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“Adaptive” Heritage: Carving as a Cultural Icon and a Way of Life for the Zafimaniry of Madagascar

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1. Introduction

The Zafimaniry people are a small population of swidden cultivators who inhabit a mountainous region in the highlands of Madagascar (Coulaud 1973). Due to the inaccessibility of this area and the relative scarcity of factory-made tools and wares, they have traditionally relied upon making their handicrafts from materials such as wood or grass.

Of note are their wooden houses, which are decorated with geometric engravings. The techniques and tools used to produce such work are easily reproducible, and many inhabitants have mastered the craft over time by imitating other practitioners. In 2003, the wood-crafting knowledge of the Zafimaniry people was designated as “a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity” by UNESCO, and since 2008, it has been inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Although Zafimaniry skills and knowledge have developed in an isolated setting, the community is increasingly impacted by modernization resulting from global advances in transportation and telecommunication. There are deep concerns expressed, particularly by local authorities, that Zafimaniry “intangible heritage” will lose its UNESCO inscription as it gradually succumbs to the increasing availability of manufactured goods and information.

Based on this contention, this chapter first aims to describe the changeable situation of Zafimaniry culture. Second, it aims to highlight how this “adaptive” heritage is shaped by inter-related changes occurring within and outside the Zafimaniry culture itself. The discussion concludes by weighing up the effects of modern-day rapid change on Zafimaniry traditional skills and comparing these impacts with the natural variation that has occurred in crafting practices during the period when the community was in relative isolation. Finally, this chapter concludes with an appeal for a reworking of the definition of “intangible heritage” to incorporate its intrinsically “adaptive” nature, both shaping and being shaped by those who practice it.

As “intangible heritage” has often been regarded as separate from and opposite to “tangible heritage” (Smith and Akagawa 2009; Arizpe and Amescua 2013), a redefinition

of the term could raise awareness of the changeable nature of skills and cultural practices over time. In this way, by breaking down the perceived dichotomous relationship between the tangible and intangible, it is hoped that this will result in a wider appreciation of heritage as a combination of co-dependent physical and non-physical elements, and as a product of a process of adaptation to forces of changes both within and outside of a community.

In this chapter, it may be noted that the concept of “adaptive heritage” is similar to current anthropological definitions of culture, which are often configured as a composite of symbols, practices, and knowledge systems that are shaped by both past and present events and circumstances. Concurrently, therefore, cultural anthropologists should tackle the subject of heritage not as a secondary theme, but as a core part of current debates in anthropological and cultural studies.

2. The Zafimaniry as Forest Dwellers

Although there is no official census for the Zafimaniry community, it is estimated that their population does not exceed 10,000 people. Compared to the Malagasy national population of 20 million in neighboring areas, the population is so small that very few people even regard the Zafimaniry as an independent ethnic group, particularly in regions far from the Zafimaniry residential area. In fact, many Zafimaniry people identify themselves as members of the neighboring Betsileo or Tanala ethnicity. However, due to increasing competitiveness with other Malagasy people, it has been observed that the Zafimaniry have been asserting a stronger cultural identity in recent years (Uchibori 2013).

After my initial visit to the Zafimaniry community in 2007, the following data and analysis are based on fieldwork that was undertaken at regular intervals from 2009 through 2012 over a total of 87 days for the purposes of research and museum collection. The conclusions are based on experiences and impressions gained during this period and supplemented by additional short research trips made in 2013, 2014, and 2015.

One of the most distinctive features of Zafimaniry material culture is their dwellings (Photo 1). In the 19th century, wooden houses of this type were common in the central highlands of Madagascar, exhibiting wide variations in design (Decary 1958). However, in modern times, this number has decreased dramatically owing to the widespread adoption of bricks as the standard building material. Nowadays, wooden houses of this size are said to be concentrated only in the residential areas of the Zafimaniry community, which has led to all such wooden houses in the region being referred to as “Zafimaniry houses” (*trano Zafimaniry*). It is possible that this term was first coined by those outside of the community, but it has since been adopted by the Zafimaniry.

One of the most distinctive features of this type of house is that it is principally constructed without the use of nails. Some Zafimaniry have described this characteristic as representative of their people’s character: supporting each other not with enforcement, but with love. Research participants also explained that for them, the traditional wooden house is an expression of the Zafimaniry ideal of mutual love and help, a cultural value



Photo 1 A house in the Zafimaniry style (*trano Zafimaniry*, taken by the author in 2010)

expressed as important to many communities all over Madagascar. The Zafimaniry house is therefore a powerful object that embodies this paradigm (Iida 2013a).

In earlier research, Bloch (1993; 1995a) highlighted that the Zafimaniry house is also an expression of “durability” or *teza*, as it is called in Malagasy, a value that is prized both materially and socially. This is represented by the construction of the walls of the house: When a young couple begins their life in a new home, the walls are constructed by combining flattened pieces of bamboo. This bamboo is split vertically and smoothed down to create rectangular flat pieces, which are then joined in a woven grid to make wall panels. At first, these panels are often see-through due to the gaps between the woven pieces. However, over time, the married couple gradually strengthens this wall by inserting more wooden boards and, as the durability (*teza*) of the walls increases, the house also acquires this virtue. The process whereby a house gains in physical size and hardness coincides with the growth and strengthening of the family. For the Zafimaniry, therefore, who communicate a deep respect for durability, this cultural value is embodied and materialized in their homes.

