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Spiritual Values in Madagascar

The Starting Point for Endogenous Conservation Initiatives

Peter Schachenmann

Ancestors, taboos, spirits, rice, and cattle are Madagascar's strongest traditional foundations—indispensable "food" for most, if not all, rural Malagasy people. On the other hand, nationalism, "development," private enterprise, and conservation of biodiversity are unavoidable modern spin-offs of globalization that influence Malagasy life, even in the most remote mountain areas. How do Malagasy people deal with these opposing forces, and can they negotiate ways of life that integrate both traditional and modern values? As illustrated in the present article, experience shows that members of rural civil society, proudly upholding traditional values and remaining strongly rooted in natural and spiritual worlds such as ancestors, spirits, and sacred sites (Figure 1), can become committed actors and promoters of Voluntary Protected Area (VPA) initiatives. Ancestral spirituality, local knowledge and traditional practices, previously seen as obstacles to conservation and development, can—in partnership with scientific ecological and economic understanding—become effective tools and offer solutions for biodiversity conservation and sustainable mountain development.



A favorable legal environment

Because of its abundant and striking endemic fauna and flora, Madagascar has been a focus of attention for conservationists and tourism. But population growth and the timber industry have led to severe pressure on natural resources. Caught between external and internal views of use and conservation, mountain communities have found it difficult to determine a sustainable course of action.

Conservationists regret that little "pristine" environment is left to preserve. However, even in remote places "Nature" in Madagascar has co-evolved over centuries with "Culture" and vice versa. A strict biodiversity hotspot and protected area focus is therefore incomplete and unrealistic. For developing countries with a colonial history, this "monotheistic" approach smacks of paternalism, is often disrespectful to local people, and easily overlooks traditional value systems, indigenous knowledge, and local solutions.

Fortunately, in 1996, in accordance with the subsidiarity principle, a new law for secure local management, the "GELOSE" (Gestion Locale Securisée, No. 96-025), was promulgated, permitting devolution of natural resource management rights, duties, and responsibilities from the state to local communities. This decentralization of power and management capacity officially opened the door to initiating an important change in the relationship between those involved: previously half-hearted *stakeholders* were encouraged to become serious and committed *shareholders*; this, in turn, constituted an excellent basis for introducing the approach of Voluntary Protected Areas (VPAs), a concept coined by the IUCN to denote self-help conservation initiatives.

NGO support for endogenous development

At the onset of the often externally triggered conservation initiatives, rural com-

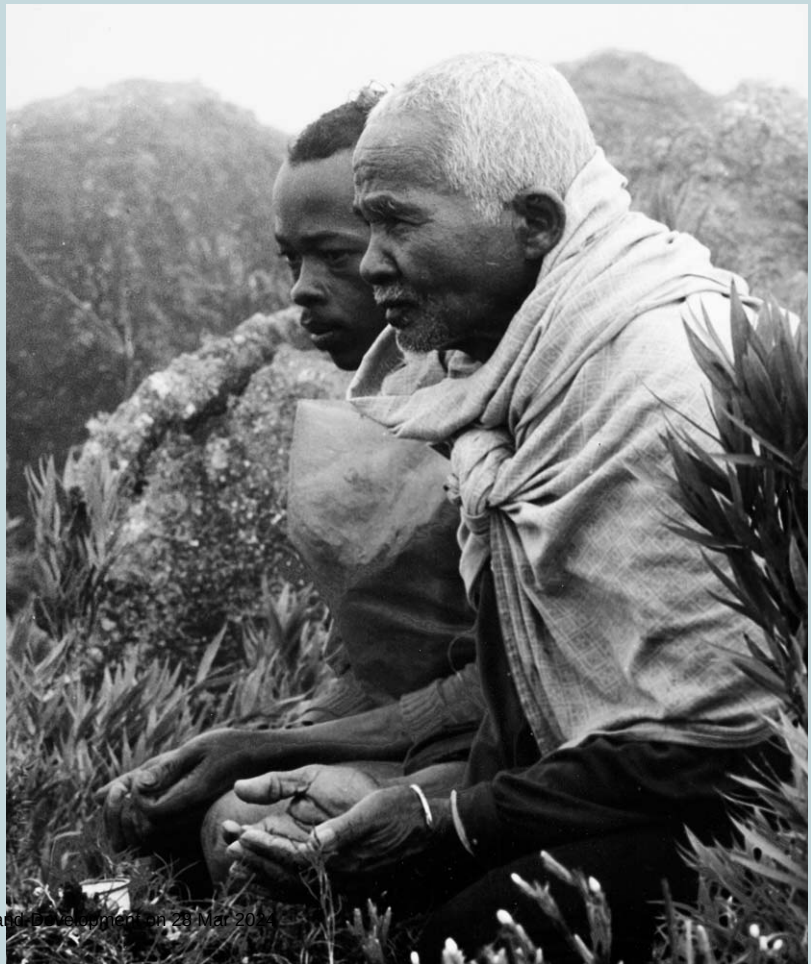


FIGURE 1 Dada Rapierre calling ancestors on the summit of Ambondrombe. (Photo by P. Schachenmann)

