



Almost Eating the Ancestors

Author(s): Maurice Bloch

Source: *Man*, Dec., 1985, New Series, Vol. 20, No. 4 (Dec., 1985), pp. 631-646

Published by: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2802754>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Man*

ALMOST EATING THE ANCESTORS

MAURICE BLOCH

London School of Economics & Political Science

This article brings together two of the best known myths of the Merina of Madagascar. Both are concerned with food and, more particularly, beef eating. These myths are seen as a general speculation on problems arising from the concept of descent which for the Merina is focused on their megalithic tombs. In the idiom of descent, being like the ancestors is the ideal, but it also means being dead. For the living, therefore, there has to be something else: vitality. This is enjoyable, but morally ambiguous because it is opposed to ancestorhood and leads to putrefaction. Vitality is represented in these myths by cattle, and the violence with which they are killed in ritual becomes a way of conquering the moral ambiguities of vitality while still retaining its strength and pleurability; while cooking beef avoids putrefaction. This resolution is, however, only a temporary and incomplete solution to the problem of descent.

This article is a study of two well-known Merina myths both of which focus on eating. When seen in the context of Merina religious practice they reveal a hesitant speculation which attempts to deal with questions concerning the nature of human beings, the nature of descent, the processes of moral and physical development and the relationship of individuals to ancestral authority. Although we are dealing with speculation we are not dealing with something which can usefully be equated with either our philosophic or literary tradition because we are dealing with what Lévi-Strauss has so accurately called the science of the concrete: the attempt to explore praxis by means of hypothetical practices such as cooking, staying awake, naming, and above all eating. It is not enough, however, just to identify the nature of the speculation; it is necessary to indicate how this science of the concrete will be reintegrated in the historical processes that produced it. This can only be very tentatively indicated here.

There are two themes concerned with the symbolism of eating which stand out in the mythology of the Merina of Madagascar. They are related but this can only be shown after a certain amount of analysis and by bringing in a certain amount of contextual ethnography. The first of these themes is concerned with the killing and eating of cattle. This theme is particularly prominent in a famous myth (Myth 2) about the discovery of the edibility of cattle by the famous king Ralambo. The second theme is more esoteric; it is the idea that in some ways the Merina do, or did, eat their ancestors.¹ This is most clearly expressed in another myth (Myth 1) which figures prominently in a book published in 1956 by the French anthropologist and missionary L. Molet. The book was called *Le bain royal à Madagascar* (The royal bath in Madagascar).

The title of the book refers to the royal ritual of the bath which will be discussed more fully in a future publication (Bloch in press). Molet's concerns,

Man (N.S.) 20, 631-46

however, are much wider-ranging than the title might suggest. He argues, largely on the basis of Myth 1, that all Malagasy funerary rituals (not just Merina ones) are based on an ancient practice of communal feasting on the flesh of ancestors by their descendants and close relatives. The publication of this book caused a major scandal in Madagascar, though, as the author has recently noted (Molet 1979), there has been no attempt at serious refutation, apart from another fanciful theory of Dama Tsoha relating the practice to supposed Buddhist influences (Dama Tsoha 1957).

The reason for this neglect is that Molet does not offer evidence which would convince the most willing historian. It is, however, a mistake to ignore this contribution altogether. Molet is a protestant missionary turned anthropologist with a vast knowledge of Malagasy ethnography and even though he does not present any historically relevant evidence he does base himself on certain facts, above all on the famous myth, and his interpretation when seen as a contribution to the study of Merina symbolism rather than history is most suggestive.

Before examining the myth, it is convenient to follow Molet and look at some of the other evidence he produces since, as he himself realises, this evidence serves well to introduce the concepts evoked in the myth.

Molet's evidence is threefold. First there is the myth; secondly he uses doubtful etymologies which do not bear examination as they are drawn without any reference to general historical linguistic changes in Malagasy. His third source, however, is much more interesting. This consists of quotations from Malagasy speeches, especially funerary speeches. In fact Molet bases himself on a series of booklets of model speeches written by an Anglican clergyman, the Rev. Maurice Rasamuel which are available in every Malagasy market. In these, such phrases occur as 'The dead has eaten the bones of others and so it is right that we should eat his bones. The dead has eaten the flesh of others so it is right that we should eat his flesh' (Molet 1956: 82). Molet takes this type of statement literally but as referring to the distant past; I think that they should be taken metaphorically and as referring to the present. I have no doubt that Rasamuel also intends them to be taken metaphorically.

The notion of metaphor has been used so loosely and so misleadingly in anthropology recently that it is important to define precisely how it is used here. I follow linguists' use of the notion of metaphor; for me it is only valuable when applied directly to language and rhetoric. A metaphor is a statement which the speaker *indicates* to the hearer should be understood metaphorically. In deciding whether a statement is literal or metaphorical we must therefore try to detect the way the indications that the statement is to be taken as a metaphor are communicated (Lyons 1981: 213–17).

