



Earth in Transition

(<http://www.earthintransition.org/>)

A NEW RELATIONSHIP WITH ANIMALS, NATURE AND EACH OTHER.

Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary

By Guest Post (<http://www.earthintransition.org/author/guest-post/>), May 23, 2017



(<http://www.earthintransition.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/tafi-5b.jpg>)

Last week, we posted the final session from the "I Am NOT an Animal!" symposium, in which Dr. Lori Marino talked about sanctuaries as a form of restitution – a way of giving back to our fellow animals some of what we have taken from them. This week, journalist Claudia Flisi introduces us to a sanctuary in Ghana for mona monkeys.

By Claudia Flisi

The sacred grove of Tafi Atome looks like a typical forest in southeastern Ghana – a latticework of semi-deciduous trees and thick green foliage – until the mona monkeys show up. They have been attracted by the bananas you are holding, and are fearless about grabbing them from your hands. They will climb up your leg, spring onto your shoulder, jump on your arm, whatever it takes to remove their favorite fruit from your grasp and plunge it into their mouths.

The monkeys (*Cercopithecus mona mona*) are sacred, too, and have been revered in this village for two centuries. But being "sacred" is no guarantee of survival, as they learned the hard way in recent decades. That they have survived is testimony to the persuasive power of eco-tourism incentives and the tenacity of community leadership.



(<http://www.earthintransition.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/tafi-7b.jpg>)

Their story begins two centuries ago. In the early 19th century, a tribe from Assini (in the center of contemporary Ghana) migrated south to a place called Tafi Atome in the Hohoe District of the country's Volta region, about halfway between Lake Volta and the Togolese border.

While in Assini, the tribe had valued the local mona monkeys, unusually smart and aggressive and a helpmate in sounding the alarm against competing clans. Among several examples of

mona monkey smarts:

- they don't accept poison
- they refuse peeled bananas, since a pre-peeled banana might be rotten
- each family group has an appointed leader, or commando, who is responsible for protecting the family
- that leader (always a male) summons his group each night to sleep, usually around 6 pm
- when a family member dies, the commando calls the family together to bury the deceased.

As per custom, the immigrants from Assini brought a fetish to Tafi Atome, an idol that they placed in the surrounding forest to keep it cool and safe. The presence of the fetish made the forest "sacred" (every visitor to Ghana understands that cool locations can be deemed "sacred" because "cool" is akin to sacred in this meltingly hot climate.) Today there are between 1,900 and 2,000 sacred groves, aka fetish groves, throughout the country.

Emissaries from the Gods

(<http://www.earthintransition.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/tafi-12b.jpg>) Soon after settling down, so the story goes, the tribe noticed monkeys in the forest who resembled the mona monkeys they had left behind in Assini. They decided that their former friends and protectors had followed them to Tafi Atome and were therefore equally sacred – emissaries from the gods sent to look out for them in their new home.

Fetish groves in Ghana often include taboos on hunting particular species, so it was natural to extend this protection to the local monkey population. The village fetish priest was the intermediary between the villagers and the forest, including the idol and the monkeys. Every February he led a ceremony to honor the monkeys, reinforcing the taboo against killing them. Traditional religion thus encouraged respect for two natural resources – the forest and the monkeys, to the benefit of the community's ecological balance.



Traditional religion encouraged respect for the forest and the monkeys, to the benefit of the community's ecological balance.

Things began to change in the 1980s. Christian missionaries had come to Ghana, and a Catholic priest based in Tafi Atome decided that conversion would be easier if traditional beliefs were weakened, so he encouraged the villagers to kill the monkeys for food.

With the "sacred" veil lifted, locals were tempted to cut down trees for farmland. The grove was being decimated, and so were its simian residents, whose diet consisted of the leaves, insects, fruits, and berries found in the grove. By the early 1990s, the survival of

the mona monkeys, considered to be the only true *exemplars* of this sub-species in Ghana, was in doubt.

Sanctuary and Restitution



(<http://www.earthintransition.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/tafi-15b.jpg>)

In 1993, a number of organizations, including the Peace Corps in Ghana, the Nature

Conservation Research Centre (NCRC) of Accra, the SNV (Netherlands Development Organization), and the Ghana Tourist Board, joined forces to lay the groundwork for what was to become the 48.6-hectare (120 acres) Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary and Cultural Village. (The grove itself is 28 hectares, the village accounts for the rest). The idea was to encourage tourists to visit the village, feed the monkeys, and take guided walks in the sacred forest. The resulting income would replace and hopefully exceed revenue generated by the felling of trees.

