

# Austronesian Mortuary Ritual in History: Transformations of Secondary Burial (*Famadihana*) in Highland Madagascar

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**Abstract.** This article identifies historical transformations in the fluid and regionally varied secondary burials, or *famadihana*, of highland Madagascar. While secondary burials were known during the early nineteenth century, most mortuary ritual at that time focused on primary interment. From the 1820s practices of secondary burial re-emerged from long-distance repatriation of soldiers' remains and from ceremonies of tomb-to-tomb transfer as kin built new sepulchres of stone. Because they consumed time, energy, significant financial resources and tended to strengthen local networks of loyalty and authority, *famadihana* and the persons who practiced them came into conflict with highland Malagasy royalty from the reign of Radama I.

No set of Malagasy rituals has garnered more intellectual attention than the famed exhumations and reburials practiced by many of the island's peoples (A. Grandidier 1886; G. Grandidier 1912; Decary 1962; Bloch 1971; Huntington 1973; Barré 1977; Rabedimy 1979; Rajaonarimanana 1979; Kottak 1980; Feeley-Harnik 1991; Graeber 1995). *Famadihana*, or secondary burials, today comprise a variety of related practices, including transfer of human remains from a place of temporary interment in the earth into a family tomb, movement of bodies from an old tomb into a newly constructed one, and temporary exhumation with reburial in the same tomb (Rajaoson 1969; Bloch 1971; Graeber 1995). Highland Malagasy often combine two or more of these distinct forms of *famadihana* into a single ceremony involving several ancestral bodies, yet the last of these types of secondary burial is today most frequently celebrated.<sup>1</sup> In all variations of *famadihana* the most apparent purpose is to honor departed ancestors by regrouping them in the same tomb and reswathing their bodies with new

winding sheets to ensure their remains are not dispersed into unidentifiable dust. Proper care of ancestors through secondary burial, it is believed, can ensure health and fertility. Famadihana are performed seasonally during the dry winter period (typically July through September, the agricultural off-season), and a single tomb is ideally reopened for ceremonies of secondary burial every five to seven years. Pipe and drum music, display of the red, white, and green Malagasy national colors, feasting, drinking, and dancing all characterize the modern forms of these emotionally intense ceremonies in which the living confront death and memories of deceased loved ones.

There can be little doubt that the practices of modern famadihana of highland Madagascar, like exhumations elsewhere on the island, trace their cultural ancestry to the widespread secondary burials of the Austronesian-speaking diaspora, of which the Malagasy are the westernmost members (Hertz 1907, 1960; Metcalf and Huntington 1991; Metcalf 1982; Hudson 1966; Miles 1965). But if ancestors can be securely conveyed into the land of the dead through a single proper secondary burial (sometimes also known as secondary “treatment” or secondary “processing”) in many Austronesian societies (Hertz 1960; Metcalf 1982; Metcalf and Huntington 1991), highland Malagasy face a far more complicated and protracted challenge. In Imerina, for example, the dead are seldom content with a single ritual of secondary burial (Bloch 1971: 169). Recurrent famadihana are necessary, highland Malagasy explain, because ancestors intervene in human lives and relationships. Ancestors are considered sources of blessing and guarantors of human and agricultural fertility. They may assist those who survive them to solve practical and emotional problems, providing encouragement and counsel in dreams. But they also may use their power in more menacing and coercive ways. As they become “cold” and discontented after several years within the tomb, ancestors tend to exit the sepulchre in spirit, manifesting themselves to living kin in a variety of ways and making demands for attention often backed by threats of violence and disaster. They may oppose or encourage a marriage, attempt to influence other human relationships, or intervene in economic decisions related to agriculture and wage labor. Sometimes choleric ancestors make good on violent threats by visiting their dissatisfaction upon the living (Abinal and de la Vaissière 1885: 250; Graeber 1995).

It is generally to rewrap the recently deceased, whose names and social relationships are still remembered and who are most likely to demand attention, that highland Malagasy conduct famadihana. But when a tomb is reopened, all bodies in it are usually provided with new winding sheets. For a particular ancestral corpse, then, the repetitive process of famadihana does not come to a close when memories attached to that body begin to

fade. At that time the remains might be wound together with a previously deceased sibling or spouse, or incorporated with multiple combined old, dried, and disintegrated corpses into a “great ancestor” (*razambe*). By the time it becomes part of a tomb’s great ancestor, a corpse, now mere dust, is likely to have been rewrapped multiple times. Enveloped in layers of cloth, it continues to be cared for as part of that collective ancestral substance each time the tomb is reopened. Since *razambe* are seldom forsaken—they are normally transferred to newly constructed tombs when old ones are abandoned—such recurrent secondary treatment theoretically never ends. For these reasons *famadihana* are not only important rituals for highland Malagasy, they are persistent ones necessary to secure continual ancestral blessing and to appease the “lurking menace” of the recently departed, so jealously reluctant to relinquish their cherished association with the living (Freeman and Johns 1840: 57–59; Metcalf 1982: 95).

Scholars researching and writing about *famadihana* have pursued two broad lines of inquiry: elucidating the symbolism and cultural meaning of the ceremony in most recent times (symbolic studies) and tracing its historical development from the late nineteenth century (historical studies). Symbolic studies predominate in scholarship about *famadihana* and are developed primarily by anthropologists. Maurice Bloch (1971: 161–71) and David Graeber (1995), for example, examine the meaning of *famadihana* within the context of local kin and tomb-group relationships and, like their colleagues studying secondary burial in other Austronesian-speaking societies, are primarily interested in the symbolism of the Austronesian “journey into death” (Metcalf 1982). The strength of symbolic studies derives from their attention to cultural meaning and localized experiences of ritual, but they offer few insights into the history and transformation of mortuary ceremonies or the influence of extralocal political forces on them.

Historical studies have attracted a variety of scholars who have not systematically researched the ritual past but who provide shorter historical notices within larger works dedicated to other issues (Molet 1979 2: 293–94; Raison-Jourde 1991: 714–20). Abbreviated histories of *famadihana* usually locate mortuary ritual within a broad political and social context while concerning themselves less with secondary burial as a dimension of local cultural life and experience. If less grounded in specific performances, these notices are concerned with transformations. Authors of minihistories generally assume that secondary burial is a relatively new ritual dating to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Reflecting on secondary burial in 1892, British missionary John H. Haile (1892: 406–7) concluded that *famadihana* had “come into practice only during the last hundred years.” Modern scholars have followed his lead but have advanced the origin of

the ritual into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Graeber (1995: 259) suggests that the most common modern form of the practice (temporary removal and return of bodies into the same tomb) “appear[s] to have become commonplace only in relatively recent times.” Finding few early references to the ritual, Louis Molet (1979 2:293–94) traced the origins of famadihana to events in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that prevented the deceased of highland Madagascar from being immediately interred in family tombs. The Franco-Merina war of 1885, he writes, was the first such event. Soldiers and accompanying kin expiring far from home were often returned to Imerina and interred there with new ceremonies akin to modern famadihana. The influenza epidemic that ravaged colonial Madagascar between 1919 and 1921 killed some highland Malagasy far from home. Like the fallen soldiers of the Franco-Merina war of 1885, these victims required repatriation into family tombs. Victims of the flu within highland Madagascar itself were temporarily buried outside family tombs according to the health directives of the colonial administration. Only later when bodies had become “dry” were they transferred to their final resting places, providing an occasion for development of the modern famadihana. Rather than focusing on the micropolitics of family, tomb group, descent group, and ancestors, Molet places the origins and purposes of famadihana within the context of highland Madagascar’s foreign relations and the devastation of epidemic disease.

While Françoise Raison-Jourde (1991: 714–20) acknowledges some eighteenth-century antecedents to famadihana, she writes that the modern efflorescence of the ceremony in the region of Antananarivo transpired in direct relationship to the progressive transformation of funerary ritual under the mounting Christian influence that swept across highland Madagascar during the final three decades of the nineteenth century. As foreign missionaries and Malagasy clergy in the region sought to suppress local funerary ritual as heathen, she argues, the Malagasy abandoned elaborate funerals and brought them under the aegis of the church. But they compensated for this cultural injury by developing secondary burials outside the theological hegemony and watchful eye of church authorities. Raison-Jourde writes that famadihana first flourished around Antananarivo, the urban capital and principal center of Christian influence, spreading from there into the highland countryside.

