



Bundesministerium
für Bildung
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NACHHALTIGES
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Participatory research to support sustainable land management on the Mahafaly Plateau in south-western Madagascar

Taboos as a key element for nature conservation in the Tanalana territory South-Western Madagascar



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September 2015

Abstract

Taboos are of the key elements defining the identity of the *Tanalana*. They play an essential role in the traditional preservation of the natural ecosystem on the Mahafale plateau. The main purpose of this paper is to show how the *Tanalana* inhabitants intrinsically take care of the preservation and the conservation of their natural environment. Although taboos can be related to all parts of life, we concentrated our research on those taboos linked to the flora, the fauna and the living space.

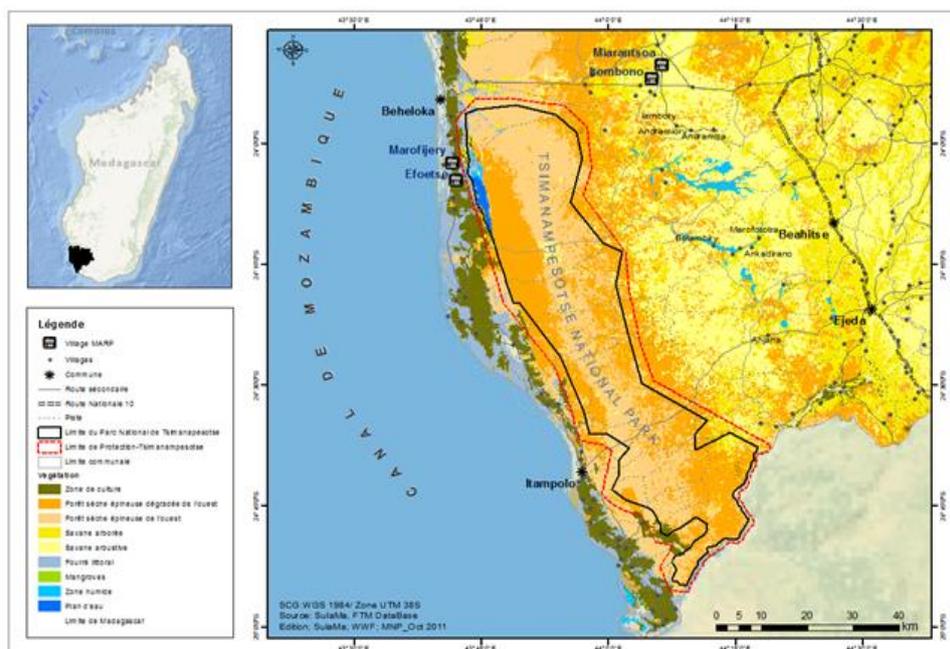
This product is helpful to everyone working or visiting the *Tanalana* territory, from the developing workers, or researchers to the tourists to better understand the habits and traditions of this region.

Introduction

To respect taboos is part of the local belief of the inhabitants of the Mahafaly region (see map 1). Taboos can be defined as a religious prohibitive system revealing the holy or cursed dimension of objects or persons. In the Tanalana dialect, the term “faly” is used to characterize a certain entity as “taboo” or “sacred”, for example *falin-draza* (ancestral taboo) or *tane faly* (holy territory).

The taboos are omnipresent in the daily life of the Tanalana ethnical group and are related to almost every socio-economic and cultural aspect of their society. We noticed that they play an essential role in their nutrition and their conception of timing and space. According to different sources, these taboos come from some divinity, or are the product of some genies (locally called *tambahoake* or *koko*). Sometimes, it is also said, that taboos come from the ancestors or formulated by traditional healers (diviner-healer and the possessed).

We will not expose the totality of the existing taboos within the Tanalana community here. We rather aim to show the importance of such rules for the sustainable conservation of the Tanalana space, all around the *Tsimanampetsotse* National Park.



Map 1 : Localization of the different villages visited during our research.