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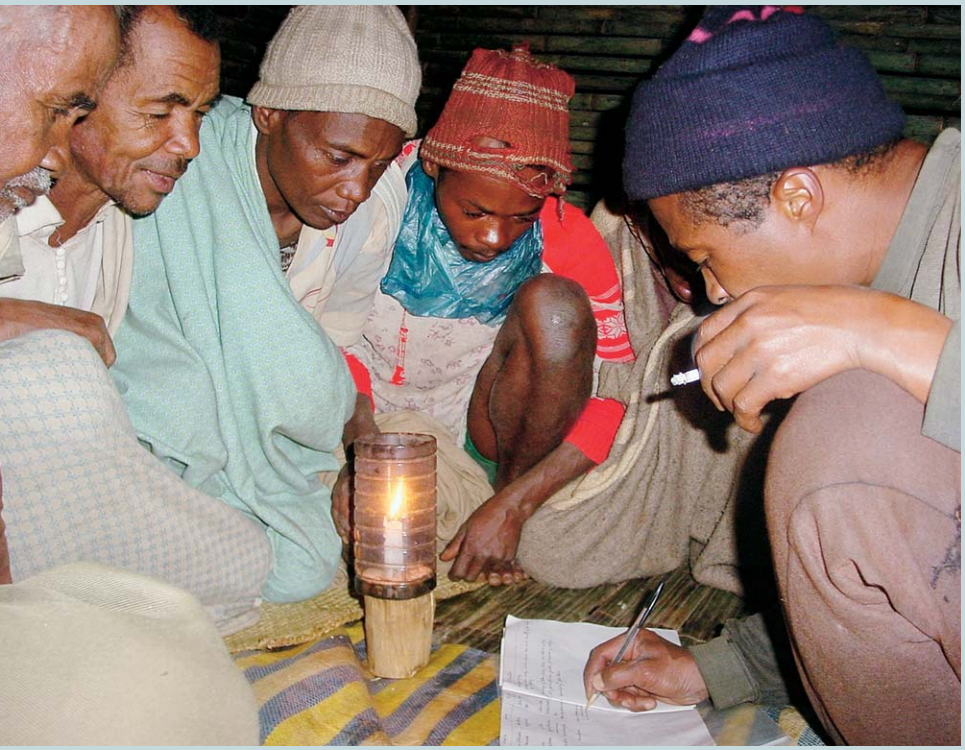


FIGURE 2 Bush school in Ambondrombe, where villagers get together, learn about biodiversity, and encounter rare and endemic forest plants found on the way up. (Photo by P. Schachenmann)

munities were challenged, however. They lacked the courage and capacity to speak up, the ability to organize themselves in action groups, and the knowledge and understanding of how a modern nation state functions, decides, and acts. Moreover, governance mechanisms were not really appropriate to deal with externally induced challenges.

Tambohitravo Malagasy (TM), the Madagascar branch of the World Mountain People Association (WMPA), brings together mountain stakeholders from all walks of life throughout the country. One of the first themes of discussion within TM was the question: "How can complex new interests coming from a mundane world, reduced to more and more 'domesticated' spaces and beliefs and provoking new conflicts, be managed without killing society's traditional values?" TM has tried to build bridges between the traditional and the modern, and therefore go forward without letting go of the past. Members of TM became facilitators but also supporters of endogenously driven processes of local development based on local spirituality (Figure 2).

Spiritual identity offers strength for negotiations

For many Malagasy highland people, Ambondrombe is a "sacred" mountain. It is situated half-way along a significant eastern humid tropical forest corridor between two national parks, Ranomafana to the north, and Andringitra to the south; 15,000 ha of humid tropical forests cover its flanks between 500 m and the peak at 1936 m. Many Malagasy people believe that Ambondrombe's clouded summits provide a refuge for their souls after death. Because of its spiritual value, the forest remained largely undisturbed, and biodiversity is still abundant. Two centuries ago the site was occupied by a clan of ancestral noble families. During the last century it became a stronghold for the Hova, the descendants of the royal family, who are holy persons by birth.

