

## **The role and place of rites and rituals in Malagasy society**

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### **1 The diversity and unity of the Malagasy people**

Several hypotheses concerning the origins of Madagascar's population have been put forward since the 19th century by various historians and researchers. Notwithstanding the significant clarifications brought about by advances in historical and archaeological research methods, there are still a number of grey areas. However, there are a few achievements that are no longer open to question.

A maritime crossroads since ancient times, Madagascar has accumulated and merged diverse contributions from different worlds into a single people and civilization.

Pre-Christian immigration is not known for certain. We do know, however, that as early as the first millennium, Indonesian, Malay and Polynesian immigrants arrived on the island in successive waves, sometimes already mixed with Indian or even Semitic contributions. Bantus from East Africa and Islamicized Arabs also arrived; and finally, from the 16th century onwards, Europeans, shipwrecked pirates and lost adventurers who were able to integrate with the pre-existing populations.

The social and cultural contributions of all these groups are indisputable, but Malagasy civilization is no hybrid. In all regions, beyond the nuances of the different lifestyles of mountain dwellers and fishermen, foresters and desert dwellers, there is *a shared vision of the world*.

### **2 The Malagasy vision of the world and of life**

To explain the Universe, nature and the origins of mankind, the Malagasy believe in a Supreme God, the "Zanahary". (lit. He who created), also known as "Andriamanitra" (etym: The First Essence/Source of Life). He is invisible, but sees all. Master of the world and of human destiny, the "Zanahary" is always invoked first in prayer.

Man owes his existence and essence to the God who made him "Body", "Spirit" and "Soul". It is this God who coordinates his life through Lahatra (order), Anjara (destiny) and Vintana (chance).

The Malagasy believe in the survival of the soul after death, and in the reciprocal relationship between the living and the dead, which continues on earth in their children and descendants. It should be noted, however, that the deceased must first acquire the status of Ancestor or Razana. This entails a whole series of obligations for their descendants.

By affirming this existence, beyond death, the Malagasy open a gateway to eternity, which therefore goes hand in hand with posterity. The dream of every Malagasy is to generate life, and nothing is more frightening than sterility, synonymous with annihilation, which must be warded off at all costs.

### 3 Rites and rituals

To speak of obligations on the part of descendants is to enter the world of rites and rituals. By these two terms, we mean cults and ceremonies whose procedures are strictly codified: words to be uttered, gestures to be performed and objects to be handled according to a pre-established order and scrupulously followed (ritual).

To discover the place and role of these rites and rituals in the traditional practices of the Malagasy people, we need to follow them through the major stages of their lives, from birth to death and beyond... As this is an introductory presentation, and bearing in mind that some of them are presented as part of the interactive exhibition and that others will be the subject of other verbal communications, we will limit ourselves here to outlining a few main points and illustrations.

As the first stage in human life, and in relation to the tragedy of sterility mentioned above, conception and birth take on particular importance, hence the many rituals that surround them. We're talking about rites of passage here, because during pregnancy, we'll be witnessing various religiously-motivated behaviors to help the mother-to-be win the "battle of life" for herself and her unborn child.

Birth itself is a rite of separation, as the newborn no longer belongs to the world of the Ancestors. This is followed by integration rites to mark the child's first acts of socialization ("Alavolon-jaza"/first haircut; "Mivoaka Itany"/first outing...).

Circumcision and marriage are also considered rites of separation, but also of integration. In the case of circumcision (Hasoavana - Sambatra...), the young boy leaves the world of childhood (asexual) to join the class of male progenitors. In the case of marriage, the bride and groom leave their respective families and enter the category of parents...

Of course, much could be said about the objects, gestures, speeches and prayers surrounding these rites, such as the rituals of foreskin excision (famorana/sambatra/Hasoavana...), dowry (vodiondry...), etc.

We conclude this introductory presentation with a few remarks on death and its funeral rites, considered to be the most complex of all rites, since they reveal both the sadness of losing a member of the group and the joy of seeing him or her join the world of the Ancestors/Razana.

The term "symbolic reversibility" means that birth and death can be interchanged. The newborn is dead for the afterlife. We speak of cyclical movement between the world of humans and the world of ancestors... Thus, we say, "ontological passage" is achieved through birth and death...