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## **Divine Worth: Weaving and the Ancestors in Highland Madagascar**

by

Rebecca L. Green

Textiles in Madagascar actively link the living and their ancestors and are therefore fundamental cultural components of the highland Merina and Betsileo peoples. The elaborate relationships between weaving, the ancestors, and reburial practices are issues that reflect a complex world of spiritual power, social significance, and potent symbolism. This paper is based upon my research in Madagascar's central highlands, where I lived and studied art, life, and culture among the Merina and Betsileo. In particular, I am interested in the powerful relationships between the living and the dead that are experienced and negotiated through periodic reburials and the manipulation of silk burial shrouds.

Malagasy culture is permeated by the ancestors, who are believed to originate all customs and traditions. They embody great power and are capable of influencing current events and manipulating the lives of their descendants, and as such, play a vital role in Malagasy life. The act of reburial, during which the living periodically re-enshroud and thus reclothe their ancestors, is called *famadihana*, and is an important event within the community (fig. 1). Depending on family, regional, and divinatory considerations, this recurring ceremony takes place every two to twenty years after the initial funeral. Reburials are essential in defining the deceased as "ancestor" by ensuring his or her final inclusion in the family tomb and envelopment in a proper shroud. Shrouds are offerings to, and integral parts of the ancestors. They are powerful tools that allow the living to tangibly care for and bestow honor upon their predecessors. Moreover, they are vehicles of communication through which the living request blessings of the ancestors, and the ancestors protect, bless, and care for their living descendants in return. Finally, shrouds identify the ancestors socially, politically, economically, and literally, that is, by marking specific placement within the tomb. Envelopment within the cloth distinguishes the ancestors as Malagasy and as fully civilized human beings. For ultimately, as the ancestors turn to dust, the "ancestors" become a mixture of their remains and that of the silk shroud, which becomes an indivisible element of those whom it was made to honor.

The burial shroud (fig. 2), called *lambamena*, is comprised of multiple panels that are woven on a horizontal, single heddle loom (fig. 3), and then sewn together lengthwise. The overall size varies depending on the dimensions of the individual panels and on the status and financial abilities of the deceased and the deceased's family. While other materials may be used, indigenous silk, called *landibe*, is considered the most prestigious and most traditional. Woven by men and women from weaving families, shroud decoration depends on personal preference and regional style. Embellishment generally consists of stripes and/or motifs made of warp floats and beadwork, the latter frequently remaining along the borders.

The inclusion of color is potentially significant. Since divination and astrology play important roles in their lives, highland Malagasy consult diviners about important events or

problems. Diviners consider a complex system that incorporates the cardinal points, calendric and numerical forecasts, and color symbolism in their prognoses. For example, each day of the week is associated with a particular destiny, set of characteristics, and colors. Thus, Monday is consecrated to remember the dead, is the preferred day to conduct purifications and inhumations, and is associated with the color red.<sup>1</sup>

The name of the burial shroud, *lambamena*, literally translates as “red cloth,” but does not necessarily refer to the cloth’s actual color. Malagasy say the name may have derived from the shroud’s historic color, although currently red is often limited to decorative bands. Red may also relate to the significance, context, and function associated with its color. According to Mack, red is associated with authority, ruling classes, and all the characteristics accompanying a person of this position. A red umbrella signified a Merina sovereign, and red is incorporated in powerful charms, suggesting its “potent, ardent or forceful characteristics.”<sup>2</sup> Such characteristics are appropriate for a textile that is intimately associated with the ancestors.

While shrouds frequently retain the color of natural silk (as in the illustrations), particularly when used by families in middle to lower economic situations, the traditional colors are remembered as various combinations of red, black, and yellow. Colors may be pre-selected by the deceased, chosen by his or her descendants, or determined by a diviner. More pragmatically, a shroud’s color may depend on one’s economic and social situation, the availability of pigments, or one’s regional affiliation. Weavers who currently make dyed cloths often use imported chemical colors to do so, and reserve the vegetal and mineral dyes for specially commissioned shrouds. Using chemicals to supplant natural dyes began in the nineteenth century,<sup>3</sup> and continues to be a topic of contention for individuals who see the imports as inferior and “non-traditional.”

