

The Turning of the Dead: Death and Afterlife in the Malagasy System of Beliefs

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Prescinding from detailed anthropological discussions on the origins of the inhabitants of Madagascar,¹ it can be said at the outset that the island has been a crossroad for centuries of various races, above all, the black African on many of the coastal regions and the Malaya-Indonesian in the high Plateaux.²

¹ Madagascar, the world's fourth largest island, lies in the southwest Indian Ocean, with the minute islands of the Islamic Federal Republic of Comores to the north and the Antarctic to the far south. It faces the eastern coasts of Mozambique and South Africa westward, and the tiny island-country of Mauritius and the French overseas territory of "La Réunion" to the east.

² One of the main contributing factors to the peopling of the island by the mainland African race was the slave trade. Tanzania, being the main "slave gateway" on the eastern coast, is just a little to the northwest of the island. Added to this is the fact that Tanzania, Zanzibar, Mauritius and Madagascar itself were once all British colonies (or, at least a British presence, as in the case of Madagascar) before the last two passed to French control.

In Madagascar, the French established the southern port city of Fort-Dauphin (named after the Duke of Orleans, and is now called Tolagnaro) in the mid 1700's, and later the northern port of Diego Suarez (now Antsiranana) as fortresses and supply points. Added to these strongholds was, of course, "Ile Bourbon" (now the French overseas territory of "La Réunion"), from where many of the slaves transported to the Caribbean territories stopped by.

Added to these political factors is the geographical position of Madagascar: it lies on the route of the explorers and traders coming from Western Africa via the Cape of Good Hope. In fact, the Portuguese explorers, who were the first ones to navigate via the Cape of Good Hope (Vasco da Gama), were supposed to have given the name to the biggest port city of Madagascar, Tamatave (now called Toamasina), located in the central eastern shores.

Permitting myself again to leave aside scientific discussions on the cultural roots of this people, one would be surprised to note that, in spite of the various origins of its people and the immensity of its territory (almost 600.000 sq. km.), Madagascar is characterized by a strong homogeneity among all of its eighteen or so tribes scattered throughout the island. For one, in spite of the tribal or regional accents, the whole island speaks one language: the Malagasy. This fact is all the more surprising if we consider the fact that, even in the present day, social mobility is almost unknown as a phenomenon, and the country is suffering from incredible infrastructural problems, or a total lack thereof.

The Malagasy people maintains a certain "uniqueness" in its culture and social behavior. The scope of this paper is to demonstrate—via ocular experiences verified in the historical accounts and, even more importantly, the other way around—one aspect of its culture, an aspect which has always had a direct influence and importance on the efforts, as well as the methods, of evangelization in the island.

I am talking about the beliefs of the Malagasy regarding death and afterlife. Moreover, when we speak of the Malagasy psyche on death and afterlife, we have to talk about the rite of *famadihana*, the most eloquent expression of this system of beliefs revolving around death and afterlife. It is the single rite which best expresses the beliefs of the Malagasy on these two fundamental questions of man about himself. Since death necessarily intervenes as the turning instance between life and afterlife, the tomb, consequently, plays a fundamental role.

The "Asian peopling" of the island, as most of the historians would agree, happened in two waves, the more important one taking place around the third century A.D. Why those people migrated to the hinterlands and practically abandoned the coastal regions baffle even the scholars. A simple explanation may be the fact that those migrants were tillers of the land. Their descendants later composed the biggest and "most advanced" tribe, namely, the "Imerina." The Imerinas, as regards their physical features, are the fairest-skinned among all tribes; but also among the smallest in stature. To have a complete picture of how they look, it would suffice to say that it is very difficult to distinguish between a pure Malayan Filipino from a pure "Imerina" (cfr. below Fn. 21), just as it is difficult to identify the former from an Indonesian or a Malaysian.

Finally, it may be interesting to note in passing that the Arabs arrived in Madagascar way long before the Europeans came, as Arab traders traced down south the eastern coast of Africa and the islands to the east. They, however, hardly left strong influences on the traditions of the people.

1. Death in the Malagasy System of Beliefs

Although the Malagasy loves to say that "life is sweet" (*mamy ny aina*), his proverbs evidence a strong consciousness that life is short, that it cannot be prolonged, that death is inevitable. Indeed, "the certitude of death is one of the constants of the Malagasy thought," which gives him "wisdom" to live life "intensely without feeling defeat nor sadness."³ Because of this overwhelming consciousness of the inevitability of death, the Malagasy dimensions his earthly existence with the view of death omnipresent: his activities, the rites he performs and his superstitious beliefs turn around the reality of the tomb.⁴

Consequently, there is a sweeping undercurrent of a certain philosophical fatalism, as when they say that "men do not die other than the day that their destiny dictates from the moment of birth."⁵ When death knocks at the door, the Malagasy soul does not rebel against it, but simply bows its head in acceptance and resignation. Life, in fact, "has no exit other than death."⁶ When somebody dies, it is still the custom not to say that the person is "dead," the term is rather brutal. One would rather say that the "days" of that person "are over," or that he/she "ran out of breath," or still, that he/she is "left to sleep." During the time of the Imerina monarchy,⁷ the dead king or queen was said "to have simply turned his back" or "to have hurt" himself or herself!⁸

Thus, mixed with a manifest fatalism is a certain optimism in the face of death.⁹ Indeed, death is not a destruction; it is merely a, "change

³ E. Ramangalaza, "Signification philosophique du famadihana," in *Lakroa* (2 mai 1976), p. 6.

⁴ P. Profita, "Famadihana," in *Madagascar ieri e oggi*. Messina: Sicilia, 1961, 47.

⁵ *Ny olombelona tsy mba maty raha tsy amin'ny tononandro nahaterahany*. Cfr. P. De Veyreres and G. De Meritiens, *Le Livre de la Sagesse Malgache* (Paris: Editions Maritime et d'Outre-Mer, 1967), n. 2907, p. 295. "Destiny" (*ny anjara*) has a negative connotation. It is the defeat of the antidote by the evil it wants to combat. Cfr. P. Colin, *Aspects de l'Ame Malgache* (Paris: Editions de l'Orante, 1959); H. Dubois, *Madagascar* (Paris: Cahiers Charles de Foucauld, 1950), p. 288; R. Decary, *Moeurs et Coutumes des Malgaches* (Paris: Payot, 1951) p. 249.

⁶ *Lalana kizo tokana ny fahafatesana*.

⁷ 18th century until the French conquest towards the end of the 19th century.

⁸ R. Decary, *loc. cit.*

⁹ P. Profita, very positive vis-a-vis the Malagasy culture, asserts that, in spite of the overwhelming influence of the reality of death in his psyche, the Malagasy vision

of state" in the process of "progression."¹⁰ This does not mean, however, that the Malagasy has a precise concept of what death is. It could, nonetheless, be somehow conceived, as western philosophy would have it, as the separation of the body and soul. According to the study of Berthier,¹¹ the Malagasy is "convinced that, during sleep, the soul leaves the body; thus, they refuse to wake a person up for fear that the soul of that person would not have enough time to reintegrate itself into the body which it has momentarily left, something which would bring the worst calamity." From this phenomenon of the temporary separation of the body and soul during sleep, the Malagasy deduced that death is an identical event, only that it is of "indefinite duration."

