

Community Responsibility and Involvement in Emergency Preparedness and Response

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Resumen

Concienciación y participación de la comunidad en la prevención de riesgos y los planes de urgencia

En Madagascar se producen situaciones de emergencia de todo tipo (inundaciones, incendios, etc.), que en la mayoría de los casos son ignoradas por la población o sólo suscitan su indiferencia, pese a que existen por otro lado múltiples ejemplos de comunidades locales que aprecian su patrimonio cultural y participan en su protección.

Las zonas urbanas del país están sometidas a transformaciones causadas por el crecimiento demográfico, el desarrollo urbano y la contaminación, que provocan alteraciones en la arquitectura de las casas y los monumentos funerarios. Sólo había un conjunto monumental en zona urbana - "Rova" o Palacio de la Reina - que constituía un vestigio intacto del patrimonio cultural colectivo, pero el incendio de que fue víctima en 1995 destruyó casi por completo este testigo del pasado. Se debe apoyar, en cooperación con organismos nacionales e internacionales, la realización de una labor educativa entre la población local para estrechar los vínculos entre ésta y los sitios culturales importantes del país. Los resultados de una labor de este tipo son prometedores, tal como ha puesto de relieve el proyecto "Babay-Lohavohitra", que se ha llevado a cabo en un lugar de culto tradicional situado en una región donde la vida comunitaria todavía es muy dinámica.

Résumé

La responsabilisation de la communauté et sa participation à la prévention des risques et aux plans d'urgence

Madagascar est le théâtre de multiples et tout type de situations d'urgence (inondations, incendies, etc.), provoquant majoritairement indifférence et ignorance de la part de la population malgré de nombreux exemples d'implication de la communauté locale attachée à son patrimoine culturel. Par tradition, le peuple malgache témoigne un respect presque sacré au patrimoine culturel et à ses vestiges. Or, du fait du développement urbain, de la pollution et de la croissance démographique, les zones urbaines de Madagascar connaissent d'importants changements qui affectent notamment l'architecture des maisons et l'emplacement des tombes. Seul un monument, le Rova, subsistait inchangé portant témoignage de ce patrimoine collectif. Mais l'incendie de 1995 a détruit ce vestige unique. En coopération avec des organismes nationaux et internationaux, des efforts éducatifs en faveur de la population locale doivent être favorisés afin de renouer les liens entre cette

population et certains sites majeurs de la région. Les résultats sont prometteurs comme l'a montré le projet "Babay-Lohavohitra", lieu de culte traditionnel où les communautés sont encore très actives.

Madagascar, as is the case of many other countries in the world, has experienced emergency situations of various kinds, such as floods and fire, plus attitudes which further contribute to the problem, for example indifference and ignorance. Museums and scholars, indeed everyone has a duty to find ways to preserve cultural heritage (both tangible and intangible) so that people can experience progress in harmony. Local community involvement in emergency preparedness and response may be "easy" as long as their traditions are respected, but it demands education and awareness raising. Many examples show that local traditions and community involvement can help solve difficulties and problems in Malagasy society, where written or State laws have yet to take root.

Historical data shows that the Malagasy people are attached to cultural heritage objects — *objets témoins* — from their past. Cultural heritage is an inheritance passed on by the ancestors and every person must respect and take care of it. It includes old sites, tombs, sacred sites, royal relics, monuments and even simple objects. Today, many non-written rules are still scrupulously observed. For example, proverbs used to illustrate points in "Kabary" (literally meaning speech, discourse or a type of stylised oratory) often include warnings and urge people to comply with ancestral mores and customs.

Successive reigning dynasties used these traditions in part to legitimise their power while also endowing this heritage with a sacred character. Kings, queens, princes and princesses used and abused this tool to control their dependents. They even succeeded in spreading the belief that they were the only "sacred" beings. In the end, with clever and continuous manipulation of this ideology, the royal persons themselves became sacred.

The notion is deeply anchored in Malagasy culture. A first and defining characteristic of heritage preservation has been to keep it apart from any "contamination", pollution or impurity. Any transgression of ancestral rules and laws relating to heritage, whether intentional or not, is a serious offence. The guilty parties are condemned to atone for or purify their offence through a set of rituals. The sanction is primarily moral but also has material and financial overtones as the rites often involve sacrifice or gifts.

Today, the so-called modern era has eroded this devotion, especially in urban areas. Various internal and external influences require new behaviour patterns from the Malagasy. Antananarivo, the capital, has probably seen the highest number of cases of "accepted" transgressions, but the loss of traditions has given rise to a great deal of nostalgia. The first contacts with Europeans generated much confusion. The architecture of houses and tombs changed; people dared to build houses in stone, materials formerly reserved for the abode of the dead.

One of the first acts of the colonial administration was to move the royal tombs, without necessarily respecting ancestral customs. Urban development and demographic growth also made it impossible to respect the sacred features of spatial arrangement based on cardinal points. The gates to the royal city, made with gigantic stone disks which encoded the social hierarchy of the era, soon disappeared. Today only one remains; the sacred stones are only a memory. Today too, the few sacred springs still in use are drying up and are victims of ever increasing pollution.

Only one monument, the Rova (Queen's Palace) remained as testimony to this collective heritage. But it too was lost, consumed in a fire in 1995. The disaster has been experienced not in terms of losing a museum collection, but as a profound moral shock with consequences which have not yet been fully measured. The real horror was the burning of the royal remains. The fact that the bodies were indecently exposed to the populace was the most reprehensible act for the people. This "pollution" shocked all Malagasy to the core.

