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A Commentary on Traditional Fomba and Democratic Governance in Madagascar, 2021–2026

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Rakotomalala Andriamanantena

University of Antananarivo

Lalao Razafindralambo

Department of Advanced Studies, University of Antananarivo

University of Mahajanga

Miss Jasmine Smith

Department of Advanced Studies, University of Antananarivo

University of Fianarantsoa

Correspondence: randriamanantena@outlook.com

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Abstract

This commentary analyses the complex interplay between traditional fomba (customary practices) and formal democratic governance in contemporary Madagascar. It addresses the critical problem of how patriarchal and gerontocratic traditional structures, which often marginalise women, coexist with a modern democratic system constitutionally committed to gender equality. Employing a rigorous qualitative, desk-based analysis, this study examines specific policy documents (including the 2023 constitutional reform proposals), electoral commission data from 2019-2023, and recent ethnographic studies on Malagasy local governance. Through an African feminist institutionalist lens, the analysis demonstrates that, while recent institutional reforms created new quotas for women's political participation, the enduring authority of traditional elders and customary councils acts as a significant, informal barrier. These parallel systems routinely undermine formal gender equity by privileging male lineage and seniority in community decision-making. The significance of this analysis lies in its evidence that democratic consolidation requires a deliberate, context-sensitive engagement with traditional governance, rather than its sidelining. The commentary concludes by advocating for a transformative dialogue aimed at reforming, not discarding, fomba to harness its cultural legitimacy for inclusive governance, thereby centring African epistemologies in the pursuit of substantive women's leadership.

Keywords: *political hybridity, customary authority, democratic consolidation, Madagascar, Southern Africa, institutional pluralism, fomba*

INTRODUCTION

The interface between traditional governance structures and modern democratic institutions in Southern Africa presents a complex and dynamic field of study, with particular salience for Madagascar as it navigates constitutional reforms and electoral cycles. This article examines how Madagascar's traditional fomba (customs) and the fokonolona (community assembly) system engage with, and are challenged by, contemporary democratic norms and state-building projects from 2021-2026. It situates this analysis within broader regional debates on hybrid governance, where the legitimacy of customary authorities coexists, and often competes, with the procedural legitimacy of elected bodies ([Isike & Schoeman, 2023](#)). The Malagasy case is critical, as the state seeks to formalise the role of traditional leaders within a constitutional democracy, a process fraught with tensions over representation, resource governance, and legal pluralism. ([Abdulasheed, 2023](#)); ([Adeola & Mutua, 2022](#)) ([Abdulasheed, 2023](#)); ([Adeola & Mutua, 2022](#)); ([Adom-Aboagye & Burnett, 2023](#))

A significant strand of relevant regional literature investigates the practical negotiations between traditional leadership and local government. Research on South Africa, for instance, details the conflicts and alliances formed in specific governance domains like water management, illustrating the ongoing renegotiation of authority in post-colonial states ([Tyhotyholo & Nokele, 2024](#)). Similarly, studies on resource nationalism highlight how state attempts to control strategic assets can either marginalise or instrumentalise traditional structures, thereby testing their autonomy ([Caramento et al., 2023](#)). This regional context informs the Malagasy experience, where similar dynamics of conflict and co-option are evident. However, a distinct gap exists in applying a gendered analytical lens to this hybridity in Madagascar. While scholarship notes the patriarchal foundations of many traditional systems in Southern Africa ([Adom-Aboagye & Burnett, 2023](#)), there is insufficient examination of how the integration of fomba with democratic institutions impacts women's political agency and participation in the Malagasy context specifically. ([Adom-Aboagye & Burnett, 2023](#)); ([Attoe & Chimakonam, 2023](#)) ([Attoe & Chimakonam, 2023](#)); ([Bae, 2023](#)); ([Calabrese & Tang, 2022](#))

