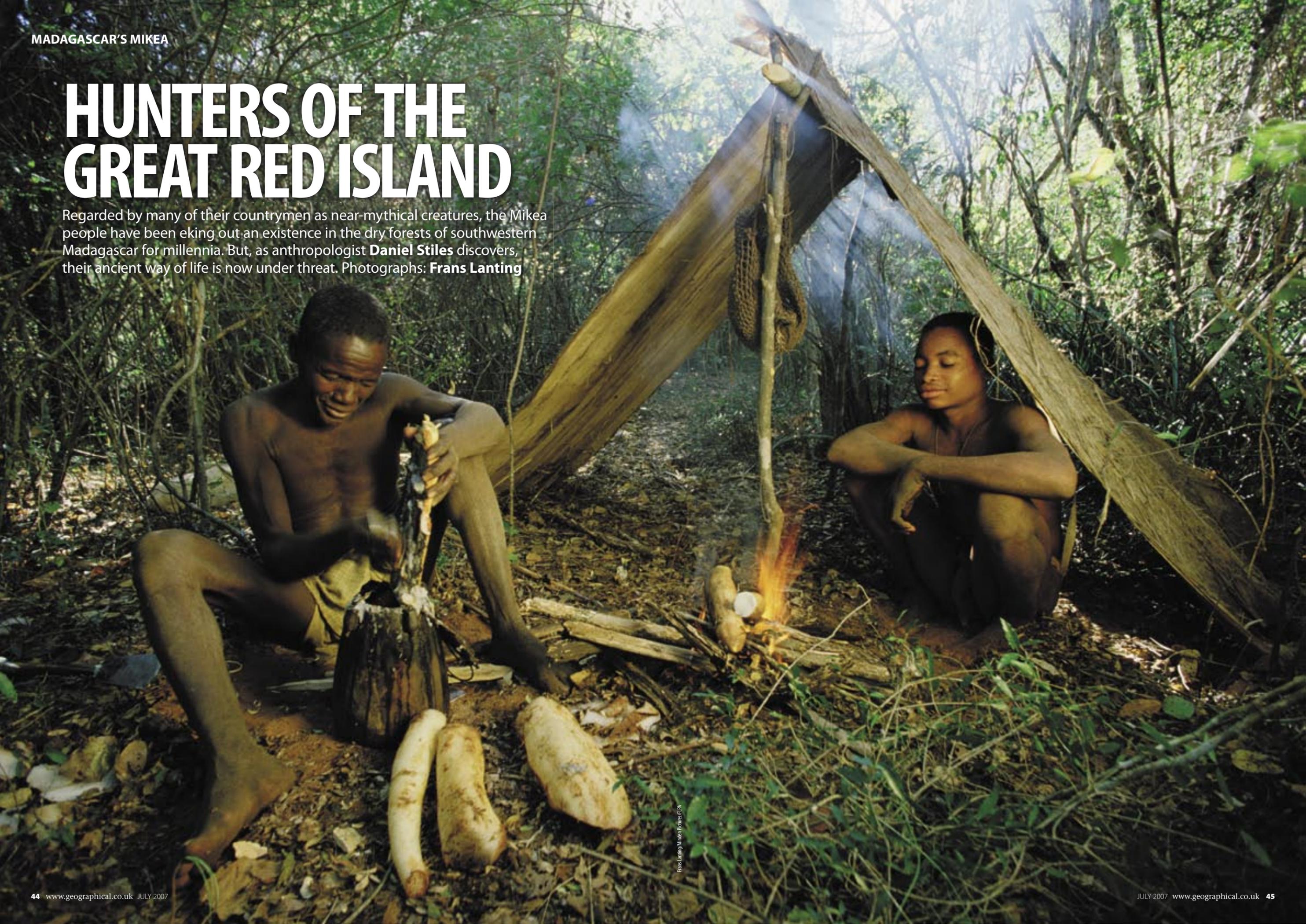


HUNTERS OF THE GREAT RED ISLAND

Regarded by many of their countrymen as near-mythical creatures, the Mikea people have been eking out an existence in the dry forests of southwestern Madagascar for millennia. But, as anthropologist **Daniel Stiles** discovers, their ancient way of life is now under threat. Photographs: **Frans Lanting**



Frans Lanting / Minden Pictures/PA

Our small expedition had been slogging through deep sand under the glaring sun for around four hours. We had left Vorehy, a tiny village carved out of the dry forest of southwestern Madagascar, at 7.30am that day. I was looking for a band of Mikea hunter-gatherers who were supposed to live in the vicinity, but since they move camp fairly often, no-one knew quite where they were.

Noel, my guide, stopped dead in his tracks and cocked his small, bronzed head to one side. He looked like a Dayak from Borneo, which his ancestors probably were, if the linguists are right. He was one of the Merina people, who live in the highlands to the east, but had spent all of his long life among the Mikea. He was known as the *olombentana*, the respected elder of Vorehy.

The sandy track that we were on cut through a thick forest made up of tall, thin, deciduous trees. A few majestic mahogany and ebony trees, and the rare sacred figs and bizarre baobabs, relieved the monotony. The sunlight trickled through the dry canopy to speckle drops of light on Noel, myself, and Tsiazonera, my assistant from the University of Tulear, Madagascar.

Suddenly, a tall, hairy, wizened black man wearing only a soiled loin-cloth burst forth from the gloom. He was walking quickly, carrying a spear, a small hatchet and a net sack of woven fibres packed with wild yams. The instant he spotted us, he wheeled around to flee.