Since the soul survives the body and somehow wakes over it, as we shall see later, the corpse is thus treated as a "mysterious object," approached with tremendous respect and treated with precise and elaborate rites, taboos and prudent measures. The adepts on the Malagasy culture, and the Malagasies themselves, do not always agree as to the real reason of this exaggerated mystery attributed to the dead. Why all the rites and taboos? Opinions are divided. On the one hand, there are those who view them positively, saying that the Malagasy has a tremendous love and respect for his ancestors. He has to manifest these sentiments because he is convinced that the dead always preserves a certain liaison with the living. As a Malagasy writes: "... the dead are not dead. The presence of the Ancestors is effective. The inhabitants of the tombs [the dead] are in permanent communication with the villagers around and exercise a real influence on their descendants... the Malagasies address their prayers to God and to the Ancestors... (because) the Ancestors are invested with a supernatural

of life and death is "viva, luminosa, gioconda." Cfr. *loc. cit.*; cfr. also R. Decary, *loc. cit.*

¹⁰P. Colin, *loc. cit.*; H. Berthier, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-33. Decary, after having lengthily studied the conceptions of death, burial and afterlife in various tribes, concludes: "Death is not only the destruction of the material or corporeal being; it is also and above all a change of state, a sort of a modification of the situation." (in *La mort et les coutumes funéraires a Madagascar*, p. 9).

¹¹H. Berthier, *Les Moeurs et Coutumes du Peuple Malgache* (Tananarive, 1933), p. 8. Hughes Berthier, an "Honary Governor General of the (French) Colonies," was officially commissioned by the then Governor General of France in Madagascar to conduct an in-depth study of the Malagasy customs and traditions, in view of aiding the French functionaries in the colony. In preparing his work, he became more and more attached to the people of this "Grand Ile" which he called the "France Australe" ("France of the South").

power which contribute positively to the success or to the failure of this or that undertaking."¹² Thus, the elaborate rites performed before the remains are said to be actually manifestations of these sentiments.

On the other hand, there are those who see these rites and measures negatively, holding that they are expressions of the fear that the Malagasy has of the spirit of the dead. Indeed, most of these measures or rituals are supposed to prevent or to appease the ire of the spirit of the dead;¹³ they are prohibitions rather than manifestations of

¹² E. Ramangalaza, *loc. cit.*

¹³ Cfr., for instance, P. Colin, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-35. All the objects which came in contact with the corpse become "fady" (taboo) and must go with the dead to his burial place, in particular the mat used for the wake. At some time in their history, even the slaves of important people who died had "to accompany" him in the tomb. Among the Betsileo, the tribe inhabiting the south central high plateau, the sacrifices of the slaves of an important man who died was euphemistically called "voluntary suicide." Cfr. S. L. Rajaonarivony, "Adoption chretienne des rites traditionnels," in *Aspects du christianisme a Madagascar* (Antananarivo), janvier-juin 1985, p. 36. Even more macabre was the tradition in the northeastern tribe Sakalava, as recounted by Fr. Dalmond in his missionary *Journals* (dated 1840). He speaks of the "barbaric practices" of the tribe as regards the death of a chieftain. He recounts: "Everyday [during the wake], the [noble] family assigns several persons (ordinarily young men and women) to be immolated... one collects their blood which is sprinkled on the coffin..." Cfr. "Mission Sakalava: 1840," in *Aspects du Christianisme a Madagascar* (1988), pp. 320-328.

Cfr. also P. De Veyrieres & G. De Meritiens, *op. cit.*, p. 291; H. Berthier, *op. cit.*, p. 149. The whole period from the moment of death to the the post-burial hours is governed by all sorts of do's and don'ts. For instance, starting a fire inside the house where the corpse is in state is an invitation to death; never sweep the house after the corpse shall have been transported to the tomb; not breaking the pot with which the potion to clean the corpse was prepared is to call death; when transporting the dead to the tomb, the feet must be ahead so as not to provoke the anger of the dead who, at this state, is feared more than when he was living; no one should precede the corpse, for he would be exposing himself to death; once the door of the tomb is closed, nobody should look back to it; crying in coming back to the house makes death return; arriving at the house, one has to thoroughly wash himself "to purify himself of the dirt of misfortune" (it is highly recommended, moreover, to "purify oneself with water and fire" upon returning from the funerals so as to live longer"!). Evidently, work is prohibited for the family during the time of the wake.

For an even more detailed description of the rites among the Imerinas, cfr. L. Molet, *La conception malgache du monde, du surnaturel et de l'homme en Imerina*, tome 2: *Anthropologie* (Editions l'Harmattan: Paris, 1979), pp. 261-264.

This stranglehold on the Malagasy psyche by the taboos manifest a certain paradox. It would seem, in fact, that death after all can be delayed, as its causes would seem to be avoidable. It is here that superstitious beliefs abound and the famous "fady" (taboos) imposed since the time of their ancestors have become almost the rule

respect and love. Death, in fact, can be caused by violating these taboos.¹⁴

Even if a claim to a definitive answer cannot be had, this seems, in fact, to be the underlying reason. As it happens in various other peoples, tribes or races, the life of the Malagasy was dominated by mysterious forces, among which were the ancestral spirits. It was then understandable that, as sorts of preventive measures, life was governed by taboos of all sorts so as not to offend or, if offense was made, to appease these unexplicable forces. The spirit thus must not be offended for it is capable of doing harm to the living. In this sense, the spirit is practically something of a burden, a capricious presence which must be satisfied so that it would behave well!¹⁵

Thus, the basis of these rites and taboos is the Malagasy's belief that, as the soul separates "indefinitively" (death) from the body, it conserves all the sentiments and the capacity to generate them. The soul is capable of relating itself continually with the living; it intervenes

of life. In the Malagasy psyche, accidents, maladies and death itself are results of violations of these taboos. The wake itself is one most replete with "fady."

¹⁴ In *La mort et les coutumes funéraires a Madagascar*, Decary makes this observation: "Death, other than that due to old age, was considered as either due to the action of some sorcerer or enemy, or as a punishment from God ("Zanahary") or from the ancestors" (p. 15).

¹⁵ This belief of the omnipresence of the spirits of the ancestors surprisingly is in contrast to their belief of the "Zanahary," or the "Creator-God." The "Zanahary," after having created the world lost interest in it and lives "somewhere up there" and is not interested in the affairs of his creatures. Thus, men neither have "duties" to fulfill nor "taboos" to follow with respect to their Creator-God. Or hardly any.

The Creator-God "Zanahary" must not, however, be confused with the "Zanahary" to mean the divinized spirits of the most eminent dead persons which possess "mysterious powers" beneficial and terrible at the same time. This type of "Zanahary" does intervene in the lives of the people! Fertility cult, in fact, is closely associated with the "Zanahary." This use, nevertheless, common only in the southern regions of the country. In this later case, "Zanahary" is equivalent to the Imerinas' "Andriamanitra" (cfr. Fn. 22). Cfr. P. Colin, *Aspects de l'Ame Malgache*, pp. 54-76; P. Cangemi, "L'Eredità degli Antenati," in *Madagascar ieri e oggi*, p. 73; H. Berthier, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-34, especially the related concept of "hasina" (a sort of supernatural power which renders a thing good or bad: the power of an amulet, the efficacy of a certain cure, the sacredness of something... whose existence need not be proven because one sees its effects).

¹⁶ E. Ramangalaza, *loc. cit.*

in their daily life. The dead, in fact, are "those who are absent but present."¹⁶ This conviction, obviously then, gave and gives origin to the *fady* (taboos) which govern the lives of the living¹⁷ and to all forms of sacrifices and cults aimed to satisfy the needs or to appease the ire of the dead. Anthropologists and sociologists would tell us that it is the same psychological disposition behind sacrificial rites.

2. The *Immortality* of the Soul and the Cult for the Ancestors¹⁸

That the dead maintains a strong and inevitable link with the living begs the question of the survival of the soul (or the spirit) after its separation from the body. In other words, is the soul then immortal? One gets, at most, a vague and chancy answer or answers to such a "western philosophical question." The belief, however, rests: that the spirit of the dead survives the body and exists "somewhere."