In this article I draw from both symbolic and historical approaches to explore five related propositions. First, highland Malagasy share a recorded tradition of secondary burial stretching back to the late eighteenth century, and they have probably practiced secondary burial from the first arrival of Austronesian-speaking immigrants to the island. Second, mortu-

ary practice has been in constant flux over recent centuries, as have other rituals like the circumcision ceremony and the royal bath, as well as mortuary culture elsewhere on the island (Bloch 1986, 1987; Feeley-Harnik 1991; Middleton 1995). While there were probably ancient antecedents to the modern famadihana, twentieth-century forms of secondary burial are historically linked to practices of primary burial as well as subsequent repatriation and movement of corpses during the nineteenth century. Third, traditions of mortuary ritual in the Malagasy highlands, especially during the early nineteenth century, were regionally varied. It is inaccurate to speak of famadihana as if it denoted a single set of regularized practices. A trend toward standardization of mortuary ritual during the late nineteenth century stemmed from both diffusion from particular centers in Imerina (especially the Vakinankaratra, a southwestern province of Imerina) and state policy in the Merina kingdom that encouraged particular forms of ritual practice over others (Larson 2000). But even in the face of these efforts, diverse practices endured.

Fourth, just as ritual practices were ever changing, the meanings of mortuary ritual did not remain fixed, single, or “transcendent” (Bloch 1971, 1972, 1982, 1986, 1987, 1989), nor are they fully comprehensible through symbolic and structural anthropological analyses focused primarily on local tomb and kin groups. Individual performances as well as broad transformations in practice were meaningful in various ways to both participants and nonparticipants. Highland Malagasy, for example, performed ceremonies of secondary burial in ways that were both explicitly and implicitly political. In this article I explore the repercussions of famadihana and other forms of related mortuary ritual for relationships between local groups and their rulers in the Merina kingdom. The shifting nature of these relationships can be perceived by tracing broad transformations in ritual practice, the reasons for those transformations, and their political implications. If at one level famadihana were imbued with intensely personal meanings, they were simultaneously of significant import in the macropolitics of highland Madagascar. Secondary burial, I propose, is embedded in political history.

Finally, and related to the preceding, the popular appeal of certain forms of mortuary ritual to highland Malagasy should be understood within the context of social experience. To fully appreciate the meanings of nineteenth-century rituals—what they signified to real people in practical life situations—it is important to understand the various forces impinging upon highland people and shaping their daily lives. In the era of the export slave trade and then of an increasingly centralized, exploitative, and authoritarian royal power that sought to transform highland Malagasy into

laborers and taxpayers, nineteenth-century mortuary ritual provided local descent groups with a means for emphasizing social solidarity, connection to homeland, communal identity, and political autonomy. These values generally strengthened descent groups and provided highlanders with cultural resources for challenging centralized power and frustrating the administrative practices of highland Malagasy royalty (Larson 2000).<sup>2</sup>

In this article I explore each of these five propositions with historical evidence from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The primary geographical focus is the immediate region of central Imerina (the districts of Avaradrano, Marovatana, Ambodirano, and Vakinisisaony) but especially the close environs of Antananarivo. In a second and forthcoming study on mortuary ritual (Larson forthcoming), I investigate these propositions in greater depth, complicating the conclusions drawn here with a broader geographical lens that includes the far southwestern district of the Vakinankaratra.

### Early Evidence of Secondary Burial

If modern scholars usually trace the origin of famadihana to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some of the earliest European accounts of highland Madagascar testify to an unmistakable continuity in secondary burial from at least the eighteenth century. Writing about his voyage into highland Madagascar in 1777, for example, *traitant* (slave merchant) Nicolas Mayeur implied that a ceremony very similar to the typical modern famadihana—a temporary exhumation and reswathing of bodies with placement back in the same tomb—was practiced during the 1770s. “A rehabilitation [*relevé*] of ancestral bones is undertaken whenever it is judged proper,” he wrote. “There are no general rules followed in this practice; it is a family ceremony. All the relatives of the dead take part in the proceedings. Everyone contributes to the cost of new clothing for the bodies to replace those that are old and to the festivities that accompany the ceremony. This practice is observed by the big and the small alike, each according to their financial means” (Mayeur 1913: 169).

A manuscript produced in about 1785 by an unnamed French *traitant* engaged in human commerce between highland Madagascar and the Mascarenes mentions introduction of temporarily buried bodies into a tomb, although it is not clear whether the practice described applies to highland Madagascar or to some other part of the island. “These people have much respect for the dead,” reports the author. After detailing funerary customs, he continues: “These festivities last several days after which the body, closed in a sort of coffin, is buried or exposed on an eminence or

a large rock. After a year, the family collects the bones to place in the tomb that holds those of dead relatives” (Mémoire 1785: 34–35). This brief vignette describes a repatriation of temporarily and individually buried (or encased) remains to a family place of interment, a form of secondary treatment of the dead bearing some resonance to modern practices in highland Madagascar.

Another unsigned manuscript, an “Essay on Madagascar” found among the Malagasy-related collections of Robert T. Farquhar, governor of Mauritius during the second and third decades of the nineteenth century, mentions a ritual of secondary burial. Likely also written by a traitant and composed in about 1815, this passage explains Malagasy mortuary practices but fails, as in the previous case, to identify them with a particular part of the island: “After some time has passed, sometimes one year and more after the death, the exhumation of the body is announced, for which cattle, drinks and a new reliquary [*châsse*] are prepared. On the indicated day, they go to the place of the burial, they open the old coffin and put the remains in a new one decorated with jewelry, arms, and clothing of the deceased. Always drinking and eating, and to the sound of instruments, they carry it to their ancestral burying place, an act which ends both the ceremony and the mourning. From the day of death until this moment, the relatives cannot care for their hair, and those closest to the dead cut theirs” (Mémoire ca. 1815: 92r).

A fourth text, also from the early nineteenth century, refers to highland Madagascar. Two German botanists resident in highland Madagascar during 1822 and 1823 appended the following remarks to their description of local funerals: “At the year’s end [i.e., at the end of the highland Malagasy lunar calendar], the same ceremony is renewed, the tomb is opened, and the corpse turned on its belly, and those families which can afford it spread new and consecrated mats (*dzihi massinna*) over the tombs, at the time of the Bathing Festival, alleging that the spirit of their friend would be offended at finding that his dwelling was not cleaned” (Hilsenberg and Bojer 1833: 260). This account suggests that turning corpses on their mortuary beds without actually removing them from their place of interment was associated with highland Malagasy ceremonies of the new year, the *fandroana* or “bathing festival,” as it has come to be known in anglophone scholarship (Bloch 1987; Larson 1997).

In their collectively composed two-volume *History of Madagascar* produced during the 1820s but published in 1838 under the editorship of William Ellis, emissaries of the London Missionary Society (LMS) explained tomb building and funerals (primary burial) in detail, but neither volume mentioned *famadihana* by name nor described practices of temporary disin-

terment with return to the same tomb, the typical modern form of the ritual (Ellis 1838 1:233–56, 423–31). But in a passage of their work, missionaries did mention special cases in which temporarily buried bodies were later reinterred in a family tomb (an implication of the passage is that most individuals who expired under normal circumstances were directly interred in ancestral tombs). These cases involved the exceptional treatment of lepers: “Another unhappy and pitiable class are the lepers; though they are buried, yet no rites or ceremonies are allowed on the occasion. The grave is dug, not among the tombs of their ancestors, but in some unenclosed place, and the body, carefully bound up, is literally rolled or thrown in any manner that can be done without touching it. Sometimes, after being in the earth for twelve months, or a longer period, during which it is supposed it has been undergoing a purifying process, it is dug up, when the bones are cleaned, wrapped in cloth, and deposited, with prescribed ceremonies, among the sepulchers of the family” (ibid. 1:243). The “prescribed ceremonies” of this passage may refer to rituals of primary interment, as lepers did not receive these at the time of their initial burial. The mere “deposit” of lepers’ remains in the tomb, as the text describes it, does not suggest that corpses already there were rewrapped at the same time, although they may have been (ibid. 1:246).