For subtle color variation, a weaver may dye or stripe the weft thread, while more obvious color embellishment comes from dyeing the lengthwise warp. Still more intricate poly- or monochrome patterns are made through the addition of supplemental weft floats, or small glass, plastic, or metal beads woven into a shroud’s weft (fig. 4). Floats and beads often create floral designs and geometric motifs, as well as words or phrases such as

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<sup>1</sup> R.P. Callet, *Histoire Des Rois* (4v. Tananarive: Académie Malgache, 1953-58. Translation by G.S. Chapus and E. Ratsimba of Callet's original 1873 *Tantaran'ny Andriana eto Madagascar*), vol. 1:65.

<sup>2</sup> John Mack *Malagasy Textiles* (Shire Ethnography XIV. Bucks, United Kingdom: Shire Publications Ltd., 1989), pp.43-4. See also Mervyn Brown, *Madagascar Rediscovered: A History From Early Times To Independence* (London: Damien Tunnacliffe, 1978), pp. 194-5.

<sup>3</sup> According to Mack, “chemically produced aniline dyes have increasingly been used” in highland Madagascar since the 1820’s (1989, p.33). Although, according to other sources, chemical dyes were first discovered in 18th century France, aniline dyes were not developed commercially until 1856 (*Encyclopedia of Textiles* 1980, p.435, Wingate 1970, p.21). It was the advent of aniline dyes, however, that finally made chemical dyes more readily available.

the deceased's name or a specific blessing.<sup>4</sup> White beads are currently used on highland shrouds, although in some regions, past royalty had the exclusive right to incorporate red and blue beads.

I was often told that decorative elements are included solely to render shrouds more beautiful. Yet, because of the shrouds' intimate ancestral associations, the significance of the cloth and its decorative elements may exceed simple ornamentation. Beads sold in the market by diviners and medicinal specialists are used as curative, protective, and cleansing devices. For example, the same white beads currently used on burial shrouds are also worn around children's wrists to ease the pain of teething. After a funeral, a person must wash away the pollution of death in a flowing river—one variation of this tradition involves bathing with small black beads that differ from those on burial shrouds only in color. A correlation may also exist between these beads and a black cloth worn in mourning, called *lambarano*,<sup>5</sup> a name meaning "water cloth." Both are black and both symbolically cleanse one of death. Moreover, beads removed from ancient shrouds are used as fertility enhancers, protective amulets, and vehicles of communication with the ancestral world. Thus, due to the relationships of beads, color symbolism, divination specialists, and the ancestors, beauty seems to be only one consideration.

The shrouds' material is also powerful. Indigenous silk is specifically identified as the quintessential ancestral material. It too is sought by individuals hoping to enhance their ancestral communication, increase their protection against misfortune, and augment their fertility and prosperity. Thus, burial shrouds are considered extremely powerful and must be handled carefully. They are associated with many prohibitions, particularly relating to their creation, handling, and storage. While the restrictions and their perceived force vary according to region and individual interpretation, the cloths are created for the dead, and direct contact with or storage too close to the living is often considered life threatening, especially for anyone in a weakened state, such as a child or someone in ill health.

Discrepancies in what is considered appropriate use of the burial shroud is currently a point of contention among highland Malagasy. Used in a socially accepted manner that Malagasy call "traditional," the shroud plays a primary role in both the initial funeral and subsequent reburials. The honor and reputation of the deceased and the deceased's family and town are based on the existence of the shroud, for it is seen as the element which separates humans from animals (fig. 5). To be buried without it is to be a person of no consequence, comparable to a dog. If the deceased's family is poor and unable to supply a shroud, Malagasy social mores stipulate that it must be contributed by the town. Thus, providing a shroud embodies a fundamental responsibility involved in being a civilized human. Even if the deceased was an enemy, one must do everything possible to ensure a shroud, for everyone is a human being first and an enemy second.

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<sup>4</sup> In the past, it was taboo to utter the name of the deceased, implying that this may be a recent development. See Jørgen Ruud, *Taboo: A Study of Malagasy Customs and Beliefs* (Oslo: Oslo University Press, 1960), p. 171.

