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Born in 1973 in Willimantic, Conn., USA

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FOCUS

PROJECT

Linking Subsistence Decision-Making and Livelihoods Strategies in Madagascar and Beyond: Risk, Delay, Conformity, and Conservation Behavior Among Hunter-Gatherers, Farmers, and Fishermen@@

The objective of my research is to link subsistence decision-making, including choice under risk, choice between immediate and delayed rewards, and choice to cooperate or defect, to household livelihoods strategies, including households' participation in markets and their degree of specialization versus diversification in different farming, herding, hunting, gathering, and fishing activities. While at Wiko I will pursue this research in two directions. First, in collaboration with Monique Borgerhoff Mulder and other Wiko Fellows, I will examine how subsistence decisions translate into behaviors that either favor or counter environmental conservation; and how conservation policies influence subsistence decisions. Second, I will write a book-length monograph summarizing a recent year-long field investigation of risk and time in the economic choices of Masikoro farmers, Mikea hunter-gatherers, and Vezo coastal fishermen of southwestern Madagascar. The book will examine the role of social learning and cultural conformity in the judgment of value and in people's actual subsistence behaviors. This research is significant for evolutionary anthropology's interest in the origins of behavior and culture, for questions of human rationality in psychology and economics, and for the application of behavioral research to international conservation and development efforts.

Recommended Reading

Tucker, B., A. Huff, Mr. Tsiazonera, J. Tombo, P. Hajaso, and C. Nagnisaha (2011). "When the wealthy are poor: Poverty explanations and local perspectives in southwestern Madagascar." *American Anthropologist* 113, 2.

Tucker, B., Mr. Tsimitamby, F. Humber, S. Benbow, and T. Iida (2010). "Foraging for development: A comparison of food insecurity, production, and risk among farmers, forest foragers, and marine foragers in southwestern Madagascar." *Human Organization* 69, 4: 375-386.

Tucker, B. (2007). "Applying behavioral ecology and behavioral economics to conservation and development planning: Example from the Mikea Forest, Madagascar." *Human Nature* 18, 3: 190-208.

COLLOQUIUM, 24.04.2012

Velomanpò (What gives the heart life):

Subsistence decisions and risk among farmers, hunter-gatherers,

and fishermen of southwestern Madagascar

Many households throughout rural Africa gain food, money, and other resources from a diversified "portfolio" of agricultural, hunting, gathering, fishing, herding, and market-oriented activities, while some households are relatively specialized. Among the major goals of my research in rural southwestern Madagascar over the past fifteen years has been to understand why households choose to diversify or specialize, and how household members decide which activities to practice.

A popular explanation for why households diversify is risk reduction, and this seems likely in southwestern Madagascar, which has one of the most unpredictable climates in the world. How people decide whether to spend the day tending maize versus digging wild tubers versus collecting octopus along the reef is a much more complicated question. I consider the following hypotheses:

- * Perhaps portfolio composition is not an individual choice at all; people may simply conform to what their community considers to be "normal." In southwestern Madagascar people commonly claim that a normal Masikoro is a farmer, while Mikea are hunter-gatherers and Vezo are fishermen.
- * Perhaps human psychology adjusts people's preferences for risk according to their needs, so that those in greater need perceive that high-risk, high-reward strategies offer more value than low-risk, low-return strategies.
- * Perhaps southwestern Malagasy people have shared, cultural knowledge such as learn simple rules of thumb for choosing their subsistence portfolios.
- * Perhaps portfolio composition is a purposive, planned, strategic choice by people with good information.

Data to test these hypotheses comes from fieldwork conducted in collaboration with Professors Tsiazonera, Jaovola Tombo, Tsimitamby, and Gervais Tantely of the Université de Toliara. In my talk I emphasize the benefits of collecting a variety of forms of data, including oral history, participant observation, time allocation, questionnaires, and psychological experiments.

How people make a living under tough constraints is a significant question for many reasons. First, food is required for life. This obvious fact means that the act of gaining food is not only economic, it is ecological (a relationship with the environment), evolutionary (result of natural selection), social (requires cooperation), cultural (has shared meaning), demographic (necessary for reproduction and survival), and political (structural factors reduce people's abilities to feed themselves, create inequality and poverty). Second, national governments and international organizations often seek to stop rural people from practicing subsistence activities judged to be wasteful, destructive, or inefficient. Policymakers and project planners are often burdened with ethnocentric notions of unilinear evolution that favor industry and intensive agriculture. They often do not understand why rural people practice activities like foraging and horticulture in the first place.