

Madagascar national day

Finding the right balance in conservation efforts

Every June 26, Madagascar and its people celebrate the anniversary of the country's independence, which they gained from France in 1960.

Off the east coast of Africa in the Indian Ocean, it is the world's 46th-largest country and the fourth-largest island — some 1,600 km long and 600 km wide.

Madagascar's isolation from other continents has resulted in a unique mix of indigenous flo-

ra and fauna. Many of these exist nowhere else in the world.

However, these precious species are reported to be endangered due to deforestation.

To help the conservation of spiny forests in the southern areas of Madagascar, Norio Kondo, the late professor emeritus at the Tokyo University of Agriculture, founded the Volunteer Southern Cross Japan Association (VSJA) in 1990.

Besides replanting the forests,

the VSJA's projects include assistance in developing products made of natural materials to help the regional communities become self-sustainable; training in cultivation techniques to improve food self-sufficiency; and conservation of endangered species living in the forest, along with saving the baobab tree and other flora.

The following is a translated excerpt from an article written in the December 2010 VSJA

newsletter Vao Vao by the group's secretary general, Akira Yoshida, who is a professor at the Tokyo University of Information Sciences, about an award-winning woodcarving in Madagascar that suggests a way for human beings to coexist with nature:

"Woodcarving artist Ialy Venance, from the area of the VSJA's activities in the Anosy region in the southern part of Madagascar, won the best origi-

nality award at the Concours de Meilleurs Artisans de Madagascar 2010, which was held in July in the capital Antananarivo.

"I visited the country in September and was impressed by the public reaction to the prize, as it was the second time that an artist from the Anosy region won a prize in the competition, which has been annually held for 50 years since the independence of Madagascar.

"On arriving in Tolanaro, I was welcomed at the regional branch of the Ministry of Tourism and Handicrafts and the city's commercial department, both of which extended their gratitude for the long-standing training and assistance by the VSJA, and requested our further cooperation in the future.

"In order to pass on a record of Venance's honor for future generations, the award trophy was brought to the Tolanaro city hall where it will be kept permanently. A presentation ceremony took place on Sept. 4.

"In the presence of high officials, including the governor, the vice governor and the head of the branch of the tourism ministry, the ceremony contained a series of speech and a reception was held.

"Here is Venance's speech: 'Hello everyone.

'First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to the Ministry of Tourism and Handicrafts, the organizer of the competition, the Tolanaro city office, its tourism department and the Volunteer Southern Cross Japan Association.

'Our woodcarving artworks are not imitations of others but are created by distinctive inventive skill through our trials and errors.

"This award-winning small wooden figure has a big significance. It is so small that you can put it in your pocket. It is stout as it is made of air-dried lumber that came from naturally dead wood. We do not need to cut down living trees. So I believe that this small wooden figure has a power to protect the forest.

'We are so happy to make a first step toward our future development.

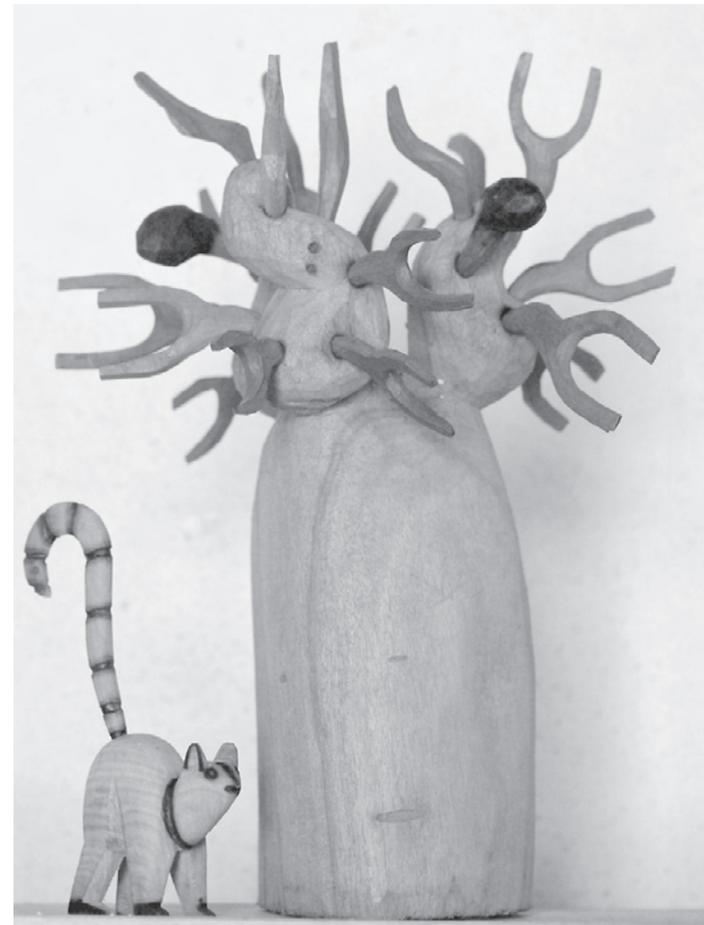
'Let me express again my thanks to you and to those who support our work of art.'

"The speech, which was delivered by a shy young man who was born and grew up in a small village in this region, was so impressive that it received generous applause.

"This award expanded awareness of our activities throughout Madagascar and brought joy and confidence to the artist in the village. This real example proved that the improvement of regional society through a slight change in thinking and steady efforts can lead to conservation of the environment. I would say that this is the most important significance of the award.

"There are a lot of challenges in the future. However, the balance between the replanting and conservation of natural forests and the lives of community residents, which is our group's basic philosophy proposed by the late founder Norio Kondo, is starting to bloom step by step."

For more information about the Volunteer Southern Cross Japan Association, visit <http://homepage2.nifty.com/vsja/> (available only in Japanese).



Art from nature: A baobab and the award-winning ring-tailed lemur wood carvings by Ialy Venance AKIRA YOSHIDA / VSJA



Unique tree: Six out of the eight species of baobab in the world are endemic to Madagascar and all six are threatened or nearly threatened by extinction. FUMIO HASHIZUME / VSJA

Congratulations

to the People of

the Republic of Madagascar

on the Occasion

of Their 51st Independence Day

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