

Famadihana: Caring for the Dead as a Ritual to Maintain Cultural Identity

In the central highland regions of Madagascar, the Malagasy people celebrate a tradition known as famadihana, which can be translated to “the turning of the bones”. Famadihana is a practice which honors the dead ancestors of the Malagasy people by taking the bodies from their graves, cleaning and rewrapping them, and holding a grand celebration in their honor, before returning them to their places of final rest. The tradition has a rich religious and cultural history, and demonstrates the importance of honoring those who have died in Malagasy culture. Funerary rituals are important and distinct in each society, but the famadihana has proved to be more than just a cultural feature. The practice has actually functioned as a way for the Malagasy people to maintain their connections to homeland, community, and social history and has allowed them to resist the ever-persistent influence of colonial power. In caring for their dead, the Malagasy people have managed to maintain cultural identity in spite of the difficulty, and can understand the value of a connection with the past. In order to truly understand the complexity of this tradition, we must first look at the religious beliefs held by the Malagasy people and how famadihana came to be.

The traditional folk religions of the Malagasy people are characterized by the strong connection between the spirits of ancestors and the living descendants. They believe in a single god known as either Zanahary or Andriamanitra, who is responsible for the fate of the Malagasy. They believe that the spirits of dead ancestors are the bridge between Zanahary and the living, and are able to accrue merit and blessings on their behalf. Because of this, it is very important in Malagasy religion, that the living and the dead have a symbiotic relationship. The living will care for the dead, and in turn, the dead will care for the living. This belief is central in indigenous Malagasy religion, and explains the importance of funerals and death care. While the modern religious practices in the central highlands of Madagascar have changed to reflect the times, these core beliefs are still essential to the Malagasy. Their beliefs, along with historical influences, have contributed to the development of the famadihana.

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Madagascar suffered a series of hardships. In 1883, a war broke out due to land rights conflicts between French colonial powers and the Merina Kingdom which ruled over Madagascar. Many Madagascar soldiers lost their lives, and were unable to be buried in their homelands with their family due to persisting wartime restrictions. It sometimes took many years for the bodies of the soldiers to be returned to

the family. Out of this, came a unique funerary practice which honored the fallen soldiers by cleaning their bodies, rewrapping them in shrouds, (cloths used to wrap the body of a deceased person), and burying them in an area designated for family tombs or a crypt. This practice became a kind of secondary burial, which allowed the family to honor their dead after the war which ended in 1885.

A couple decades later between the years 1919-1921, Madagascar was hit with the third strain of the Spanish Flu. The virus killed 2% of Africa's total population in just 6 months. Madagascar was heavily affected, and Malagasy communities suffered many deaths. Families were advised by medical professionals to not interact with the bodies of those who had died, because they were still likely infected. Unable to give many Spanish Flu victims the burials they deserved, the bodies were buried quickly outside without any traditional Malagasy rituals like cleansing and wrapping the body. Later, when the bodies were dry and no longer at risk for being infectious, the family would exhume the body, wash and wrap it, and then bury it properly in a different location.

Finally, we cannot understand the importance of famadihana without discussing its role alongside Christian influences. Christianity is one of the dominant religious systems in Madagascar today, which can be traced back to the work of Christian missionaries throughout the nineteenth century. Labeling traditional Malagasy religious practices as "heathen", they prohibited them to perform traditional death care and only allowed for Christian funerals. In an effort to retain their religious and cultural beliefs, the Malagasy people began to hold what are called secondary burials. After conducting a Christian funeral at the time of death, the Malagasy would later exhume the body and hold a celebration that honored the dead in accordance with their beliefs. Scholars believe that all of these influences led to the development of the modern famadihana, which is now a defining practice for the Malagasy.

Famadihana, or the "turning of the bones" is a celebration that happens every five to seven years during the dry winter months in Madagascar. The practice officially begins when a family member receives a calling in the form of a dream. The dream is interpreted as an ancestor spirit calling to the community to begin the ceremony. Famadihana is usually a community-wide affair and all the members of a particular village might participate. They walk together to the burial site of the deceased to retrieve the bodies. The bodies might be wrapped in a special straw mat to be transported back to the site of the ceremony. The procession to and from the graves is a

truly joyous occasion. Musical instruments are brought along and the journey is filled with songs, laughter, and dancing.

Once the site of the ceremony is reached, the bodies are laid next to one another. The old wrappings are removed so that the bodies can be cleaned by their living descendants. The old silks may be taken as tokens of luck and are sometimes given to community members who are experiencing the most difficulty in life. The bodies are then rewrapped in colorful silks called “lamba” which are often purchased at a great cost. The descendants of the ancestors take this time to update them on their lives, tell stories, ask for blessings, and express gratitude. These moments can be very emotionally intense, and reflect the deep respect that is given to ancestors.

After the rituals to prepare all the bodies, a huge feast is held in honor of the ancestors. Lavish food and drink is served, and the celebration is full of dancing and music. Sometimes, the Malagasy will dance with the bodies of their ancestors which is thought to bring them great joy. Some traditions say that the bodies of the dead call to the living to dance with them. The celebration can last up to two days before the bodies are returned to their graves. The community might rebury them with gifts of money and alcohol to keep them satisfied until the next famadihana.

This ritual is meant to show respect for the dead and encourage their spirit ancestors to watch over the community. The bodies of ancestors might be cared for by many generations of descendants. It is believed that their spirit does not fully transition into the afterlife until they have completely decomposed and have turned to dust. Many other rituals in Malagasy religion focus on caring for the dead and honoring the connection between spirit ancestors and the living, demonstrating the importance of celebrations like famadihana. It is important to note the diversity of the practice and point out that famadihana rituals vary from community to community. The festival reflects a long history of community death care and cultural evolution.

Famadihana is a way that the Malagasy people have forged a strong connection with their cultural heritage and identity. Through persistently caring for their dead, they have managed to find meaning and connection through tragedy. Rather than allowing their religious beliefs to be completely replaced by other dominating influences, they remained committed to honoring their dead and retaining spiritual autonomy. The importance of death care in the Malagasy community has become a pillar of community and culture, and allows the people of Madagascar to celebrate the connection between their living and their dead.

Citations

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