Another characteristic trait of Zafimaniry homes is the geometric patterns (*sikotra*) carved on the wooden shutters of the windows (Photo 2). Some people have questioned whether these patterns are representative of family crests, or perhaps have a magical function.¹⁾ During the course of fieldwork, however, it was observed that these patterns are a decorative feature marking the completion of a long process of building a house when it has achieved *teza* (durability and hardness).

Bloch has stated that in the past, people outside of the Zafimaniry community often mistakenly interpreted Zafimaniry patterns, which were seen to be exotic, so-called “primitive art,” as being latent with mysterious symbols (Iida 2013b; see also Bloch 1995b). However, before modern building materials and paint became available, carving was used as one of the few techniques available for decorating a house. There are several basic patterns for Zafimaniry geometric carvings; their characteristic style is produced by



Photo 2 Geometric patterns carved on window shutters (taken by Itsushi Kawase in 2012)

a combination of these patterns that fill a round or rectangular frame (Iida 2013b).

According to tradition, the construction of the house, along with engravings on it, is highly regarded by Zafimaniry people, as they usually build a house only once in their entire life. Therefore, for at least a few generations, house owners were accustomed to hiring skilled carpenters to complete their houses. When there was insufficient money to finish a task, the carpenter took on the responsibility of producing and fixing tenons (wooden joints) into mortises (slots for the joints), while the remaining work was completed by the owner's family. This is often the case with engraved patterns, which are carved not only by skilled carpenters but also by house owners themselves. It is easy to see how such elaborate and ornate patterns on these houses attracted attention from non-Zafimaniry tourists, which finally led to the inscription of the knowledge and craft on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list.

In contrast to the production of houses as luxury objects, more routine and everyday objects are also commonly produced. Due to the mountainous and comparatively isolated region in which they live, members of the Zafimaniry community traditionally had to make tools and wares for their own consumption. These items included honey containers, which used to be considered an indispensable item during seasons when food was scarce (Photo 3a); stools, which are kept aside for guests in the house (Photo 4a); and flint-carrying cases, which are used for lighting fires to clear the swidden fields (Photo 5a).

The carving skills to produce everyday necessities possess some noteworthy characteristics: (1) use of readily available natural resources; (2) application of rich natural-historical knowledge to manipulate such materials; (3) minimizing the number of tools required by employing various bodily techniques; and (4) daily opportunities for ordinary people to harness and master woodcraft skills through observation and imitation of other craftsmen.

Such characteristics rarely feature in the typical range of carpentry skills found in the West. In addition, all Zafimaniry tools and wares are traditionally carved from a single block of wood; that is, the craftsmen seldom make tools by joining together



(3a)



(3b)

Photos 3a and 3b (3a) Honey container of the older style; (3b) honey container with a geometric pattern (both taken by the author in 2009)



(4a)



(4b)

Photos 4a and 4b (4a) A stool of the older style (taken by the author in 2009); (4b) stools with geometric patterns (National Museum of Ethnology 2013: 62)



(5a)



(5b)

Photos 5a and 5b (5a) Flint-carrying case of the older style; (5b) flint-carrying case with a geometric pattern (both taken by the author in 2009)

multiple wooden pieces. These techniques are also applied to the construction of their homes, which are made from complementary jointed pieces of wood without the use of nails or screws.

3. Commercialization of Wood-crafting

Although the description of the status of Zafimaniry culture in the previous section can be considered representative of wood-crafting practices in earlier times, in recent years, the community has been undergoing a process of rapid change due to the shift from a comparatively cashless, agrarian society to an increasing participation in the global market economy.

The first major change seems to have occurred in the 1960s when Zafimaniry farmers started to sell their woodwork to foreign visitors: a trend initiated by a French Catholic priest who had begun to collect their work as art. He aimed to alleviate the suffering of farmers who were particularly affected by poor harvests (Peltreau-Villeneuve 1991). In a similar way, the museum associated with the University of Antananarivo in the country's capital was also collecting cultural artifacts from villages in Madagascar, focusing on the artistic traditions passed down in mountainous areas. This subsequently led to a substantial collection of woodcarvings currently in their museum (Vérin 1964). Consequently, Zafimaniry sculpture achieved wider recognition for their craftsmanship through the appraisal of foreign visitors and art collectors, and their work began to gain status among the wealthy classes of Madagascar.

The spread and adoption of a cash-based economy in the Zafimaniry community resulted in the following changes to craft making.

a) Professionalization

Before commercialization, wood-crafting was an occasional activity to produce tools and wares for personal use. As farming was the Zafimaniry's major livelihood, people only engaged in woodcraft when they were not at work in the fields. As the demand for woodcrafts from external buyers increased, so did the potential for a greater cash flow to the household, meaning that farmers began to devote more time to wood-crafting as a source of income.