The preceding vignettes offer some early evidence of secondary burial but depict different sets of practices. Two of the accounts describe the temporary exhumation of bodies at a single place of interment; the others detail the transfer of temporarily buried bodies out of their initial resting places and into tombs elsewhere. The earliest account, Mayeur’s, emphasizes both the collective nature of the ritual (“all the relatives of the dead take part in the proceedings”) and its periodic performance (“undertaken whenever it is judged proper”). While his remarks hint that the ceremony was widely observed (“this practice is observed by big and small alike”), they also intimate that no fixed forms of practice were adhered to. Families varied the ceremony according to their financial means and inclinations, much as they do today. Charles Theodore Hilsenberg and Wenceslaus Bojer’s account from 1823 mentions “turning” bodies prone, a practice akin to partially rotating corpses described in the late nineteenth century by Alfred Granddier (1886) (and examined in a later section of this article). An emphasis on corporeal rotation or flipping in these accounts may suggest the origin of the modern highland Malagasy term for rituals of secondary burial: *fama-dihana* means “overturning” (also “betrayal”). The vernacular term *fama-dihana*, however, is not attested in either foreign-produced or indigenous texts until the second half of the nineteenth century, when it refers to transfer rather than rotation of corpses (more on this later). All the other ac-

counts describe transfers of bodies from initial to final burying places elsewhere. Those offered by LMS missionaries to highland Madagascar suggest such transfers were special and seldom performed under normal circumstances. The accounts written by merchants plying the trade from highland Madagascar eastward, however, imply precisely the opposite. Early historical evidence for secondary burial depicts a variety of practices.

Because mortuary ritual was regionally varied, it is important to tie particular practices to specific places. A complication for highland Malagasy ritual history, however, is that none of these early accounts of secondary burial can be confidently placed in the immediate environs of Antananarivo. Hilsenberg and Bojer (1833) explicitly limit their discussion to Imerina, where they resided during most of their visit in 1823. Because they traveled throughout the highlands conducting botanical research, though, it is possible they observed the ritual at some distance from the kingdom's capital. The two abbreviated accounts of secondary treatment produced by anonymous merchants cannot be placed in highland Madagascar with any confidence and possibly refer to practices observed along the east coast. Mayeur's (1913) account of secondary burial describes a ritual very similar to the modern *famadihana*, but I cannot be sure whether his information stemmed from experiences in the Antananarivo area or in the Vakinankaratra, some 160 kilometers to the southwest, where he sojourned for two months before arriving in Antananarivo, or from both areas simultaneously. Finally, although most of them were stationed in Antananarivo, LMS missionaries traveled throughout the Malagasy highlands.

From early testimonies such as these, it is clear that secondary burial in various forms was practiced on the island and in highland Madagascar—possibly even in the immediate environs of Antananarivo—before and after the beginning of the nineteenth century. The relative popularity of secondary burial, however, remains unclear, and the precise forms it took cannot be linked to any specific parts of Imerina. Most important, the types of secondary burial described in these passages (temporary interment with subsequent reburial within the same tomb or elsewhere in close proximity) were seldom mentioned by other European contemporaries, suggesting they were not especially prevalent during the early nineteenth century. From at least the second decade of the nineteenth century, long-range repatriation of the deceased appeared far more important.

### Repatriation from Afar

Like some reports of secondary burial in the previous section, most accounts of highland Malagasy mortuary ritual from the early nineteenth

century depict movement of bodies from temporary burying places into family tombs. The difference between these previous accounts and the preponderance of evidence for the early nineteenth century examined in this section, however, is the distance and circumstances under which most bodies were transferred. By far, the greatest number of references to exhumation during the early nineteenth century are accounts of soldiers' experiences in the expanding armies of highland king Radama I (ruled 1809–28). Radama marched huge regiments of highland men from one end of Madagascar to another in the process of conquering the far-flung coastal and inland parts of the island (Mutibwa and Esoavelomandroso 1989: 416–22; Valette 1962, 1979). Mortality in Radama's regiments was extraordinarily high, although seldom from direct combat. Returning deceased soldiers to their highland homelands became a major undertaking from before 1820. When remains were repatriated, much care was taken to remove all flesh from the bones before transport. British missionaries (in highland Madagascar from 1820) explained:

All possible means are employed by the friends of those who die in battle, or during a campaign, to ascertain the fact, and then to have the bones of the deceased carefully brought home for interment. Hence, on setting off to war, it is customary for friends to give a mutual pledge, that, should one of them die, the survivor will endeavour to obtain, and convey the bones of the deceased to his relations. In such cases, they carefully scrape off every particle of flesh from the bones, bring the latter with great labour and fatigue from the most distant parts of the country, and deliver them with great care to the friends of the deceased, by whom they are received with all the expressions of mourning that attend those who die in the midst of their families; the bones are afterwards buried with the usual funeral solemnities. (Ellis 1838 I:256)

The LMS missionaries' report suggests that when repatriated remains were received by kin, ceremonies performed at the tomb were those of the customary primary burial ("the usual funeral solemnities"). Hilsenberg and Bojer (1833: 260–61) reported similar practices:

When a Huwa [highlander] dies at a distance from his own country, or in war, his friends carefully carry home the bones and render all the last honours to them. General Brady has informed us, that in the country of the Saccatawa [Sakalava] he has frequently seen the children scraping the flesh from their parents' bones with the same knife as they used to cut their food, and drying the bones and skulls at the

same fire as is then employed for the purposes of cookery. The family is half comforted when the last remains of a dear friend can be recovered; if, on the contrary, the fate of war or famine compels them to inter their dead in a foreign and distant land, they yield themselves up to despair, and regard this privation as the heaviest of their woes. In the latter case, they carefully mark the spot of interment, and provide themselves with relics of it, at the interval of many years. (See also Coppalle 1970: 55)

Many families' desires to deposit the bones of their kin in their ancestral tomb, as this passage indicates, remained unfulfilled. While some families satisfied themselves with souvenirs from the site of their kinsperson's demise, others erected tombs and memorials at home in the absence of a body. By the end of the decade many tombs about Antananarivo were dedicated to fallen soldiers. "Among those [tombs]," noted travelers in 1828,

There are many erected in honour of the slain in battle, or those who have otherwise perished, and whose bodies have not been found by their relatives. These are oblong stone structures, and variously adorned, but always open towards the west; while, at the contrary end, a pole, eight or ten feet high, bearing a flag, is placed, and on a second post, with a transverse beam at top, are displayed the horns of the bullocks slaughtered at the time of the funeral ceremony, which is always performed notwithstanding the absence of the corpse. Some of these untenanted sepulchres are of a semicircular form, with the bullocks' horns, forming a border of points, built into the cornice of the wall. Within this segment there are fixed enormous stones, from twelve to fifteen feet high; around which, in the open space, the spirits of the deceased are said to come and play. (Tyerman and Bennet 1831 2:540-41)

As late as the 1860s Ellis (1867: 444) described the tomb of a repatriated soldier as "a modern pile [of stones] erected over a warrior's grave, on the upright shaft or obelisk rising from the center of which is very neatly carved in clear relief a warrior's shield and spear."

In about 1825, Keturah Jeffreys witnessed the repatriation of a military commander, a fallen friend of King Radama. Her narrative, like that of Hilsenberg and Bojer, implies that the wealthy were most likely to successfully repatriate the remains of deceased kin.

