



## ***Projet Renala***

A preliminary report outlining the main achievements of a reconnaissance ethnobiological expedition to Madagascar by Jim Bond (6th April - 17th May 1996).

### *Objective*

The objective of the above expedition was to assess the possibilities of and prepare the ground for a longer term research, conservation and development project with the Mikea people of south-western Madagascar.

### *Introduction*

The Mikea live in or on the margins of an area of dry, 'spiny forest' between Toliara and Morombe. As a group they are chiefly defined by their lifestyle, which depends to a large extent upon knowing how to subsist in the forest by foraging for natural products such as tubers, honey and tenrecs.

The Mikea Forest, as it is known to outsiders, forms part of the unique, xerophytic natural vegetation formation of Southern Madagascar, and is the largest remaining area of a distinct formation that occurs on acidic sands. In contrast to the spiny forest of the limestone Mahafaly plateau, there has been little scientific research of any kind here, perhaps in part due to its relative remoteness and difficult conditions (infrequent water supplies, sandy, very hot and thorny...) Until recently these factors have also served to protect the Mikea Forest from the devastating effects of slash-and-burn agriculture which have destroyed most of the other primary vegetation in Madagascar. However, encroachment from outside is now increasingly leading to clearance of this forest too, particularly for the unsustainable production of maize, a process known locally as *hatsake*. Conservation is an urgent priority.

### *Activities*

These included an initial preparatory phase of 3½ weeks, followed by two weeks' fieldwork in the Mikea Forest.

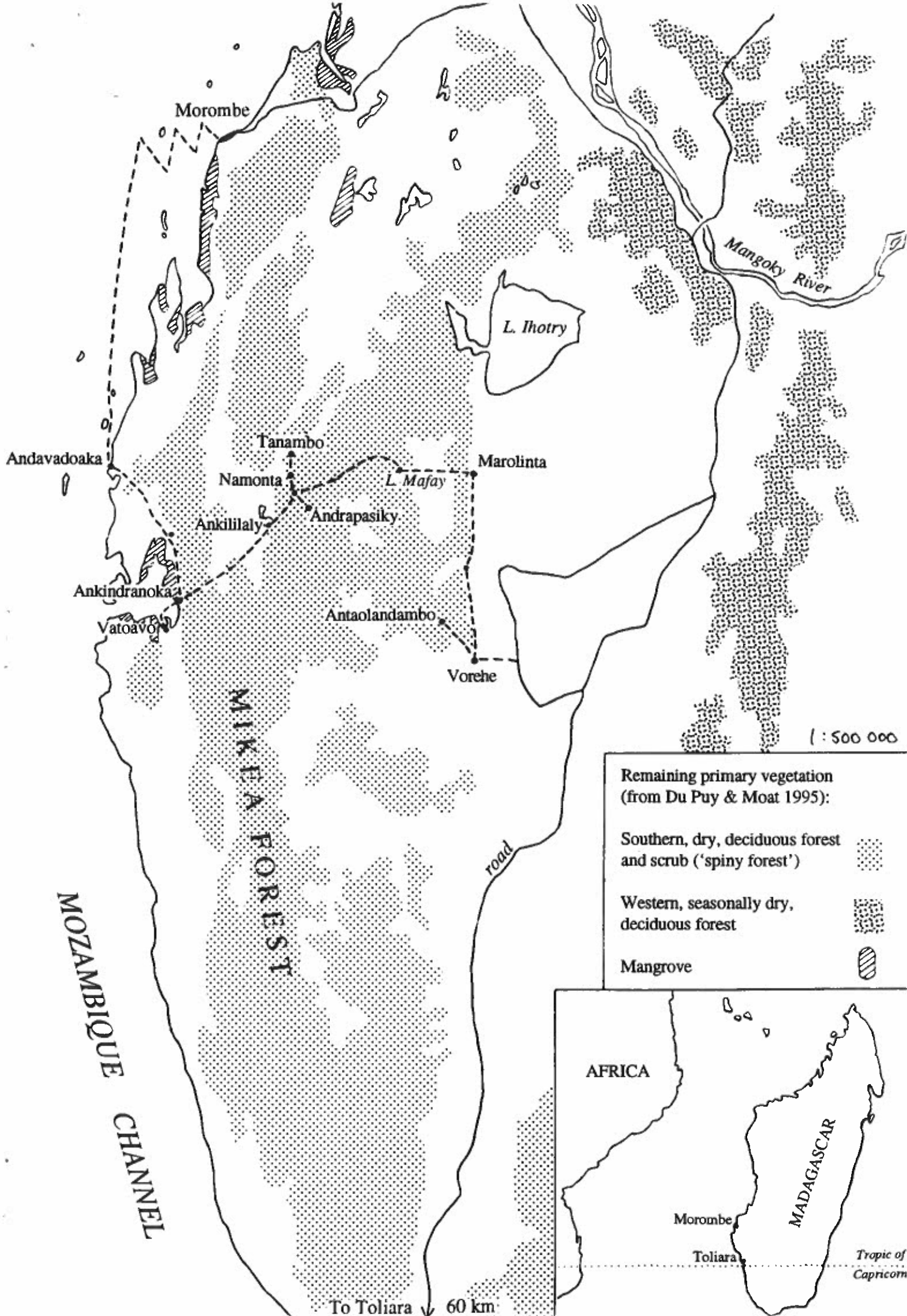
The preparatory phase was based around the cities of Antananarivo and Toliara, and involved contact-building, finding a suitable research partner, obtaining permits, logistics and a literature search. It also enabled me to become more familiar with the distinctive culture, dialect and flora of the south-west.