Source: Team SigSuLaMa

I. Taboos related to animals

Among the various Tanalana taboos related to wildlife, we chose to focus on the quail, the *do* and the turtle.

A. The quail or *kibo* (*cotrunis communis*)

The quail (*kibo*) is a bird considered by the Tanalana as a food taboo. According to Tanalana's oral tradition, a quail did its best to protect its offspring from a human looking for his own son, who was kidnapped. Surprised by the determination of this bird, the human gave up and made the decision to go after the kidnappers of his son to get him back. This bird species is thus not endangered in the Tanalana territory.

B. The *do* or the *kako* (*Acrantophis madagascariensis*)

The *do* (boa) is a sacred snake living in the Tanalana territory. People believe that it was created by the genies of the forest, called *tambahoake*. For this reason, it is strictly respected by the inhabitants; even when the *do* eats eggs or chickens from the people. They cannot hurt it and have to immediately bring it back under the tamarind tree, which is considered a resting place for the *tambahoake*. It is a mark of respect for this animal and its creator to take care of it. The *do* shows up mostly during the night and is considered as a sign of good fortune (for rain) and often delivers a divine message.

C. The turtle (*Geochelone radiata*)

In the case of the turtle, it is said, that this animal was used to be eaten a long time ago. But since the spouse of a chief used it as seat, its consumption has been prohibited. According to other testimonies, this animal might have broken the ancestral clay pan, and is now always considered as ominous.

Photo 1: quail or *kibo*.



Tahirindraza, August 2014,
Ankiletelo, rural commune of
Itampolo, south-west
Madagascar

Photo 2 : a *do*



Daniel Austin, from Madagascar-
photography.com, consulted on
12.05.2015

Photo 3: a turtle.



Tahirindraza, April 2013,
Anjamatave, rural commune of
Beheloke, south-west
Madagascar

II. Holy trees and others

According to the Tanalana perception, there are two categories of trees: the sacred and the cursed trees.

A. The sacred trees

The inhabitants qualify them as the supreme divinity or « king » of all trees. The most cited trees are the *katrafà*, the *kile*, the *samata*, the *zà* and the *mendorave*.

- **The *katrafà*** (*Cedrelopsis grevei*)

The *katrafà* is used to build the traditional house. It is also used for the creation of a *hazomanga* (holy pale), or as carburant to cook the sacred meat served to the ancestors.

- **The *kile*** (*tamarindus indica*)

This tamarind, locally called *kile*, plays an important role within the Tanalana society and is considered as the supreme tree. It embodies the wisdom and the magnitude, which also explains why the elders, particularly the owner of this tree, are also called *kile*.

There are many categories of the tamarind tree. The ordinary one is used as a relaxing and dialogue place. It is dedicated to the familial or lineage-relatives meetings. The sacred one is a place where rituals are performed. Additionally, this tree is a key element during the funerals: before being buried in the ancestral grave, the body of a deceased, originally coming from another region, is laid under a tamarind (outside of the village). This tamarind is commonly called *famangana* and is also considered as sacred. Naturally, it must not be spoiled, otherwise the spirits belonging to it will take revenge against the offender.

- **The *samata*** (*Euphorbia stenoclada*)

The *samata* is another important tree in the Tanalana society. It is especially used as fodder for livestock. The location of the *samata* is also used to perform diverse rituals. Sacred familial objects are placed for example all around or even on the tree, whereas the fetishes are put at its base. It is also appreciated for providing shadow, especially when inhabitants come back from their field or from transhumance during the dry season.

- **The *zà*** (*Adansonia zà*)

The *zà* (baobab) is used for diverse reasons for example its base is used to collect water for the households during the warm period. The tree provides also fibres used to bind together the hands and the foot of the deceased, in order to let its corps as straight as possible.