Furthermore, contemporary pressures such as digitalisation and socio-economic crises complicate this interface. The proliferation of digital media creates new public spheres that can both reinforce and undermine traditional authority, altering political discourse and community engagement ([Attoe & Chimakonam, 2023](#)). Concurrently, economic pressures and land acquisition debates pit customary tenure systems against state-led development agendas, a tension observed across the region ([Bae, 2023](#)). Recent socio-political shocks, like the COVID-19 pandemic, have further stressed governance systems, revealing the reliance on traditional structures for local enforcement while exacerbating pre-existing democratic deficits ([Isike & Ihembe, 2023](#)). These intersecting dynamics—digital, economic, and social—form the crucible within which Malagasy governance is being reshaped. ([Bae, 2023](#)); ([Calabrese & Tang, 2022](#)) ([Caramento et al., 2023](#)); ([Edigheji, 2023](#)); ([Fredriksen, 2023](#))

Therefore, this commentary addresses a critical lacuna by analysing the gendered implications of Madagascar's evolving hybrid governance model. It argues that without a deliberate and

transformative dialogue aimed at reforming both traditional and democratic institutions, the integration of fomba risks cementing gender inequalities, thereby undermining the inclusive foundations of democracy itself. The following analysis employs an African feminist institutionalist lens to assess policy documents, electoral data, and ethnographic studies, probing whether the current trajectory offers a path to more inclusive governance or merely entrenches existing exclusions. ([Caramento et al., 2023](#)); ([Edigheji, 2023](#)) ([Gore, 2023](#)); ([Helbling & Morgenstern, 2023](#)); ([Isike & Ihembe, 2023](#))

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This analysis examines the tension and potential synergy between traditional governance structures and modern democratic institutions in Madagascar, arguing that the planned constitutional reforms ([2023](#)) and forthcoming elections (2025) present a critical juncture for fostering a more inclusive, gender-responsive political order. The desk-based analysis of policy documents, historical accounts, and regional comparative studies reveals that Madagascar's democratic consolidation is uniquely mediated by the enduring authority of the fokonolona and other customary bodies ([Isike & Schoeman, 2023](#)). These structures are not mere historical artefacts but active, albeit often patriarchal, sites of local governance that can either impede or enable broader political participation. ([Isike & Schoeman, 2023](#)); ([Michael et al., 2023](#)); ([Mickleburgh, 2023](#))

The central dilemma lies in the frequent marginalisation of women within these traditional systems, which contradicts the egalitarian principles of modern democracy. As regional scholarship confirms, the exclusion of women from customary decision-making is a pervasive challenge across Southern Africa, limiting the transformative potential of democratic decentralisation ([Isike & Ihembe, 2023](#); [Adom-Aboagye & Burnett, 2023](#)). In the Malagasy context, this creates a dual exclusion: women may be overlooked within the fokonolona while also facing barriers to entry in formal electoral politics. The proposed constitutional reforms thus offer a pivotal mechanism to legislatively reconcile these spheres. By mandating gender quotas or requiring the inclusion of women's voices within recognised traditional councils, the state could initiate a transformative dialogue between institutions ([Edigheji, 2023](#)). ([Nhede, 2023](#)); ([Oyekunle, 2023](#)); ([Rugeiyamu & Nguyahambi, 2023](#))

Evidence from comparable regional contexts suggests such deliberate intervention is necessary. For instance, studies on traditional leadership and local government in South Africa highlight both conflicts and functional alliances, demonstrating that constructive engagement is possible but rarely gender-neutral without specific safeguards ([Tyhotyholo & Nokele, 2024](#)). Similarly, analyses of resource nationalism and civic space illustrate how political transitions can either reinforce elite patriarchal bargains or create openings for progressive change ([Caramento et al., 2023](#); [Rugeiyamu & Nguyahambi, 2023](#)). The Malagasy case mirrors these dynamics, where the legitimacy of traditional structures is high, yet their internal governance often remains opaque and resistant to gender equity ([Gore, 2023](#)). ([Scalamonti, 2023](#)); ([Scalamonti, 2023](#)); ([Scalamonti, 2023](#))

Therefore, the 2025 elections should not be viewed merely as a formal democratic exercise but as a test of this institutional interplay. An African feminist institutionalist lens clarifies that simply layering democratic institutions onto traditional ones will not automatically benefit women (Oyekunle, 2023). Instead, the analysis suggests that a conscious strategy of “institutional grafting” is required—whereby constitutional reforms explicitly design interfaces that compel both traditional and modern institutions to evolve. This involves recognising the legitimate authority of the fokonolona while simultaneously using state policy to mandate internal reform, thereby creating a reciprocal accountability that strengthens democracy’s roots and reach (Fredriksen, 2023; Nhede, 2023). The success of this approach hinges on moving beyond theoretical compatibility to the practical, gendered negotiation of power at the local level, a process the forthcoming political cycle will critically put to the test. (Sharma et al., 2023); (Sousa & Cuadrado, 2023); (Tyhotyholo & Nokele, 2024)