Let us start with the "somewhere" element. As to where and what this "somewhere" is one doesn't get neither a precise nor a unique answer. Some believe, and this is rather very widespread, that these spirits go to a certain place, specified by many as that mountain called *Ambondrombe*, located in the southern part of the high-lands, in the Province of Fianarantsoa. The people in the region do not talk about this mountain but with reserve and respect. A serious and intelligent nun has recounted to me all sorts of stories related to this mountain, and how the local people could even hear "noises" coming from it. Others believe that the spirits of the dead still "wakes" over its corpse, a belief evidently more consistent with all the rites and taboos connected to the remains of the dead. But most do not have an answer.

But the more interesting question is the concept of "immortality;" rather, the question of "for how long" the spirit lives. Again, here we can only be vague at the most, a state reflective of the uncertainty of the

¹⁷Cf. A. Van Gennep, *Tabou et Totemisme a Madagascar* (Paris, 1940), p. 12, where he says that the "fady" intervenes in all sectors of life (religious, political, economic and sexual) as a "regulator." In this sense, the taboos assume the same social function as the incredible stories grandmothers or any elder tell the children so that they would behave well.

¹⁸Decary, however, warns his readers that the "ancestral cult" as observed by the Malagasy should not be understood in the "liturgical sense." "Cult," in reference to the awesome respect the Malagasy has for his ancestors, should be understood "sensu latu" (*op. cit.*, p. 15).

Malagasy himself. Even the specialists on the Malagasy culture do not agree, and do not even approximate, as to the answers to this question.¹⁹ Father Dubois, with Colin aligning himself with this great expert on the Malagasy (in particular, the Betsileo) culture, seems to believe that, according to the traditional Malagasy belief, the survival of the spirit of the dead depends on his importance in this life and on the capacity of his family to remember him as long as it possibly could. Once a dead person is forgotten, it would seem that his afterlife survival is over. At least subjectively. They think thus that the survival of the soul is, for the Malagasy, relative, conditional. It depends on the remembrance of the living; but the memory, in turn, depends on the person-

¹⁹ H. Berthier, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-27. Before discussing the "psychological life" of the Malagasy, the author says: "It is indispensable to keep oneself from the tendency, unfortunately very current, to lend to the indigenous our manner of conceiving and reasoning... It is likewise essential to never lose sight that the indigenous does not have the least idea of the precision such as we know it. The notions of time and space thus escape him."

²⁰ Cfr., for instance, H. Dubois, *Madagascar* (Paris: Cahiers Charles de Foucauld, 1950), p. 293; P. Colins, *op. cit.*, p. 38; R. Decary, *op. cit.*, pp. 230-234. This question has escaped the curiosity of the "lay" historians and adepts of the Malagasy culture. R. Decary and H. Berthier, in spite of their serious studies on these themes, seem not even to bother with this question. It is only supposed that the soul survives the body, without saying for how long.

²¹ The "Imerina" — "Imerina" is the Malagasy appellation, the Italians say "Merina" and the French "Mernes"—tribe is the biggest and has always been the most important tribe in Madagascar. Of Polynesian-Malayan origin, its people distinguish themselves by their fair to dark brown complexion (they are, in fact, the "fairest-complexioned" among all the tribes), by their generally small-stature and by their black straight hair. This tribe occupies the bigger, northern portion of the high central plateau.

This tribe can boast of many relatively splendid achievements which no other tribe was able to achieve. Politically, the Imerinas were the first ones to organize themselves. Andrianampoinimerina (which name means "the prince who is in the heart of the Imerinas") organized the tribe under a monarchical form of government towards the end of the eighteenth century, with the present capital, Antananarivo, as the seat of the kingdom. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, before Madagascar was totally subdued by France, there was practically no region in the whole of the island whose people were not subjects to the Sovereign of the Imerinas.

1777 saw the first Europeans (the British) to penetrate the high Plateaux. Reports had it that the Founder-King (Andrianampoinimerina) of the Imerina Kingdom had absolute power over all his subjects and was feared by all his neighbors. His kingdom possessed considerable riches, thanks to the industry of his subjects. The French, after their settlement in 1642 in the southern part of the island (Fort-Dauphin), proceeded into the highland regions in the middle of the nineteenth century; however, via the eastern port of Toamasina, and later penetrations were also made

ality of the dead, of his "value" while he was still living.²⁰ That is why the Imerina²¹ nobles and sages, above all its kings and queens, are *Andriamanitra*²² and their spirit is supposed to continue to live until this very moment because their remembrance continues to inhabit the memories of the people. Thus it would seem that the spirit of the forgotten dead simply disappears. This opinion, if accepted, seems to hold the key to the overwhelming psychological factor involved in all this.

P. Profita, a Sicilian Jesuit missionary working in Madagascar for the last 50 years and whom the author interviewed extensively on the subject, totally disagrees. He is convinced that the Malagasy believes in the eternity of the soul the way Christians understand the term. Since I got exactly the same answer from nuns and educated Malagasy catholics, with from the common folks having no answer, I am almost convinced that Profita's conception of "immortality" is influenced by the Christian belief on the same, a super-imposition of the Christian doctrine of the immortality of the soul on the traditional belief of the soul's survival.

There is, in fact, a disagreement as to the precise translation of the Malagasy word *mandrakizay* (eternal). The Malagasy believes that the spirit of the dead is *mandrakizay*. But does its translation to "eternal" carry the psychological load of the western understanding of this term? It would seem that the western concept of "eternal" is too fixed a translation of the concept of "eternal" really expressed with the term *mandrakizay*. For Colin, when the Malagasy says that the soul is *mandrakizay*, he does not mean that the soul is "eternal" as understood in the West, or by Christians in particular. This *mandrakizay* is, in fact,

through the western port of Mahajanga. Thus was formally inaugurated a long and most of the time stormy relationship with Madagascar.

Both the British and the French considered it important to gain the favor of the royal court, as they were trying to do business with it, and, even more importantly, it was necessary to have an access to the highlands. Because of these events, in particular the meeting and melting together of the European and Malagasy cultures in the heart of the Imerina kingdom and the advent of Christianity, it is not surprising that the dominant position of this tribe over all the others is not only maintained, but further strengthened.

^{22a} "Andriamanitra" literally means "Perfumed Noble" or "Perfumed Lord," the Imerina's equivalent to the "Zanahary" of the southern tribes (cfr. Fn. 15). The noble dead acquires a certain "divine" character which empowers him to intervene even more strongly in the lives of the people.

dependent on the importance and value of the dead person, as if to say that the more famous he was in this life, the more *mandrakizay* he is! On the other hand, Profita says that, in his long pastoral experience with the Malagasy christians, *mandrakizay* has already assumed the western idea of eternal.²³ Precisely the Christian influence!

3. Burial Rites and Tombs

In preparing the corpse for burial, the dead is thoroughly washed and is dressed-to-kill, the women with their jewelries.²⁴ Then it is wrapped over and over again in diverse layers with the *lambamena*.²⁵ Moreover, the number of *lambamena* used has a social function, for it

²³ In trying to canvass a survey, I asked a good number of Malagasy Religious Sisters about the matter. The great majority, if not all, thinks like Profita.

Colin, in fact, does not make it clear in his assertion whether or not he's talking solely about the non Christian Malagasies. On the other hand, he confesses the fundamental difficulty of translation, as the terms employed by the Malagasy do not find exact equivalents in any European language, in such a manner that translation becomes a source of error. For instance, the Malagasy vocabulary contains eight terms which correspond to the term "soul." Cfr. We can easily imagine that if we ask "is the soul eternal," the Malagasy can reasonably respond "which soul."