<sup>5</sup> Anonymous, *Monographie Sur Le Lamba En Imerina* (Antananarivo: Musée d'Art et d'Archéologie, #TH726), no date.

This cultural responsibility includes respecting and caring for all ancestors, not only the recently dead. During reburials, many ancestors are taken out of the tomb to be honored and to receive new shrouds. It is considered inexcusable to allow ancestors to sit, unattended in the tomb for any appreciable length of time. If this occurs, they may feel cold and disrespected as a result of a deteriorating tomb or disintegrating shroud. Temperature, as described by the anthropologist Graeber,<sup>6</sup> is an important aspect in establishing the relationships between the two worlds. Heat keeps the living alive and the dead dead. When a living person becomes cold, he or she dies. Similarly, as long as the ancestors are kept warm, they will remain in the realm of the dead. If they become cold, they will communicate their displeasure to the living by causing misfortune, or by appearing in descendants' dreams.

Burial shrouds also act as a vehicles of communication. During reburial ceremonies, shrouds are used to request blessings of the ancestors. For example, on the walk to the tomb, a female descendant who wishes to become fertile may wear the cloth, draped across her breasts and stomach, or dance with it in her outstretched hands. During the process of re-enshrouding the ancestors, living descendants sit with the ancestors on their laps and talk to them of important family events or private matters and ask for blessings in return for hosting the ceremony--all the while touching and interacting with the ancestors and their shrouds. At this time, the living often take fragments of the ancient silk, beads, or mats used to carry the ancestors, items that will be used in the future to physically transmit requests of the ancestors and to transmit the ancestors' benedictions in return. Moreover, diviners also use silk as an ingredient in powerful protective amulets and medicinal cures.

Additionally, burial shrouds act as intermediaries between the living and the dead by allowing physical interaction. Because corpses are carried out of the tomb on mats, they are touched only minimally before a reburial's climax when they are wrapped in new shrouds. Once the ancestors are enshrouded, interaction with them is permissible and even encouraged (fig. 6). They are lifted onto the waiting shoulders of family members and danced around the tomb, sometimes traveling as far as the town or farm to view any developments since their last outing. As the primary means of atonement and appeasement, shrouds keep the ancestors happy and warm, and therefore receptive to granting their descendants' requests. Yet, the shroud is the only object that the ancestors touch or which touches them, making relevant the prohibitions concerning improper physical contact.

Thus, although silk shrouds are highly valued, they and the ancestral forces they embody, are not passive, but are powerful and potentially dangerous. If handled inappropriately, the ancestors may be angered and many people believe that the result could be fatal. Therefore, it is no surprise to find controversy over new materials, such as inexpensive cottons, replacing indigenous silk. Of greater significance for many Malagasy is that shrouds, which are imbued with the ancestors' tremendous spiritual power and which embody those aspects of the ancestors such as authority, power, legitimacy, and obligation, are now being sought by some Malagasy for use in non-ancestral contexts. Specifically, shrouds, whose greatest danger lies in their inappropriate proximity to and physical contact with the living, are being incorporated into the new cultural arena of highly

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<sup>6</sup> Graeber, personal communication 1990.

fashionable, tailored suits. To use a material associated with powerful ancestral forces in a way that contradicts socially prescribed use is indicative of an emerging cultural environment and an evolving sentiment of individuals within the society that challenge the ancestors, upon whom the living base their traditions, customs, and identities. Moreover, a person makes strong economic, political, religious, and social statements when choosing indigenous silk to create an expensive tailored suit and when wearing it in a cultural atmosphere that traditionally prohibits such use. It expresses the personal aesthetics and the moral and ethical positions of the creator and the wearer of the ensemble. This issue is highly controversial among many highland Malagasy due to a widespread belief in the potentially fatal consequences not only for the person who misuses a material reserved for the ancestors, but for anyone close to him or her.