- **The *mendorave*** (*Albiza tulearensis*)

The *mendorave* is a sacred species (*faly*) and exclusively used for the confection of the coffins. It symbolizes both the death and the afterlife. Its red shining wood is a hard and resistant material. If a deceased is buried without a coffin made from *mendorave* wood, he/she will be qualified as “badly buried”.

Photo 4: two zebus relaxing under a *samata* tree



Tahirindraza, April 2012,
Belemboke, rural commune of
Beheloke, south-west Madagascar

Photo 5: holy tamarind of
Ankilempanjaka. Tree used for rituals,
here surrounded by bushes



Tahirindraza, April 2012, village of
Anakarake, rural commune of
Beheloke, south-west Madagascar

Photo 6: baobabs



Tahirindraza, April 2013, village of
Itombone, rural commune of
Beheloke, south-west Madagascar

B. Cursed trees

These trees are considered as inferior for rituals. Because of their bad reputation, the local population avoids using them for any ancestral ritual. They are afraid that otherwise their requests addressed to the ancestors and God might fail.

- **The *fatra*** (*Terminalia ulexoides*)

This species has the power to deflect the good fortune of a person, or prevents them to receive the blessing from the ancestors and God. Thus, this tree is used by the diviners to curse somebody. The term *fatra* derives from the verb *mamatratse* (<*mam-[f]atratse*), which means “to avoid development”.

- **The *laro*** (*Euphorbia tirucalli*)

This tree is also used to curse somebody or something. The term *laro* implies a sort of extermination.

- **The *hatakatake*** (*Albizia hatakataka*)

The term *hatakatake* derives from the repetition of the word *hatake* (to beg). This tree is used by the diviners to force the cursed person to beg continuously. Even if this tree is poorly esteemed, it forms part in the preparation of funerals. Its fibres are used to bind together the hands and the foot of the deceased.

In spite of their obvious cultural key role, these sacred and cursed trees are now threatened and become increasingly rare, due to intensive use and illegal clearance.

Photo 7 : *hatakatake tree*

Tahirindraza, August 2012, Ankilebory-sud, rural commune of Beheloke

III Taboos related to the man-made space

A. Taboos related to animal husbandry

Livestock keeping is a very important activity for the Tanalana. That is why everything related to the zebu is considered as taboo. This strategy helps to manage this wealth in a sustainable way. For example, it is prohibited to use dung for agricultural activity. This restriction has been formulated by the diviner-healers and concerns in particular the coral. It is also prohibited to cut or burn trees around the coral.

B. Taboos related to the *hazomanga*

Holy or ritual wood pales, belonging to a lineage or a clan, constitute the *hazomanga*. The Tanalana venerate the *hazomanga*. Furthermore, the place, where it is planted, is considered sacred and thus cannot be desecrated. It is strictly forbidden to cut this tree and to clear a part of the forest around the *hazomanga* as it might desecrate its ancestral value. It is also prohibited to wear shoes, gold jewels, pants and skirts at the *hazomanga* place.

Photo 8 : *hazomanga*

Tahirindraza. October 2011, Belemboke, rural commune of Beheloke, south-west Madagascar

C. Taboos related to water wells

Vovon-draza are wells created by the ancestors. Most of them are used to supply for the households' needs. The inhabitants put the umbilical cord of the newborns close to these ancestral wells. Some of the names of these wells originate from the names of Tanalana villages, like the *vovon-draza* named *Efoetse* and *Anakarake*. It is also prohibited to soil the wells and their surroundings, because the inhabitants usually collect water and perform rituals there.

IV. Taboos related to the natural space

Taboos related to the natural space concern water holes such as lakes and resurgences; as well as forests and caves. These natural spaces are occupied by supernatural beings, who created the taboos.

