"A wonderfully vivid and beautifully written book that brings to life the social and natural history of a remarkable place." — Sarah Hrdy, author of *Mother Nature* and *The Woman That Never Evolved*

About the Book

"Where can you find scientists from all over the world, a family of French aristocrats who never quite noticed the French Revolution, a pastoralist tribe who still think of themselves as spear-carrying warriors, six species of lemurs, and usually a TV team underfoot?" asks Alison Jolly. The answer is Berenty, Madagascar.

A nature reserve located among the spiny deserts of the south of Madagascar, Berenty is a tiny place, but in some ways it is "a microcosm of the whole world — rich and poor, international and traditional cultures, people and animals," according to Jolly. In *Lords and Lemurs: Mad Scientists, Kings with Spears, and the Survival of Diversity in Madagascar*, Jolly takes us inside the unique universe of Berenty, where three groups that so often seem to be in conflict — Westerners, people of the developing world, and wildlife — remarkably coexist, to the benefit of all.

When Jolly (one of the "Mad Scientists" of the book's subtitle) first went to Madagascar forty years ago to study lemurs, she discovered her ideal research site at Berenty, a private wildlife refuge on a plantation owned by an old aristocratic French family, the de Heaulmes. These lords had first come to Berenty in the 1930s. As they developed their plantation over the years, they set aside land for lemurs, and they treated the local Tandroy tribespeople with respect, helping them preserve their traditions alongside the commercial economy.

The Tandroy, the "Kings with Spears," are as noble and proud as the de Heaulmes, and Jolly
shares the amazing story of how the tribe has maintained its vibrant culture while obtaining some of the most important benefits of the modern world, including health care and education. Tandroy continue to live in traditional villages surrounded by walls of thorns, and they continue to keep their cult of cattle and hold exuberant funerals (Jolly and her husband were honored to be invited to one), but they have given up some other customs, like keeping slaves and stealing women from other tribes.

The de Heaulmes have kept their pact with the Tandroy in a globalizing world. True, they are capitalists and they were colonialists, but these leaders epitomize *noblesse oblige*; they feel an honorable sense of responsibility for the place where they live and the people and animals they live with. For example:

- When the people of Madagascar campaigned for independence from France, the de Heaulmes stood with them and joined the first government.
- When one of the de Heaulmes was imprisoned during a civil war, the Tandroy marched on the prison to demand his release.
- When the sisal grown on the plantation was made obsolete by artificial fibers, the de Heaulmes did not pack up and return to France to enjoy their wealth; they transformed Berenty into an ecotourism resort that continues to provide jobs for the Tandroy, protection for the lemurs, and a sanctuary for scientists.

"In the year 2000 Berenty and its lemurs still flourished because the de Heaulme family are still here. And vice versa. Forest and family saved each other," Jolly writes.

Poignant and colorful, tragic and funny, *Lords and Lemurs* is a remarkable tale of one of the last great places on earth and the extraordinary people who inhabit it.

**About the Author**

Alison Jolly, a pioneer in the study of primate behavior and the evolution of social intelligence, is the author of *A World Like Our Own: Man and Nature in Madagascar*, *The Evolution of Primate Behavior*, and *Lucy's Legacy: Sex and Intelligence in Human Evolution*. She has taught at Princeton and is currently at the University of Sussex, England.

**A Conversation with Alison Jolly**

**Q)** Why did you first start studying lemurs?

**A)** I was in graduate school at Yale, supposedly doing a thesis on sponges. I got a bit bored with sponges, and happened to see a photo of a tarsier — all big eyes and little hands. I said to Evelyn Hutchinson, my professor, "If I had my druthers I would go and study that. It's cute and it lives a long, long way away from Yale." He said, "Well, a professor over in Anthropology has fifty of them." I took one look at the animals — not tarsiers, but lemurs, lorises, bushbabies, potto — and that was that.
Q) So you were hooked because they are so cute?

A) No, the real reason was that there were so many kinds, about thirty species of lemurs alone — big and small, fast and slow, fruit and leaf and insect eaters. Dial me up the world's smallest primate — okay, here's a mouselemur that can sit on your thumb. Dial up social ones that will give insights into the evolution of social life — okay, here are sifaka and ringtailed lemurs, the kinds I wound up studying in the wild. It turns out that their females totally dominate their males, which makes them even more interesting. Besides, they are not just cute. They're beautiful.

Q) How are lemurs related to humans?

A) There is a rip-roaring argument about that. The standard version is that our ancestors diverged from lemurs 40 or 50 million years ago. There are ancient lemur-like fossils in Wyoming. Then they supposedly spread south to Africa, where one branch evolved into monkeys and apes. A few of the early animals rafted across to Madagascar, where there were no monkeys to compete with. They turned into the surviving modern lemurs.

