

In Madagascar, digging up the dead divides families
As religions blend, some see sacrilege in ritual that exhumes ancestors

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ANTANANARIVO, Madagascar -- It was when Andre Rabeatoandro saw his father's shinbone emerge from the tattered burial shroud that he began to question the Malagasy tradition of partying with the dead.

Seeing how much his father's body had decayed since his death nine years earlier was bad enough. But the whole custom of removing ancestors from their tombs, dressing them in fresh shrouds and dancing with their bodies suddenly struck the born-again Mr. Rabeatoandro as un-Christian.

"I believe that one day Jesus will come and raise the dead," he explains. "I'll wait until then."

So Mr. Rabeatoandro, a 48-year-old English teacher, told his family that never again would he participate in the "turning of the dead" ceremony.

His theological decision has carried a steep emotional price. Mr. Rabeatoandro's relatives were aghast. His brothers refused to discuss the matter with him. His mother worried that ignoring the dead could bring bad luck. "Someone who refuses to turn the ancestors denies his identity as a Malagasy," says Mr. Rabeatoandro's cousin, Joseph Rabefarano, a 66-year-old retired house painter. "He leaves the family."

In a culture where the ancestors are revered, many families are splitting along religious lines over whether ritual exhumation of the dead is an act of respect or an act of sacrilege.

Madagascar, an island nation half again the size of California, has long had an uneasy relationship with Christianity. During the 19th century, Queen Ranavalona I suspected that missionaries were colonial agents, so she ordered her soldiers to push Christian converts off a cliff, which they did.

Today, 52% of Malagasy practice indigenous religions, while 41% are Christians, according to the CIA World Factbook. The reality, however, is far more complicated. Many families include both Christians and animists. And many individuals blend Christianity with a belief that the ancestors can intercede with the Creator to bless the living with wealth, health and happiness or, if mistreated, curse them with unemployment, disease and misery.

The melting pot often comes to a boil over the turning of the dead, or famadihana, as the ceremony is called in Malagasy. Although the Malagasy are an ethnic blend of Malaysians, Indonesians, Africans and Arabs, the origin of the famadihana itself is a mystery. Elie



**Andre
Rabeatoandro**

Rajaonarison, an anthropologist at the University of Antananarivo, says that the ceremony survives in part because it reinforces social order. People lead good lives so that they, too, will be honored as ancestors some day.

Generally, the exhumations are held in the dry season every five or seven years, after a family member has a dream in which a dead relative complains that he is cold in the tomb.

Exhumation ceremonies can be very expensive in a country where the average person earns roughly \$900 a year. The new shrouds range from about \$3.50 for a synthetic fabric to \$110 for a fine shroud of light-brown raw silk. Buying a cheap one raises the specter of offending the ancestors, and the living.

Unlike Mr. Rabeatoandro's divided family, Georges Rakotomalala and his siblings agreed on the need to rewrap the ancestors entombed in Sahomby, a village of perhaps 100 residents overlooking rice paddies and eucalyptus groves 40 miles from Antananarivo. The problem was money. It took Mr. Rakotomalala, a 52-year-old butcher, 18 years to raise enough money to be able to exhume his ancestors in style.

"I want to stress there's nothing anti-Christian here," Mr. Rakotomalala, a Catholic, explained the night before the long-awaited event in August.

He hired a medium, who looked in a mirror, prayed and spoke to his own ancestors, then announced that Aug. 19 would be the most auspicious date for Mr. Rakotomalala to exhume his parents, grandparents and a score of other relatives.

The family slaughtered a bull and two pigs and cooked the meat overnight to make a breakfast stew for 1,400 friends, neighbors and relatives, who ate in shifts on wooden benches.

"This will clear my conscience regarding the ancestors," said Marceline Rabakomalala, Mr. Rakotomalala's 43-year-old widowed sister. "They are always beside me, so I must care for them, as well."