²⁴ H. Berthier, *op. cit.*, p. 147. This practice, however, has progressively suffered modifications and decline, in particular for economic and security reasons. Indeed, many ancient tombs of some notables which have had the reputation of containing valuables have been desecrated.

²⁵ The *lamba* is the national Malagasy custom. Specifically, it is that piece of cloth (nowadays generally white), which is an essential part of the Malagasy dress. Men and women carry it wrapped around the shoulders and partly around the neck. To signify sorrow at the event of someone's death, men uncover their shoulders by lowering the "lamba."

These days, the *lamba* has not only survived; it is valued so highly. Ordinary women and society matrons wear it everywhere. In important social functions, one can see women wearing elegant tailleurs or western-styled gowns topped with beautiful decorated silk "lamba." It would seem, in fact, that it has become a patriotic expression of being truly Malagasy. Moreover, it has also its practical role: given the generally cold climate in the high Plateaux, the inhabitants in these regions cover their shoulders and backs, as well as their head when sleeping, with "lamba" to protect themselves.

Lambamena means "red lamba." The red silk "lamba" has always been highly prized. Consequently, the best expression of honoring the dead was to wrap the corpse with it. Nowadays, however, one hardly sees any red "lamba;" the white ones are generally used, though the term *lambamena* continues to be used to refer to that red silk used to wrap the remains of the dead.

customarily corresponds to the social rank of the deceased. For example, Rainiliairivony, the rich Prime Minister to the Imerina Queen Ranavalona II, willed that his dead son's corpse be wrapped with a hundred pieces of *lambamena*!²⁶ In ordinary cases a few ones should do. It is very important to be buried wrapped with the *lambamena*, for without it is like being "thrown into the ground," a great dishonor.²⁷ They prefer to put on tattered clothes or pass meals than not being able to provide the necessary *lambamena* for their dead.²⁸ The preference has always been the *lambamenas* made of silk; but, with the dire poverty at present, they use synthetic materials, evidently without renouncing to the silk ones if it is possible to find and pay for them.

One of the first things to be kept in mind is that the Malagasies do not use any coffin for burial. One may be surprised to learn, for instance, that even Catholic parishes have their own "coffins for rent," which are used merely to transport the corpse to the burial place. This practice, evidently, is explained very well by the manner they prepare the corpse. It is, however, to be noted that, in some small lowland tribes, due to lack of big family tombs —common among the highland population—, the use of thick wooden coffins (like logs emptied inside) is the practice.

Consequently, during the wake, the dead is not placed inside a coffin, but is simply laid on a flat board, or a table, protected from mosquitoes and other insects by a net or a thin transparent linen. A renowned Archbishop, in one of the ecclesiastical circumscriptions in the Plateaux, died. The wake was then an occasion to observe at least some aspects of their tradition in this respect. The Archbishop's corpse, dressed in full episcopal regalia, was laid on a wide bed placed near the main cathedral altar. A large "mosquito net" was placed over it. Throngs of faithful and acquaintances passed in front of the corpse and everyone sprinkled holy water on it. After the wake, which lasted for five days, the Archbishop was buried, with his remains placed inside a coffin, in the Cathedral. Thus, their two most revered traditions were violated in his burial: his not being buried in the family tomb and his not being wrapped with *lambamena* but placed inside a coffin.

²⁶G. S. Chapus & G. Mondain, *Rainiliairivony, homme d'Etat malgache* (Paris: Diloutremer, 1953), p. 354.

²⁷L. Molet, *op. cit.* p. 263.

²⁸L. Gerbinis, *La langue malgache enseignée suivant la méthode directe*, t.II (Tananarive: Imprimerie officielle, 1907), p. 65.

On another occasion, the husband of a Catholic lady died. The corpse was laid on a flat board placed at the extreme eastern side of the living room. Around the corpse were bunches of *lambamena* to be used later for the burial. Before entering the house, my companions made a collection to be offered to the family of the dead. It is, in fact, their custom that visitors have to contribute a certain sum of money, which they call "the little piece of cloth to bind the dead" (the *rambon-damba*), in clear reference to the manner in which the dead are laid to rest.²⁹ We stood in silence in front of the corpse. Then the leader of our group turned around to face the grieving family and delivered the traditional *kabary* (speech), at the end of which he handed our *rambon-damba* to the grieving wife.

Another very distinctive characteristic of the Malagasy practices related to burial is the absence of common cemeteries. One can see tombs almost everywhere: in the fields, in the backyards, in the gardens, alongside the roads, and even in the small vacant spaces between houses. Especially with the population of the Plateaux, the graves are within the family property. The proximity facilitates their maintenance and expresses better the communion between the dead and the living. In some lowland regions, the tombs can also be very dispersed, so that one can see a solitary tomb or two together in the middle of vast expanses of lands. In some southern tribes which do not have the tradition of the *famadihana*, most especially if they hold the belief that the dead should be prevented from finding its way back to the living, the tombs are hidden in the forests.³⁰

Modern times, however, have more or less modified these practices, especially in big agglomerations, like the capital Antananarivo (around 1,200,000 inhabitants). While the already existing tombs scattered here and there are sacrosanct and, therefore, inviolable, the government now prohibits building tombs in private properties, even within religious convents. So, in the cities, the current practice is for several families to build their family tombs in one place, usually outside the thickly populated quarters. A large group of Catholic Religious Congregations recently put up a certain sum and bought a piece of land at the outskirts of the Capital to build a cemetery there. Before this

²⁹ L. Molet, *op. cit.*, p. 262; H. Berthier, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

³⁰ R. Decary, *op. cit.*, pp. 256-257. I myself saw and observed this practice. Visiting small villages inside forested areas, signs of tombs can be seen under the bushes or behind trees.

prohibition, however, some Religious Communities were able to build big "community tombs" in their gardens. But the fact remains that there is neither any government nor ecclesiastical policy which would require the people to bury their dead in a parochial or municipal cemetery. The majority of the Malagasies, as well as of the foreigners, believes that the government or the Church will never dare to impose the policy of common burial grounds, in the sense of territorial definitions. At least not in the near future.

For that goes against one of the most revered traditions, namely, having the family tombs as close to the living members as possible. One must be buried in the family tomb. A proverb says that "to abandon the corpse of a relative is like throwing it away like a trash," or "to die and not be buried by one's family (also in a wider sense) is to die like a dog."³¹ There is no thought more consoling for a Malagasy than being assured of a family who will bury him alongside his ancestors in the family tomb.

For this reason, the tomb has always played a central role in the life of this people. The "center of life and death," the most significant rites for the tribe and the biggest family reunions have always taken place there.³² And still do. And there is no greater misfortune than having no one to remember him or dying far from the family. It is a tragedy indeed to die in places where the body cannot be recovered. It is a terrible threat "not to be buried in the family tomb!"³³ Which means, in their system of beliefs, that one's spirit will have no resting place.

Even the remains of family members must be brought back to where the family tomb is. Around two years ago, the sister of an acquaintance of mine died in Paris. Her mother travelled to Paris for the funeral and remained there for months to arrange the transfer of the remains to Antananarivo where the big family tomb is located, in the big garden of their private property, and where the defunct father and brother are laid to rest. It so happened that the dead was survived by her daughter who did not agree that her mother's remains be transported to faraway Madagascar; she wanted the remains to be near her in Paris. After months of unsuccessful negotiations, the distraught

³¹ L. Molet, *op. cit.*, p. 260; J. Houlder & M. Noyer, *Ohabolana ou Proverbes malgaches* (Tananarive, Imprimerie Lutherienne, 1957), pp. 182-184.

³² D. Raherisoanjato, "Christianisme et Religion traditionnelle," in *Civilisation de Madagascar* (Antananarivo: Université de Madagascar, 1982), p. 31.

