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ESSAYS ON CULTURAL TRANSMISSION

MAURICE BLOCH

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QUESTIONS NOT TO ASK OF MALAGASY CARVINGS

Maurice Bloch

This chapter is a cautionary tale or a short history of the attempts at interpretation of the carvings of a group of people in Madagascar: the Zafimaniry.

The Zafimaniry are swidden cultivators living in the eastern forest of Madagascar and they number about 40,000. However, they are famous because they are one of the few groups which originally produced the kind of things museums and tourists can take away and display, and subsequently they have developed a tourist-goods industry of some significance. Here I am concerned with their traditional carvings. These are low reliefs or engravings of relatively elaborate geometrical patterns which cover the wooden parts of their houses – especially the shutters and, most beautifully, the three main posts. Since the 1920s, at least, professional and amateur anthropologists and archaeologists have bothered the Zafimaniry by asking them what these carvings 'meant'. Included among these, in the recent past, has been myself.

I say what these carvings 'meant', but this is a tricky word indeed. What I am talking about is in part the trickiness of the word. There is of course a massive, almost infinite literature in philosophy and linguistics on the topic, but here I simply want to consider the problems of the word when applied to this type of material culture and then in a rather matter-of-fact way, since this is one of the kind of cases which anthropologists and archaeologists deal with.

The people who interrogated various Zafimaniry and then went on to write articles or books in order to report the answers they were given did



Figure 3.1 Malagasy carvings

not use the word 'meant', because they were writing in French. This is not quite such a trivial point as it might seem, because already in French there is no equivalent to the English verb 'to mean'. One can ask the 'sense' (which perhaps corresponds to the English meaning) or one can use the phrase (and that is the phrase used by the writers) *vouloir dire*, 'try to say'. These authors tell us, then, what these carvings are 'trying to

say'. If there is a problem between French and English, it is not surprising that there is also one between French and Malagasy. All the writers concerned purport to report Zafimaniry answers to their question – but to what question? First of all, the authors fall into two categories. Two of them can speak Malagasy, in both cases probably better than I can (one of them is a native speaker); the others must have used an interpreter who was presumably landed with the critical task of rendering into Malagasy the French phrase *vouloir dire*. How did they do it? I can only guess from my attempts to ask the same thing in Malagasy. One can ask something which is a bit like the English 'What is the point of', a phrase which is the rare positive of a commonly used catchphrase which means 'there is no point to it' (*antony*); or one can use a rather ontological phrase which asks, 'What is the root cause of this?' (*fototry*); or one can ask for the engravings, 'What are those pictures of?'; or you can ask people as they are doing the carvings, 'What are you doing?' None of these questions really conveys what either the French or the English terms convey. In any case, when I asked these questions of the Zafimaniry during my first fieldwork there I obtained rather disappointing answers. To the question 'What are those pictures of?' I was answered with great certainty that they were pictures of nothing. When I asked for a cause or the point of the carvings I triggered the ready-made phrase that there was no point, and when I asked what people were doing I was told 'Carving'. There was actually one answer I was given very often, but I felt it was so bland and therefore frustrating that I paid no attention to it and did not even put it down in my field notes. It was that 'It made the wood beautiful'.

I want to return to this in a moment; but first, a word about what the other writers say they were told. Apparently they did not have the same frustrating experience as I did – or, at least, give no hints of this. My first reaction to their apparent success, when I knew perfectly well that all these people had merely been passing through, when I had spent a considerable time with the Zafimaniry and spoke their language, was that these authors were mainly making it up. Now I am a little more charitable – at least, in the case of two of them, one of whom is the native speaker I referred to above. I don't think these two were lying – simply that they were misleading. These authors report that various parts of the carvings are representational; that, for example, the ubiquitous circular designs represent the moon and that some of the designs, which appear like shading, are rain.

I think I now know what they are talking about. As a result of subsequent fieldwork I was told by certain expert carvers somewhat similar things about various designs commonly used by the Zafimaniry. However, in following these up it was made very clear that what was meant was that these were 'the names' of these designs. It is not that they represent the phenomena but that the names indicate a trivial similarity which can be used as an indicator of the design when, for example, you ask a carver to do a particular design for your house. It is rather like herringbone tweed. Clearly the tweed is not a picture of the osature of the fish.

All this, however, does not mean that I have nothing to say about these carvings, and I shall try to explain how I feel able to move on. This is partly as a result of the fact that someone once elaborated the remark that the carvings make the wood beautiful by adding 'They honour the wood'. Immediately I realized that the bland statement was not so bland after all since its focus was not beautification in general but beautification of the wood. But really this was only a hint. In fact the only useful answer the Zafimaniry could have given me and the other researchers to our questions was the famous one: 'If I were you, mate, I would not be starting from here.'

Where one needs to start is with an understanding of the significance of houses and the wood the carvings decorate, and I briefly shall try to indicate this.