A. Taboos related to water points

In the Tanalana region, most of the water holes are qualified as *faly* (taboo), commonly named *rano faly* (sacred pond or water hole). The majority of the water holes around the *Tsimanampetsotse* National Park are sacred and almost all are wells from the limestone plateau, like the springs of *Remandé*, *Andranoaombe*, *Manavambey* or *Manavamasay*, and the grotto *Mitoho*. Its water is sweet and provides the habitat for the famous blind fish (*Typhleotris madagascariensis*), which are also taboo. At the edges of *Tsimanampetsotse* salt lake there grow certain types of rushes as the *vondro* (*Typha*), the *boboke* and the *saro*. At its center there are plenty of seaweeds, on which surface bird species like flamingos (*Phoeniconaias Minor*), teals (or *vivý*) look for food. The inhabitants believe that these places are protected by the *Tambahoake*, which are the owners of these water points. Plenty of taboos are related to them such as not to soil them, and not to kill/hunt animals living around or over them. If the taboos are transgressed, these supernatural beings may, immediately or later, manifest their anger. However, these places play a key role, particularly within traditional healing and in the rituals for the well-being of the local population. To benefit from these places, it is recommended to bring offerings like red rum, goats or black chickens there.

Photo 9: resurgence of *Remande*



Tahirindraza, August 2014, *Tsimanampetsotse* National Park

Photo 10: holy lake of *Tsimanampetsotse*



Tahirindraza, August 2014

Photo 11: the cave of *Mitoho*



Tahirindraza, August 2014, *Tsimanampetsotse* National Park

B. Taboos related to the forest or the *Falin'ala*

In the Tanalana region, the sacred forest is commonly called *ala faly*. This classification is true for all forests around the sacred or taboo water points due to the supernatural beings living (*tambahoake* and *koko*) there. Further, the forest with burial sites or other locations where Tanalana perform rituals are *ala fady* (like the sacred place of the *hazomanga*). In all these places, it is prohibited to cut or clear trees, because they are part of this estate; to hunt and mistreat animals living there; and to urinate or to defecate.

C. Taboos related to caves

There are plenty of grottos in the *Tsimanampetsotse* National Park. Many taboos must be respected when people enter these places, for example it is forbidden to wear red clothes, to urinate, to spit, to make fire or to use flashlight.

Conclusion

As we showed above, Tanalana have their own ways to manage their natural environment. This knowledge is inherited from the fore-fathers and has been passed down many generations. They are aware that the destruction of this ecosystem has consequences on their social, economic and particularly cultural life.

In the Tanalana belief, the accidental or intentional disobedience from these taboos creates problems. As a consequence, people may not be able to develop the agricultural or pastoral activity, or they may suffer from an unknown or hard-curable sickness, or even die. To appease the anger of the fore-fathers or *Tambahoake*, those who did not respect the taboos, have to accomplish a purification ritual.

All in all, this traditional method to preserve nature is different from the modern notion of sustainable natural resource management. Both concepts may be complementary and harmonized for the future generations.

Annex

Table : Samples of sacred patrimonies in the Tanalana territory						
Place	Water points	Water holes	Forests	Caves	Ritual places	Trees
Itombone	The sihanake of Itombone		Malaikaike	Malaikaike	Grave of Tsiharame	Ankilemilieto
Ampotake	The sihanake of Ampotake		Vohitelo, Rekapila			
Beheloke	Antsirasira		Berombo, Anatevondro, Analakoko		Hazomanga	Ranjo of Romefe, ranjo of Kakavave
Efoetse	The sihanake of Efoetse				The sihanake of Efoetse	Zoenarivo
Anakarake		Anakarake, Masonalimbe			Hazomanga	Ankilempanjaka, Erepake
Manasy		Manasy, Ankilemihare			Hazomanga	Ankilemihare
Tsimanam-petsotse National Park		Ambararata, Manava bey, Manava masay, Andranoaombe	The entire forest of the park	Mitoho, Resadro	Ambararata, Manava bey, Manava masay, Andranoaombe, Mitoho, Resadro	All the trees of the park

Tahirindraza, May 2015, Toliara

