

Fire of the Rova, the Queen's Palace, in Antananarivo

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Resumen

El incendio del "Rova", el Palacio de la Reina de Antananarivo

Una noche de noviembre de 1995, un incendio destruyó el "Rova", el Palacio de la Reina, así como algunos edificios anejos, dejando solamente intacto el 20% de las colecciones albergadas en ellos. Este incendio, criminal o accidental, se llevó consigo la memoria colectiva de todo un pueblo. A raíz de esta catástrofe y de la consternación popular subsiguiente se creó el Comité Nacional para la Operación "Rova", auspiciado por la UNESCO.

Está siendo muy largo el camino para rehabilitar este bien del patrimonio cultural y reconstituir las costumbres y tradiciones perdidas, no sólo a causa de las interpretaciones subjetivas de éstas, sino también a causa de la falta de medios de financiación para reconstruir los edificios deteriorados. El pueblo malgache ha vivido una luctuosa catástrofe nacional, cuyo resultado ha sido la destrucción de un conjunto de monumentos excepcionales, de los que sólo quedan las ruinas que pueden contemplar los visitantes llegados del mundo entero.

Résumé

L'incendie du Rova, le Palais de la Reine, à Antananarivo

Une nuit de novembre 1995, le feu détruisit dans ses flammes le Palais de la Reine et certains monuments annexes, ne laissant derrière lui que 20 % des collections. Cet incendie, criminel ou accidentel, a emporté avec lui la mémoire collective d'un peuple. Après un mouvement de panique populaire dans les jours qui suivirent l'incendie et suite à un appel à la solidarité internationale lancé par l'UNESCO, de cette catastrophe est né le Comité national pour l'opération Rova.

La réhabilitation du palais, la reconstitution des traditions perdues et le sauvetage de ce patrimoine culturel allaient prendre plusieurs années en raison des divergences d'opinions et d'interprétations sur les coutumes et les traditions au sein des divers groupes en présence, ainsi que du manque de financement pour la restauration des bâtiments endommagés. C'est un véritable deuil national qu'ont vécu les Malgaches, l'incendie laissant place non plus à un ensemble de monuments exceptionnels mais à de simples ruines, semblables à celles que les visiteurs peuvent voir à travers le monde.

On the night of November 6, 1995, a fire destroyed all the monuments of the Queen's Palace, a site that dominated Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar. The royal tombs, the individual royal sites (Tranovola, Manjakamiadana, Mahitsielafanjaka, Manampisoa and Besakana), and the temple were reduced to ashes. Some of the collections of artefacts (less than 20%) were saved from the flames.

Consternation, sadness and anger were the feelings shared by all Malagasy who felt helpless in the face of such a disaster. The politicians made a unanimous statement on the urgent need to restore the Rova, the Malagasy term for palace. Hypotheses abounded: lack of precautions, an accident or criminal act. The official investigation concluded very quickly, too quickly in the eyes of some, that it was an accident.

UNESCO recommended that an independent committee of local experts be set up to tackle the issue. This produced the "DNOR" or National Direction of the Rova Operation. At the same time, the Ministry of Culture was overseeing the operations to set up an advisory committee to help the DNOR.

Over the first months, emergency aid poured in from different sources. The money was used to clean up the site, have archaeological remains removed by archaeologists from the university, remedy dangerous situations, and draw up documents for reconstruction work. The first estimate for costs amounted to tens of millions of US dollars. The time frame for the project was estimated at five years.

In addition to financial and technical problems, the reconstruction of the Rova gave rise to a range of social reactions. On the night of the fire, a bizarre event took place. The body of one of the queens was found in the public square in the centre of the city. The following day these royal remains were the subject of a funeral vigil attended by many thousands. Officials came to pay tribute, bowing down in front of the body which was never identified.

The streets of the capital were full of small groups crying in grief and threatening possible culprits. People accused, in turn, government officials, social groups from outside the capital, foreign powers and so on. An explanation was needed and immediately. A series of dignitaries and politicians appeared on radio and television to support their different hypotheses. The fire was presented as a punishment or warning from ancestors. The Malagasy people felt a shared sense of guilt for past conduct in relation to ancestral values.

