

Famadihana*

FI.MA.MPI

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1 Foreword

It's crucial to state first that everyone has their own opinion on *famadihana*, and the *mpikabary* is no exception. We at FI.MA.MPI. think that Malagasy culture is worthy of mention especially to those who have a great yearning to know the Malagasy values.

We should also remark that during the *Ntaolo*—Malagasy ancestors—era, women were not allowed to keep *hazom-pasana*—the key of the tomb. Moreover, the *kabary* during *famadihana* could only be carried out by the king or queen's descendants. Today, these restrictions do not apply anymore to *famadihana*.

2 What is Famadihana?

One of the ancient Malagasy traditions is *famadihana*, the reburial ceremony during which all family members gather, dance, and sing together to celebrate the turning of the dead. In Madagascar, “family” means all people who are related to each other including those who are now dead. Therefore, *famadihana* is a huge familial festivity where people who are still alive can meet the dead. We Malagasy believe the body dies but not the soul. So when a person dies, we believe the soul of that person is still present.

Famadihana may last several days. Each day, the family prepares immense banquets known as *vary be menaka*—rice with a lot of oil—for the guests. The banquets are composed mainly of rice with fat meat derived from zebu cattle that have been slaughtered.

The family also organizes series of *kabary* and *hira gasy* shows during the celebration.

3 Origin of the Word Famadihana

The word *famadihana* comes from *vadika* which means turn over or swap.

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famadihana → f-am-(v)adika/h(a)-ana.

4 Definition from the Dictionary

Famadihana is a custom followed by some Malagasy tribes to show respect for the dead and ancestors and to ask for their blessing.

- Moving the bones of the dead that have been buried *an'irotra*¹ or *sakalava diso*² into the family's tomb.
- Giving new shrouds to the dead in a tomb and stowing them in the same tomb or in a new one.
- Laying the dead in a particular position according to Malagasy customs. That is, the elders should be laid next to the east wall with their head oriented to the north, whereas the others should be laid with their head oriented to the east following the descendant order. The meaning of *famadihana* is taken literally here because the positions of dead are being swapped.
- *Famadihana* is mainly practiced by the highland regions such as Imerina, Vakinankaratra, and Northern Betsileo.

5 When Does Famadihana Take Place?

In General, *famadihana* takes place in winter (July to September). However, some people perform it a little bit later. The reason is that Malagasy used to believe the dead are cold in winter and need new shrouds.

Some people might also say their now deceased grandfather or grandmother has appeared to them in a dream wearing shrouds that have been ripped up and need to be renewed. The idea of organizing *famadihana* starts from that moment.

6 Is Famadihana Necessary?

Yes There are several motives to justify the necessity of *famadihana* according to Malagasy customs and beliefs. First, we Malagasy respect the *razana*—the dead and the ancestors—and used to believe their blessing. Consequently, we accept that the *razana* be treated in a special way. It's necessary, for instance, to renew their shrouds regularly to prevent their bones from strewing. Next, *famadihana* is the major family gathering. Everybody does their best to attend

¹An'irotra is the way of burying a dead person outside of the family's tomb, for certain reason.

²For example, if a person who comes from Tana was died in Toamasina and laid to rest there, and if one or two years later, the family decide to bring the person's body to their tomb in Tana, we call that person sakalava diso.

the event, even those who live far away from home. Hence, it's an opportune moment for all family members to know each other. People who come from the same region can also meet during the *famadihana*. Finally, there is a kind of money called *sao-drazana* given by the guests to the family during *famadihana*, and sometimes the amount of that money is really huge. So some people take advantage of *famadihana* just to get that money.

No For some reasons, many Malagasy people agree that it's time now to forget about *famadihana*. First, it's a waste of money. Next, according to the Christian religion—which is followed by the majority of Malagasy, *razana* will never bless. It's only God who could bless, and the faith in God cannot be melded with other things. What's more, before the *famadihana*, one needs to consult a *mpanandro*—a kind of astrologer—about the appropriate date for the ceremony. That practice is forbidden in Christian religion which accepts that all days from God are suitable. Finally, some people also believe the dead should not be moved from their current place.

7 Final Thoughts

Famadihana is a Malagasy custom as well as a family festivity. So, in our opinion, the decision to keep it or not is a family issue and should not be considered as a nationwide discussion.