When a native of any distinction dies in the war, they carefully preserve his bones, and his relations are obliged by law to see them buried in his native village. We saw several instances of this; one was, the father of

a child at our school, a captain, and a friend of the King. His remains were carried on a bier, wrapped up in his robe, and covered with a scarlet cloth; upon this was placed his hat, sword, and other parts of his dress. His horse preceded the bier; the King followed; then came persons of distinction in the army; and last of all, his relatives, carrying his property to be interred with its late owner. This is a common practice; and hence it is that they are at immense trouble to make the graves secure, lest they should be plundered of their riches. (Jeffreys 1827: 167–68)

As this and other exposés suggest, repatriation and the elaborate burials that followed them often entailed consumption of considerable wealth.

The connection between repatriation from afar and the outlay of resources required to accomplish it provides one window into the politics of mortuary practice in the early nineteenth century. Captain Lewis Locke, who visited Madagascar from Mauritius at least twice during the reign of Radama I, intimated that the human effort and wealth expended on repatriation were so extensive and disruptive of royal designs that the king sought to forbid them. “And in consequence of this custom,” he wrote,

The people, when proceeding on the expeditions which took place between 1817 and 1824, entered into a solemn agreement with one another to bring back the bones of such as might be killed, to be thus buried; and they were faithful in their endeavours to perform this kind office, till the weight of the burden and state of the bones became so obnoxious as to produce fever, which terminated in their own death. This happened to such an extent, that Radama deemed it necessary to abolish this practice; and at length fully persuaded his people, that although the bones lay not with their ancestors, and in the place of their nativity, yet, being buried in Madagascar, they were still interred in their own country. (Locke 1835: 241)

Although Radama adduced health reasons for outlawing repatriation from afar, he disliked the energy and economic resources his subjects invested in fetching the remains of friends and family from their distant places of death. The king and his people were developing different interests in mortuary ritual. An army preoccupied with repatriation and fractured by personal loyalties to friends and family back home could hardly effect the king’s will with efficiency and resolve. Time- and resource-consuming repatriation detracted from commoners’ loyalties and financial obligations to royalty. Because they entailed maintenance of the connection between descent groups (*firenena*) and their homelands (*tanindrazana*) and tombs

in Imerina, repatriations could strengthen local social solidarity and the claims of remaining kin to land. They also displayed socioeconomic differences in local communities. Radama, however, sought to weaken the descent-group identities that tied individuals to their homelands and provided, at the local level, structures of authority potentially independent of royal power (Larson 2000). By claiming that soldiers who expired anywhere in Madagascar were dying in their “own country,” Radama sought to promote a “national” identity at the expense of local descent-group identities and weaken the social relationships and protections those descent groups afforded his highland Malagasy subjects. If it could be a source of royal ideology (Bloch 1981, 1982, 1983, 1989), mortuary ritual could likewise serve the interests of firenena and kin, becoming a terrain of political struggle between rulers and their citizen-subjects. By performing mortuary rituals or seeking to suppress them, highlanders and royalty addressed political issues of much wider relevance for their everyday lives and circumstances.

In most of the cases of repatriation from afar discussed earlier, some form of ritual was said to have accompanied the deposition of remains in an ancestral tomb in highland Madagascar. Should these rituals be considered primary burial ceremonies at the first but delayed opportunity, or rites of secondary treatment? Preparation of remains by cleaving flesh from bone and carefully drying the latter suggests a form of secondary processing consistent with mortuary traditions elsewhere in the Austronesian-speaking world (Hertz 1907; Metcalf 1982). While this connection is compelling, it is curious that neither in their published volumes nor in any of their unedited correspondence and writings did British missionaries—who of all foreigners knew the language and customs of highland Malagasy best—mention cleaving flesh from bone for persons who died normally *at home*, or secondary burial rites of any sort for corpses *originally interred within a family tomb on their ancestral homeland*, as most apparently were. Cleaving flesh from bone seems to have been reserved only for soldiers and others fallen far from home or temporarily buried outside a tomb by exceptional reason of witchcraft accusation or ritually polluting disease (see the previous section). In the case of lepers temporarily buried outside family tombs, bones were “cleaned” before being deposited into the final sepulchre. Diseased flesh was felt to be polluting even before death, so it is not difficult to imagine why the bones, now substantially deprived of flesh by reason of temporary burial in the earth, would be cleansed upon transfer to a final resting place.

Practical reasons also suggest themselves for cleaning bones in cases of repatriation from afar. Returning the “wet” bodies of deceased soldiers

from distant provinces would have proved exceedingly cumbersome, and this helps to explain why flesh was removed from the bones and only the latter were returned. Attitudes toward decaying flesh as polluting also account for why highlanders cleaned bones. In the previous section I detailed how this applied to lepers, whose bodies were “literally rolled or thrown in any manner that can be done without touching.” Even when soldiers moved corpses of fallen comrades for short distances, they avoided coming into contact with putrefying flesh. When James Hastie (1903: 104–5) observed two highland soldiers far from Imerina dragging a corpse into the woods by a cord about its neck in 1817, the men informed him they were providing a deceased friend with a modicum of dignity by removing the body from public view.<sup>3</sup> Given these attitudes toward decaying flesh, highland Malagasy could not have relished the task of cleaning bones in the way European accounts evinced in this section seem to suggest, whether that cleaning was performed for ritual or practical reasons. Highlanders’ intent when processing fallen soldiers’ corpses remains uncertain, then, especially since practical and ritual reasons for cleaning bones of flesh are by no means necessarily exclusive.

### **An Emphasis on Primary Burial**

A more comprehensive way in which to interpret practices resembling secondary processing in early-nineteenth-century highland Madagascar is to locate them within the wider array of highland Malagasy mortuary culture. I begin with tombs. As I have written elsewhere, tomb building in central Imerina demonstrated considerable variation during the eighteenth century but became increasingly standardized during the reign of King Andrianampoinimerina (r. ca. 1780–1809), who promoted construction of stone slab final resting places as an effective strategy for garnering popular support and eliminating political rivals (Larson 2000: 183–91). “The site having been chosen,” LMS missionaries noted about tomb construction in the early 1820s,

A large excavation is made in the earth, and the sides and roof of the vault are formed of immense slabs of stone. Incredible labour is often employed in bringing these slabs from a distance to the spot where the grave is to be constructed. When they are fixed in their appointed positions, each side or wall of a vault or tomb, six or seven feet high, and ten or twelve feet square, is often formed of a single stone of the above dimensions. A sort of subterranean room is thus built; which, in some parts of the country, is lined with rough pieces of timber. The stones

are covered with earth to the height of from fifteen to eighteen inches. This mound of earth is surrounded by a curb of stone-work, and a second and third parapet of earth is formed within the lower curb or coping, generally from twelve to eighteen inches in height, each diminishing in extent as they rise one above another, forming a flat pyramidal mound of earth, composed of successive terraces with stone-facing and border, and resembling, in appearance, the former heathen temples of the South Sea islanders, or the pyramidal structures of the aborigines of South America: the summit of the grave is ornamented with large pieces of rose or white quartz. The stone-work exhibits, in many instances, very good workmanship, and reflects great credit on the skill of the native masons. Some of these rude structures are stated to be twenty feet in width, and fifty feet long. (Ellis 1838 1:244–45)

Describing his residence of one year at Antananarivo in 1825 and 1826, French artist André Coppalle (1970 [1825]: 55) described tombs there in the following terms: “The Ambaniandro [highlanders] appear to have the greatest respect for their tombs, which are constructed with rock or brick in the form of a rectangular prism situated on a more or less elevated base. Each family has a particular place for the sepulcher of its members.” Because bricks were introduced by LMS missionaries after 1820, their use in tomb construction represented a recent innovation.

