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CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT IN SOUTHERN MADAGASCAR: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

The south of Madagascar is highly varied on every level: its climate, its ecology, its human occupations, both past and present. On the eastern edge lies Anosy, which is characterized by a subtropical environment and high rainfall. On the south-central region is Androy, which has a notoriously arid climate; and to the far west, in the region of Toliary, one finds a hot tropical climate. Six major rivers cross Southern Madagascar and have been the site of human settlements from early times to the present. From east to west these rivers include Efaho, Mandrare, Manambovo, Menarandra, Linta, Onilahy (Fig. 8.1).

The present chapter focuses on a comparative study of the regions of Anosy (humid) and Androy (arid). These two regions are topographically separated by a granitic mountain ridge. These climatic conditions are one of the most important factors influencing human settlements in the region. Although the two localities are contiguous, the climates on each side of the mountain ridge are radically different. Humidity carried by the southern Indian Ocean trade winds cause rains on the Anosy region whereas the Androy region, west of the mountain ridge, remains arid. The wetter eastern side of the ridge is forested and is also a catchment for several permanent rivers. The arid western side is the domain of spiny forests and ephemeral rivers.

The coastal component of the Anosy and Androy regions consists of alternating limestone cliffs and white sanddunes, which do not allow rivers to reach the ocean. The hydrology of the region has been affected by the shifting of sanddunes blocking the river mouths, which creates lakes. Many false lakes are behind the present dunes between Taolagnaro (Fort-Dauphin) and Amboasary in these same regions. Recently, it was predicted that in 10