Noel called after him in Malagasy, reassuring him that we meant no harm. Luckily, he knew the old man and called his name. Vahana warily approached us and then Noel told me in French: "Give him some *paraky*, the snuff. That's probably why he's heading for Vorehy." I reached into my knapsack and took out the packet of tobacco and held it out with two hands, palms up. Vahana displayed his broken teeth in a grateful smile and stuck the spear in the sand. He took the snuff and squatted, then stuffed a pinch up his nose and sneezed in satisfaction.

Indigenous beliefs

I had finally found a legendary Mikea. Many Malagasy didn't even believe they existed, or considered them to be Hako, a local version of the Yeti or Big Foot.

Vahana guided us back to his camp, which was about an hour away. A couple of yapping dogs greeted us, but no-one else was around. Vahana's abode was a



Previous page: a Mikea tribesman prepares a tuber while his companion looks on. Wild tubers form a significant component of the diet in many Mikea communities. They are also sometimes collected specifically for sale at local markets; Above: when the rains come, the Mikea begin to forage for honey

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lean-to, made from bark slabs, with only a hearth and a tin can hanging from the centre-pole for decoration. The other three huts in the camp were rectangular bark-slab boxes.

I discovered that Vahana was an *ombiasy*, a kind of witchdoctor. So, I interviewed him, with Tsiazonera and Noel interpreting for me. Two of the *ombiasy*'s sons, also in loincloths, arrived later with net sacks full of *ovy*, wild yams. They changed into shorts when they saw me, the *vazaha* (Westerner).

Despite my extensive studies of hunter-gatherers at university and the fieldwork that I had carried out with them in various places in Africa and Asia, I had never heard of the Mikea. Then, some years ago, while on safari, I visited the small museum in Tulear, a provincial capital in southwestern Madagascar. I knew nothing of the people or history of the Great Red Island, so I went to meet the director of the museum, Jean-François Rabedimy.

Using a large wall map in the museum, Rabedimy proceeded to point out where the agricultural-pastoral Masikoro farmers lived inland, the coastal location of the Vezo fisherman, and the place in which the Mikea bush-people lived in the forest in-between.

"Bush-people?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied. "They are nomads who live on tubers and tenrec [small, hedgehog-like mammals]."

Less than a year later, I was back in Tulear and, with the co-operation of Rabedimy and the University of Tulear, I set off to find out about the history and way of life of the Mikea. I believe that it's important to study present-day hunter-gatherers, as they usually live in areas with relatively undisturbed ecosystems. The people themselves are invaluable repositories of indigenous knowledge about wild plants and animals, and how human ingenuity has created ways to live an environmentally sustainable life.

Most hunter-gatherers will have occupied the habitat in which they currently live for centuries. And while it's possible to over-romanticise the notion of indigenous people living in harmony with the environment, it's generally true that they will have found ways to ensure that they don't overexploit their resources.

Some 90 per cent of the plants in Madagascar's dry southwestern forests are found nowhere else, as are many of the animal species. Hence, conserving the flora and fauna of this region is of



Above left: Mikea children spend much of their time foraging for tubers. Even at the leisurely rate at which they work, they can usually gather enough to cover their own daily food needs within one or two hours; Above right: a Mikea elder uses traditional methods to produce fire

considerable importance. The small number of Mikea – around 1,000–1,500 people – doesn't threaten wildlife survival; the main threat is posed by incoming farmers burning and clearing land for crops and cattle grazing.

Natural cycles

I made three expeditions to Mikea country and found that they have a very structured annual cycle; they aren't nomads wandering the bush, as some people have suggested. The people live in deep forest camps and are highly mobile, sleeping in the sand or dug-out pits at the base of termite mounds. They live almost entirely from hunting and gathering, shooting lemurs and birds with blowguns, hunting bush-pigs using spears and dogs, and digging for underground tubers.

The annual cycle begins in the hot and humid period before the rainy season in October. The Mikea's main goal at this time is to collect as many wild yams and other tubers as they can.

When the rains come, the Mikea plant maize and sometimes cassava in small, shabby fields. Nearby, they put up diminutive grass huts in which to sleep. At this time, they hunt mainly tenrec, both men and women using clubs to kill the slow-moving animals, although they will also hunt rodents, turtles and birds. The coming of the rains signals the start of the main honey-collecting season.

At harvest time in April and May, some maize is eaten, the rest sold in village markets. At this time, the Mikea move away from the fields, carrying maize with them, and once more begin digging tubers in the forest, returning to their old bark houses or building new ones. They hunt all the available animals

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during this season, even fruit bats and the largest carnivore on Madagascar, the unusual fosa, which looks like a cross between a dog and a wild cat.

Around June, the waterholes begin to dry up, and standing water can usually only be found in the crooks of trees. To supplement this, the Mikea search for the *babo*, a large tuber, which is similar to watermelon in texture.

July to September sees not a drop of rain, and the cold winds and freezing ocean currents from the wintry south make the nights quite cool. The tenrecs burrow into the ground or find holes in trees in which to sleep until the rains return. During this period, the hunters focus on bush-pig, guinea fowl and other birds, and lemurs. As in October and November, digging for tubers is a principal activity, and many are traded.

So why are there Mikea? They exist primarily as a result of what is called resource partitioning. The Mikea could live further east on land with better soils and higher rainfall, but they choose to live in an area that is harsher because the forest provides abundant food, construction materials, trade products and safety. Neighbouring farmers want the trade products, but the forests are too far away to get there on a regular basis. Thus a type of symbiosis has built up, each group giving the other what they lack. Also, since the Mikea are stigmatised by outsiders, they prefer to live away from them.

“I have not known a day's hunger in my life,” the ancient Vahana told me. Yet if the slash-and-burn farming that is transforming southwestern Madagascar's forests into scrublands persists, his descendants could be less fortunate. **G**