As it is 50 km from a national highway, the site was off the beaten track until recently, when a rural road rehabilitation project opened the door to multiple new interests among other ethnic groups and alien stakeholders trying to initiate "progress." In addition, politics within government agencies and national and international development and conservation NGOs gained momentum. The trigger for change was sudden new pressures on the region: scientists and conservationists were interested in biodiversity values; the first tourists started to appear; valuable tropical timber, previously off limits for commercial harvesting, attracted loggers with lorries; and landless people from other regions in Madagascar started penetrating the forests with their traditional slash-and-burn cultivation.

The case of the sacred mountain of Ambondrombe: the power of community identity regained

Rasolo Germain, an educated local leader, and Dada Rapierre, a senior spiritual leader (Ray aman-dreny) and guardian of the sacred mountain of Ambondrombe, both felt that their community had to face the challenge. These two local leaders, quite different in their backgrounds and outlook, joined hands to educate and organize the people. In a synergy of moder-

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FIGURE 3 Before the expedition, the guardian of Ambondrombe, Ramoma Pierre, known as Dada Rapierre, makes offerings and calls mountain and forest spirits for permission to enter the forest and go up the sacred mountain. (Photo by P. Schachenmann)



nity and tradition, the two leaders initiated and led a local transformation process.

Rasolo Germain, in search of help, became a founding member of Tambohitravo Malagasy. Subsequently, Dada Rapierre, the guardian of tradition and sacred values, invited some members of TM to a mythical pilgrimage to Ambondrombe's mysterious summit, half-way between the physical and metaphysical universes. The way up was marked with taboos, accompanied by sacrifices and offerings to ancestors, and religious requests for permission addressed to mountain and forest spirits (Figure 3). These signs of respect showed a profound relationship between the natural and the spiritual worlds. The expedition, initiating all participants into the local people's deep religiosity and strong cultural identity, triggered new thinking and approaches. Against this background of a spiritually imbued cultural identity, and within the framework of GELOSE, "progress without denying the past" became the guiding motto for the quest for a contractual agreement between the state and the local community.

During negotiations, the poor faced the rich, local visions and aspirations had to stand up against regional, national, and global perspectives, interests, and influences; and the demands of traditional subsistence livelihoods clashed with modern economic goals. There were and still are ever new challenges in molding and keeping together a quite heterogeneous local community for common visions, goals, and appropriate actions; but committed citizens with a clearly expressed ambition of helping themselves, and the patience and diplomatic skills to negotiate and compromise, are essential for successful outcomes. The outside facilitator, a member of TM, acted as an invisible coach: he did not take the lead but stayed in the background, thus succeeding in letting go of the power that he inevitably had as a consultant mandated by a development agency. Rasolo Germain and the local community eventually spoke in one voice and argued from a position of unity inspired by the sacred mountain of Ambondrombe, and of strength reinforced by participation in TM's forum.

Civil society, upholding an identity drawn from cultural and spiritual values, was eventually recognized by the modern nation state as official forest custodians and natural resource managers, standing up against migrants, settlers, and illegal logging. The way forward was endogenous and evolutionary, making it possible for old and new world visions to co-evolve. In this case, traditional beliefs in ancestors, taboos, and mountain and forest spirits provided the glue to hold together the community, which was thus able to defend itself against still alien modern world interests and gain its rightful place in society in order to control its own development. In the process, which lasted several years, the community near Ambondrombe has succeeded in making an inventory of natural resources, establish-

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ing demarcations, and elaborating a management plan with support from various organizations.

The case of Alan' Anjà Community Protected Area: community solidarity wins over short-term economic benefits

Alan' Anjà (meaning "the forest of Anjà") is situated near Andringitra National Park, close to the urban commune of Ambalavao and national trunk road RN7. Formed by huge boulders from an ancient rock fall, the site has spectacular granite domes, cliffs, and caves with patches of forest. Alan' Anjà was an ancestral dwelling, refuge, and burial site for noble families. Recently, the local community was divided on the future use of the area; 3 stakeholder groups fought for supremacy:

- About 15 households who saw the fertile forest soil and the water held back by the boulders as a resource for developing agriculture (bananas, corn, tomatoes, onions, beans, and other cash crops);
- A group led by elite absentee landlords who wanted to develop tourism as a source of capital;
- A group of people led by Rahaovalahy Victor, another founding member of TM (Figure 4), who were motivated by a spirit of self-help and community solidarity, and held their ancestors "sleeping" in their tombs in deep respect.

