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In: Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 130 (1974), no: 2/3, Leiden, 348-352

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MADAGASCAR SEEN FROM ROTI, A COMMENT

The publication in your pages of Dr. J. Fox's review of my book *Placing the Dead* (1971, pp. 504 ff.) raises several issues of interest. The value of his implied comparison between Indonesian and Malagasy ethnography gives me the opportunity to comment on two topics inadequately dealt with in my book which subsequent fieldwork and reflection have clarified. After considering these questions I take the opportunity to correct several errors in Dr. Fox's review.

The two points of interest raised by Dr. Fox's review which I want to discuss further here are the symbolical nature of the link between women and their descendants and the nature of alliance among the Merina.

I. Dr. Fox rightly suggests that in *Placing the Dead* I gave no satisfactory account of why it was that in the *famadihanas* such a stress was placed on *women* transforming their relationship with the dead and sacrilegiously dancing with the corpses. He suggests, obviously influenced by Rotinese ethnography (Fox: 1971, p. 245), that the descent group is symbolically male and that complementary matrilineal links are being broken during the *famadihanas*. Although this view might apply more to other people in Madagascar it is not strictly applicable to the Merina who see descent as being passed on equally matrilineally and patrilineally. Indeed, the strong in-marriage tendency of Merina descent groups means that different lines are not distinguished. There is, however, another way in which links between women and their relatives are in contradiction with the descent group and which explains why they must be broken at the *famadihanas*. Since the internal organisation of the deme can be seen as a web of unenforced claims to land, stress on the individual household is anti-deme and, since a central feature of the household is its focus on its women cooking and bringing up their children, the woman-relative link is anti-descent. This is especially so for the mother-child link. I now would stress that the *famadihana* contains an anti-household element and is anti-individual mother-child link and pro-descent, that is pro all ancestors-all descendants link.

I have reached this view as a result of work on which I am now engaged, and which I anticipate here, on the domestic organisation of the Merina and on their circumcision rituals. One of the most striking features of Merina child raising theories is the emphasis on the import-

ance of children not eating or sleeping exclusively with their parents but for much of the time casually dropping in for meals or for the night at the houses of their relatives. Parents who keep children exclusively in their household are thought to be particularly wicked. This sort of mobility is only possible for kinsmen living relatively close to each other. When kinsmen live further away this exchange of children takes the form of extremely common fostering for varying lengths of time. This attack on the exclusive mother-child link can also be seen more generally as a link to a custom already described (Bloch: 1971b, p. 101) whereby kinsmen passing by a house shout to the housewife asking to be given some food and occasionally snatching food or otherwise disrupting the cooking process. This joking assault is another way in which exclusive claims of the household, symbolised by the activities of women, are represented as antagonistic to the communal nature of the descent group.

The Merina circumcision ceremony is in many ways symbolically far richer than the *famadihanas* although it is less important as regards the expense involved and the number of people invited. Its central theme is transforming the exclusive mother-son link to a more generalised one. It goes however much further than we could do with the evidence given above in that there the fertility element which is a minor aspect in the *famadihanas* becomes uppermost. It is clear that in the symbolism of circumcision the mother-child link is associated with sterility and its break is linked with fertility. It is also relevant that the whole ceremony consists of an assault on the household — in this case represented by the house, which is a female symbol. (It is also interesting to note in the light of Dr. Fox's suggestion that one of the symbols of the descent group in the circumcision ceremony is water obtained from a pure waterfall.) Here again we have the opposition between household descent or woman-child link and general descent. It is this opposition which explains why it is *women* who dance with the corpses in the *famadihanas*. It is because the descent group can exist only if the individual household links are denied and these are the links focussed on women as housewives.

II. The second topic I want to discuss here concerns the nature of Merina alliance, a topic which is indirectly raised by Dr. Fox in his review. Throughout *Placing the Dead* I stressed the absence of the notion of opposition between affines and kinsmen for the overall kinship system. This differentiates the Merina system sharply from most Indonesian systems. This merging is the result of the stress on endogamy and the obsession with the property of the descent group. There is, however, a clear notion of affinity in the immediate kinship relationships of own parents-in-law, own siblings-in-law and own children-in-law. (There are special terms for these relatives which, unlike other Merina kinship terms, are restricted in use to these specific genealogical links.) This element of affinity is especially clear albeit temporarily in the Merina marriage ceremony. What must be added to this, and what I had not seen until fieldwork which I carried out subsequently, is that the ritual

of marriage itself acts out the opposite of the implications of affinity. Marriages should at first be virilocal so if everything goes well the household of the husband gains a member, and potentially others, when the marriage produces children. The implications of this would lead to a patrilineal tendency and it is recognised that as a result of such a marriage the family of the groom gains. The ceremony of marriage, however, is called by the act whereby an inferior recognises a superior, the giving of the backside of an animal (Bloch: 1971b, p. 179), and this gift is given for the groom to the bride's family. In other words, it is as though the father of the bride were gaining a dependent: the opposite of the actual situation. The ritual of the demand also denies the actual situation in an even more subtle way. Among the Merina the notion of being an elder is intimately tied to that of being a speechmaker. In the marriage ceremony it is the family of the groom who takes on the role of speechmaker only to be ridiculed by the family of the bride (Bloch: 1971b, p. 184), the opposite of the way a speechmaker should be heard in a political assembly and the accepted device by which his position in such an assembly would be denied (Bloch: 1971c). What happens is that the hierarchical and alliance aspects of affinity are contradicted and so neutralised. This produces the disappearance of its principle as a major organising precept.

