Madagascar: Sacrality as a way of conservation

The forest of Sakoantovo in southern Madagascar is sacred for the people that inhabit it. In general, a sacred forest is a place that is venerated and reserved for the cultural expression of a community, and its access and management are governed by traditional powers. Sacred forests cover a total area of 60,000 hectares in the Spiny Forest ecoregion of Madagascar, one of the biologically richest drylands on earth.

To the Mahafaly and Tandroy communities of southern Madagascar, the forest has always held a central position within social and cultural life, inspiring respect through a great number of taboos and norms. Sacred forests, where the remains of royal ancestors lie, are also sources of many medicinal plants and have therefore been zealously protected for centuries. However, they are threatened by the dismantling of the old production and consumption systems which have allowed for their conservation. Handing the control and management of these natural resources to their traditional stewards is therefore necessary to warrant more effective, sustainable conservation.

The Sakoantovo forest is extraordinary. Skinny green tubes covered in spines grow alongside tall trees topped with tufts of needle-like leaves. Squat baobabs with swollen trunks stand beside tangled masses of thick, thorny, branches. Above this collection of alien-looking plants is a clear blue sky; below, red sand.

Venture further in, and the dry spiny forest gradually changes to riparian forest growing along a riverbed (they form the transition between the aquatic and the terrestrial environment). Here the forest looks more familiar. Tamarind trees dominate, but there are also figs and other plant species. There is an incredible feeling of serenity, the stillness only broken by occasional birdsong and the gentle grunting of lemurs.

The local Mahafaly people have known for a long time that the forest is special — for them, it is sacred. “This forest is a burial site for our ancestors,” says Evoriraza, who lives in a nearby village with his wife and two children. "There is a sacred tree in the middle of the forest that cannot be touched, and also sacred animals such as tortoises, lemurs, and birds. It is taboo, or fady as we say, to hunt them. Some animals are like spirits or ghosts, and can harm people if they transgress these prohibitions.”

There are very few riparian forests left in Madagascar. The world’s fourth-largest island has already lost at least 80 per cent of its original forest cover — with over half this loss in the last 100 years. Sacred forests are no exception.

Traditional practises — which in the past have helped protect wildlife — are eroding. Madagascar is one of the most economically disadvantaged parts of the world, with a climate not always favourable to farming. When people need to eat, taboos on hunting certain species can break down. The forest is already a hardware store and pharmacy for local people; in times of famine it becomes their food store as well.

"Many people do illegal things, but they do so out of necessity," says Avimary, a Mahafaly prince. "They are forced to cut down trees to make charcoal, so that they can make a living and earn enough money to feed their children. Cutting down trees is not something they do willingly."

The entry of the modern world into Madagascar is also affecting traditional practises. "Some of the younger generations ignore the law and the word of their elders," says Avimary.

But Sakoantovo forest could show how to turn this depressing picture around. In June this year, the management rights over the forest were legally transferred from the Malagasy government to the local Mahafaly community.

The idea is that the people who know best how to look after the land are those who actually live on it. The Mahafaly now have the power to manage the forest — something the government had little success with in the past. Illegal felling and collection of medicinal plants had all been on the increase. But now, through local management committees, the Mahafaly have committed to sustainably manage their sacred forest in cooperation with local authorities.

This represents a significant departure from previous beliefs that the way to protect forests was to set up national parks that excluded local people. Indeed, this conservation approach is not really new to the Malagasy. They have a phrase, 'tontolo iainana', which means ‘the world about us’ — a concept of human being and nature living together in harmony.

Article based on information from: “Sacred forests conserve Madagascar's biodiversity”, afrol News, http://www.afrol.com/articles/11095 ; “Sacred sites and spiny forests”, Richard Hamilton, http://www.panda.org/news_facts/newsroom/features/news.cfm?uNewsID=8503