This change occurred at variable rates in each village, depending on their accessibility to the outside world. In 2012, it was possible to find craftsmen working full-time in Antoetra, a town that offers an advantageous location with a road to bring many foreign tourists to the area; while they were absent, they hired somebody else to farm their fields. It was observed, however, that not only foreign tourists were buying the craftsmen's products, but Zafimaniry themselves were also purchasing furniture from professional craftsmen. This point is discussed in further detail below (see c).

b) "Iconicization" of Patterns

Traditionally, geometric patterns were not considered necessary for practical items, such as containers, stools, and flint boxes. Today, however, in the souvenir shops in Antoetra,

it is possible to find many such woodwork items containing decorative patterns (Photos 3b, 4b, and 5b). As it is difficult to carry away carved house parts, woodworkers began to carve similar motifs on small portable objects and items of furniture that could be taken home as souvenirs. For visitors, therefore, such decorated objects represent proof of their contact with the Zafimaniry people.

It is not possible to definitively say that portable objects did not have patterns before the 1960s. When the University of Antananarivo collected many samples of Zafimaniry woodworks in 1963 and 1964, quite a few objects, as well as window shutters, which were made before the growth of the tourist industry, had geometric patterns (Vérin 1964). It seems that such patterned objects were primarily used for interior decoration, rather than as practical household items. As a result of visitors’ preferences for decorative products, most portable goods in shops today exhibit a range of patterns, considered “iconic” of Zafimaniry culture.

c) New Forms and Styles

As the fame of Zafimaniry crafting skills gained recognition at a national and international level, this gave rise to a wave of new forms for tools and wares. The most popular product was a detachable deckchair made of two boards (Photo 6). This type of chair is commonly sold not only in Antoaetra, but also in Antananarivo, the capital city. It is called the “Zafimaniry chair” (*seza Zafimaniry*), even though such a type was not historically produced in Madagascar, but was traditionally found on the African mainland.

According to people in the village of Ambohimanjaka, the elders began producing such chairs, acting on the orders of a Catholic priest, whom they referred to as Michael Peltier, a mutation of his French name, Michel Peltreau-Villeneuve. Zafimaniry craftsmen thus began to create new designs to suit the tastes of foreign consumers. Although a comparatively recent innovation, it is not entirely inappropriate to call it a “Zafimaniry chair” because it is now widely used in Zafimaniry houses, especially in those houses where they expect to welcome many guests. Therefore, the modification of traditions for tourists’ consumption, such as the development of practical wares with patterns, flows back into and simultaneously influences Zafimaniry culture.

Another new craft that gained popularity was the clothes chest (Photo 7). It is made by combining multiple pieces of wood, a technique that was previously exclusively used for building houses. It is said that there are few Zafimaniry craftsmen, if any, who have the skill to make such chests at present; other producers simply carve the chest from blocks of wood and fix them together with iron nails. Moreover, producers of these chests are usually based in villages with better access, and thus, typically have a higher demand for production. It can be presumed that it has been quite some time since a traditional, skilled chest maker lived in Ambohimombo, as it is the only Zafimaniry village, except Antoaetra, which is accessible by car. In this village, it is no longer possible to find examples of the chests produced in this way.

Other types of “new” products include wooden boxes for Bibles, spice containers, knife sheaths, and decorated disks. The last item on the list, the decorated disk, is typically 20–30cm in diameter with geometric patterns on both sides. Zafimaniry



Photo 6 A deckchair made of two boards (*seza Zafimaniry*, taken by the author in 2009)



Photo 7 A clothes chest (taken by the author in 2009)

craftsmen call it *sous-plat*, meaning saucer in French, but few buyers expect to use it practically in this way. Rather, it is designed to be hung from a wall or placed on a stand as a tableau, serving as an icon of artistic Zafimaniry patterns.

Of these crafts, a Western-style chair with four long legs is most likely the oldest invention (Photo 8). At first glance, it looks like an ordinary chair, but on closer inspection it is possible to see that it is carved from one large block of wood. When Zafimaniry people began to produce woodworks for Europeans, they were not familiar with the technique of joining wooden pieces together for furniture, and as a result, they



Photo 8 A Western-style chair carved from one piece of wood (taken by the author in 2009)

began to produce works by carving from a single piece of wood. This means that the volume of waste material was greater than that of the finished product, a method that demanded high material and labor costs.

This may be the main reason that the chair is seldom seen nowadays, as the greater numbers of foreign visitors coming to the Zafimaniry region mean that it is more profitable to sell small and inexpensive things in larger quantities, rather than expending a lot of time and energy on single luxury items.

d) Innovation in Tools and Materials

The commercialization of woodcarvings has also increased the diversity of tools used for producing crafts. Photo 9 shows a set of tools that carvers typically used in their workshop at the time of fieldwork. It should be noted that this image may not exhibit the complete range because of the absence of tools required for rough processing. It is important to note that many tools are so small that local ironsmiths likely had difficulty in making them, meaning that some carving tools may have been manufactured by machines. It is not possible to conclude this issue until more extensive research is completed to clarify the forms of ancient carving tools used, but it is important to take this point into consideration.