Although it is generally expected that Malagasy youth will follow the latest fashions before returning in middle age to highland “Malagasy dress,” whose primary element is a shoulder wrap, the current issue challenges traditionally accepted behavioral boundaries held by many Malagasy. While I have no illustrations of the silk being worn as a suit, this topic can trigger intense debate. One’s sense of identity and cultural affiliation are integral to this issue, particularly if it is a Malagasy rather than a foreigner misusing the silk. Strangers may not be aware of the cloth’s cultural connotations, or if aware, are not affected because they are not a product of the culture. Thus I found no adverse feelings towards foreigners using the shroud, even as furniture covers, table cloths, curtains, or bedspreads, but rather pride in the foreign interest and an attitude that outsiders using the cloth improperly do so out of cultural ignorance rather than malicious intent. Yet, if a Malagasy uses the shroud in an unorthodox manner, it can be interpreted as a clear violation of acceptable cultural norms.

This dilemma is exemplified by a young Merina woman I met in 1990 who closely followed current European styles and wanted to wear a fashionable suit of indigenous silk. Her mother, the matriarch of the family, was horrified at the suggestion and staunchly refused, declaring that silk is reserved solely for the dead and that no living person should wear it. In the elder woman’s eyes, using the cloth in this manner would be disrespectful towards the ancestors and Malagasy culture, could prove a fatal mistake, and thus would not be tolerated in her family while she lived! Malagasy of all ages reacted to this story based upon each person’s interpretation of tradition. For many people, the prohibition against wearing silk represents a faithful adherence to its historical use, and while many Malagasy agree with her, others feel that anyone who continues to believe that wearing a cloth meant for the dead will cause death is living in the past. Some people, however, feel that she is mistaken and that silk was in fact worn by important individuals, although interpretations of how it was worn vary. Consequently, various individuals hold firmly to distinct beliefs that the cloth was worn as a ceremonial wrap or as a tailored suit, was restricted to men or worn by men and women, or was reserved for elders or worn by fashion-conscious youths.

Literary sources support the contention that indigenous silk was worn in the past. The geographer Gade notes that formerly men’s suits were made of the silk that “reflected a European fashion” until the influx of inexpensive cotton lowered the demand for clothing

made in this costly material.<sup>7</sup> The historian Raheisoanjato further maintains that once imported cottons replaced silk, it subsequently became distinguished as ceremonial wear for such ritual events as births, marriages, and funerals.<sup>8</sup>

Wearing indigenous silk is a source of immense pride for some highland Malagasy. In choosing to wear silk, one is selecting a material of high quality, comparable to certain expensive and elegant imported textiles. When worn abroad, the silk reflects pride in one's own cloth and culture due to the silk's inextricable ties to its cultural and spiritual settings. Therefore, while to ignore the cloth's associated meanings is interpreted by some people as being disrespectful of the ancestors, for many Malagasy, once the material is taken out of its ancestral context, and more importantly, once it is altered, it is not seen as desecrating an essential ancestral element, but as taking pride in one of the primary features of Malagasy identity. According to individuals of this opinion, indigenous silk that has been decontextualized and tailored has left the realm of the ancestors.

Regardless of one's opinion on tailoring the silk, I found almost universal rejection of using the unaltered burial shroud as a blanket, or otherwise coming in direct physical contact with it outside of a funerary context (fig. 7). Interaction with the cloth by the living during a ceremony honoring the ancestors, as when women wrap themselves in shrouds during a reburial, is acceptable, whereas using the unaltered indigenous silk for non-ancestral purposes is not. Thus, I was frequently told that to sit next to someone wrapped in a blanket of indigenous silk would be like sitting next to a corpse. One reason given was that the shroud's color instills fear, and is therefore not as beautiful as a blanket. Yet, as noted above, shrouds are often embellished to enhance their appearance. It may well be that using a shroud as a blanket is visually and tactilely too similar to an enshrouded corpse.

