
Madagascar: Exhumation Ceremonies

Exhumation is not practised by westerners unless for forensic reasons, but in Madagascar the Turning of the Bones ceremony is vital in maintaining links with revered ancestors, who still play a very real role in daily life. Travel Africa investigates.

At first, the Malagash custom of exhumation can seem macabre to westerners. We are squeamish and accustomed to concentrating on living successfully without those who have died, rather than keeping their daily role within the family very much alive.

During the dry winter months (June to September), famadihana ceremonies take place among Madagascar's Merina and Betsileo people. The corpses of the razana (ancestors) are removed from their tombs, cleaned and wrapped in a new shroud before becoming guests of honour at a party that may last several days. This, it is hoped, will keep the powerful ancestors happy so that they will intervene positively in the earthly life of the family.

Famadihana (or "the Turning of the Bones") ceremonies are conducted every few years, according to a family's needs. If there has been a general decline in fortunes or health, if a young wife appears infertile or if a dead relative returns in a dream, it's believed the razana are unhappy and need attention from their living relatives. In the absence of any such crisis, famadihana will take place every seven to ten years so as to maintain contact with the deceased.

Death is not a sad occasion for many Malagash. While the dead are sorely missed, it is believed they have passed through to a superior existence where they enjoy increased power and wisdom. Thus, famadihana is not a time for grieving but for celebrating.

The ritual begins with the exhumation of the bodies. These are carried out feet-first from the tomb by the closest relatives. The tombs are expensive, sturdy constructions, often made from stone or marble. Inside are neat rows of bunk-bed shelves for the corpses, labelled with their names.

Once outside, the bodies are laid out and washed before being wrapped in a new shroud or lamba - preferably woven in dark red silk, though cost often dictates that undyed cotton is used instead. No living person may wear this type of lamba. Women who are having trouble conceiving will take fragments of an ancestor's old shroud and place them under their mattresses (or even eat them) to induce pregnancy, as the razana are thought to have an even more important role in conception than the husband.

The dead are wrapped carefully according to ancient rituals. Once dressed, the corpses are carried round the tomb seven times to the rhythms of traditional songs, and are then guests at the huge party thrown for them. These parties are very important for a family's status among its earthly peers, as well as its spiritual wellbeing, and can often cause short-term bankruptcy. The costs include catering for an extended family of up to 400 people for several days, hiring musicians and an ombiasy (holy man) and sacrificing the appropriate number of zebu (humpbacked cattle), which must all be monochromatic. All those economically responsible for the upkeep of the tomb and the famadihana must pay their share or risk banishment from the family, home and, worst of all, the tomb.

During the ceremony, mountains of rice and meat are washed down with countless litres of spirits. Musicians play and sing relentlessly, their piercing bamboo pipes and mesmerising drumbeats summoning any spirits who may be out wandering, so they don't miss the celebrations arranged in their honour. Guests will chat and sing to the corpses, informing them of all the latest happenings in the family and village, touching them and even dancing with them. Overwhelming feelings of togetherness and love are not uncommon, dissolving boundaries between the living and the dead.

When the festival ends, the bodies must be returned to the tomb at a precise time. They may be sprinkled with perfume and flowers, and will be re-buried alongside gifts of money and alcohol. Affluent families may even place a photo of the deceased on the corpse. After a final ritual cleaning, the tomb is immediately closed - a powerful and emotional moment, embodying all the spiritual richness of the previous days' celebrations.

The presence of strangers can often be considered a positive omen, and visitors may be asked to honour the family and razana by attending. However, few foreign travellers are fortunate enough to receive an invitation. Those who do are extremely lucky. It is moving to witness the joy of people being reunited with their beloved ancestors and their satisfaction at having carried out their traditional duty towards them.

Although the concept of famadihana may seem strange initially, it emerges as a profoundly reassuring and strengthening ritual, which can even stimulate a re-evaluation of our own beliefs surrounding death.

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