Another important feature of this image is the presence of a black circular can at the top. This is an example of a shoe polish used to give wooden products a glossy finish. Although craftsmen have often given preference to products with a more pleasing esthetic

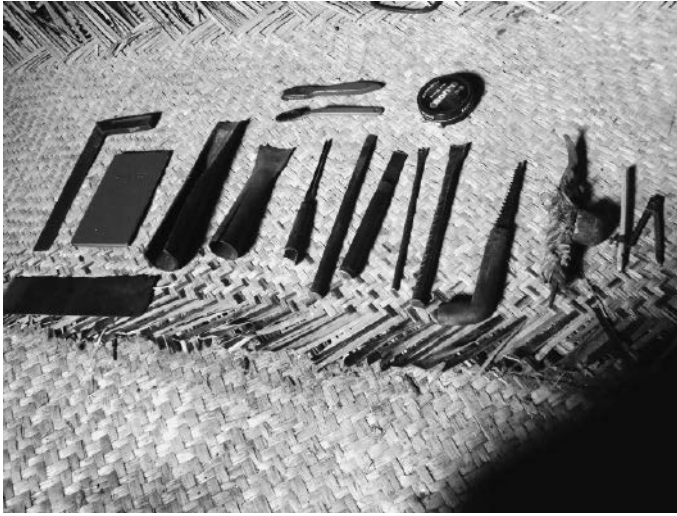


Photo 9 A set of a carver's stock-in-trade (taken by the author in 2009)

to appeal to consumers, the desired natural materials to achieve this appearance are rapidly decreasing. Therefore, they began to use shoe polish to make more common, readily available woods look attractive. They call the shoe polish *lida*, a corruption of *lude*, the commercial name of the polish, and it is made in China, a country with which Madagascar has especially focused on promoting trade since the 1990s. It is interesting to observe that imported modern supplies are increasingly needed for the continuation of local craftworks undertaken in remote local villages in Madagascar.

e) From Professional Craftsmen to Artists

It was observed that the word “professional craftsmen” was often used by outsiders to refer to Zafimaniry woodworkers; however, such craftsmen often prefer to call themselves “artists.” To sustain a career in woodworking, it is necessary for these practitioners to seek out and secure good buyers. In Antoetra, where foreign tourists gather in the largest numbers, there are several souvenir shops that exhibit artists’ works, and some have a relatively long connection with buyers from outside.

As activities that rely on cash-based transactions have diversified, this has led to a growth in the number of artists who have chosen not to produce three-dimensional objects, but prefer to focus exclusively on carving geometric patterns on the surface of antique wares. Such wares include rice containers from remote non-Zafimaniry villages, such as the Tanala people, who live in lowland rain forests. The Tanala region is home to many trees with a wide girth, and the rice containers used in their daily life are made by hollowing out large pieces of wood that are then adorned with decorative Zafimaniry patterns. A source of contention is whether such rice containers should be identified as Zafimaniry or Tanala woodcrafts.

4. “Heritagization” of Zafimaniry Crafts

The 2000s witnessed a sharp rise in the number of foreign tourists visiting Madagascar on account of the liberal diplomatic policies encouraged by President Marc Ravalomanana. Accordingly, there was a marked increase in tourists in this area, the majority of which were from foreign countries (Mancinelli, 2014). Consequently, more Zafimaniry people gained employment as guides and porters in Antoetra,²⁾ and concurrently, the volume of carvings sold commercially also increased.

In addition, the weekly market in Antoetra began to attract traders from other villages in the area who sought to sell agricultural and handmade products and purchase factory-made goods for themselves, meaning that the overall population of the area also increased. In 1998, for example, a crew from the National Museum of Ethnology, Japan recorded a film in Antoetra to document textile weaving. It is possible to see in the film that there were far fewer houses at that time than during more recent fieldwork in 2012.

In 2003, UNESCO designated Zafimaniry wood-crafting knowledge as one of the masterpieces of oral and intangible heritage of humanity and is now inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.³⁾ This designation has since stimulated further demand for Zafimaniry woodcrafts, attracting even more tourists to the area. Consequently, the Zafimaniry community is more than ever dependent on a cash-based economy, which has brought about significant changes to traditional Zafimaniry knowledge and heritage practices.

f) Canonization of “Traditional” Knowledge and Patterns

As discussed previously, Zafimaniry patterns on window shutters and other items were not intended to possess special meanings. However, it was observed that people visiting from outside the community were keen to derive symbolism from these designs. Consequently, local Zafimaniry guides began to provide commentaries surrounding the origin and meaning of these patterns to satisfy the curiosity of outsiders.

It seems that international organizations, such as the Madagascar branch of UNESCO, have authorized these accounts by publishing a chart (Figure 1) of these commentaries in an official booklet (Ny Birao Mpandrindra UNESCO 2008), largely based on oral descriptions provided by local guides (Iida 2013b). Some Antoetra people, however, report that nearly all this information was derived from a single skilled carpenter in the village of Sakaivo who passed away in 2013.