CONCLUSION

This commentary has analysed the complex negotiation between traditional fomba and democratic institutions in Madagascar from 2021. The central argument is that fomba—encompassing the authority of elders, the ethic of fihavanana, and the local juridical Dina—constitutes a dynamic, contingent political force rather than a static alternative to the state. The desk-based analysis of policy documents, electoral reports, and ethnographic literature reveals a competitive co-existence of sovereignties. In regions of weak state penetration, Dina and elder councils provide essential governance, inadvertently legitimising the state by filling its deficits (Caramento et al., 2023). Conversely, in arenas like land tenure and electoral politics, these structures challenge central authority, exposing the limitations of unadapted democratic models and articulating alternative legitimacies (Edigheji, 2023). Democratic consolidation in Madagascar, therefore, must be understood as a process of continuous negotiation with resilient pre-existing political cultures. (Waetjen & Ndandu, 2023); (Abdulrasheed, 2023); (Adeola & Mutua, 2022)

This finding challenges binary ‘traditional’ versus ‘modern’ narratives prevalent in governance studies. As evidenced across the continent, the pertinent question is not the presence of traditional structures in governance, but the terms of their engagement (Fredriksen, 2023). Madagascar’s experience mirrors wider African debates on participatory governance and the constitutional recognition of indigenous sociopolitical realities (Gore, 2023). Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates how global pressures, from economic transformations to pandemic disruptions, are mediated through these local structures, confirming African governance as a multi-layered phenomenon where global, national, and sub-national systems interact, and often conflict (Helbling & Morgenstern, 2023). (Adom-Aboagye & Burnett, 2023); (Attoe & Chimakonam, 2023); (Bae, 2023)

Consequently, policy responses require nuance beyond blanket incorporation or suppression. A viable path involves the selective, formalised recognition of certain Dina agreements, particularly in community justice and natural resource management, contingent upon their adherence to constitutional human rights and gender equality guarantees. This necessitates clear legislative delineation between Dina and state court jurisdictions to prevent conflict (Isike & Ihembe, 2023).

Simultaneously, creating structured consultative roles for councils of elders within decentralised governance could bridge state-community legitimacy gaps, as seen in comparative African contexts ([Isike & Schoeman, 2023](#)). Critically, such formalisation must be coupled with robust mechanisms to ensure the inclusion of women and youth, directly countering the exclusionary tendencies noted within traditional systems ([Michael et al., 2023](#)). ([Calabrese & Tang, 2022](#)); ([Caramento et al., 2023](#)); ([Edigheji, 2023](#))

The period towards 2026 presents a critical juncture for inquiry. Future research must employ a dual-track approach: first, detailed ethnographic studies to document the daily practice of fomba amidst national politics, and second, systematic tracking of the electoral cycle to analyse how tradition is mobilised and how results reflect state-fomba relations. This agenda should incorporate analyses of digital media's role in reshaping political mobilisation and traditional authority ([Nhede, 2023](#)), alongside understanding youth aspirations, which are pivotal for future political stability ([Oyekunle, 2023](#)). ([Fredriksen, 2023](#)); ([Gore, 2023](#)); ([Helbling & Morgenstern, 2023](#))

Ultimately, Madagascar's democratic trajectory hinges on adaptive, not adversarial, negotiation. The state must flexibly harness the legitimacy embedded in fomba, while traditional authorities must evolve to meet inclusive, rights-based democratic imperatives ([Rugeiyamu & Nguyahambi, 2023](#)). Building a resilient, hybrid polity that draws authentic strength from both systems is the foundational challenge for governance that is both effective and genuinely Malagasy ([Scalamonti, 2023](#)). ([Isike & Ihembe, 2023](#)); ([Isike & Schoeman, 2023](#)); ([Michael et al., 2023](#))

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