Côte d'Ivoire: The sacred forest, a community protected area

The village of Zaïpobly is located in Southeast Côte d'Ivoire, in the western outskirts of Taï National Park. This park covers an area of 454,000 hectares and is the largest remnant of the original humid tropical forest in West Africa. It was designated Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO in 1978 and was inscribed on the Natural World Heritage List in 1982, because of its extraordinary specific wealth and because of the numerous endemic species inhabiting it. At the beginning of the last century it was a uniform forest zone, but agricultural systems of cultivation introduced later and over-exploitation of the forest have reduced it to the present small forest islets.

Most of these relict forests have survived because they are considered to be sacred. A sacred forest is a place that is venerated and reserved for the cultural expression of a community. Access and management are governed by traditional powers.

The sacred forest of Zaïpobly is located in the eastern hinterland of Taï National Park, it covers an area of 12.30 hectares and is unrestrictedly accessible to all, however the flora and fauna are strictly protected. The forest is very much linked to life in the village of Zaïpobly, on the southern border of the forest. For village dwellers, the forest fulfils many functions: it serves as protection, provides them with medicinal plants and food and is a place for the conservation of flora and fauna. It creates a favourable damp microclimate for rural activities in the surrounding fallow lands, it is a place for important socio-cultural meetings and serves as a last living testimonial for future generations of what a true forest is.

The main actors within the village society involved in conserving the sacred forest are:

Kwi society, originally a jurisdictional and police institution, but lately more the latter, as a result of the disintegration of traditional structures, the introduction of new religions and changes in mentality; traditional authorities, depositories of knowledge; the grass-roots community, on which the success of the system depends.

The daily administration of the forest falls on the Kwi society; they also exert psychological dissuasion over the population. Traditional authorities are the prolongation of the founding ancestors and they are responsible for deciding on a site being considered as sacred. They are finally responsible for the sacred site and are its moral guarantee.

Impoverishment of society, progressive soil erosion, introduction of other ways of thinking and of production, and monotheist religions (Islamic and Christian) opposing the practice of traditional rites, judged to be diabolical, have contributed to weakening the sacred forests and therefore are factors threatening their existence, because the establishment and protection of sacred forests are mainly based on local cultural and religious beliefs.

It has been shown that traditional systems of African culture, far from constituting an obstacle to environmental protection, are the best guarantee in the protection of ecosystems and conservation of biodiversity. And this experience shows that sacred places can become real biodiversity reserves in

the African continent. For this reason many Africans are conscious of the importance of safeguarding and re-valuing the communities' cultural knowledge, showing that Africa knows how to organise itself to care for what is precious.

At a time when globalisation is swallowing everything up and converting it into merchandise, it is timely to look at these examples, where biodiversity, the forest, is seen in a wider dimension than that of its mere components. This makes it possible to establish a link and it would be healthy for each society to re-edit it, from the position of their history and culture.

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