Closely linked with this denial is a most important aspect of *famadihanas* whose omission in my discussion of the ceremony I much regret. Of the obligations of the 'children of the dead' to contribute, the most stressed and that said to be the most onerous (though this does not come out clearly in my figures) is the obligation of the husbands of the daughters of the tomb family who live away from the tomb family. This was explained to me as being due to the fact that the son-in-law whose wife and children live with his family is guilty (*tsiny*, Bloch: 1971b, p. 163) towards his parents-in-law. His important contribution to the secondary funeral is an emphatic redeclaration that he and his children really belong to the tomb family of his wife while really with such a system what is actually happening is that his household is being absorbed into his parents' family. Reality is again negated, a repeat of the ritual of marriage. In this way the unilineal implications of affinity are again denied and the undifferentiated nature of the deme re-established.

The new discussion of these two important aspects of Merina ethnography has been in part promoted by Dr. Fox's review and by the fresh perspective his 'Indonesian' eye has given to the material. Clearly comparative material from related cultures is stimulating and I hope the discussion here has shown this. However, Dr. Fox tried to go much further in his review and guessed at Madagascar from Roti. As a result he was inevitably wrong on nearly all the specific points he raised. It does not seem to me that we can ever do this with confidence, even with very closely related cultures, but when we are dealing with cultures separated probably by more than a millenium of history and where many different other cultural influences are at work (Kent: 1970) the attempt

is ludicrous. What we recognise as common is of the utmost importance, but what is different we must accept.

III. The following is a list of specific errors arising from Dr. Fox's review:

- (a) I did not receive an initial anthropological training in France.
- (b) The reference from Sibree given by Dr. Fox does not refer to *famadihanas* but to royal tombs.
- (c) Dr. Fox accuses me of not including sufficient reference to the research that has been done on the descent systems of Indonesia, Melanesia and Polynesia. The reason is that I have discussed this topic elsewhere (Bloch: 1971a).
- (d) Nobody acquainted with Professor Fortes' work on kinship could attribute a remark such as that families can be thought of as "webs of unenforced claims to land" as reflecting his work (see Fortes: 1969, pp. 220 ff. for an attack on such a point of view).
- (e) Dr. Fox accuses me of describing the marriage system of the Merina as a paradox. I do not say that the *system* is a paradox but that it is produced by contradictory concepts of right marriage held by the Merina.
- (f) Dr. Fox says that the principles that I gave as governing the marriage system do not explain the fact that parallel patrilineal cousin marriages are slightly more incestuous than cross-cousin marriages. This is a point that I made myself, stressing that the difference is only slight. However, the explanation which Fox seems to be driving at, that the Merina system is one of those which stress cross-cousin marriage, is obviously wrong when marriages between grandchildren of brothers are less 'incestuous' than marriages between cross-cousins.
- (g) The Merina do not associate bones with the 'male' aspect of the person. I was aware during fieldwork of the existence of such beliefs in other parts of the world but could get no confirmation of this notion in spite of considerable prodding.
- (h) Professor Condominas and myself used the word 'clan' in the same way, the way used by Radcliffe-Brown, whose definition is quoted by Condominas (Condominas: 1960, p. 24).
- (i) I did not report that the term *fokon-olona* was not used in my area of study. Indeed I have devoted an article largely to the discussion of the use of the term in that area (Bloch: 1971c).
- (j) I did not only conduct my research in a pioneer area but I also conducted a four month study in the heartland of old Imerina, actually quite close to the villages where Professor Condominas worked.
- (k) There is no mention in the book of fertility obtained through water that is believed to *seep* into the tomb.
- (l) Dr. Fox finds it strange that people so obsessed with tombs and mortuary rituals as the Merina should have undeveloped ideas about death. The point I made is that the Merina stress the significance of communal death in a tomb against the fate of individual souls. This is not an undeveloped idea about death. This point has actually been made

by very many writers on Madagascar.

(m) Dr. Fox regrets my not including a list of the Merina kinship terms. I have discussed elsewhere (Bloch: 1971d) why I distrust such a list and hope, as is made clear in the book, to publish a study which will include these terms in a meaningful way. In the meantime, the kind of list required by Dr. Fox has been already published (Raharijaona and Verin: 1964) and indeed some account is given in the book by Sibree quoted by Dr. Fox himself.

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