In the kingdom’s eastern regions, burial practices differed from those in the immediate vicinity of Antananarivo. Jeffreys and her husband John resided some thirty kilometers east of Antananarivo in the town of Ambatomanga. In 1827, Jeffreys published a book-length account of her experiences in Madagascar. “Perhaps the reader is ready to enquire,” she asked, “if they [the residents of Ambatomanga and its environs] have no regular burying place?” by which she meant a common burying ground or British-style cemetery.<sup>4</sup>

They have not, but inter their deceased friends wherever they please; their usual mode of interment is, first to wrap up the body in the best robe they can procure, and then to wind around it a new mat, instead of a coffin; they then place it on a bier, and four persons carry it away to the grave, followed by all the relatives and friends of the deceased, who make a most distressing noise as they pass along: their only mark of mourning consists in having their hair, which at other periods is fantastically plaited, in a dishevelled state, which gives them a very doleful appearance. When they come to the grave, the body is laid on two large stones, one placed at the head, and the other at the feet; they

then form an arch over the body, to prevent the earth from touching it, and to preserve it as long as possible. (Jeffreys 1827: 133)

Jeffreys clearly describes individual burial here. The body was wrapped with a “robe” and a woven mat for transport from place of death to site of individual interment. Were these remains later exhumed and reburied in a collective tomb? The attention Jeffreys notes highlanders paid to shielding the body from earth both under and over it and preserving it “as long as possible” suggests this, but she does not comment elsewhere in her work on further processing or translation of remains. Whether the deceased about Ambatomanga were permanently buried in the ground or later transferred to stone tombs cannot be determined from this passage. Unlike her colleague missionaries, though (individuals resident in and around Antananarivo), Jeffreys never mentions tomb construction. She freely exchanges the words “tomb” and “grave” in her account but nevertheless clearly describes individual burial in this passage and elsewhere in her work. Perhaps large collective tombs were found in greatest density around Antananarivo during Jeffrey’s residence in highland Madagascar. “In the neighbourhood of the capital [Antananarivo],” wrote two travelers in 1828 tending to support this conclusion, “tombs are very numerous” (Tyerman and Bennet 1831: 2: 540).

Although the humble burial Jeffreys describes may have reflected the poverty of the family concerned, modern verbal testimony and archaeological reconnaissance in a region east of Antananarivo uphold the inference that collective tombs were few or nonexistent around Ambatomanga and its neighboring territories. In his study of the community of Ambohibaho in eastern Imerina, Claude Vogel (1982) writes that individuals were once buried in “communal pits” (*lapabe*) that corresponded to village moieties. Only in recent times did kin-based groups hive off from those common burying places to build separate stone tombs (*ibid.*: 121–29, 170–75). Judging from the convergence of various types of evidence, it is likely that burial practices in the Ambatomanga region east of Antananarivo varied from those in the more immediate environs of the kingdom’s capital, where bodies were usually placed directly in collective tombs. These differences characterized regional variation in mortuary culture as well as in socioeconomic status.

Whatever the geography of tomb building in highland Madagascar, most ceremonial activity associated with death as described in written historical sources from the early nineteenth century took place soon after expiration—it was centered upon primary, not secondary, burial. In addition to placing a corpse in a tomb or individual grave, primary burial entailed

sacrifice of cattle, communal feasting, celebratory festivities, noise making (especially musket firing), and sometimes lavish entombment of wealth in money and goods with the deceased. Describing the *manao afana* (from *manao*, to do or perform, and *afana*, a ritual purification), a key ritual sequence following interment (Richardson 1885: 7), LMS missionaries noted in the early nineteenth century that it “is a ceremony performed at the tomb of a person recently buried. It consists of firing muskets or cannons, slaughtering oxen, and feasting. The quantity of gunpowder used, and the number of cattle slaughtered, depend entirely upon the rank and riches of the deceased. The skulls and bones of the oxen are fixed on poles, at the head of the tomb, for a memorial. The natives say that the use of the *afana* is to take away evil from the dead, that he may rest quietly in his grave. This is their last act of kindness for the departed” (Ellis 1838 1: 423, see also 1: 239–41; Freeman and Johns 1840: 59–60; Tyerman and Bennet 1831 2: 507).

While the wealthy could afford greater ostentation in their celebration of death, everyone performed some version of the *manao afana* to satisfy the recently deceased and keep them from soon exiting the tomb to exact favors from the living. In 1824, Hilsenberg and Bojer (1833: 260) characterized the *manao afana* festivities following primary burial in much the same terms: “After the tomb is closed, and the stones arranged above it, a great sacrifice takes place. The wealthy often slay twenty, thirty, fifty, and even an hundred oxen, which are divided among the family, friends, and guests. The horns of the beasts, with a kind of white drapery stretched along them, are arranged upon the tomb, to prove to the passers by the riches of the deceased.” In December 1825, Coppalle (1970 [1825]: 55) described a similar set of practices: “Yesterday I was witness to a funeral ceremony. Eighty or one hundred persons of the two sexes, their hair undone, accompanied a red-draped bier in silence. A man carried a white flag at the front of the parade. From time to time muskets were discharged. Arrived at the place destined for the burial, the flag was planted at one of the extremities of the tomb, then a certain number of cattle were sacrificed, a piece of which each of the participants took.”

Jeffreys (1827: 133–34) elaborates on these mortuary festivities of the *manao afana* and their purpose with respect to highland Malagasy ideas about death and the afterlife:

These people entertain a singular idea about the soul of the deceased; they imagine it continues for a time hovering about the grave, or its recent dwelling, in a state of restlessness; and in order to pacify it, they go through a singular ceremony at the grave, which they call “Manou afany”; the order of which is as follows,—they sacrifice at the tomb

one or more bullocks, according to their ability; they then drive a pole into the ground, and hang upon it the horns of the animals slain, supposing that the greater number of horns they can fix up, the happier the departed will be. It is also customary at burials to have feasts, to which all the relatives and friends are invited; and these also are regulated in their extent and expensiveness, by the circumstances of the deceased. It may also be proper to observe, that all who attend these feasts are considered unclean for several days after, so that they will not enter a habitation of any respectability, till they have bathed in pure water. (For a similar explanation of the cultural logic behind mortuary ritual, see Ellis 1867: 63)

All these accounts suggest that the dead were normally buried directly in tombs or final individual sepulchre. Most ritual activity associated with death, including the communal feasting Robert Hertz described in 1907 as a hallmark of secondary treatment, occurred soon after primary burial. None of these authors, with the exception of Hilsenberg and Bojer (see the discussion earlier in the article under “Early Evidence of Secondary Burial”), mentions rituals of secondary burial performed for individuals who died without polluting disease or witchcraft accusation and who were normally interred on their ancestral territories.

Highlanders not only celebrated death with sacrifice and feasting, they commonly interred wealth and other desirable implements with the deceased to comfort them in the afterlife and to prevent ancestors from bothering the living for them. LMS missionaries explained this custom, describing how highlanders were already adapting their usages to the objects and practices of Christian literacy.

Even their mode of burying the dead seems to indicate something like an idea that some portion of the departed, either material or spiritual, will be able to possess and take pleasure in the same things which afforded satisfaction in life. It is customary to cast into the tomb or vault in which the dead are buried, garments, ornaments, looking-glasses, and any thing that was precious or useful to them when living. The funeral of the late king Radama was celebrated by a greater sacrifice of this kind than was ever known to have taken place in the country at any other time. It is stated by Mr. Jones [one of the British missionaries], that on the death of one of his scholars, who was the son of a noble, and who, in addition to his being a superior and talented youth, had excited higher hopes in the minds of his Christian teachers; on being laid in his tomb, or vault, his mother and relatives ordered all his books, slates, and papers to be buried with him. . . . If asked their rea-

son for continuing this practice, the Malagasy reply, that these things are buried with the dead, in the hope that they may be useful to them again, though in what way they are unable to explain. (Ellis 1838 1: 429; see also Jeffreys 1827: 168)

The departed aspired to dwell among earthly wealth and possessions, enjoying their social position in death as they had in life. The burden of fulfilling these desires fell to living kin, who in turn affirmed their responsibility to new ancestors by caring for them. At the same time the family of deceased individuals affirmed their social status through sometimes lavish expenditures and displays of wealth. Hilsenberg and Bojer (1833: 260) also commented on laying the dead to rest among money and earthly possessions: “When arrived at the tomb, which is of masonry, and often rises to ten or twelve feet high, the corpse is deposited there, and with it are buried all the best clothes, along with the money of the deceased, often amounting to a very large sum. Notwithstanding the poverty of the surviving relatives, they never take back this money, which gave rise to the remark, that ‘the mines of Madagascar would be richer than those of Peru, as the silver lies there all ready purified and coined.’”