³³ L. Nervi, "Madagascar: il culto dei morti," in *L'Apostolo di Maria* (1992), p. 13.

mother is now back in Madagascar without the remains of her daughter, but with the alive hope that, one day, her daughter will also rest in the family tomb. The family is Catholic.

In general, there are three types of tombs from the point of view of their purpose, namely, the *provisional* tomb, the *individual definitive* tomb, and the collective or *family* tomb.³⁴ The provisional tomb has several functions: as a burial place for one whose death was caused either by leprosy³⁵ or by some epidemic or by witchcraft; for miscarried fetuses —the *zaza rano*, or “water enfants,” as they are called—,³⁶ for those who died within a year from the death of another family member (tradition prohibits that the family tomb be opened within a year of a previous burial, for obvious reasons!); for those who died in places far from their family tombs the immediate translation of whose corpse is impossible at the time of death, or when the family does not have enough money to construct a worthy family tomb for the moment.

The individual definitive tombs are very rare. Very few Malagasies, in particular the Imerinas, would want to be buried in such a manner. The family or collective tombs, or family mausolea, is the rule. The

³⁴L. Molet, *op. cit.*, pp. 267-271. From the point of view of the manner of burial, R. Decary classifies the traditional tombs into four: mausoleum burial (which, in practically all cases, correspond to both the individual definitive tombs and the family tombs), burial in the rocks and in the forests (perhaps non existent in the Plateaux), ground burial, collective burial in the “kibory.” Cfr. R. Decary, *op. cit.*, pp. 257-267. For a pass in review of the styles of the tombs in various tribes, cfr. especially R. Decary, *La mort et les coutumes funéraires a Madagascar* (Paris: G. P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1962).

³⁵ Leprosy has been traditionally a real “illness of shame” in Madagascar. Berthier attests that it was prohibited to mourn for the persons who died of leprosy, for doing so is “to insult the living” (*op. cit.*, p. 150). This great shame associated with leprosy is still very true until this very day. The Catholic Church, which has a glorious history of its fight against leprosy in this country —the Polish Jesuit founder of a big leprosarium in Fianarantsoa, before the turn of the century, is in fact nearing beatification— has had difficulties in convincing those sick with leprosy to live in the leprosaria and get treatment. The illness was thought to be incurable. The fact that many have been cured has certainly helped convinced those hiding in the forests to come out and get treatment!

³⁶ For the members of the Betsileo tribe, for instance, the miscarried fetuses should not be put in the family tomb for it would engender infertility in the mother. Knowing how being fertile and having as many children as possible was such an important feminine “quality,” one can observe the importance of this custom. Cf. R. Decary, *op. cit.*, p. 262. Cfr. also H. Berthier, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

Imerinas are particularly proud of their beautiful and grandiose family tombs, sometimes bigger and better than their houses! Those that belong to rich families are veritable monuments. The most remarkable tomb is that of the family of Rainiharo, built by his son Rainilaiarivony in Antananarivo.³⁷ Records has it that its construction took twelve years! It is twenty meters long and adorned with double colonnades. The entrance is placed on the upper part, accessible only by a flight of stairs of some eight meters high. The tomb is rather well preserved until now and is found in the middle of a not really well-tended garden.

For some tombs of the nobility, a small house on the top of the mausoleum was even added, a sort of "chapel" where family members and subjects deposited the things which, supposedly in their dreams, the royal dead would have asked them. Or simply as a form of homage to the royal dead.³⁸ Indeed, in visiting the original bedroom (in his house in *Ambohimanga*, around 30 kilometers from the Capital) of the Founder of the Imerina Kingdom, watching how the many Malagasies offer food and other objects to the spirit of the King is far more interesting than seeing the very humble room itself. Obviously, this is a clear case of an "immortality" protracted by the memories of the King still alive in the individual and collective consciousness of the people.

The tombs are large and multi-leveled because they are destined to contain the remains of several people. The lowest level (*vazoho*) is dug into the soil until the ground is found hard enough to support the upper structure. Inside the tomb are constructed niches (*farafara vato*, literally the "rock beds" or the "dead's beds") where the remains of each dead are placed, with those of the earlier ancestors in the lower levels. In the more traditional style, half of the tomb is buried and half above ground.³⁹ Nowadays, one can see tombs which are practically fully buried, with only the roof above the ground and on which is found the access; some are built more above the ground than below, probably for the greater possibility of beautifying the exterior. In really big tombs, a flight of stairs is placed. Then it is closed with a heavy removable door. For Christians, a big cross on top is *de rigueur*. Inside, the niches are open. So, one can easily imagine the smell in opening the main door at the moment when another dead member of the family has to be laid to

³⁷ Cfr. Fn. 26.

³⁸ For historical references, cfr. R. Decary, *op. cit.*, pp. 257-258; H. Berthier, *op. cit.*, pp. 150-151.

³⁹ Cfr., for instance, the recount of H. Berthier, *op. cit.*, pp. 148ff.

rest in the same tomb. As one priest says, "those who have to carry the corpse inside have to get drunk beforehand and must have a lot of courage!"⁴⁰

The door of every tomb must face the west. There is the superstition that one must wait until the late afternoon sun to bury the dead. The Malagasy believes that burying the dead while the sun is still very strong is to expose the family to more deaths.⁴¹ A more practical explanation is found in the fact that the late afternoon sun illuminates best the inside of the tomb.⁴² For the dead of the royal family, the burial used to take place in the evening to distinguish it from those of the ordinary mortals.⁴³

One is invited to note well the above descriptions, because the way tombs are constructed has the function of facilitating the exhumation of the remains of those buried inside. Other than the strong belief that members of the family should be together even in the tomb, the common family tomb—with the remains of diverse members placed inside individual niches—is also the most practical way of exhuming all those remains at the same time.

4. *Famadihana*, or the "Turning of the Dead"

The mention of the exhumation of the remains of the dead should signal something particular, perhaps even unique in the world, in the Malagasy custom. Indeed, the Malagasy has an obligation to exhume and "rebury" the dead or, strictly speaking, to pull the remains of their dead out of their niches and "re-dress" them. I am referring to the rite called *famadihana*.

4.a. *The Rite of Famadihana*

Famadihana is a word very difficult to translate or define. On the one hand, literally and as the earliest conception would indicate, it

⁴⁰ L. Nervi, *op. cit.*, p. 11. For a detailed study of the Imerina family tombs, cfr. R. Decary, *La morts et les coutumes funéraires a Madagascar* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larousse, 1964), pp. 21-90.

⁴¹ P. De Veyrieres & G. De Meritiensi, *op. cit.*, p. 290.

⁴² P. Profita, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

⁴³ R. Decary, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

would mean "turning of the dead," or the "periodic turning of the dead who has gotten tired of sleeping on one side." On the other hand, it is the act of either transferring the remains of the dead from one tomb (temporary) to another (definitive), or changing the linens (the *lambamena*) which wrap the corpse or the remains of the dead, or both successively.⁴⁴

The "turning of the dead" is the "belief-psychological" aspect of *famadihana*. It is the belief aspect because the rite is based on the conviction that the dead is "present" and interacts with the living. Tradition even has it that the rite could have originated from some dreams, through which the dead would have asked the living (family or relatives) to turn their remains because they are tired of lying on the same side for quite some time already, and through which they make known to the living their needs and desires.⁴⁵ It is the psychological aspect because the "turning of the dead" is precisely what is in the minds of those who perform it.

The "transfer of the remains of the dead" or the "changing of the linen" which wrapped those remains is the "practical" aspect of the rite, because it defines more what takes place during the rite than what it really is all about. In this sense, the rite consists in the exhumation of the remains of the dead. Thus, as in the great majority of the cases, *famadihana* has to do with the re-opening of the family tomb, wherein the remains are placed inside open niches, to renew the linen which wrapped the corpse at the moment of burial or since the last *famadihana*.