The other version is a radical new idea. Perhaps lemurs originated on Madagascar itself! They ran around on twigs and dodged dinosaurs. That would have been at least 100 million years ago, a Volume I of evolution, which we guess at from molecular evidence, before the fossils begin in Volume II. About 88 million years ago a huge volcano erupted just about over my present study site, kick-starting the final rift between Madagascar and the Indian subcontinent. Lemurs stayed put while India drifted north, carrying the ancestors of monkeys, apes, and us. Of course, I love the idea that we all started from Madagascar.

Q) Is Lords and Lemurs all about lemurs?

A) No, it's the story of the people of Berenty Reserve in the far south of Madagascar.

Q) Berenty Reserve? Why?

A) I had just finished a big book on human evolution, called Lucy's Legacy. I thought, "I want to write something short and funny." Then I thought, "I couldn't make up anything as peculiar as the place I'm in right now, Berenty Reserve. Where else would you find scientists from all over the world, a family of French aristocrats who never quite noticed the French Revolution, a pastoral tribe who still think of themselves as spear-carrying warriors, six species of lemurs, and usually a TV team underfoot? All of us living together in peace with a really unlikely tale of how it came to be."

Q) You call it a story. Is this a book of fiction?

A) No, it is biography-autobiography-history. I think of it as a story, though — the life story of Jean de Heaulme, Berenty's owner, who came to the south of Madagascar as a six-month-old baby in his mother's arms, in the sidecar of his father's big Harley-Davidson motorcycle. There was a road from the capital, but it was sometimes hard to tell where that road was. He was nine years old when his father negotiated for land with the warrior tribe of the region. He is still there, having lived through tribalism, colonialism, socialism, and the neocolonialism of the World Bank and the modern conservation lobby. His adventures link the book together, along with my own adventures as a lemur-watcher.
Q) Who are these spear-carrying warriors?

A) They are called Tandroy, which means "People of the Thorns." They live in the spiny desert, a surrealist forest with thorny plants like the bunched fingers of a hand twenty feet tall. About 95 percent of the spiny desert plants are unique to Madagascar. Tandroy traditionally live in villages of tiny wooden huts hidden inside the forest. Women walk to a pool or river for water, ten or twenty kilometers away, or else the water is brought in an old oil drum on an oxcart. Their real wealth is their humped, long-horned zebu cattle.

Three Berenty Tandroy, whose names in English are He-Who-Cannot-Be-Thrown-to-Earth, The Abandoned, and The Never-Suckled, told me about the royal family of the valley and about the nature spirits called kokolampo. They also talked of their own lives — how they survived droughts and famines and what it means to turn Christian and have to give up all but one wife. Especially they told me about what it means to go and work on a plantation.

There is an amazing book from the eighteenth century that was probably ghostwritten by Daniel Defoe, who wrote Robinson Crusoe. That is the tale of Robin Drury, a cockney midshipman who was shipwrecked on the coast of Androy when he was fifteen years old. He spent the next ten years as a Tandroy slave. He was in lots of clan raids for women and cattle, wound up falling in love himself, and finally ran away only because he fell afoul of both his master and a sorcerer. Defoe may have jazzed the tale up a bit, but most of the details could have been known only by somebody who lived with the Tandroy.

Q) So these warriors kept slaves?

A) Slavery was finally banned when the French colonized the region in 1902. When romantic visitors look at the Tandroy, they are all too likely to think "noble savages." Either that or they think "exploited poor people of the Third World." Tandroy are as complicated as anyone else. They have their own hereditary lords, and rich people with cattle and poor people without, and some tough traditions, especially about women. One of the strangest things to me is that women laugh loud and stride freely and don't seem to be afraid of anything, even though they have almost no formal rights and have to leave their children behind when they get divorced. The children, however, gain a rock-solid identity as members of their father's clan.

Q) Are Tandroy still so traditional today?

A) Many Tandroy work on plantations like Berenty or migrate throughout Madagascar to find work. Other tribes are still a bit afraid of them — people hire them as security guards, which would be like Americans choosing Comanches as bodyguards. Many settle in distant places, but the ideal is still for a young man to come home with enough money to buy a wife or wives, and eventually to have a really slap-up funeral with burial in a grand tomb. When a clan elder dies, zebu cattle stampede through the village with gunfire and dancing and merrymaking and sex, up to the grand climax when young men spear a whole herd of zebu to send their ancestor into the afterlife. Lords and Lemurs ends with an account of a Tandroy funeral, which was the best party I have ever been to in my life.
Q) Why did the French family go to Berenty?

A) The de Heaulme family had lived on the island of Réunion for two centuries. They founded Berenty Estate in 1936 to cut the forest for timber and to plant sisal, an enormous spiky agave whose fibers are used for rope and carpets.

Q) Were they colonialist settlers?