It is not possible to ascertain whether the information provided by local guides is false. However, the primary concern is that if such knowledge is made too readily available, the intrinsic value of intangible heritage may be adversely impacted. Moreover, to preserve the integrity of knowledge relating to these practices, such information should be transmitted orally within the community, and not through a printed publication. The appearance of the UNESCO booklet, therefore, although having sought to preserve an intangible heritage, may ironically threaten its survival by trying to concretize knowledge that is inherently changeable and evolving, a characteristic that forms an essential part of its core value.





	ANARANA/ DENOMINATION	HEVINY	SIGNIFICATION OU SYMBOLE
1	Sampahon' akondro 	Tsy misara-mianakavy	<i>Cohésion familiale</i>
2	Kintana 	Firariam-pahazavana eo amin'ny fianana	<i>Vœux pour une vie sans embûches</i>
3	Tanamasoandro 	Fahazavam-po Fahatsaram-po Fatoram-pihavanana eo amin'ny fianakaviana	<i>Sincérité Honnêteté Liens familiaux</i>
4	Mason-tantely 	Firaisan-kina Fiaraha-miasa Fahamarinana Fizarana ny mamy	<i>Solidarité dans les travaux à entreprendre Honnêteté Partage du bonheur</i>

Figure 1 “Meanings” of geometric patterns canonized by a UNESCO publication (Ny Birao Mpandrindra 2008)

g) Replication of the Landscape

During my visit in July 2013, it was reported that French-related NGOs had offered to assist villagers in Antoetra to build new houses. The financial support provided was exclusively for the construction of wooden houses, but not for brick houses. Owners of brick houses were subsequently offered money for materials and the provision of carpenters' salaries in exchange for disassembling the houses in which they were then living, a program that was subscribed to by a surprisingly large number of residents: a total of 60 households in the village.

During a second visit in October 2015, I observed that there were 55 newly built wooden houses, with 10 old wooden houses repaired through finances supplied by this NGO. It was not a requirement that old wooden houses be disassembled, but instead received a special grant-in-aid for the replacement of any damaged parts. This program was carried out by the NGO “Des Villages et des Hommes.” According to their official website,⁴⁾ the program was financed by a donation made on an exhibition and auction held in Paris in January 2013. The description of the exhibition on their homepage states:

72 contemporary artists are helping Madagascar. Using as their base-materials the doors and shutters hand-carved by Zafimaniry people from the high plateau of Madagascar, they have created 72 works that invite us to look at Zafimaniry culture side by side with

contemporary art. All proceeds from the sale of these works will go to help disadvantaged populations living on less than one US dollar a day. The inhabitants of the village of Antoetra, the source of Zafimaniry expertise, will thus have access to water, health, education, and a dignified environment that respects their culture.⁵⁾

Each of these artworks was subsequently auctioned off for 800–15,000 euros, achieving total sales of 270,000 euros. Despite the overall humanitarian mission of the project, it is difficult to avoid the feeling that Zafimaniry craftsmen’s art is still undervalued when compared to the sales achieved by works of Western contemporary art; however, this is an issue for another time.

As has often been observed, a “traditional” appearance for houses and the landscape is usually the preferred esthetic for tourists. The NGO website states that the renovation project aims to create a new landscape that respects traditional Zafimaniry culture by enabling wooden houses to regain their primary function in the community. However, those familiar with the former appearance and layout of the village would not fail to observe the impact of such contemporary additions on earlier forms and concepts relating to such houses in the village.

For example, due to the high density of structures in the village today, it was observed that not all newly built houses could be constructed along the traditionally important north-south axis. After the NGO renovation project, it could be seen that 19 of the 55 newly built houses (34.5%) were built along an east-west alignment. In such houses, therefore, the furniture had to be moved to incorporate this new position. This had a significant impact on domestic practices, as elders could no longer give blessings for their young as they used to by drawing power from their ancestors, which is believed to come from the northeast corner of the house (Coulaud 1973: 141).

It may be observed that in the past, modifications were common with less expensive houses made of mud. In contrast, owners of wooden houses usually strictly observed the traditional plan and symbolism of their houses. As a result of external influences and interventions, this situation is likely to change quickly.

h) Danger of Resource Depletion

There is also concern that the depletion of particular wood species, caused by intensive overexploitation of the surrounding forests in a short period, threatens both the cultural and environmental sustainability of the Zafimaniry region.

Hundreds of wooden parts that constitute the house structure are classified into about 20 groups (Iida 2013a). Each of them has a specific species of wood from which it should be preferably made: light wood for the roof and heavy wood for posts supporting the roofs. It has been reported by the Zafimaniry that heavy wood is especially hard to find. According to a survey conducted in the village of Fempina (or Fempona), where forests were so plentiful that wooden houses historically dominated the area, it was reported that only *nato* (*Faucherea parvifolia*, Sapotaceae)⁶⁾ and *rotra* (*Eugenia* sp., Myrtaceae), a good substitute for *nato*, possess the higher specific gravity required for use in ridgepole-supporting posts (*andry*). A high specific gravity indicates that the

individual tree grew slowly over a long period. Therefore, only very old trees of a particular species can provide the material suitable for making buildings according to traditional quality standards.

