

REVIEW

Review of Maurice Rabemanantsoa's *Le Famadihana et la résurrection des morts: Étude malgacho-biblique d'un rite en relation avec la foi en la resurrection*

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In the foreword of her work on Malagasy religion, *La Religion Malgache Ancestrale Pratiquée* (Les Impliquées, 2015), Charlotte Rabesahala-Randriamananoro notes that foreign scholars write the bulk of the documentation on Malagasy ancestral religion (8). In the last few years however, an increasingly large number of scholars and religious professionals from Madagascar, including Rabesahala-Randriamananoro herself, have undertaken to change this pattern. Maurice Rabemanantsoa is one such scholar.

A Malagasy theologian trained at the University of Fribourg and member of the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin, Rabemanantsoa provides an expertise at the intersection of Malagasy indigenous culture and religion, and global religions' doctrines. The genesis of Rabemanantsoa's book comes from his own observations of a traditional Malagasy ritual known as *famadihana*. The theologian observed that Catholics, not only local worshipers but also the Church's foreign hierarchy, saw little contradiction between the rituals of *famadihana* and those prescribed by their religion's dogma. The author then undertakes to analyze how traditional Malagasy and Catholic worldviews both converge and diverge in relation to death, ancestry and resurrection. To comprehensively address this question, he organizes the book in three movements.

Part I is anthropological in style and provides a native perspective to a plethora of key concepts in Malagasy society and worldview, such as *Razana* (ancestor), *fasandrazana* (family crypt), *fanahy* (soul), *fiavanana* (kinship), *Zanahary* (supreme being), etc., and their relation to the concept and rituals of *famadihana*, whose definition he rephrases. Rabemanantsoa argues that contrary to appearances where each family excavates their deceased and reburies them in the family crypt, the *famadihana* is not a celebration of the dead; it is rather a rebuttal of death, an assertion of the continuation of life after death. He writes: "Le *famadihana* devient un défi à la mort, ou en quelque sorte, une lutte contre la mort car il a pour but de rendre 'vivants' les personnes décédées" (140). The *famadihana* as ritual is what stands between death and ancestry; it thus provides both the foundation and the building blocks from which all the other aforementioned concepts are erected. In that sense, according to Rabemanantsoa, it echoes the symbolism of the resurrection of Jesus Christ in catholic worldview as an assertion of the victory of life over death.

Part II takes a theological approach and expands on the similarities between Christian faith and traditional Malagasy faith. In that movement of his analysis, Rabemanantsoa identifies events he perceives as the second burials of many important characters in both the Old Testament (Jacob, Joseph, Rachel, Saul, Jonathan, etc.) and the New Testament (biblical characters awakened by

Jesus and Jesus's own resurrection,) and argues that those events and their interpretation in Catholic faith are akin to Malagasy *famadihana* and its role. He claims that through the ritual of *famadihana* the aforementioned biblical characters become the ancestors (the *Razana*) and referents of all Catholics, just as the Malagasy *Razana* are social beacons whose importance extends to identity formation and geographical belonging.

Part III takes a sociological approach and extrapolates on those same similarities to propose a biblical reading of Malagasy *famadihana*. This section hints at the fact that these similarities might explain the convergence of the *famadihana* and Catholicism, and the tolerance of Catholic authorities towards that practice in Madagascar. The author warns against an attitude in certain religious circles to downplay the cultural significance and the theological soundness of traditional Malagasy religious rituals by highlighting the common grounds between their worldviews. For him, it is undeniable that some of the detrimental aspects (impoverishment of families, insecurity during the ritual, etc.) the *famadihana* are largely exceeded by its benefits both for the community that practices it (kinship, community bonding, and solidarity) and for Christian authorities who should recognize it as an opportunity to ease in some of their teachings.

Overall, in *Le Famadihana et la Résurrection des Morts*, Rabemanantsoa can be acclaimed for using an inquisitive yet accessible language that democratizes research in theology, a rather opaque discipline for the lay reader. Furthermore, the author deserves praise for reframing established ideas about death rituals in Catholicism and Malagasy worldview through sharp, though unassumed, postcolonial lenses as he intends to provide a local voice and a native perspective to the academic discourse on death rituals in Madagascar. Part I is a particularly brilliant piece of research and offers one of the most exhaustive descriptions and native interpretations of the *famadihana*; an introspection that is reminiscent of the 1969 doctoral thesis (Université de Paris-Sorbonne) of incumbent President of the Akademia Malagasy François Rajaoson, *Contribution à l'Étude du Famadihana sur les Hauts Plateaux de Madagascar*, which should have been quoted in the book. However, the author makes up for overlooking Rajaoson's work by making Malagasy scholars the bulk of his sources and citations. Furthermore, Part II and III offers dense literary reviews of the Catholic theology of death and resurrection, and the biblical rituals and theories around them. But even though the author aims at providing an objective report, sometimes the lines between the theological scholar and the clergyman are blurred, especially in Part II which, although backed with numerous scholarly references, reads sometimes like notes from Sunday mass. Nevertheless, it is important also to observe that, unlike Part II for example, the author maintains largely neutral and objective tones in Part I and Part III; and when there are hints of authorial subjectivity, it is to chastise those detractors of the *famadihana* who he sees as culturally alienated or close-minded.

Written in scholarly, yet accessible, French, this book would be a very informative read for general audiences interested in Malagasy culture and worldview. The author offers authentic native interpretations and exhaustive description of the rituals of the *famadihana* and the ethos behind them. He also often circles back to describe key concepts to facilitate the reader's comprehension. Most specialists would appreciate Rabemanantsoa's innovative efforts and his convincing analysis of points of convergence between Catholic and traditional Malagasy religious rituals and worldviews. This book would be most valuable for researchers who work on death rituals, especially in the Indian Ocean, and could become an *incontournable* read for anyone interested in an authentic introspection inside traditional Malagasy religions.