In midafternoon, a few men with flat shovels took to the dirt mound that contained the body of a cousin they planned to move up the road into the newer family tomb. They pushed aside boulders and dirt until a small entrance appeared, then widened to reveal a doorway into the darkness.

All the while, a band sat atop the tomb playing lively tunes on clarinet, drum and tuba.

Finally, the diggers hoisted a shrouded corpse into the crowd, where an angry debate ensued over whether the body was the cousin they were after. It wasn't. But custom forbade simply putting it back as is, so the relatives put new shrouds on all eight bodies in the

tomb, before placing seven of them back inside.

Then the group paraded the correct dead cousin to the modern concrete-and-stone crypt. The medium, a cherubic man in a baby-blue scarf, poured whiskey down from the roof to protect the crowd from evil. Mr. Rakotomalala removed the chain and padlock from the metal door and pushed it open as the crowd waved photos of the dead.

The men placed 18 bodies, one by one, in woven mats and passed them out of the door into the arms of their nearest relatives. Some bodies were largely intact. Others had been reduced to slender tubes of bones and dust. Skulls and femurs peeked out of dirty shrouds. Roots sprouted from a few.

"This is our father," said one woman, gleefully welcoming some shrouded remains.

"This is our sister," said another.

In some famadihanas, the families take the bodies on a stroll through town, to show the ancestors what is new, and introduce them to children born since they last left the tomb. The thinking is that, to help the living, the dead must be familiar with their lives.

Mr. Rakotomalala's ceremony was simply too large to include a walk through Sahomby, however, and the sun was setting too quickly. Instead, family members crouched on the ground and wrapped new shrouds -- as many as five for a single body -- over the old ones, tearing strips of cloth to tie each ancestor into a neat, stiff package.

A few women sobbed over one body, but most smiled as they worked. One man jotted names on the shrouds in ballpoint to avoid confusion.

Then the living lifted the dead into the air and began to dance, surging forward and backward until the area in front of the tomb turned into a happy chaos of bouncing bodies.

Finally, as the sun fell below the hills, the celebrants returned their ancestors to the tomb. The door was again shut, the chain restored and the padlock clicked into place. "The ancestors are happy now that they've been taken care of," said Mrs. Rabakomalala.

Mr. Rakotomalala is quick to defend the ritual against those who would brand it idol worship. "As a Christian, every Sunday I go to Mass and pray to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit," he explains. "So the two things can go together."

Catholics are often accepting of the ceremony. Father Solofomampionona Razafindrakoto, a 29-year-old Carmelite priest, sees the ancestors as akin to Catholic saints and the corpses akin to the relics kept in many churches. He has even celebrated mass before a famadihana. "The saints were people like us," he says. "They knew our lives and our suffering. Now they are close to God, and that's why we pray to them."

On the other end of the spectrum are many evangelical Protestants who argue that the

ancestors have no place in the Bible, and therefore no place in daily life.

Mr. Rabeatoandro, the English teacher who soured on the ceremonies after seeing his father's leg bone, is a serious, contemplative man who wears a necktie under his leather jacket in case he runs into his students in the streets of Antananarivo. His Catholic mother, Helene Razafiarisoa, taught him that to honor the ancestors, one must celebrate with their remains from time to time. "Since the spirits of the dead are near God, they also pray to God for blessings for the living," says Mrs. Razafiarisoa, a tiny 71-year-old.

But Mr. Rabeatoandro was swayed by an American Pentecostal missionary he heard preach 20 years ago. Sixteen years ago, Mr. Rabeatoandro attended his last famadihana, when the family pressure was still irresistible. For a while after that, he continued to help pay for family ceremonies, even though he wouldn't participate. These days, he won't even contribute money. "I don't miss seeing the dead bodies," he says. "But I miss the parties a little bit, and most of all I miss being together with my family."

Mrs. Razafiarisoa says she respects her son's decision. But she nonetheless hopes that when her own body grows cold, at least some of her nine children will remember to turn her bones.