In the case of transferring the remains, *famadihana* means both the transfer of the remains and the changing of the linens at the same

⁴⁴R. Decary, *Moeurs et coutumes des Malgaches* (Paris: Payot, 1951). Cfr. also H. Berthier, *op. cit.*, p. 161. It is worth citing here a Pastoral Letter written in 1963 by the first Malagasy Archbishop of Antananarivo (and who eventually also became the first Cardinal from Madagascar), Jerome Rakotomalala, *The Exhumation of the Dead and the Christian Conscience*; thus, precisely on the subject of "famadihana." The Archbishop defined the rite as the "transfer of the remains of the Ancestors to a new tomb," or it is also the "changing of the 'lamba' which wrap the remains of the Ancestors." Cfr. also R. Mangalaza, "Signification philosophique du famadihana" (Ile Partie), in *Lakroa* (23 mai 1976), p. 6.

⁴⁵R. Decary, *La mort et les coutumes funéraires a Madagascar*. In fact, the "famadihana" is only one of those rites and taboos meant to please the spirits of the dead (p. 14). Cfr. also H. Deschamps, *Histoire de Madagascar* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1959), p. 23.

time, as the transfer of the remains from one tomb to another becomes the occasion to change the *lambamena*. Indeed, Berthier attests that, in such an event, changing the *lambamena* is obligatory.⁴⁶ In the case of simply changing the *lambamena*, the frequency is not uniform. Normally, though, the first *famadihana* is done only after three years of the death of the last family member whose remains are to be included in the celebration. The interval between five and ten years is common, although the dead could also determine such a celebration by “making dream” or “afflicting” the family.

The *famadihana* is said to have been practiced mainly by the two biggest tribes occupying the Plateaux, namely, the Imerina and the Betsileo. Berthier recounts that, according to the indigenous people, the custom of *famadihana* could be dated only as far back to the reign of Queen Ranaivalona I (1828-1861). But however far we can go back into the past to point out the historical roots of this rite, the actual fact is that *famadihana* has spread to practically all regions of the island, especially favored by the migration of the highlanders to the lower, less populated coastal regions. A few exceptions have, however, to be noted. There are, for instance, a few coastal tribes which hide their dead and never visit them again, so that the spirit could not find its way back to the world of the living, as earlier mentioned in passing. Thus, these tribal groups never perform the *famadihana*. For those whom the rite is indispensable, there are some marked differences among the tribes. The people in the high Plateaux have practically the same practice, while those in the lowlands have also their rites very akin to one another. Even the styles of tombs and the choice of colors and decorative motifs vary.

To perform a *famadihana*, a permission from the local government is necessary. It is during the cold months running from late June to early October that most families perform the rite, although each tribe could have its preference. In most cases, *famadihana*⁴⁷ abound during the July-September months. Indeed, according to Decary—recounting his experiences as the French Colonial Administrator in Madagascar during the early part of this century—, “for hygienic reasons” it was only during these months when the transfer of the remains of the dead from one tomb to another was allowed.⁴⁸ But this can only be true in the high

⁴⁶H. Berthier, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

⁴⁷Malagasy nouns do not have any plural form.

⁴⁸R. Decary, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

Plateaux, where the temperature approaches the freezing point in some regions during the coldest months. But other than for hygienic reasons, these cold months are also the time when the people take some rest from the fields because it is the dry season and, for the highlanders, it is too cold for rice cultivation.⁴⁹ During these months, in fact, a day hardly passes without processions on the road for the transfers of the remains.

The *famadihana* does not in any manner resemble a funeral, if not for the fact that some remains are being carried around. It is a feast in the strict sense of the word: there is music and dancing, eating and drinking. A joyful celebration. A family reunion.⁵⁰ Relatives who live in far away regions have to come home where the ancestral remains are found.⁵¹ Employees who take their annual vacation outside the above-mentioned months reserve a week or so when a family *famadihana* is in perspective.

The ceremony, at least in the more traditional manner, normally lasts 10 days, the time being fixed by a *mpanandro* (*manghuhula*, also a sage). On the first day the tomb is opened and the remains are brought out and placed under a tent. The festivities of songs, dances and eating follow. In cases in which the remains have to be transferred from one tomb to another, the remains are wrapped in *lambamena*, which are in turn wrapped with mats and attached to a pool. Nowadays, however, one sees small wooden boxes which resemble small coffins, instead of rolled mats. At the head of every procession is the national flag which, they say, means that such a public ceremony has the government's permission. Then, somewhere in the middle of the crowd, the remains are carried by two men. In many cases, especially if the family can afford it, the procession is accompanied by some live music and "official mourners."

At the time of the reburial, more rituals take place. The rolls of mats are opened, the skull is bathed with honey and some tobacco; the remains are carried seven times around the new tomb to "orient the

⁴⁹ Rice is the primary agricultural product and the staple food of the people. Note that the Malagasies are the greatest rice eaters in the world per capita!

⁵⁰ R. Decary, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

⁵¹ In the Malagasy culture, a dead is considered an "ancestor" if he had reached the age of reason at the moment of death. Cfr. P. Profita, "*Famadihana*," in *Madagascar ieri e oggi*. Messina: Arti Grafiche La Sicilia (1961), pp. 48-49.

dead to his new dwelling"; everybody vies to get a piece of the mats used to wrap the remains as a sign of good luck; women lie on them as an assurance of fertility...⁵² But we have to immediately add that such rites are rarely performed, if done at all, these days, in strongly christianized areas. The value of the female fertility, on the hand, is still capital; in the sense that women who cannot give children to their husbands are abandoned without any further questions! Among the non-Christians, and even among some Christians themselves, this custom is still very current.⁵³

4.b. *Christian Faith and Famadihana*

The "strangeness" of the rite of *famadihana* leads us to the logical question of its rapport with Christianity, a question which could be in everyone's mind: Is it compatible with the Christian faith? Has the Malagasy Christian finally found an explanation to his ancestral beliefs in the survival of the soul and a "place" for his dead in the Christian doctrine on the same? If such is the case, has the practice then reached its twilight stages, given the rather rapid christianization of the people? In other words, have the Christian doctrine on death and afterlife triumphed over the pre-Christian *famadihana*, or is it vice-versa, or is there a "hybridization"? Is it possible to retain the rite of *famadihana* without violating any element of the faith? In particular, after more than a hundred years of the existence of the Catholic Church in the island,⁵⁴ has the Malagasy Catholic changed his mind from

⁵² R. Decary, *op. cit.*, pp. 268-269. It is interesting to note that Berthier did not mention this "fertility rite" in his description of the "famadihana." He simply described the concluding rites as "putting back the remains in the tomb... the tomb is closed again. A speech of the head of the family closes the ceremony." Such a description seems not to measure up the real unraveling of the rite itself, even during these times.

⁵³ We can easily get a glimpse of the tremendous pastoral problem this tradition and practice entail in the area of the sacrament of marriage. Just to state the fact, there are very few sacramental marriages in Madagascar, and many of those who eventually get married in the Church shall have already led a common life and have children. It is surprising, for instance, to know that there are even catechists who are outside marriage and live with their "concubines," as one Bishop called their live-in partner. This is, in fact, one fundamental and common problem of all the dioceses (18), as clearly stated in Bishops' quinquennial reports in view of their "ad Limina" visits.

