a means to intensify the exploitation of a resilient species, octopus, and weaken the ecological feedback between overfishing and coral-reef degradation.