After a few days this popular movement of panic died down. The purported royal remains were put back in what remained of the royal tombs of the Rova. It was time to tackle the problem of reconstruction.

Given the size of the problem and the resources needed, priorities had to be set. The temple, which was the least affected part of the site, had to be the first element restored. Work concentrated on shoring up the stone walls of the main palace that threatened to collapse. The archaeologists continued their work drawing up an inventory and excavating the ruins. This was all that could be done in the course of the first months.

The general population focused on two aspects: the restoration of the roof of the main palace, and the royal tombs. People felt uneasy at the sight of the decapitated palace. If the roof was in place, at least there could be the illusion that the palace was still standing. In fact it was just as urgent to bring back the visual and sacred symbol of royal power which was still intact in the hearts of the Malagasy, despite the vicissitudes of the country's political past.

The rehabilitation of the sacred site was a major concern. With the fire, the site had been "sullied" and it was of the utmost necessity to have it purified. Ceremonies centred on the royal tombs were therefore organised to ask for forgiveness for any social wrongs committed, to re-establish the sacred character of the site and to ensure that restoration work was carried out without incident.

This type of ceremony was repeated later for various reasons. The clans of the keepers of tradition each had their own interpretation of the facts. The discussions did not focus so much on the physical rehabilitation of the monuments as on the way it would be undertaken. The episode of the "central pillar", for example, took a passionate turn. The DNOR declared it was technically impossible to replace the wooden pillar in the middle of the stone ruins of the main palace. The wooden pillar, which was more than 40 metres high, was the beginning of a major controversy. Some dignitaries insisted that the pillar should be put back in place using whatever means were required, and these arguments undermined the authority and expertise of the DNOR. The pillar in fact had dual symbolism. Men had carried it on their backs from the eastern region of Madagascar and popular opinion believed it should be made again, carved from a single piece of wood. The position of the huge tree trunk symbolised the power of the central kingdom in relation to the main pillars in the four corners of the building. It was very important that the symbol should not disappear. There was even one suggestion that a virtual pillar could be set up. The famous pillar, said to be carved from one log, was actually a series of cylindrical blocks.

Technical solutions for the task clashed at every turn with the demands and traditions of various groups who rarely agreed among themselves. Disagreements ranged from the choice of day to start work through to the type of wood to be used.

Tombs set as priorities were delayed as no consensus could be reached on how to conduct the work. Everything to do with the royal remains was highly sensitive. The direct or supposed descendants of these reigning families had their own opinions. They were potentially the legitimate heirs; the only problem was that there were so many of them and with so many diverging points of view. It was as if every royal faction wanted to use the work as a way of asserting their position within the hierarchy of royal families. This attitude meant that the rest of the population felt helpless and excluded. This reached fever pitch in the first few months, but as the years have gone by, people have learned that life goes on without the Rova.

The DNOR quickly drew up the technical documents needed to request local, bilateral and multinational financing. Evidence had to be provided showing that the work was beyond local capacities. With the budget and

schedule, reconstruction would take several decades. It was vital to find substantial international help. Alas this proved to be very parsimonious, only helping with the most pressing needs.

During the funding phases the site was closed to the public for reasons of security and safety. This was the most difficult period for a lot of Malagasy who used to go to the palace not to visit the museum, but to "speak" with these, the most important of their ancestors, the Kings and Queens for whom they show great reverence, giving them the title "Masina" or "sacred". The royal tombs were the loftiest places for prayer, so when the people were deprived of access to the site, they had to fall back on sites far from the city which were less "efficacious" in generating real protection from the trials and tribulations of daily life. It was reported (although there was no proof) that some churchgoers tried to bribe the guards to gain access to the tombs so as to whisper their requests there. This phenomenon went almost unobserved by the persons in charge, but had in fact upset a large part of the population. Most people urged the authorities to rebuild the Rova not so much for the monuments as for the symbolism. It was particularly important to recover the sacred, consecrated character of the site and to do this as quickly as possible.

In the meantime, the Malagasy gaze at the palace, unfailingly every day, hoping that one day it will recover its past splendour. The site is again open to the public and can be visited the same way as other ruins around the world. The presentation of the monuments, showing their foundations alone, depends on the quality of the explanations given by the guide.