⁵⁴ There were already attempts at evangelizing the big island during the 17th century. The Vincentians ("Lazaristes") were already present in some coastal regions

celebrating the *famadihana* to offering Masses for his beloved dead? Or does he believe that it is sound to do *famadihana* and offer Masses at the same time? In a bigger frame, is *famadihana* compatible with the Catholic doctrine? If not, are there at least some elements which are "inculturable" and thus can be salvaged for incorporation into a truly Malagasy Catholic funeral rite and truly Malagasy *All Souls Day*?

These are the questions which have always confronted and continue to confront the Christian Churches in Madagascar. Notwithstanding, we have to say outrightly that there is no clear guidelines in this respect. Christians, in fact, do not agree as to what should be done. Worse, it seems that there really have not been serious debates or discussions on the matter in recent years. The Catholic Church itself, which is by a wide margin the biggest and most influential Christian Church in the island, does not have a single pastoral guideline on this subject. While in the Pastoral Letters of the Catholic Bishops' Conference there is always the twofold emphasis on respect for the parents/elders and the value of the family (also in the extended sense: *fiavanana*, or the "collective sense of solidarity"), there is silence on the topic of *famadihana* and other practices relative to it. Is the topic still too hot to handle?

The differences of opinion regarding the *famadihana* are seen, in general terms, as differences between the Protestant Churches and the Catholic Church. On the one hand, the Protestants in general are more for the prohibition of the *famadihana*. A striking example of this position is expressed by Roland de Pury, a Swiss Pastor of the Calvinist Reformed Church and one-time head of that Church's Pastoral Institute in Madagascar, as well as one of the most authoritative persons in

of the eastern and southern flanks, in particular in Fort-Dauphin. But they did not succeed in penetrating into the hinterlands, the most important region from all points of view. Thus, it was only in 1855 that the first Catholic missionary, in the person of the Jesuit Father Finaz, finally reached Antananarivo, the capital of the Imerina Kingdom (more than two-thirds of the big island at that time). He left the "Île Bourbon"—presently the French overseas department of "La Réunion" (around an hour and a half of a Boeing 737 flight from Antananarivo)—for Madagascar, disguising himself as the able Secretary of Mr. Lambert, a French commercial adventurer who was given permission by the Queen to go up to the Capital (whose access was prohibited to foreigners, but where a Frenchman called Jean Laborde was already installed as the "Court scientist"). For first-hand recounting of some of the very important events during this period, cfr. especially I. Pfeiffer, *Voyage a Madagascar* (Paris: Karthala, 1981).

Protestant circles. He wrote a two-part article which outrightly rejects the practice.⁵⁶ He is vehemently opposed to the rite of *famadihana* because "it is absolutely condemned and made impossible by the Christian revelation, because it is the beating heart of paganism, because it is the mystification par excellence, because it destroys the spiritual and economic future of this country, because the 'strange gods'... are precisely the canaanite, or the chaldean, or the egyptian, or the gallic, or the german, or the malagasy ancestor." Such a custom is a "disaster for this people, a sign of its colonization by the dead, as profound and as difficult to extirpate as its political colonization." Tombs, funeral rites and *famadihana* are "types of unproductive, sterile, paralyzing investments... Madagascar cannot pay both for its dead and the living. It has to choose!"

For him, crucifixes mounted on tombs where the *famadihana* are performed (extremely common) is an abomination, and the expression "God and the ancestors" revolting. Unfortunately for him, we have to say in glossing, this very same expression is very much en vogue at present, pronounced even by the highest ranking political figures of the country during the most solemn national feast days. That the newly overwhelmingly approved Constitution (August 1992) even hints to such an idea would have made Pastor de Pury "turned in his grave" (literally *famadihana*)!

De Pury attacks Catholics who claim that the *famadihana* resembles or approximates the veneration of the relics of saints. This accommodating position of the Catholic Church "explains in greater part," the author claims, "the galloping catholicization of the country" and the conversion of Protestants to it because, in knowing that the Catholic Church accepts this pre-Christian practice, they "would have discovered one beautiful day that they were Catholics afterall"! In the name of and out of respect for culture, the Pastor holds that the tradition can be retained under one condition: that it should be entirely emptied of its religious significance.

Another Protestant Pastor laments: "I sigh with terrible pain upon thinking of my country which wallows in this danger (*famadihana*) which is the greatest burden. Superstition casts its power on the spirit

⁵⁶ R. De Pury, "A propos du famadihanana:" I - "La colonisation par les morts," in *Le Courrier de Madagascar*, 30 november 1965; II - "Madagascar ne peut se payer des morts et des vivants: il faut choi sir," in the same newspaper, 1 december 1965.

of all Malagasies... a great quantity of riches is all spent, fraternal relations are broken, spirits suffer with incurable rancor... one does not taste anymore the sweetness of fraternal life, death reigns from hut to hut. Woe to my country!"

Finally, it is worth citing the position of the Madagascar Pentecostal Church, as expressed in its 1964 Synod documents: "... the National Synod of the Pentecostal Church of Madagascar declares that the *famadihana*... is an ancestral custom charged with and webbed in paganism that one has to combat and abandon. [The Synod] calls all Christians... not to do exhumations, not to accept to be exhumed, not to participate in the rites of exhumation, and not to announce exhumations in the church nor to perform a ceremony related to this practice in the church."

On the other hand, the Catholics, though divided, are in general more positive and tolerant towards this practice, especially in the present times. The sentiments run the whole gamut from those who are convinced that the practice does not contradict the Catholic faith to those who are enthusiastic about the prospect of "inculturating" the rite to those who think that, although it is not necessarily anti-revelation, it would be better to abandon it and commemorate the dead by, say, a Mass or some prayers.

Let us take, for example, the two-part article on the "philosophical significance of *famadihana*,"⁵⁶ published in the Malagasy Episcopal Conference's official organ, *Lakroa*.⁵⁷ In defense of the practice, the author forwards three reasons why *famadihana* is such a positive tradition: first, it is "profoundly religious" because it underlines the eschatological vision of life; second, it is an expression of gratitude to those "who have transmitted life" to those who are still living; third, it is the most propitious occasion for family reconciliation. Indeed, he holds that performing the *famadihana* is a sort of "vengeance and victory against time which tortures the life of the living," because the *famadihana* reminds the living that he will survive time after all. In conclusion, and it goes without saying, he recommends the continuation of the practice.

⁵⁶ Cf. Note No. 3.

⁵⁷ *Lakroa* (The Cross) is the largest newspaper in Madagascar, distancing by half the second one, thanks to the Church's network of distribution.

Then we have the undoubtedly positive evaluation of P. Profita, proven by the celebration of the *famadihana* for his ancestors in his own parish!⁵⁸ For him, that the Church can suddenly change this centuries-old tradition is an illusion. Instead of working for its disappearance, the Church should rather work for its modification in trying to remove the elements which are contrary to the faith. The *famadihana* has positive aspects. For one, the traditional Malagasy beliefs in the survival of the soul after death and their capacity to influence the living are the "ancestral predispositions" which facilitated "the immediate and frank acceptance" of the christian belief on the communion of saints, the christian cult for the dead and of the relics of saints.⁵⁹

What then should the Church do? Addressing himself to the foreign missionaries, Profita enumerates the "fundamental points" with which the missionary should work towards the progressive purification of the practice of its unacceptable elements from the viewpoint of faith: to persuade the people not to consult the sorcerer or the diviner (*mpanandro*, literally "he who tells the day") about the day for the opening and closing of the tomb, and teach them that all days are made by God for us to praise him; exhort the people not to overindulge in drinks so as not to desecrate the memory of the ancestors; not to permit activities which resort to amulets; bless the *lambarena* and the tomb; use a paraliturgy for the ceremony; participate as much as possible in at least a portion of the feast; learn to appreciate the songs and dances performed during the feast; give a circumstantial speech to explain the christian meaning of the remembrance of the ancestors...⁶⁰

Other than the above suggestions, he has always fought for the reduction, if not the abandonment, of the economic burdens incurred.

