

# MALAGASY ORIGIN

The aboriginals of Madagascar were the Vazimba, who were considered mysterious people. The Vazimba race had dwarfism and were driven out by the Huva (coming from Asia) who conquered the Highlands which thereafter were home to many immigrants of various origins. The first immigrants originated mainly from Indonesia (Java, Sumatra), Malaisia, Africa, India, Arabia and Borneo. This diversity of origins has given another dimension to the Malagasy culture and language.

The second wave of immigrants was the arrival of the Arabs' between the 7th to the 12th century and the colonising Bantu in the 12th century on the West coast of the Island. Europeans arrived only in the 16th century. The Portuguese, Diego Diaz, discovered the Island in the year 1500. He noted the prevalence of the Merina tribes based in the central Highlands. From that period onwards the trade with slaves and weapons started. This trade supported four large kingdoms: the Sakalava Menabe, the Merina, the Zanamalata and the Betsimisaraka

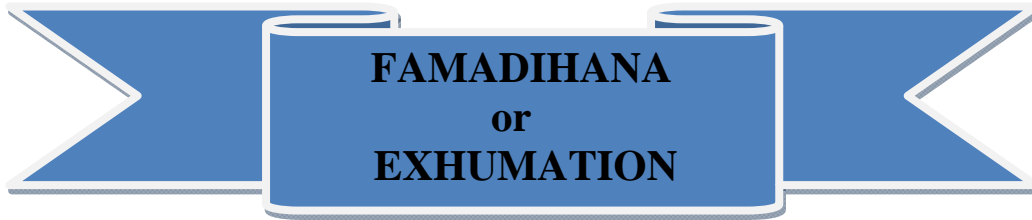
Madagascar's actual population is estimated at 20 million inhabitants. Famous for their hospitality and friendliness, Malagasy people put a high value on the land and the traditions handed down by their ancestors. There are 18 main tribes speaking different dialects which have the official Malagasy language (Merina Language) as their root. Our culture is primarily based on having a great respect for the elders, the ancestors, the family and God the Creator.

## CULTURE

**Madagascar** is truly unique on the world. It is close to Africa but certainly not African. **Madagascar has** an astonishing mixture of different appearances, Indonesian, Asian, Polynesian, African and European. The island has more than 18 different tribes but despite the variety, Malagasy people share one language and one fascinating culture, thus the racial diversity, but cultural uniformity. Most people believe in God, it might be the traditional God or Christian God but they still believe in the power of the ancestors' who are the intermediate connection between the living and God .The ancestors are the centre of not only Malagasy belief but Malagasy life .Life and death are very tightly linked in Malagasy thinking, death is only continuation of life. The building of "ancestorness" is the main goal of all Malagasy people and leads to the necessity of being "good". The Afro- Asian origin of the Malagasy has produced people with complicated and fascinating beliefs and custom.

Madagascar is called the "ISLAND OF Ancestors",

We Malagasy people believe that, when you die, you rise to an invisible and sacred life. You then get a higher status after all the necessary rituals have been observed such as the exhumation. Afterwards you will commonly be called a " Razana "( Ancestor) because you are nearer to God than the living.The Ancestors are able to guide the living and therefore , in order to have our dreams and wishes come true (good health , children , prosperity, protection ...) or just to be forgiven, we communicate with our ancestors which will then communicate with God .



# **FAMADIHANA or EXHUMATION**

Famadihana is one of the Malagasy cultural rituals and consists of re-wrapping the remains of the ancestors from the family tomb in silk, which happens every 3,5 or 7 years, depending on the family astrologer's instructions.

## **Description**

The "FAMADIHANA" is an important Malagasy traditional celebration which is related to the reclaiming of the bones of the Ancestors so that they can be rewrapped in new layers of hand woven silk shrouds. This is also an opportunity to honour the transfer of someone's bones back to his ancestors' tomb. To make the celebration special, the ancestor's family sells zebus or other belongings in order to collect all the money necessary to honour this event and organize it 2 to 7 years after the last FAMADIHANA or burial when sadness and sorrow have completely disappeared.

On the "D" Day, the ancestor's tomb and house and their surroundings should be well dressed. Relatives, friends and neighbours are invited and come to bring their symbolic contribution called "Saodrazana" which means "thanks to the Ancestors (money)". One to three zebus are slaughtered for the celebration animated by one to three groups of traditional groups of musicians and singers called Razana. Traditional songs and dances are performed especially those which were the Ancestor's favourites. One or many Ancestors are wrapped in new shrouds. The traditional Malagasy speech called "Kabary" starts and ends the festival dealing with the Ancestor's biography, words of thanks to God and the guests, preceded and followed by a prayer.

## **The Rationale behind the "Famadihana"**

Malagasy ancestors believe that it is the soul or spirit called "FANAHY" what makes the human being. It is from God, it makes men different from animals and goes back to him after death. That's why the soul is sacred and should be highly respected through the "FAMADIHANA". Apart from that, the family's unity is highlighted in Malagasy ancestor society whether dead or alive. It is because the soul is the base for life and relationship. Let's not forget that it is a sort of insult for the Malagasy people not to be buried in their Ancestor's tomb, and a real shame for someone whose burial in this tomb has been refused or forbidden by his ancestors or his parents. This is illustrated in the following quotation: "Velona iray trano, maty iray fasana" "Alive in the same house, dead in the same tomb" and the practice of the "FAMADIHANA" is an opportunity to unify the souls of the family members through the reconciliation and tolerance among them

## **Malagasy Exhumation ceremonies**

Most of the beliefs in Madagascar fit with the local customs. The exhumation of the dead is one of them.