For the Zafimaniry, houses are the basis of ordered society and the mark of a successful life; this is because they are the outward side of a successful marriage. For the Zafimaniry, going through life successfully is a gradual process of settling down, of which marriage is an essential element, and growth through the production of children, grandchildren, etc., who are the continuation of the couple. When children are young they are undetermined in place, substance or morality. Their bodies are malleable so that they are permanently affected by their environment. They don't have a home of their own. They don't take part in agriculture, but they hunt and gather all over the place, they play in a chaotic way, their language is not well rounded. The attachments they form – and these include sexual attachments very early on – are chaotic and impermanent. But then, gradually, they settle spatially, physically and psychologically as they move toward marriage – and marriage takes material form in the house they begin to build and furnish. The young man will put up the

central house-posts and a flimsy outer wall of reeds and mats, the young woman will bring the furniture of the hearth. This building is the flimsy beginning of marriage; but if the relationship settles down (which may or may not happen) – above all, if the couple start to produce children – the house will harden. That is, the flimsy materials will, little by little over many years, begin to be replaced by massive vertical pieces of wood. It is as if the body of the pair as individuals begins to fade in significance and instead it is replaced by the building of their mutuality. This is expressed in a number of ways but, above all, by the oft-stressed observation that the house is acquiring bones: that is, the pieces of wood. And the wood that is used is not any wood; it is wood from the hardest, longest-lasting trees, and it is not any part of the tree, but the hardest impacted heartwood of these woods which the Zafimaniry call by a word which literally means 'to last'. The aesthetic and moral value of the hardness of such wood, especially the fact that it is a hardness produced from an original softness (the young plant), totally dominates Zafimaniry discourse in a way which would almost be impossible to overemphasize. This house and this wood can be seen as material culture, but to an extent this is misleading in that such a phrase suggests something different from non-material culture. It would be quite misleading to see Zafimaniry houses as expressing Zafimaniry marriage and society or containing married pairs. The house is the marriage. With time, the original couple (in human form) will die and the children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren will disperse, but ideally neither of these processes will occur completely. This is because these descendants will gather on occasion in the house to settle disputes or ask blessings from the original couple – or, rather, from the house or parts of that house such as the cooking pot and posts. The original couple therefore survives and continues to grow as their progeny multiply – and so will the house. The descendants soon take over the business of the house, at first during the life of the original couple and then without interruption after their death. The house will continue to harden and become more and more bony. This is a process which is never complete, partly because some wood will need replacing but also because the hardening is in fact endless. Even if the wood of the house is very hard and sound there is a continuation to the process of hardening and transformation, and that continuation is carving. Carving 'honours' the hardness of the heartwood and makes it even more evident and beautiful.

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The carvings are therefore the continuation of the process of human maturation and settling down, of marriage and house creation, of hardening, of growth, of acquiring bones. The carvings are not separate from this process, they are not representing, they are part of the finishing of a task which should never finish as it should grow for ever. The carvings are a celebration of the material and the building and of a successful life which continues to expand and reproduce (and, by the way, this is why the carvings must remain shallow engravings because otherwise they would be negating their very purpose by weakening the wood).

The carvings are not pointing outwards – mutely trying to say something, *voulant dire* as the questions expected – they are an essential element of the material and the social principle on which they occur; they are not referring or signifying. The beautifying is merely the extension of the making and being of the wood and the house and growth of the original marriage. The carvings are the continuation and magnification (as in *magnificat*) of the growth and success of the couple transcending the impermanence of life.

CHAPTER 4

COMMENSALITY AND POISONING

Maurice Bloch

In all societies, sharing food is a way of establishing closeness, while, conversely, the refusal to share is one of the clearest marks of distance and enmity. These points have been repeatedly made by both anthropologists and psychologists (Miller, Fiske and Rozin 1998). Commensality, the action of eating together, is thus one of the most powerful operators of the social process.

The reason is that the sharing of food is, and is always seen to be, in some way or other, the sharing of that which will cause, or at least maintain, a common substance among those who commune together. I use the word 'commune' here to evoke the Christian communion, the commemoration of the Last Supper, itself a transformation of the Jewish Passover feast (Feeley-Harnik 1981). These are rituals that can be associated with that loose class of ceremonies that go under the label of 'sacrifice', a most characteristic feature of which is the triumphal closing communal meal, usually of meat. This commensal aspect of sacrifice is an old theme in anthropology, first fully developed by the nineteenth-century theologian Robertson-Smith, but which I, among others, have also recently discussed (Bloch 1992a). However, the image of eating together as a form of communion is also found in much less complex and elevated practices such as the daily domestic meal of families across the globe, or even, and equally intriguingly, if less openly, in the flirtatious practice of eating out of each other's plates, common in French restaurants and elsewhere.¹

If the theme of eating in common is universally an indication and a creator of bodily propinquity, this does not mean that we should forget