FOREST DEPLETION IN IMPERIAL MADAGASCAR, c.1790–1861

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It was traditionally believed that most of Madagascar was originally covered by forest which, in the central highlands, humans had destroyed (see e.g. Aubert et al 2003). This article argues that, contrary to the conventional view, the central highlands possessed considerable woodland until the eighteenth century, and that both highland and eastern woodlands were rapidly depleted in the period 1790–1861 due chiefly to the Merina crown and its adoption of autarkic policies.

Early Western visitors were impressed by Madagascar’s eastern forest: In 1820, British Agent, James Hastie, and LMS missionary, David Jones, noted “the immense forest of Alamazaotra” (Ellis 1838: 222) which missionary David Griffiths (who arrived in 1821) stated was “over forty miles wide... hundreds of miles in length... [covering] approximately one third of the land surface” (Griffiths 1843:12). In fact, the Tamatave-Antananarivo route crossed two forests: the Alamazaotra and Analamaizina (“Dark Forest”), west of which visitors were as struck by the denuded plateau. For example, on reaching Imerina’s eastern frontier (Ankaramadinika), William Ellis (1862) observed that the country had few trees and within an hour’s march (Anosiarivo) was “entirely destitute of wood” (Ellis 1867: 24; see also ibid, 22–3).

Recent research indicates that while much of highland and western Madagascar possessed a mosaic of natural vegetation, including ancient stretches of savannah, and human occupation appears to have led to firing of woodland notably from c.1100–1300 (See e.g. Bond et. al. 2008; Wright 2007: 10), scholars have emphasized that Andrianampoinimerina (r. c.1787–1810) introduced what one author calls “the first known attempt at woodland conservation anywhere in the pre-colonial African realm”

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2 Joseph Freeman and William Ellis use much the same description, probably based on Griffiths’ original manuscripts—see Freeman 1830; Ellis 1838. vol.2: 35. Others give different names for the forest, such as “Fanghourou” instead of “Analamaotra”—see e.g. Descartes 1846: 250.
(Gade 1996: 106). Andrianampoinimerina prohibited exploitation of woodland on the twelve sacred hills of Imerina (Analamanga, Ambohidrabiby, Alasora, Imerimanjaka, Antongona, Antsahadinta, Ambohimanga, Ilafy, Namehana-Ambohidratrimo, Amboantany, Ambohijoky and Ikaloy), proclaiming: “the forest is a common national heritage from which orphans, children, women and others may live, which provides