Apologizing for such glib and disapproving foreign assessments of highland Malagasy mortuary ritual to a French traveler in the mid-1820s, Ramanetaka, the cousin of King Radama, explained that

One of our customs you will without a doubt find strange is burying with the dead a large part of their money. There was recently in Antananarivo a kabary [consultation] to find out if it was proper to place in the tomb of a rich man who had just died a bail of cloth he had left to his inheritors. Elders were consulted. They decided, after deliberating several days, that it was sufficient to bury piasters [the coined silver Spanish money used in highland Madagascar] to obey the custom. These deposits are always respected, and those who try to steal them would be considered as a witch (*ampoum'chave*) and condemned to undergo a trial by poison ordeal. This custom is the cause of the scarcity of coin in Imerina. It even happens frequently that if a head of family dies without leaving money, his children address themselves to the usurers and even sell their persons, in order to procure some piasters to bury with their relative. (Leguevel de Lacombe 1840 1: 146–47)

Ramanetaka's story poignantly illustrates the dilemma highlanders faced when confronted with the complementary values of earthly wealth: employing it to fulfill the immediate needs and desires of the living or lavishing it on the departed. Although both might bring happiness, security, and so-

cial prestige to the living, balancing these social expenditures confronted highlanders with practical and moral dilemmas. Could it be that elders consulted in this story considered it more important to bury their dead with silver than with consumer goods? While the former was directly linked to rituals that produced *hasina* (the sacred efficacy that empowered ancestors to bless their descendants), worldly goods could be immediately enjoyed by the living and generously distributed in ritual to generate a commendable reputation?

Some innovative persons began to solve tensions arising from the varying uses of wealth by celebrating the *manao afana* ceremony *before* their deaths. Joseph John Freeman and David Johns (1840: 59) reported the following droll incident, which must have occurred before their departure from highland Madagascar in 1835: “An elderly man, anxious to make sure of the ceremony called ‘Manao afana,’ which is always made after death, being performed for him, determined on seeing it done before his death. Cattle are, on occasions of this ceremony, killed as a kind of peace offering and farewell to the departed, and they are supposed to go to the departed in Ambondrombé [a mountainous area of highland Madagascar considered an abode of the departed]. The old gentleman killed about thirty head of beef, and was much praised for his sagacity by those who shared the meat he had so liberally distributed.” The host in this incident creatively resolved the tension between competing uses of wealth by merging them in performance of a *manao afana* for himself while still alive. In this way he could enjoy the “sagacity” and prestige such “liberal distribution” of meat brought him before his death, usurping that distinction from his descendants who would have later thrown the feast at his tomb. Idiosyncratic and innovative acts like this one suggest how integral mortuary ritual was to an economy of prestige and how such rituals, their purposes, and their meanings could shift as the result of individual initiative.

Although descriptions of elaborate *manao afana* continue into the early 1860s, burying the deceased with large amounts of money and personal goods probably reached its peak during the early decades of the nineteenth century, when silver was most abundant. Residents of Ambohimanga informed traveling LMS missionaries that some eighteen thousand silver dollars had been interred with King Andrianampoinimerina when he departed in 1809 (Jones, Griffiths, and Canham 1823: 42). So many tombs were reputed to hold silver treasures that talk of grave robbery became a major discursive preoccupation. Tombs were burglarized, it was said, even to plunder the single silver coin customarily deposited in the mouths of resting corpses, the greatest wealth most highlanders could muster to accompany their kin into the afterlife (Jeffreys 1827: 168; Ellis 1867: 215; Abinal

and de la Vaissière 1885: 195). Ubiquitous narratives of tomb theft during the early nineteenth century smack of rumor, however, in that no account with which I am familiar convincingly documents a particular instance of looting (see Ellis 1867: 215 for an example of such a rumor). Stories about the transgression of tombs by strangers and robbery of their contents were expressive of the pervasive insecurity faced by highlanders during the nineteenth century and served as rhetorical cover for kin who undoubtedly re-entered sepulchres to retrieve interred funds.<sup>5</sup> Whatever the ultimate fate of entombed wealth, missionaries often bemoaned what they understood as a gross wastage of resources on festive funerary ritual, which they consistently criticized. “Thus the dead had been enveloped in rich clothing, covered with ornaments, and surrounded with silver,” they opined, “whilst the nearest living relatives were by these means reduced to the lowest state of degradation” (Ellis 1838 2: 304; see also Tyerman and Bennet 1831 2: 510; Matthews 1881: 137–38).

Highland rulers viewed the matter in much the same terms. Like foreigners, they envisaged alternative uses for their subjects’ wealth. Not only did Radama seek to forbid repatriation from afar, as I have discussed earlier, he frowned on the *manao afana* and entombment of money and commodities. Hastie, the British ambassador to Antananarivo, it is said, convinced the king to move against entombment of wealth in 1824 by rendering unlawful and uncollectable all loans tendered to fill sepulchres with silver and consumer goods, a practice sometimes ending with the enslavement of debtors who could not meet their financial obligations but who had successfully fulfilled a moral commitment to recently departed kin. “The king, who saw the inconveniences of this custom,” wrote a visitor to highland Madagascar, “has recently made a law that forbids creditors to require sums of their debtors lent to be deposited in the burial places of their relatives” (Leguevel de Lacombe 1840 1: 147; see also Tyerman and Bennet 1831 2: 510; Ellis 1838 2: 304–5). The effect of this edict was to make lenders reluctant to put out money for rituals of death, reserving it to more financially secure purposes. LMS envoys attributed Hastie’s counsel and Radama’s action to the king’s progressive enlightenment in ways European, but it is far more convincing to see the interdiction on such loans—as Ramanetaka did (“this custom is the cause of the scarcity of coin in Imerina”)—within the context of Radama’s poverty in silver. Yet mortuary practices were not solely responsible for the scarcity of silver in highland Madagascar. Cessation of the export slave trade in 1820 had nearly terminated the flow of silver into highland Madagascar just when Radama desired it most acutely to purchase foreign-manufactured weapons for highland troops effecting his goal of islandwide political conquest (Campbell

1986; Larson 2000: 238). Silver gracing ancestors in their resting places was unavailable to the sovereign's tax collectors or to enliven the economy, and it reduced the money supply.<sup>6</sup> Mortuary ritual came into conflict with the sovereign's political and financial goals. The irony—and perhaps the point—of Radama's laws is that the king himself was said to have been buried in 1828 with 10,300 silver coins and a vast collection of imported goods, including clothing, jewelry, dishes, silverware, and weapons—all amounting to an estimated sixty thousand pounds sterling (Tyerman and Bennet 1831 2: 558–59; Ellis 1838 1: 254; Jourdain 1839: 22–23).

If secondary burial, especially in its typical twentieth-century form of temporary exhumation and return of bodies to the same tomb, was practiced in highland Madagascar during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, foreign observers seldom described it. Repatriation of fallen soldiers' remains, however, preoccupied much time, effort, and money. These repatriations, which took the form of separating flesh from bones and returning only the bones to Imerina, might have represented a sort of secondary treatment of the dead. But such treatment was not usually extended to those dying at home under normal circumstances, individuals who were immediately buried individually or in a kin group's ancestral tomb. While normative of the Antananarivo area, burial in a collective tomb was probably not universal to all highland Madagascar, especially in the rural eastern zone. By comparison with secondary treatment of the dead, however, rites of primary burial were much more visible, developed, openly celebrated, and described by foreigners during the early nineteenth century. The extravagant amounts of wealth sometimes expended on festive mortuary ritual were part of the rites of primary burial taking place soon after a person's demise. During the early nineteenth century, descent groups affirmed their identities and established political autonomy from royal power through mortuary ritual ensuing soon upon death. At the same time, mortuary ritual served as both an arena of and a marker for regional and local sociopolitical differentiation.