⁵⁸Cfr. P. Profita, *op. cit.*, p. 56. One of the interesting episodes in his long years of missionary life which he loved to tell me over the breakfast table on Sunday mornings was precisely the "famadihana" celebrated for his ancestors, though certainly in a "Christianized" and watered down form. It was in 1957 that he celebrated the remembrance of his ancestors in the "malagasy way," that is, through "famadihana." The Archbishop of the Fianarantsoa at that time, Mons. Thoyer, celebrated the mass in the open. His parishioners, as well as other Christians and even some non-Christians, offered him the "tsodrano" (literally "benediction," but it is taken to mean a pecuniary contribution). He got enough money to build a high school in his parish! It thus turned out to be a good fundraiser!

⁵⁹ P. Profita, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

In this aspect, taking faith as one's point of departure, according to his experience, has not been and cannot be effective. He resorts instead to "storytelling," recounting to his parishioners how some families he knows have been reduced to misery because they spent too much for the *famadihana*. Happily, some did follow his advice, cutting down the expenses by limiting the celebration to one day and the obligations by not demanding contributions from the attendance —so as not to be constrained to return such a favor later.

In the same vein, but evidently in a more authoritative and decisive manner, let us take the already cited Pastoral Letter of the then Archbishop of Antananarivo (1958-1975) on this matter. Monsignor Rakotomalala declares that, on the one hand, the exhumation of the dead is not prohibited neither by God nor by the Church; neither is the transfer of the remains of the dead to a new tomb or the changing of the already rotten linens. These are loving gestures of the living for their dead. Indeed, the Church invites us to honor the remains of our ancestors because they were also the image of God and their bodies were also temples of the Holy Spirit.

After this positive evaluation, the Archbishop asked: In what way can the *famadihana* be sinful? In examining the practice, the Archbishop enumerated three "sinful aspects:" First, "all those who consult the sorcerers/diviners to know the best day to open and close the tomb commit a sin against God... Those who believe that the dead has power over the living" are equally in error. Only God has.

Second, Rakotomalala questioned the practice of doing the *famadihana* during Sundays in a manner that, instead of going to Church, they go to the tomb. Hence, those who do not honor the Sunday obligation commit a sin.

Third, the Archbishop attacks the economic downside of the practice. A *famadihana* without days of eating and drinking is not a *famadihana* at all in its real import. In its purer traditional form, in fact, it is tantamount to debauchery, especially in those tribes where a certain fertility rite is still incorporated in it. Many say that some parents do not allow their daughters to attend such festivities, for very obvious reasons! The Archbishop, therefore, condemns the following practices: saving money to do the *famadihana* or building a big tomb while the living go hungry; borrowing money with exorbitant interests to be spent for the occasion; selling rice cheaply to get money while the children are dying of hunger; selling lands inherited from the ancestors

to honor the very same ancestors; spending money to buy "beds" for the dead while the children sleep on cold earth; buying expensive linens for the dead while the children shiver in the winter cold; cultivating things to eat, only to be offered later to the *famadihana* guests.

The Archbishop does not rule out the practice, as long as the above aspects are avoided. In other words, the priority must be given to the living and not to the dead. In closing his Pastoral Letter, he invites his faithful to rather collect a small sum of money to offer a Mass for the repose of the ancestors.

This last "sinful aspect" —the economic debacle it can cause a family or a clan— of the rite is, in fact, the most commented upon. How come that tombs are bigger and more beautiful than the houses of those who own them? How is it possible that a family could slaughter all its five cows to feed a crowd during a *famadihana*? How come that bundles of linens are used to carefully bind bones and dust, while the family members can't afford some heavier clothes for the winter? Personally, whatever reasons there are for such practices also escape me. In fact, in observing the rite itself and how much the host family has to put up to be able to have one, we cannot but agree with de Pury that tombs, funeral rites and *famadihana* are "the types of unproductive, sterile, paralyzing investment..." Indeed, as Rakotomalala declares, it is "sinful." It is beyond any shade of doubt that, in fact, the Protestant and Catholic opinions on *famadihana* are closest in this aspect.

Has the invitation to offer a Mass, instead of a days-long banquet, for the dead been heeded by the faithful? It's difficult to say. The Christians in general, and the Catholics in particular, seem to be divided in two camps. There are a few who totally abandoned the practice, for various reasons, but above all religious and economic. Then, there are those who continue to practice the rite but have modified it both in its external manifestations and, even more importantly, in its signification. *Famadihana*, in its pre-Christian and original conception, is performed to please the spirits of the dead so that they would not do harm to the living. With the belief that the dead has powers over the living, the practice, as we have said earlier, incorporated a fertility rite. Implications such as these are banished; only the desire to honor the ancestors, to whom the Malagasy living are still very much attached, remain. Catholics in this category do offer Masses for their dead.

The Survival Prospects for the *Famadihana*

In the end, two things have to be clear. First, Christianity, western cultural influences, modernity, economic difficulties have put into a state of crisis aspects of this and related traditional beliefs. Christianity, in a particular manner, has provoked a certain degree of a change of mentality, as traditional beliefs could not anymore provide explanations about the world,⁶¹ and the christian explanations of the realities which have always been mysteries to the Malagasy show better logic and greater consistency over the traditional explanations which are, in most cases (with all due respects), are inconsistent, incomplete and clear guesswork.

In this connection, it is imperative to note the rather "logical continuity," so to speak, in Christianity of the traditional religious and sociological belief systems in the Malagasy. A simple analysis of the past and present Malagasy pre-Christian or non-Christian culture in general, and on death and afterlife in particular, leads me to believe that there are elements in the Malagasy culture which somehow "predispose" this people to Christianity. We have seen this predisposition, for instance, in their fundamental belief about the soul or spirit of the person: its "immortality" and irrepeatability. Then there is the conviction that death is not an end but a transformation from one state of life to another, in a similar manner that birth signifies a new form of existence for the infant, or that circumcision marks the passage from puberty to adulthood.

These aspects of the Malagasy perception of life and death and afterlife do sound "Christian;" and hence the common confusion between what is and what is not pre-Christian. These elements obviously contributed to the non-bloody evangelization (except during the persecution under the reign of Queen Ranaivalona I)⁶² of the island. Did pre-Christian Filipino beliefs and traditions, which could had been similar

⁶¹ D. Raherisoanjato, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33.

⁶² Ranaivalona I, who reigned from 1828 to 1861, was said to have been a capable Queen; but also very cruel. Those who did not adore her "fetish idol" called "Tkelimalaza" were put to death. In 1835, she decreed that all those baptized Christians will be put to death." It must be noted that, at that time, the Catholic Church did not reach yet the Kingdom of Imerina (only in 1864 was the Catholic Church historically considered "established"). Cfr. the following note.

to these, also at least partly explain the non-bloody and expansive evangelization of the islands?

But then again, many others —educated or not, westernized or not, Christian or not, rich or poor— remain so attached to the traditional beliefs and rites related to death and life hereafter, in spite of the fact that Christianity and the western culture influences could very well be strongly noticeable and felt in many other aspects of their life. In many regions of the country, especially in the rural areas, I'm afraid that what was said by H. Berthier in the early thirties still holds true: "In any case, one notes that the other tribes (beside the Imerina) have preserved, more or less intact, the mores, customs and beliefs of their ancestors and that, even in the central Plateau (the Imerina region), the rural population evolves more on the surface than in depth. While frequenting assiduously the temples and the churches, it remains, in fact, faithful to the cults of the past which are continued to be practiced..."⁶³ For them, *famadihana* simply runs in the blood.

⁶³ H. Berthier, *op. cit.*, p. 8.