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Understanding the complex dynamics of cross-cultural research often reveals unexpected challenges, particularly when working with indigenous communities. This scenario was exemplified when anthropologist Clifford Geertz Kottak initiated his research among the Betsileo people in Madagascar. His experiences, especially the initial reactions of local children, shed light on the importance of cultural sensitivity, trust-building, and appropriate research methodologies. In this article, we explore the reasons behind why children ran away from Kottak during his early fieldwork, the cultural context of the Betsileo, and lessons learned for anthropologists engaging with indigenous communities.

Background: Who Are the Betsileo of Madagascar?

Geographical and Cultural Context

The Betsileo are one of the prominent ethnic groups residing in the highlands of Madagascar, primarily in the southern-central part of the island. Known for their intricate rice-farming techniques and rich cultural traditions, the Betsileo are recognized for their social organization, craftsmanship, and unique rituals.