The exhumation ceremony called "Famadihana" means to move the remains of the dead body to another place. There are different kinds of customs according to regions. Normally a dead person of Malagasy origin should be buried in his or her family tomb. Burials and exhumation require special preparation; you need to see an "astrologer" or "mpanandro" to choose the right date and to prepare the "ancestors" for the exhumation. It's the family head's duty to go and announce the family's "visit" at the family tomb. He will call the ancestors' attention preparing them to make sure that the corpse will be easily recognized for the shroud renewal. At the end of the speech, the "visitors" will take some Malagasy-made alcoholic beverage and they will not forget to share it with the dead, pouring some on the tomb.

On the day of the ceremony, the astrologer opens the march from the house to the tomb with the close relatives of the dead or all family members. There is a national flag and dance at the rhythm of Malagasy folk songs on the way. At the tomb the women and the close relatives keep on dancing while the men take out the corpses with a mat calling each one by their name. The close relatives carry the corpses around the tomb seven times to the rhythm of a lively Malagasy folk music; then follows the shroud renewal.

There are often more than one corpse taken out of the tomb, so while waiting for the last corpse to be wrapped up in the new shrouds; each family gets together to put the newly wrapped corpse of their ancestor in their laps.

Before the sunset, the astrologer writes a thank you note and moves on to a special ritual of locking the tomb.

The guests are then served the traditional "fat rice". Everybody should be happy. The mats which received the bones of the ancestor before the wrapping are supposed to have a healing and blessing virtue so everyone rushes for a piece of it to keep at home. A banana tree is thrown into the pit to fill up the hole (which hole?).

Men put the corpses back into the tomb, and to end the ceremony, the family thanks the guests and carries on with the traditional "fat rice" and the folk music.

It's very important for Malagasy people in the Highlands to honour their dead relatives in different ways. They believe that all those who die bless their descendants and in return, the latter should respect their ancestors by keeping the customs.

There are many casts in the Highlands and I'm going to talk about the funeral ceremony of the «Andriana" cast or noble cast which is different from the other casts.

To start with, when there is a death in an "Andriana" family, the close relatives of the family should sit up for the funeral. They should stay with the dead from evening till morning and sing and pray together. And during the day, they receive visitors presenting their condolences. Visitors have to contribute by standing in front of the dead and his/her family and giving speeches of condolences and giving money and Lambamena (shroud) as a symbolic

contribution in order to help with the expenses because this kind of event costs a lot of money.

While the dead body is still in the family home the only meat allowed is chicken meat, killed at home.

Before being put in the family tomb, the corpse should be wrapped up with a special material called lambamena made with raw silk and often red in colour.

The corpse cannot be placed into the family tomb until the sunset.

These are the main things to do for the ancestors if you want to have in return their blessings. Those who have fulfilled their duties will feel better and believe that all bad things will be gone with the deceased person.



## THE FITAMPOHA

Fitampoha is one of the Malagasy customs in the region of Menabe, the western part of Madagascar, which was occupied originally by the Sakalava tribe. People in that region celebrate the relics because, in their opinion, sovereigns do not stop to be sovereigns even in their demure. To be precise, “**Fitampoha**” is a cult to celebrate the rites of the Dady wash, or the bath of the royal ancestors' relics which contain mainly teeth, hair, and finger nails. During the celebration, these idols are washed carefully with affection, using accessories such as dusters, honey, olive oil, and vegetable soaps known as **fihositry**. The sacred house, or zomba, in which the relics are stored, dwells in a village called Belo Tsiribihina.

Fitampoha is managed by the royal family and the keeper or guard of the Dady--the royal ancestor's relics. The Sakalava slaughter on average 20 oxen for the ceremony and all the tribes contribute to the expenses. This is why fitampoha has a national character. The festivities then start with dance, chants, traditional wrestling and the “**moraingy**”. For a week; the Ancestors are in the limelight in a décor rendered even more magnificent by moonlight and red sunsets. The relics are hung on poles aligned under a white tent called “**rivotse**”.

The ceremony is held in the sacred Tsiribihina River. During the Bathing of Relics, wearing shoes and crossing the river Tsiribihina is prohibited. It is ruled by “**fomba**” (customs) and a well ironed etiquette until the final “**Valabe**”, described as a great moment of collective unwinding. It has traditionally been practiced every year during the Asaramanitra month (July). Today, fitampoha is carried out every ten years.



## **SAMBATRA**

Sambatra is common practice in Madagascar. In order to be a "real man", boys have to be circumcised. This happens during the winter period (July to August). Circumcision is an inevitable stage in the life of a young boy in Madagascar. An uncircumcised man would be exposed to public scorn, would be banished from the clan, would never find a wife and even worse, will have no place in the family tomb. The ceremony generally starts late in the evening and is over at dawn.

In Mananjary, on the east coast of Madagascar, the Antambahoaka tribe celebrates every 7 years the "Sambatra", a collective circumcision ritual. The festivities last 4 weeks.

The first 3 weeks during which people from everywhere in the surrounding bush converge to the main village are dedicated to the preparations. Every day except Thursday which is a taboo day, at sunrise and sunset, the wise men come together into the king's hut while the women dance to invoke the ancestor's benediction.

During the last week, or holy week, the activities go crescendo. Women go to the bush to collect rushes, plait mats and make dresses and bonnets for the young boys. Men carve wooden pigeons to be placed on the top of the king's hut. The king gets out of his hut to make the regal dance. On Friday, effervescence is on top. In the morning, the young men assault the fathers of the intended circumcised in order to show their virility and then, after zebras have been scarified, the whole tribe proceeds to the mouth of the sacred river to make ablutions. Back to the king's hut, the little boys will undergo the painful operation which will transform them into men...