The hills around Antananarivo, some of which are important archaeological sites, are the focus for very lucrative land speculation, but the sites remain sacred as they were inhabited by ancient Kings or Queens or their close relatives. Laws and regulations exist to protect this heritage but the means to enforce them are sorely missing.

In the countryside, in the rural context, the situation is different. The population still respects the ancestral legacy but hopes for quick profits are beginning to erode its hold, and local communities have very few means of true defence in the face of outside forces. Facts over the last fifty years show that the population can only delay an action. Financial and economic imperatives inevitably take the upper hand.

Archaeological sites are the most vulnerable. In the majority of cases, the current occupants of the land do not have any direct ties to the remains. For some years now, we have begun to educate the local population about the sacred nature of these sites. For our "Babay-Lohavohitra" project we are trying to establish a tie between the population and some of the major sites in the region, requiring permanent dialogue over many years, but the results are promising.

Babay and Lohavohitra are located about forty kilometres north of Antananarivo. These are old archaeological hill sites (about 1,510m above sea level) surrounded by ditches, dating from the 15th or 16th century, and where people today still perform traditional rites for the (royal) ancestors. These sites were chosen for their importance to the local community, to conduct a programme to preserve cultural heritage. The area includes a natural forest where traditional healers continue to collect medicinal plants for curing many kinds of disease, especially important when people cannot afford to buy imported medicines. In this forest, sacred places and sacred springs are also worshipped and, at the tombs, local people from surrounding areas or far away come to perform traditional religious rites.

After almost ten years, we have succeeded in making people aware of the importance of sites and of taking care of them, explaining that

they might also be a source of profit, both moral and material. During scientific reconnaissance and investigation, archaeological excavations, botanical collection and other missions, the local population has been involved and, alongside scholars, have discovered traces from the past and realised how rich their environment is. From our perspective, this approach is also a way of “recycling science” for a large audience, and as a result the communities are proud of their cultural heritage. The local population is now ready to work closely with us to re-introduce and recover traditional knowledge, products, techniques, games, handicrafts, etc. which they know are their cultural “property”, their cultural heritage. The local community is very keen to retain this experience and is conscious that it is not undesirable to follow tradition. The experience is still in progress and we are continuing our dialogue with local communities, convinced that this approach may help to change their attitude and ease them into the new millennium without culture shock. The next step could be to make people accept that they can have many things at the same time. A common saying is: “You may have either Babay or Lohavohitra, but you can’t have both at the same time”. We hope to replace this with the idea that different ways of life can be combined and that they are not incompatible.

In general, sacred sites are still relatively well protected. A permit from the village elders or notables is needed to gain access, but thieves can always manage to steal relics or funeral ornaments, selling them for absurd amounts compared to the value of the objects on the international market (e.g. the funeral statues from the Sakalava region, in western Madagascar). In these cases of theft or destruction, the vigilance of the local community cannot be questioned. It remains efficient internally but there is no hope in the face of outside forces taking advantage of the people’s extreme poverty.

Madagascar may become an interesting country case study to evaluate the role and the strength of local communities in preserving their heritage. The will is still there and our role would be to help them in this effort. For this, the experience of “Babay-Lohavohitra” needs to be extended to other places or an appropriate action framework should be developed for each community. General awareness raising at a national level is certainly needed but alone will be far from sufficient. Many attempts have been undertaken and continue. In addition to the National Committee of ICOM, the Ministry of Culture, other associations and NGOs for the preservation of cultural heritage have been working in their individual capacities. For example, CARPS (*Cellule d’Appui, de Réflexion, de Programmation et de Suivi*) and MIKOLO (*Mikajy ny Kolontsaina*, for safeguarding, protecting and enhancing heritage) are working with the Urban Commune of Antananarivo to preserve and restore different sites. This has helped set up a fire-fighting system and similar actions have been undertaken by the MAMELOMASO Association (founded in 1995, after the fire of the Queen’s Palace) on the Ambohimanga site, which is on the World Heritage List. Another NGO *Les Amis du Patrimoine de Madagascar* does similar work.

Many examples could be cited showing that local traditions can help solve difficulties and problems in societies where written laws have yet to take root. We mentioned Kabary (speech or discourse), a form of oratory found in all Malagasy societies and which is used for ceremonies or when

people from the villages gather to study problems and find solutions. There is also the Fokonolona, an assembly of people from the village. At Fokonolona meetings, held using Kabary, the concerns of community members are presented and are also seen in relation to specific tasks. The solidarity of the population, as expressed at the time of the Queen's Palace fire, may be used to reach goals agreed on or set by the community. Local traditions can help revive traditional knowledge so that communities are proud of their cultural heritage.

Modern change should be culturally acceptable and harmonised. No one can impose anything on anyone. The Malagasy determination to protect their heritage remains not only deeply anchored and latent within the people's subconscious but can also appear sporadically, sometimes in a violent way, as for example if new buildings are constructed on sacred sites, or in a more passive way, through continued allegiance to ancestral religious practices.

The State should recognise the Malagasy and their respect for ancestral values and heritage, declaring that it does not constitute a hindrance to development, quite the opposite. It is impossible to make a society progress when it has lost its roots and references.

To conclude this short presentation, as stated in the ICOM-CC (Conservation) statutes: "all people in the world, wherever they live will not succeed and prosper without their cultural past. In our global village we must safeguard our past in order to guarantee our future." We believe that local communities must be made aware of the fact that heritage and its preservation and conservation go hand in hand with development. Museums and other organisations have an important role to play in the field of preserving cultural heritage, and have the duty to educate, train and involve communities in different ways, one aspect being training in the field of emergency situations, a programme which will have the communities fully involved when they know that this is their "property".