Despite a general preference for *nato*, its proportion relative to the presence of the species of wood used to make *andry* in nine of the newly constructed houses in Antoetra recorded during fieldwork undertaken from July 2013 to March 2014, was no more than 50%, while *rotra* was not found at all.⁷⁾ Moreover, according to an Antoetra farmer who provided an explanation of the houses under construction, most of the *andry* trees used were so young when they were cut down that the posts for which they were used were not durable enough to survive for a long time over the decades. The farmer's opinion may be considered an astute assessment as he once worked seasonally as a logging and carpentry laborer in a distant province (Bloch 2005: 3). If so, these newly built houses are being constructed from materials unsuitable for the traditional style of construction and incongruent with the philosophy of longevity.

Further fieldwork is required to confirm whether the sources of wood traditionally used for the robust construction of these houses have already been completely depleted. If they are now very scarce, it is difficult to foresee where such materials can be sourced in the future when the newly constructed houses require repairs, or when somebody else wants to build a new house, for example. While the results of fieldwork thus far have concluded signs of resource depletion, this evidence needs to be corroborated by further work.

i) Formation of Zafimaniry Identity

It was observed that the commercialization of woodcrafts may be closely linked to the strengthening of the Zafimaniry people's perception of their cultural identity. According to Motomitsu Uchibori, the Japanese anthropologist who worked among the Zafimaniry in the late 1990s, as the number of tourists to villages grew and the production of woodworks increased, such works gained status and value when they were inscribed as products of "Zafimaniry origin" (Uchibori 2007).

During fieldwork, it was seen that one of the most prominent features of their craftwork is the geometric designs that residents from the capital and non-Malagasy visitors call "Zafimaniry patterns" (*sikotra Zafimaniry*). As a result of outsiders' identification of these patterns as hallmarks of Zafimaniry culture, these features have subsequently become affirming symbols of identity for the Zafimaniry people, fostering a sense of belonging for those in the community who are surrounded by these patterns in their daily lives. Modern-day concepts of their cultural identity have thus been formed and strengthened as these unique geometric patterns gained status and recognition both outside and within the Zafimaniry community.

5. Toward an Understanding of Heritage "Adaptiveness"

The changes that the Zafimaniry people have experienced over the last half century have been dramatic. The carving skills that were formed through the rigors of life in an

inaccessible area suddenly became a source of marketable income: skills that rapidly lost their necessity for practical life as people became increasingly dependent on factory-made products supplied by a narrow road off a national route. Currently, handicrafts are largely demanded by non-local consumers, rather than the Zafimaniry people, who prefer to decorate their rooms with items resulting from their own touristic encounters.

Although the same trend can be seen in communities impacted by globalization all over the world, the Zafimaniry case may be considered a particularly extreme example. A generation ago, their skill was relatively unknown even to neighboring people, but their work is being currently regarded as “representative of humanity” on account of UNESCO’s inscription to the Intangible Heritage list. It is possible to see that the multiple changes that have occurred in Zafimaniry cultural practices are correlated and interdependent.

The most radical shift is the diversification of what was once a dependency on a singular way of life. This may be seen in crop production, for example, where methods of irrigating rice fields increasingly became part of mainstream crop cultivation from the 1970s and 1980s, meaning that swidden cultivation was no longer the only source of livelihood.⁸⁾

Similarly, crafting is not the only source of wares and tools for everyday necessities, with factory-made goods readily available in the weekly market in Antoetra, where an unpaved road brings in trucks and four-wheel drives conveying goods and visitors. This condition has thus increased opportunities for local community residents, with farming and crafting becoming a key source of cash-based income, while crafting still forms an important creative expression in their personal lives.

Meanwhile, there has been flourishing of professional craftsmen and artists whose products have acquired new forms and symbolic meanings. It can be seen that the “traditional landscape” has been preserved not out of the necessity for the residents of the community, but for the benefit of tourists. While this has made people more aware of and conscious of their cultural identity, this trend has resulted in the depletion of forest resources because of the unnatural speed and spread of “heritage-making” practices.

The changes that have occurred in Zafimaniry lifestyles and practices may be considered in tandem with widespread challenges to the concept of culture itself. Let us take an example of the Vimbuza healing rituals in Malawi, which was selected as a UNESCO masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity in 2005, two years after Zafimaniry knowledge. Although it used to be practiced to heal patients with intractable illness with the help of spirit possession, it is now displayed, after selection and inscription, increasingly in nonritual settings, especially political rallies, touristic events, and newly created Vimbuza dance festivals. Consequently, it seems to lose its original meaning, both supernatural and medical (Gilman 2015). However, it is not only UNESCO’s exertion of authoritative power that desemantizes Vimbuza.⁹⁾ Hafstein (2018), admitting that Vimbuza is threatened, argues that instrumentalization, commoditization, festivalization, or folklorization in his comprehensive term, is a consequence of modernity where change is so ubiquitous that traditional practices are replaced with technologies provided by expert systems, whether commercial or non-commercial (Giddens 1994). If

so, researchers should not or cannot stop the process of transformation of cultural meanings, but just control speeds and directions of changes in order for folklorization and decontextualization not to trigger desemantization.