The sanctuary was formally created in 1996, as was a 14-member Project Management Committee to oversee it. Organizers were acutely aware that success would depend on support from locals, so members included representatives of the four communities in the area – Tafi Atome, Tafi Mador, Abuiife and Vakpo-Fu. Traditional authorities, fetish priests, and experts from ecological organizations were also involved from the beginning.

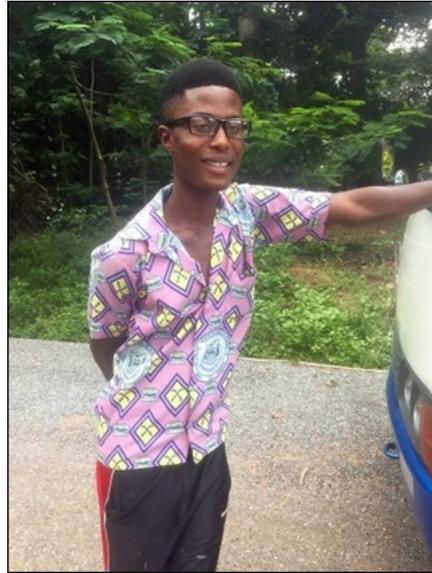
In 1997, mahogany trees were planted to delineate and protect the sanctuary's boundaries. These supplement 36 concrete pillars that mark the 1.9-kilometer boundary line.

(<http://www.earthintransition.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/tafi-13b.jpg>)

In 1998, the sanctuary added a modest visitors' center, funded by both local and external donors. This has been improved over the years with the addition of guest seating, a bathroom for visitors, and a small shop selling water, soft drinks, and souvenirs.

Local villagers and other stakeholders were interviewed extensively between 2004 and 2006 to ensure that the interests of all were well represented and to address issues of concern before they became problematic. The consensus was that the one thousand residents of Tafi Atome have benefited economically from the influx of visitors, and that the community's cultural values have also improved.

These benefits are not apparent at first glance when you visit the village. Pregnant goats gambol in the dirt; toddlers scramble in the dust. Waves of heat billow up from the one dirt road running through the center of town, where women gracefully balance vases on their heads as they carry water to their homes. Shacks of mud and wooden slats house up to eight family members each. Little girls and boys bequeath you with dazzling smiles. Older children are guardedly curious. Still, in this typical-looking African community, revenue generated by the sanctuary has made possible a school building, a library, and a medical clinic to date.



Good for the Monkeys, Good for Everyone



(<http://www.earthintransition.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/tafi-10a.jpg>)

You can visit the sanctuary for a few hours, for a day, or stay overnight at the local guesthouse set up for that purpose. Whether you visit as an individual or as part of a group, you will be assigned one of the sanctuary's four guides. The youngest of these, Paul, is the only truly local guide, he informs you proudly (he was born in Tafi Atome). He hopes to go to university someday, and return to improve the sanctuary and the lives of its residents, sacred and not. He and the other guides squire between five and seven visiting groups per day on the weekends, fewer during the week. Visitors are mostly Germans, Americans, Canadians, Italians, Belgians, and British.

(<http://www.earthintransition.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/tafi-3a.jpg>)

In 2016, 600 mona monkeys called the sanctuary home, an increase in population of 15 percent over the previous year. With the killing of primates prohibited and dogs not allowed in the local community because of the monkeys, their death rate is low. Their only natural enemies are occasional pythons – far less deadly than human hunters and deforestation. So, prospects for population increase are good, and there is room to accommodate them; at its present size the sanctuary can support 1,500 mona monkeys.



One major question mark clouds the future of Tafi Atome. The community and the government must remain committed to the idea of sustainable development: protecting the boundaries of the sanctuary, ensuring that the revenue it generates is distributed equitably, and developing new revenue streams for local farmers. The project will succeed only if all stakeholders share these goals and are willing to work together to achieve them.

One more *sine qua non*: an inexhaustible supply of bananas. These monkeys are not aggressive in a threatening way, but they want their bananas, so there better be *plenty* on hand when visitors come to call.

Claudia Flisi is a freelance writer (<http://www.paroleanima.com/>) with wide expertise from business to fashion, along with her passion for animals.

Information:

Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary, Information Center
PO Box 492, HoeHoe, Ghana

Phone (https://www.google.it/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=tafi+atome+monkey+sanctuary+phone&stick=H4sIAAAAAAAAAOPgE-LRT9c3LCiptLCsNDHX0s9OttJPzs_JSU0uyczP08_Oyy_PSU1JT40vSMxLzSnWz0gsji_IyM9LtQKTAMIHh3FBAA)

+233 54 166 8682 or +233 24 787 7627

@tafiatomemonkeysanctuary

Guide Paul Fleku Paulpromise43@gmail.com

Like 48

Tweet

Save 1

G+1 0

Share

8