### **Secondary Burial: From Transfer to Rewrapping**

If most emphasis in mortuary ritual during the early nineteenth century followed shortly after death, some funerary practices favored [re]development of secondary treatment of the dead. Of these, the most significant was transfer of bodies from old tombs or places of temporary burial into newly constructed or otherwise permanent places of interment; modern rituals of famadihana are closely linked to these practices. As I explored in the first section of this article, some of the earliest descriptions of secondary

burial entail transfers of temporarily interred bodies into nearby tombs. A passage in Ellis's *History of Madagascar* (1838) suggests that rituals surrounding these transfers into newly constructed tombs were not particularly elaborate. The account indicates that new tombs were sometimes constructed for deceased persons who did not yet have a tomb in which to be buried. "In some cases," wrote the missionary authors, "a corpse is buried in a dwelling-house *pro tempore*, till the new tomb is finished, when it is disinterred, and removed to its final resting-place with the usual ceremonies" (ibid. 1:246). Precisely what those "usual ceremonies" were in this case and whether they entailed something in addition to the customary rituals of primary burial is not divulged. While such accounts demonstrate that transfers into nearby new tombs were occurring during the early nineteenth century, it was primary interment and long-range repatriation, as I have discussed, that continued to occupy most highlanders' attention and resources into mid-century.

The ritual emphasis on primary interment began to shift toward secondary burial over the course of the nineteenth century, especially after mid-century. This transformation was foreshadowed by the curious preparation for a "turning" of the remains of King Radama I in 1853 reported by James Cameron, who visited Tamatave in August of that year ("curious" because highland royalty normally eschewed secondary burial; Raison-Jourde 1991: 152). The intensification of earth-to-tomb and tomb-to-tomb transfers in this period was supported by an expansion of new tomb building in the central regions of Imerina from the turn of the nineteenth century, a key policy of founder-king Andrianampoinimerina which I have explored elsewhere (Larson 2000: 183–91).<sup>7</sup> Although many individuals did have a tomb in which to be placed after death, it became increasingly common for highlanders to upgrade their eventual resting places by building newer, larger, and more fashionable ones and to create a political and social identity for themselves by hiving off from kin and constructing separate burying places (Graeber 1995: 266–69). "Many of the Malagasy begin to erect their tombs in early life," noted LMS missionaries in *History of Madagascar*, "and make their completion through a series of years one of the most important objects of their existence, deeming a splendid or costly depository for their mouldering bodies, the most effectual means of being held in honourable remembrance by posterity" (Ellis 1838 1:248).

"The first serious work in life is to build a tomb," affirmed LMS missionary Haile (1892: 406) near the end of the century of his researches among "persons of all ages and conditions, from the withered old woman of ninety summers to children of tender years, from proud nobles to mean slaves." "The estimation of both living and dead," he continued, "depends

much on the quality of their tombs, solidity and splendour are the measure of honour. The man who is unable to boast a tomb is a nonentity in society and unworthy of consideration” (ibid.: 408, 409). Whether the result of tomb-group fissioning (in which case only some of the bodies lying in a tomb were moved to a new one), the total abandonment of an existing tomb for a new one and simultaneous transfer of all the bodies within it, or relocation of bodies temporarily buried in the earth to a tomb, corpses in secondary burial as described in available sources until about 1885 were virtually always *relocated*.

Referring to such transfers of remains, the modern Malagasy term *famadihana* appeared after mid-century. The earliest documented case of a ceremony identified as *famadiham-paty* (*famadihana* of a corpse)—in 1866 near Antananarivo—entailed movement of bodies from an old tomb into a newly built one (Sibree 1870: 259–61). Malagasy language narratives collected after 1864 (the *Tantara ny Andriana*) employ the term *famadihana* for rituals of transfer; earlier Malagasy-language sources, as far as I have been able to ascertain, do not use the word (Callet 1981: 269–74). Every instance of secondary burial described in these Malagasy narratives entails the entombment of corpses previously and temporarily buried in the earth (*an'iritra*) under extraordinary circumstances. Temporary burial and an ensuing *famadihana*, the narratives affirm, occurred only in four special situations: when death took place during the festivities of the *fandroana* (corpses could not be interred then; see Abinal and de la Vaissière 1885: 200; Bloch 1987); when a person died far away from his or her homeland; when an individual expired without having a tomb in which to be immediately laid; or when the deceased had died of smallpox (Callet 1981: 57, 269, 271–74).

As in Malagasy language texts, definitions and descriptions of *famadihana* by foreigners during the second half of the nineteenth century all assume that corpses were displaced. In his Malagasy-English dictionary published in 1885, James Richardson (1885: 720) defined the active verb *mamadika* (which describes the process of secondary burial) as “to remove a corpse from one tomb to another.” Three years later, French scholars Antoine Abinal and Victorien Malzac (1963 [1888]: 798) published a Malagasy-French dictionary, defining *famadihana* as “the action of returning, overturning, transporting the dead into another tomb.” When in 1892, Haile published an article on *famadihana* in the scholarly magazine of the LMS, he described the ritual only as a movement of bodies into newly constructed tombs. This happened, he wrote (paralleling the logic of the Malagasy language texts mentioned in the previous paragraph), under four special circumstances: when a person had no tomb in which to be buried when

he or she died; when a body was repatriated from afar; when tomb groups hived off from each other, dividing ancestral bodies among themselves; and when persons died within a few years of a previous famadihana ritual (generally, tombs that had been opened for a recent ceremony could not be reopened for primary burial in the immediately ensuing years) (Haile 1892: 407, 408, 409, 411, 412, 414). However they characterized secondary burial, foreigners and Malagasy resident in and around Antananarivo after mid-century all assumed that famadihana required *transportation* of bodies from a tomb or location of temporary burial to another place.

This assumption began to crumble, however tentatively, toward the end of the nineteenth century. A description of mortuary ritual in 1885 by two French missionaries suggests how famadihana of rewrapping (by which I mean temporarily removing bodies from a single tomb, rewrapping them with new winding sheets, and returning them to the same tomb) emerged from famadihana of transfer. Abinal and Camille de la Vaissière (1885) reported that all persons who died during ceremonies of the new year, who expired far away from home, or whose tomb had not yet been completed upon their decease, were temporarily buried in the earth. After temporary interment, a date was fixed for “funeral solemnities,” when the bodies would be transferred into a waiting tomb. “They even profit on these occasions to renew the lambas [cloth winding sheets] that envelop the remains of the *other* deceased kin resting in the same tomb,” Abinal and de la Vaissière (*ibid.*: 200–2, my emphasis) noted. If practices of secondary burial in the region of Antananarivo from about 1885 were shifting from famadihana of transfer toward famadihana of rewrapping, the metamorphosis appears to have developed *within* ceremonies of transfer themselves rather than from a separate or independent tradition.

In 1886, Alfred Grandidier published the first late-nineteenth-century description of a famadihana of rewrapping that I have located. He explained that highland Malagasy periodically performed a ceremony called *mamadika*, or “turning over,” as he translated it. “From time to time,” he wrote, “the Hova families practise a ceremony which they call *mamadika* (lit. ‘turning over’), and which consists in going to their tombs to turn the corpses on one side, so that they may not be fatigued by remaining too long in one position. This ceremony is usually observed during the year following the death of one of the members of the family. This is a time of feasting and rejoicing; all the relatives are invited, and, dressed in their best clothing, with music going before the procession, repair to the family tomb in order to visit their dead relations, whom they turn round, as above described, and wrap up in new *lamba*” (A. Grandidier 1886: 229–30). This English translation of the passage is taken from James Sibree (1896: 302–

3), who plagiarized it and other texts in English translation from A. Grandidier. Sibree (1870: 259–61, 1880: 330–1) must have noted the tendency toward ceremonies of rewrapping, for in his two previous books he had described famadihana only as repatriation and transfer. It is impossible, of course, to quantify transformations in secondary burial over the nineteenth century and thus to demonstrate conclusively the direction and speed of changes in practice; we are largely dependent on foreigners' characterizations of Malagasy ritual for the nineteenth century and earlier. What is important is that different forms of mortuary ritual, whether primary or secondary burial, were interdependent and flowed from each other. This was as true in the past as it is today and accounts for why mortuary ritual is both polysemic and extraordinarily malleable.