The fieldwork was carried out through a 12-day trek across the (most populated) northern fringe of the Mikea Forest, from Vorehe in the east to Andavadoaka on the coast [see map]. We covered about 100 km by land, excluding day forays to nearby camps, either on foot or with an ox-cart. Because of the heat we usually travelled at night, by moonlight. From Andavadoaka we hired an out-rigger canoe for the 8½ hour sail to Morombe, and the flight back to Toliara.

Again much of the fieldwork was contact-building in nature, although some specific research was carried out on the activities of the traditional healers (*ombiasy*), general plant uses, and baobabs.

### *Achievements*

Good contacts were made at national and regional levels, and preliminary discussions held about possible future collaboration. Good relations were also established with the local doctors at the Vorehe mission, and with leaders and *ombiasy* along our route.



I was fortunate to find Jaovola Tombo, an ethnogeographer from Toliara, to accompany me as research partner into the Mikea Forest. Not only has he visited the Mikea on four previous occasions, but he has the invaluable quality of being able to make people feel at ease. There is a strong possibility of our working together again.

Our journey across the Mikea Forest helped provide me with a first-hand overview of the geography, vegetation and peoples of this area, their distribution and various lifestyles. A better understanding of some of the local issues was gained, notably of: an epidemic of tuberculosis; the loss of an important Mikea healer (*ombiasy be*) in one area; the extent of the *hatsake* problem; and the economic exploitation of the Mikea by their neighbours for forest products such as honey and plant medicines.

I identified a group who would appear to be highly suitable for a further, concentrated study: These are the Marakely, who move around the marginal forest near lakes Mafay and Betsiriri. They are relatively receptive to outsiders, yet have not previously been studied. They are very mobile, do not practise *hatsake*, and being of Vazimba\* lineage have some very interesting traditions and skills such as the use of blow-pipes for hunting. There is also an *ombiasy be* in Chief Marakely's brother's group, the Marabe.

[\*said to be the earliest inhabitants of Madagascar]

### *Research*

We questioned the *ombiasy* we met on their methods, training, hierarchy and referral systems, and areas of patient catchment, although not on specific treatments. Some data on general plant uses, and an impression of the level of biological and medicinal knowledge among ordinary Mikea was also gathered.

A specific study was made on the distribution, folk taxonomy, ethnobotany and ecology of the three local species of baobabs, *Adansonia grandidieri* ('renala', or 'mother of the forest'), *A. rubrostipa*, and *A. za*. Floral determinations were made of perhaps the most southerly populations recorded for the restricted range and 'vulnerable' status *A. grandidieri*, one with unusually young trees. Observations of baobab distributions, from land, sea and air, would appear to confirm theories of water vs. animal dispersal patterns between the species. The ethnobotanical and ecological questioning did not yield many new discoveries, but does complement the data gathered from other locations.

### *Future plans*

A more detailed report is in preparation. It is planned to establish Projet Renala as a recognised organisation within Madagascar. The next step is to raise funds for this, and for a follow up expedition in 1997.

### *Conclusion*

The expedition achieved its objective. It is possible and worthwhile to carry out ethnobiological research in this area. There is urgent conservation and development work to be done. Good contacts were made; the priorities and logistics worked out for the longer term project.

### *Acknowledgements*

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A.J.B.



Mikea lady returning home, with digging stick, fish and *balo* roots (*Dioscorea* sp.).  
Boy holding *akanga*, a wild-caught bird to be reared for the pot. © Jim Bond