Art and the world in which it is created and consumed are both sophisticated and complex. Therefore, art must be considered within its many social and cultural contexts. Art is an active element in the process of societal change, and artists and art consumers are conscious, vital agents in the negotiation of that change. As the art historian, Baxandall aptly states, individuals involved in the act of creation do not passively accept the "influences" of outside forces, but rather, make an "intentional selection from an array of resources."<sup>9</sup> This active role of artists and consumers of material culture invests the life experience with an essential dynamic quality. Thus, the choice to adapt indigenous silk into fashion based on international styles is a conscious and active manipulation of the

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel W. Gade, "Savanna Woodland, Fire, Protein and Silk in Highland Madagascar," *Journal of Ethnobiology* vol. 5, no. 2 (1985), pp.109-122.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Raheisoanjato, "Quelques Aspects des Problèmes Relatifs au Développement de l'Industrie Textile à Madagascar: l'exemple des tissus de soie ou Lamba Landy," *Symposium sur les 'Exigences Religieuses et Imperatifs de Développement dans les Sociétés Malgaches*. Académie Malgache - Tsimbazaza: 15-19 Décembre 1986. (Antananarivo: Musée d'Art et d'Archéologie Bibliothèque #TH.867, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1988), p.59.

cultural environment by members of Malagasy society who are redefining their own life experiences, carefully selecting and incorporating those elements from different cultures which appeal to them most, and changing elements from within their own culture to fit their evolving needs and desires.

The desire to use indigenous silk outside of an ancestral context is a controversial subject challenging some of the fundamental principles currently associated with burial shrouds and related ideals held by highland Malagasy, just as they no doubt have in the past. Being challenged are Malagasy conceptions and interpretations of “tradition,” and notions of what constitutes “Malagasiness,” both of which form the basis for accepted and expected behavior. However, this process, which many interpret as a radical departure from the so-called “traditional” observances, is only one phase within the overall evolution of a vital and constantly changing culture. Moreover, even if “traditional” use is professed, it is functioning in a new environment and thus has changed, thereby revealing that the concept of a stagnant and unchanging “tradition” is unrealistic.



Fig. 1. A newly re-enshrouded ancestor returning to the family tomb during a Merina reburial (1993).





Fig. 2. New burial shrouds transported to a Merina reburial ceremony in a new basket (1993).



Fig. 3. A Betsileo loom (1993).



Fig. 4. Newly re-enshrouded Betsileo ancestors within the family tomb. Note the white beads on the dark shroud in the lower right corner (1993).



Fig. 5. Betsileo women wrapping a newly deceased elder woman in an indigenous silk burial shroud (1993).



Fig. 6. Family members gathered around a newly re-enshrouded ancestor before lifting it onto their shoulders to dance with it prior to re-entombment (1993).

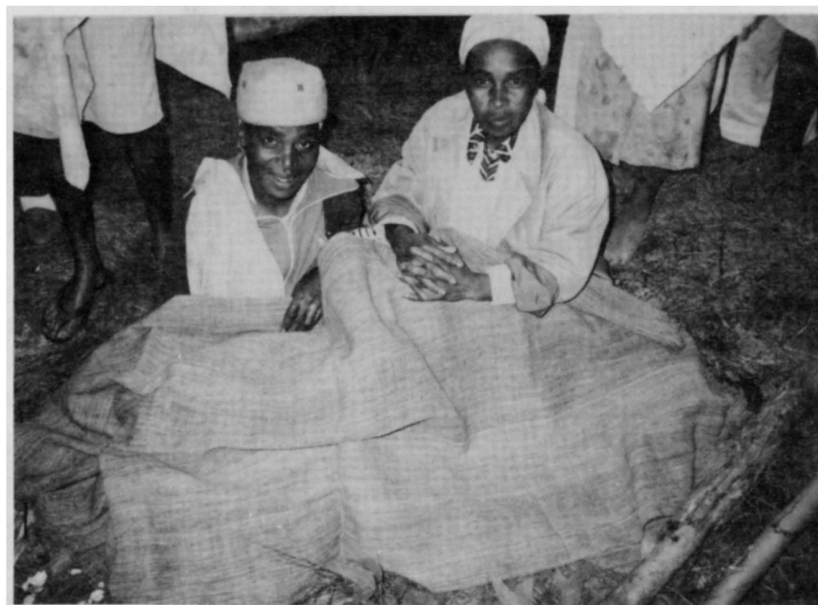


Fig. 7. Two Betsileo women sit with a new burial shroud draped over their legs for warmth and to request blessings of the ancestors during a reburial ceremony (1993).