
Madagascar: Colonialism as the historical root cause of deforestation

Madagascar's historic problem of deforestation can be linked to the detrimental policies of the colonial state in terms of land use and agriculture. The deforestation problem in Madagascar began when it was annexed as a French colony in 1896. An uncertain political climate and famine followed this annexation, and many of the Malagasy fled to the woods for survival. These farmers started practicing the method of shifting cultivation as a means of survival.

Madagascar's domestic economy, from the beginning of colonial times, has been geared toward export promotion. Exports consisted primarily of coffee, but rice and beef were sold abroad as well. Coffee was originally planted on only the east coast, but expanded across the island when it became apparent that producers were able to generate large profits. Because of this expansion of coffee, the island's economic development was uneven. Rice shortages resulted as early as 1911 because of the excess demand for labor in the coffee sector, and the nation's "food security" began to erode. Rice was also more vulnerable to changes in the weather and cyclones, which exacerbated the shortages. Peasants that once worked cultivating the nation's rice moved into regions where they were able to cultivate coffee because of the higher wages. These peasants would then clear additional land so that they could practice shifting cultivation and generate enough food to subsist.

In response to the increasing shifting cultivation, or tavy as it is called locally, the Governor General prohibited its practice in 1909. The state's objective of this ban was to try and save what was left of the nation's forest as well as impose "rational forest resource management". However, the land set aside by the state for the nation's rice cultivation was inefficient because of soil problems. The policy was therefore ineffective in erasing Madagascar's rice production problem. The government also thought that the ban would give them a greater ability to collect taxes because it would be easier to locate citizens if they were forced to remain in one place.

The Malagasy interpretation of the ban was almost entirely opposite of the state's intentions. They viewed wage work as equivalent to enslavement and many revolts took place. Not only did the Malagasy ignore the ban, but they illegally burned many acres of forest in protest. "The ban elevated the practice of tavy to a symbol of independence and liberty from colonial rule." The Malagasy viewed shifting cultivation as a sacred means of survival that they were taught by their ancestors.

The forest degradation problem became even more serious when the state decided to open up the island's forests to logging concessions in 1921. Many viewed it as ironic that the state allowed massive clear cutting on concessions while the ban on shifting cultivation was still in effect. More than just the claimed lands were ruined however, because many owners clear-cut lands beyond their concessionary limits. The Forest Service was unable to regulate the concessions because of shortages in labor and "a lack of political will." Much of the illegal felling of trees was completely overlooked and the fines that were levied for violation of the permits were far lower than the actual damages. The combination of these detrimental government policies meant that "roughly 70% of the primary forest was destroyed in the 30 years between 1895 and 1925".

It is interesting to note that the much publicized "population growth" issue didn't become a factor in

forest degradation in Madagascar until 1940 when vaccines were introduced that lowered the death rate. During the next 40 years the population increased rapidly from 4.2 million to 9.2 million, and some 4 million hectares of forests were cleared during this 40 year period, as compared to between 3 and 7 million hectares in the 40 year period from 1900 through 1940. Much of this deforestation was, however, still linked to concessions, export promotion, and insecure land tenure, rather than on population growth in itself.

Even more interestingly, much of the process described above can be easily mirrored with what has happened in many other former European colonies throughout the tropics, where the historical root causes of deforestation are clearly linked to the expropriation and exploitation of natural resources for the benefit of the colonial powers. Most of those colonies have now become formally independent, but not much seems to have changed in the unsustainable economic model inherited from colonial rule, which continues producing cheap and abundant raw materials at the expense of people and their environment for the benefit of the North.

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