In the first half of the twentieth century, culture was conceived of in a narrower sense as a set of ideas and practices necessary for survival. After half a century, however, such definitions of culture increasingly lost their practical meanings as the areas constituting an individual's life and identity were expanded at the national and global levels. Culture thus became an object of consumption, produced through processes of negotiation and appropriation (Appadurai 1996; Clifford 1997; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). Confronted with such cataclysmic changes to the conditions surrounding the concept of culture, it can be difficult to see how ideas and practices representative of traditional lifestyles can survive as heritage at the local level.

While it is not possible to predict the result, the prognosis is not necessarily a pessimistic one, as local ideas and practices have undergone constant renewal and re-innovation since their original conception. This general characteristic of intangible heritage may be contrasted with that of architectural and monumental structures represented on the World Heritage List, which continue to exist in a relatively unchanged form on account of regular physical restorations. Intangible heritage, in contrast, is safeguarded through regular repetition and performance of its practice. Zafimaniry carvers, for example, preserve their craftsmanship by transmitting their knowledge to beginners who continue the practice. The heritage is maintained not on account of the material durability of the product, but by the repetition and performance of making these crafts. The products are not copies of an original in a rigid sense; while the base remains the same, the performance is transformed continuously after myriad repetitions. In this regard, Zafimaniry craftsmanship and practice of woodcarving can be described as an "adaptive" rather than "intangible" heritage.

Heritage conceived in this way does not have an unchangeable original or ideal form. Instead, it exhibits differences every time it is performed, with the performers themselves complicit, sometimes intentionally modifying their practices to suit present conditions. In other words, "adaptive" heritage does not have an absolute form, but has a range of acceptable and equally valuable manifestations.

This is the key difference that sets it apart from immovable and fixed architectures and monuments, which when conserved over time as structures are not permitted significant alterations to their original form. Although historically, heritage practitioners and scholars have tried to apply the precepts of conservation to the intangible aspects of heritage, this project has failed to consider that changeability is a key essence of these cultural practices. Rather than conservationist approaches, therefore, it seems that our understanding of this phenomenon can be better enhanced by turning to cultural theory, which considers the relationships between the non-physical "adaptive" and the physical, unchangeable components of heritage.

It is important that we begin to consider "adaptiveness" as a natural part of the performance and transmission of intangible heritage, rather an obstacle to it.¹⁰⁾ The value of heritage ought not to be determined by a singular universal standard (as premised in

the World Heritage Convention) but ought to be credibly assessed by experienced practitioners who are familiar with its range of acceptable variants (this is a principle highlighted in the Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention, but it has not been effectively communicated to the wider public). If we adapt such an open approach to the interpretation of heritage, it may make it difficult to grasp the full extent of its present condition. If UNESCO is to fulfill its commitment to achieve community-centered heritage management, it ought to actively promote greater flexibility in the interpretation of intangible heritage to emphasize its changeable nature (see the introduction of this volume).

6. Conclusion

Having reviewed the case study of the Zafimaniry people, it is important for us to consider the options available to assist them in transmitting their cultural legacy to the next generations under times of drastic change to their local economy and culture. Three options can be considered: 1) an approach to “freeze” carving practices by enacting a complete block of modern-day traffic and telecommunications; 2) encouraging the maintenance of current carving techniques but trying to keep their practice and performance at a distance from the market economy; and 3) professionalization of crafting as a mainstream industry, limiting the transmission of carving techniques only to skilled practitioners. Although there is much room for middle ground in these options, it is hoped that considering the three extremes may assist us in identifying a route that offers the most natural and sustainable way for the Zafimaniry people to continue their cultural traditions.

A complete freeze, proposed in option 1 above, is not a realistic or natural option for Zafimaniry people, particularly if we consider the importance that interaction with the outside world has had on the construction of their cultural identity. As stated, it has been observed that the recognition of the unique styles presented in their house building and geometric patterns has had an important influence on present-day Zafimaniry people’s understanding of their cultural identity. Although it is true that their former geographical isolation was an important source of the development of their unique cultural characteristics and techniques, communication with the outside world has also been responsible for influencing contemporary notions of their identity. Therefore, a complete block of traffic and telecommunication could only result in a negative overall impact on modern-day Zafimaniry lifestyles and culture.

If the Zafimaniry people wish to encourage ongoing economic changes and the influx of tourists and factory-made commodities, the future of their crafts can be conceived in one of two extreme ways: either they continue the tradition as a purely cultural practice completely divorced from economic gain (option 2), or they adopt crafting as the main source of their cash income (option 3). As both are unrealistic due to the complex interaction of economic and social conditions, it would be best to try to reach some middle point in this spectrum between the two extremes.

If all Zafimaniry people of adult working age were to become involved in souvenir

production, the most valued material species of wood *Dalbergia* spp. (rosewood in English, palissandre in French, vômboña in Zafimaniry Malagasy) would quickly run out. In contrast, if the craftworks were to lose their economic value, the next generation would have to look to alternative sources of income in their already limited range of resources and comparatively isolated conditions, meaning that they would be unlikely to continue the craft for the purpose of purely cultural activity.¹¹⁾ Zafimaniry craftwork should therefore maintain both economic and cultural values.