With the development of famadihana of transfer and rewrapping, as demonstrated in the preceding passages, emphasis on expenditure and festive ritual was shifting from primary to secondary burial, and within secondary burial away from transfer toward single-tomb rituals.<sup>8</sup> The slippage in festive mortuary ritual during the nineteenth century from primary to secondary burial is the most compelling evidence that famadihana of rewrapping represented a renaissance of old practices rather than an unbroken, unmediated, or direct continuity with them. As suggested in the historical documentation, transition in ritual emphasis from primary to secondary burial was neither abrupt nor evenly observed about the Malagasy highlands. Both types of ritual coexisted and continue to do so (Vig 1893: 109–23), although secondary burial is today clearly more consuming of time, energy, and financial resources. Rites of primary burial resonating with those performed during the early part of the century (i.e., including elaborate *manao afa*) were still observed by Merina officials about Antananarivo during the early 1860s (Ellis 1867: 205–7, 213). In the Vonizongo of northwest Imerina, elaborate practices of primary burial remained vigorous into the second half of the nineteenth century at a time when such rituals were eroding in Antananarivo (Matthews 1881: 137–38; Abinal and de la Vaissière 1885: 195–96). In the Vakinankaratra of southwest Imerina, however, secondary burial had surpassed primary interment in ritual emphasis by at least mid-century, before the arrival there of foreign Christian missionaries.

Despite a commingling of newer and older mortuary practices, by the late nineteenth century most highlanders seldom buried silver and consumer items with their dead as they once had nor sacrificed so many cattle at primary burial, posting their horns at the tomb. No doubt this was partly due to royal opposition, including the sumptuary laws decreed by Radama

during the 1820s, and possibly to the adoption of Christianity as an official religion in 1869 (as suggested by Raison-Jourde 1991), but it also reflected a deepening economic and security crisis facing highland farmers. Most highland Malagasy were poorer in silver by 1890 than they had been during the early nineteenth century, when silver flowed more liberally into the island in exchange for export slaves. There was little silver available to bury in tombs after the abolition of the export trade in 1820. The expenditures entailed by famadihana were no less burdensome, and they testify to the importance of mortuary ritual and the tenacity of highlanders in the face of their leaders' alternative visions for such wealth.

The struggle between highland Madagascar's rulers and its rural communities over disposal of wealth at death continued well into the nineteenth century. "Earlier, sacrifice of cattle was required at the burial," wrote Norwegian Lutheran missionary Wilhelmsen in 1878. "But now that has been forbidden by the queen." Slaughtering cattle and placing their skulls on poles by tombs is now "hardly ever seen in Imerina," added his colleague Lars Dahle, who spent most of his time at Antananarivo. The prohibition against sacrificing large stock at primary burial was largely observed; people often killed fowl instead. Some highlanders began to fashion esthetic iron horns of the sort frequently seen today in the Betsileo homeland to substitute for the genuine horns of slain cattle once erected at tombs (Wilhelmsen and Dahle, in Dahle 1878 2:74-77). Throughout the nineteenth century, rituals of death and the management of wealth surrounding them were points of tension between highland Malagasy rulers and local communities. As new prohibitions were enacted from Antananarivo, highlanders sought creative solutions to fulfill their obligations to the departed and thereby to protect themselves from the potential dangers of visitation by the recently deceased.

## Conclusion

Descriptions of mortuary ritual from precolonial central Imerina suggest that such rites were elaborate, distinctly Austronesian in practice and symbolism, and undergoing continual adjustment and modification. Highland Malagasy funerary culture was a domain of extraordinary innovation and transformation. Historical evidence for secondary burial in the environs of Antananarivo indicates that even in its most typical twentieth-century form of temporary removal and reinterment of bodies within the same tomb, famadihana was neither a late-nineteenth-century nor an early-twentieth-century invention. The ritual has significant historical antecedents dating to

at least the eighteenth century, and probably earlier. In the early nineteenth century, however, major emphasis centered on rites of primary burial, including animal sacrifice, festive ritual, feasting, and interment of wealth in silver and consumer goods along with corpses. Although there is some evidence for secondary treatment at this time, it is scant and infrequent by comparison to the evidence for mortuary ritual accompanying primary burial.

When secondary burial occurred in and around Antananarivo after mid-century, it usually entailed transfers of bodies from one place of interment to another, either as repatriations from afar or movements of bodies from old tombs into newly constructed nearby structures. As mortuary practices became more elaborate and consuming of time and financial resources, they came into conflict with the designs of royalty to capture the labor, loyalty, and wealth of commoners. From this vantage, repatriation and funerary ritual served to affirm social relationships at the local level and to strengthen the autonomy and power of descent groups in their transactions with royalty. By decentralizing power and consuming resources, these cultural practices in turn were among the impediments to sovereigns' attempts to capture the peasantry of highland Madagascar. A fundamental dimension of the life cycle and cultural identity in highland Madagascar, mortuary ritual was equally an arena of political struggle.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, two developments favored a shift in ritual emphasis from primary to secondary interment. The first of these was repatriation of the remains of large numbers of fallen highland Malagasy soldiers and others from the far provinces of the Merina kingdom to their homelands in Imerina. The second was an upsurge in tomb building from the early nineteenth century. Ancestral bodies shifted by living kin from old tombs to new ones received fresh winding sheets and ritual attention. Transport of remains from places of temporary burial to permanent rest in descent-group tombs nourished rituals of secondary burial that led, in the final instance, to the archetypal twentieth-century form of the ritual as temporary exhumation and rewrapping, with return to the same tomb (i.e., no displacement of corpses or introduction of new ones). Because Mayeur (1913) reported temporary exhumation during his visit to highland Madagascar in 1777, *famadihana* represented a cultural renaissance rather than an invention but a renaissance that developed out of contemporary practice rather than reappearing independently. This renaissance was sustained through decisions exercised by highland Malagasy who were aware of the political implications of secondary burial for their relationships with kin as well as with the rulers of the Merina kingdom.

## Notes

- 1 Bloch (1971: 146, 164) writes that the most common form of famadihana is the “return famadihana” in which bodies are moved into an ancestral tomb from a place of temporary burial. Graeber (1995: 259) implies the opposite, and this has also been my experience in the Vakinankaratra and elsewhere in highland Madagascar. These discrepancies may result from a continuing difference in the geographical dispersion of popular forms of famadihana. Bloch conducted his research north of Antananarivo; Graeber and myself to the west and southwest, respectively.
- 2 By royalty I mean only the reigning sovereign, his or her immediate family and associates, and their governments, not all persons of *andriana* status, individuals more appropriately glossed in English as “nobility.” For this usage, see also Bloch 1978: 315–18.
- 3 Or it is possible they had been caught attempting to conceal a murder.
- 4 “There being no cemetery in this country,” Hilsenberg and Bojer (1833: 260) wrote in the same vein, “the tombs are frequently seen in the court-yards or at some spot in the land which the deceased had himself selected, and it is difficult to walk ten steps without meeting with one.”
- 5 Some tombs undoubtedly were burglarized. But the absence of silver and consumer items from even the oldest highland Malagasy tombs suggests that such wealth was eventually removed by kin rather than strangers (some tombs would still contain such items if the only process by which they were removed was burglary, since burglars were unlikely to have opened every tomb in highland Madagascar). For kin as the most frequent of such grave “robbers,” see Abinal and de la Vaissière 1885: 196.
- 6 Graeber (1996: 15) has suggested that Radama’s “measures amounted to an attempt to shift the competition over adornment from the dead to the living.” Although this may have been the case, practical considerations were probably paramount, especially since highlanders could employ tombs as tax shelters. For the currency crisis in Imerina during the early nineteenth century, see Campbell 1986: 99–118.
- 7 Some highland Malagasy explained to Dahle (1878 2:68) that the change occurred during the reign of Ranaivalona I (r. 1828–61).
- 8 For two rare and explicit contemporary acknowledgments of nineteenth-century transformations in mortuary ritual, see Vig 1893: 114; A. Grandidier 1886: 229.

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