FIGURE 4 Rahaovalahy Victor, founding member of the Anjà Miray (AMI) association, in Anjà. (Photo by P. Schachenmann)



At the end of the very long dispute, community solidarity won over the other 2 visions of the future. The local community developed strategies, tools, and instruments for a voluntary community protected area, offering unique cultural and natural values to visitors.

The process leading to this outcome depended on an institutionalization of efforts: in 1999, the community organized itself and created an association called Anjà Miray (AMI), which numbered 80 members who now manage the site and activities. In 2001 the association, acknowledged by the state as a traditional stakeholder, received legal recognition as a shareholder according to the new GELOSE law. Community and state jointly drew up mechanisms for the transfer of rights of natural resources, as well as tools describing goals, rights, duties, and responsibilities for future development and management of this unique cultural and natural resource. In this case, too, the key to progress was Tambohitravo Malagasy (TM): the association of Malagasy mountain people was the catalyst for this exemplary bottom-up approach. The local village initiative evolved and became a form of self-development, rooted in traditional spiritual values. The community avoided the trap of paternalistic assistance, which often leads to adopting the passive attitude of "beneficiaries."

By 2004, Alan' Anjà had become one of the first flourishing examples of a Voluntary Protected Area (VPA) in Madagascar. The benefits were immediately visible and economically tangible. Shifting cultivation upstream stopped, reducing the problem of downstream siltation of 20 ha of paddy rice and of a 3-ha lake. The village economy, initially entirely dependent on agricul-

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FIGURE 5 Research and development on the botanical circuit in Anjà. Villagers work together with a national botanist and international students. (Photo by P. Schachenmann)



ture, was successfully diversified with the addition of ecotourism (Figure 5).

Today, 120 villagers (of whom 30 are women) are members of Anjà Miray. Many have been trained as guides and are learning to communicate in several foreign languages. Village youth groups have developed 100 ha of forest and several cave circuits for exclusive visitor enjoyment. More than 2000 tourists stopped at Alan' Anjà during 2001, and with popularity rising there were 5341 foreign visitors during 2005. All recently published guidebooks for Madagascar now include Alan' Anjà as a worthwhile place to visit. Income from moderate entry fees and the sale of handicrafts and other tourist articles has grown year by year, reaching the equivalent of over US$ 14,000 for the whole village in 2005. This in turn is growing into a sizable contribution to local development, since taxes are being paid to the local commune, the Department of Water and Forests, and the state.

Compared to the nearby Andringitra National Park, Alan Anjà has more visitors at lower costs; as such, it is far more financially sustainable than the nearby park, which survives mainly on donor and state subsidies. The site of Alan' Anjà and the association draw strength from the region's historical cultural background, its rediscovered (or re-affirmed) spiritual values, very strong roots, and the endogenous dynamics of the development process, propelled by clearly visible and economic advantages experienced daily.

Conclusion

Both cases clearly show that traditional cultural values, a spirit of self-help, and solidarity, combined with limited coaching assistance offered as a form of mutual learning, can be powerful engines for natural resource conservation, economic diversification, and sustainable mountain development. Progress without denying the past is possible. In the case of Ambondrombe, a respected elder working with an educated local promoter was the catalyst for the transformation process. In the case of the historic site of Alan' Anjà, the trigger for transformation was a group of young community members motivated by a leader with a vision of communal economic development.

When change has its roots in indigenous and autonomous initiatives, is catalyzed by strong local leaders—be they old or young, men or women—and is based on a self-help spirit, traditional solidarity (*fihavanana*), and cultural values that uphold local spirituality, sustainable mountain development seems feasible. The crucial role of a facilitator—in these 2 cases Tambohitravo Malagasy—was to encourage, foster, and strengthen indigenous community capacity for negotiation with modern nation-state institutions and global stakeholders and players. TM did nothing but offer a trusted indigenous platform for brainstorming and discussion, providing a suitable environment for collective decision making and conflict resolution between old and new world visions and values. Thus, humiliated "beneficiaries" or powerless stakeholders may slowly evolve towards becoming proud, strong, and committed shareholders. Such a process makes it possible to address social injustice more effectively, and to negotiate common institutional agreements and actions. Time will tell whether these 2 localized and shorter-term success stories can serve as models for pathways to sustainable mountain development.

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