A) They had a government mandate to seize people's land, but they also negotiated with the Tandroy and became blood brothers to local chiefs. Of course there wasn't perfect understanding. Jaona the Never-Suckled, who was a teenager back then, said, "They asked my grandfather for land. My grandfather said, 'You may take whatever you need.' We all thought they wanted a cornfield! Just a half-hectare to cut and burn like anybody else. It was a long, long time before we understood they wanted the whole forest!"

The de Heaulmes certainly got rich while their workers were poor. The first time I ever saw Berenty, Jean and his guests arrived in their own airplanes. Once Jean flew his new Beechcraft all the way from Kansas to Madagascar. Meanwhile, workers were paid very low wages and, in the early days, were forced to work because the colonial government demanded a head tax that had to be paid in cash.

However, most plantation people work only four hours a day. All of them grow crops and keep cattle as they always did, either on their own land or on land allotted by the de Heaulme family. Plantation work dovetails into traditional life without replacing it.

Q) Why do people work on the plantation?

A) Salaried work is above all a buffer against drought and famine. In this region, every ten years or so, old women and men and the kids under five are likely to die of hunger. One of the worst famines occurred just before the de Heaulmes came to settle, when an imported insect destroyed the prickly pear, which was a main famine food. The plantations and later international aid mean that people aren't quite so vulnerable now.

When I asked about famine, people told me, "My family walked two hundred miles across the island to an uncle who gave us food"; "My father died in the famine and I had to bury him as a Christian, because Christians can be buried without the sacrifice of zebu that dignifies death." Jean de Heaulme, aged fifteen, was in the forest when a branch broke and dropped the desiccated corpse of a woman right at his feet. She had climbed the tree to die so she would not be eaten by the starving dogs.

Q) How has a colonial family stayed there up to the present day, forty years after Madagascar's independence?

A) I'm not giving away too much of the plot if I say the turning point of the story was Jean de Heaulme's imprisonment by Madagascar's socialist government. They wanted him to agree that his plantation could be nationalized. He stuck it out for five months in Fort Dauphin prison, in the town where he had practically been king. His wife lined up with all the other prisoners' wives at the prison gate three times a day to bring their men some food.

Finally his foremen came in from Berenty to argue with the police, to try to free their boss.
Jean was very tempted to encourage the Tandroy to rise in revolt, as they had done a few years earlier. The police were actually scared of even fifteen Tandroy hanging about in the main town square. They finally decided that Jean was the only person who could calm things down. They marched him up from the prison, a guard with a Kalashnikov on either side.

"Go home and take care of Berenty," he told his men. "I promise I shall return."

"Very well," they said. "We will go because you say so, Monsieur Jean. But if we hear they hurt you, we will come back. It won't be fifteen of us, it will be five hundred, and we will bring our spears."

**Q) What has a plantation to do with a lemur reserve?**

**A) **Back when the plantation was founded, the de Heaulmes set aside part of their estate as a nature reserve just because the forest was so beautiful. Berenty is now a tourist destination. If you ever visit Madagascar, you will probably go to Berenty. If you have seen any TV show on Madagascar, some or all of it was shot in that reserve. If a troop of twenty lemurs promenades toward your television screen and the sunlight haloes black-and-white ringed tails like swaying upraised question marks, that is Berenty. If you see white sifaka leap between trees in an aerial ballet or bounce over the ground with flailing arms, that is Berenty. In fact, it is likely to be Berenty's parking lot, while the cameraman ties himself in knots to frame out the human side of the story.

**Q) Last question: Madagascar has a huge conservation problem. Do you talk about that?**

**A) **Madagascar's new president has just announced that he is tripling the protected areas of the country, from 1.8 million hectares to 6 million. That is one of the most stunning advances ever proposed for conservation. President Ravelomanana knows that ecotourism at places like Berenty is very important to his country — to Berenty, and to the huge government reserves that hold the real wild wealth of Madagascar. But much more important than tourism, the forests preserve the watersheds that everyone depends on in a country prone to both droughts and cyclone-caused floods. There could be hope for the future, with the current upsurge of optimism for the president's new regime.

*Lords and Lemurs* is about one tiny corner of Madagascar, but each small part of the world reflects all the rest. In some ways Berenty is a microcosm of the whole world — rich and poor, international and traditional cultures, people and animals. Maybe the book will stand as one story of how people and nature can live together through disasters and triumphs.

**Advance Praise for Lords and Lemurs**

"There is no other book remotely like this one. Alison Jolly is an extraordinarily gifted writer. She is also an astute observer of the peculiarities and ironies of the human condition, as well as the social lives of lemurs. *Lords and Lemurs* is a wonderfully vivid and beautifully written book that brings to life the social and natural history of a remarkable place — Madagascar."

— Sarah Hrdy, author of *Mother Nature* and *The Woman That Never Evolved*

"*Lords and Lemurs* is the bright and loving story of a strange land, a special people, and a
few exotic tribes of primates and primate-watchers — as told by one very distinguished member of the latter." — Dale Peterson, author of *The Deluge and the Ark* and coauthor of *Demonic Males.*