Such a swing between extremes is not a new situation for the Zafimaniry. In the past, they were able to shift their activities to adapt to and balance unpredictable changes. The only difference between the present and past situations is the level of self-determination and control the Zafimaniry now possess over the changes to their culture. In the past, the balance was easier to achieve when the Zafimaniry were in isolation from others as they could adapt themselves according to highly localized economic and social change. Currently, however, the Zafimaniry people must make similar decisions but with consideration of a wider field, considering the demands of tourists and other outsiders. This is a situation that has not had a precedent until relatively recently in their cultural history.

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that the impact of outsiders is not necessarily negative. The Zafimaniry can also seek help from outsiders to assist them in preserving their cultural traditions. By outsiders, I mean not only foreign tourists but also researchers, officials, NGO workers, craft dealers, and museum curators, whether domestic or international. By assisting the Zafimaniry people to gain the skills and knowledge to negotiate and deal with outsiders, while asserting their position and rights to “adapt” their heritage as they deem fit, it is hoped that they may be able to challenge the assessment that Zafimaniry culture is endangered by its interaction with the processes of globalization and modernization. Empowerment of Zafimaniry people, who have historically been capable, will enable them to find their way to survive with rich cultural resources in harsh geographical conditions.

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Notes

- 1) This reaction was repeatedly observed during the exhibition “Zafimaniry Style: Life and Handicrafts in the Mist Forest of Madagascar” which was held at the National Museum of Ethnology, Japan, from March 14 to June 11, 2013 (National Museum of Ethnology 2013). While this observation may be biased according to its context in Japan, Bloch’s note (later cited) shows that Europeans have the same tendency as well.
- 2) Ambohimitombo, another entry point for visitors to this area, seems to have benefited much less from tourists than Antoetra, because it has poorer access routes.
- 3) When the Zafimaniry wood-crafting knowledge was designated as a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity in 2003, the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage had not yet been approved. This convention was adopted by the General Assembly of UNESCO in 2003 and went into force in 2006. It was only in 2008, at the inter-governmental meeting to review the Convention, that it was decided that all the Masterpieces of Humanity that were selected in 2001, 2003, and 2005 ought to be automatically inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.
- 4) <http://www.desvillagesetdeshommes.com/> (viewed on 19 September 2015)
- 5) <http://www.christies.com/Artists-Angels-pour-Madagascar-24390.aspx> (viewed on 19 September 2015) The website says that there were 72 objects produced by 72 contemporary artists; however, there were actually 75 objects in the list of the website.
- 6) Identification of herbarium specimen: Coulaud (1973: 28) identified it as *Labramia* sp., while Ny Birao Mpandrindra UNESCO (2008) as *Sideroxylon* sp. All of them belong to *Sapotaceae*, but Ny Birao Mpandrindra UNESCO (2008) records *Calophyllum* sp. (*Calophyllaceae*) as another species similar to *nato*.
- 7) The number of ridgepole-supporting posts observed was 22, of which 18 were on both ends of the ridgepole (*andry mangisy*) and could be observed from outside the houses. Data collected on the remaining 4, which supported the ridgepole in the middle (*andry mafana*), were obtained with permission from the house owner who provided entry into the property. 5 houses were locked, so it was not possible to identify the species of *andry mafana* in the middle posts. The *nato* comprised 11 posts of the 22, while 6 were *tamboneka* (*Ravensara acuminata*, Lauraceae), 2 were *laloña* (*Weinmannia bojeriana*, Cunoniaceae), 2 were *hazoambo* (unidentified), and 1 was *merandahy* (*Maesa lanceolata*, Myrsinaceae). If one observes all 55 newly built houses, it is likely that the proportion of *nato* is even less.
- 8) Coulaud (1973) reported that rice production was a minor method of cultivation among the Zafimaniry at the time of his research, although it had already been introduced in the early 20th century.
- 9) Another important point of Gilman’s argument is that the UNESCO selection process of masterpieces or items for the Representative List is not suitable for the ideal of cultural diversity. In Malawi, the effects of Vimbuza rituals are disputed between Christians and traditional healers, whose ontologies contradict each other (Gilman 2015). I regard this negative effect as significant, even when compared to cultural decontextualization. In the Zafimaniry case, this kind of dispute rarely happens because the Zafimaniry population is too

- small, and their products do not harm the majority.
- 10) I have an impulse to say that nothing is authentic, except the fact that everything changes. I do not stress this “authentic change” here because the word “authentic” implies “the existence of its opposite, the fake, and this dichotomous construct is at the heart of what makes authenticity problematic” (Bendix 1997: 9). In the context of this discussion, I feel that the notion of authentic change in heritage practices is heuristically possible, as long as it relates to the primary heirs’ (community’s) definition of authenticity rather than UNESCO’s evaluation of it.
- 11) In reality, Zafimaniry women stopped weaving textiles when factory-made cloths became available in this region (Yoshimoto 2013). We cannot say that the same thing would not also happen with wood-crafting.

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