In the Merina dialect of Malagasy there exists a folk category of linguistic acts which is referred to by the word *kabary* (Keenan 1975). This word is usually translated as meaning 'formal speech making' or 'oratory' (Bloch 1975: 7–11). The book written by Rasamuel is actually entitled *Kabary*. One of the implications understood by speakers of Malagasy, and noted by all commentators on

the notion, from the very earliest ones (Sibree 1889; 1890; 1891; Keenan 1975; Bloch 1975) is that *kabarys* are highly decorated speeches containing elaborate, even euphuistic metaphorical decoration. In other words, when it has been indicated that a linguistic act is a *kabary* the listeners have been warned to expect very many metaphorical statements. This is the first reason therefore why we should expect statements in *kabarys* to be metaphorical, but of course this raises the next question. How do speakers know that they are hearing a *kabary*? A *kabary* is usually indicated by a number of para-linguistic indicators such as the way the speaker stands and where he stands, the way the listeners behave, the intonation, etc., and also by a number of linguistic indicators, such as the choice of certain syntactic forms, the choice of vocabulary, the overall structure of the utterance. Above all a *kabary* is indicated by the occasion. For example, at a funeral it is known that a *kabary* must be uttered at a particular stage in the proceedings. Rasamuel tells us that the text quoted by Molet is to be used for such an occasion. One of the implications of this statement is therefore that we are dealing with the type of linguistic act called *kabary* and that we should 'look out' for metaphorical statements. This, however, is an insufficient indication that a particular statement within a *kabary* is a metaphor. In an oral performance of a *kabary* metaphor would be indicated by certain prosodic features and by the epigrammatic forms of certain phrases. In the written text only this second indicator remains but it is quite sufficient. There are, therefore, sufficient indicators in the text quoted by Molet for there to be no doubt in the mind of anybody acquainted with the uses of language in Imerina that a statement such as the one given by Molet concerning the eating of the ancestors has been signalled to the hearers or the readers as metaphorical.²

If, however, we can be quite confident in seeing this statement and a few others like it as metaphors, it is still necessary to establish what they are metaphors of. To do this it is necessary to consider the general context of this kind of expression found in this and other speeches.

This statement must be considered together with the many others of which the speech quoted by Molet consists; statements such as the Malagasy proverb, quoted by Hertz in his famous essay on Death (1907: 113), 'Living we are one house, Dead we are one Tomb' which occurs in the same speech. We know from the form of *kabary* that all the different metaphors which follow each other are intended to indicate the same truth. As a result it is possible for us, as it is for the hearers, to focus on the lowest common denominator of the illustrations used. The ideas lying behind the forest of metaphors reveal themselves as the following: (1) different generations should act in the same way because in the end they are the same; (2) different generations are consubstantial so that the body of one generation is the source of life and substance for the next.

These two propositions so revealed are the core of the ideas which construct Merina descent (Bloch 1971: ch. 2) and it is therefore necessary before proceeding further to be reminded of these ideas for a better understanding of the process.

Merina descent is posited on a related set of injunctions and beliefs, the fundamental belief being that the living of the descent group, the dead of the descent group, and the ancestral lands, especially rice lands of the descent group,

are all aspects of a single unity. All the facets of this unity should not be separated or distinguished. Merina descent notions urge non-differentiation and abhor division whether this be division of land, of the people, or of the remains of the dead. The horror of dispersion through the movement of the living or the devolution of land to outsiders is a continual theme of Merina symbolism and has obsessive aspects. This is strongly emphasised in the absolute duty to regroup the bodies of the dead of the descent group in the communal ancestral tombs which are situated at the heart of the ancestral lands (Bloch 1971). Most Merina rituals are therefore concerned with the retention of the mystical and practical resources of the descent group, and with stopping their dispersion. This can only be ensured through the unsquandered transmission from generation to generation of these resources. This is the sentiment dramatically revealed in the quotation from Rasamuel used by Molet to such unfortunate end.

We can now see that the notion of eating in the quotation is a metaphorical allusion to the dependence of descendants on previous generations and, secondly, to the idea that different generations of a descent group are made up of the same stuff: a stuff which is limited and therefore needs to be transferred if it is not to be dispersed to non-descent group members.

There is, however, yet another metaphor of eating. Eating is the destruction of the specific individual form of the object eaten but the retention of its substance. Eating therefore implies the reduction of individuals to a mere descent substance endlessly reused and taking specific forms which then again need to be destroyed in their specificity in order to be reused. This corresponds particularly closely to the Merina notion of descent which views individuality as divisive while total non-differentiation leads to the continuation of the descent group. This concept takes a material form in Merina funerary rituals when the dried bodies of the dead are actually crushed by the process of reburial in order to become an impersonal descent amalgam, a substance unmarked by the individuality which once incarnated it (Bloch 1971: ch. 5) but which so transformed leads to the blessing which will give life to future generations (Bloch 1985: ch. 2).

The statement quoted from Rasamuel and used by Molet as historical evidence is therefore no such thing. It is a metaphorical expression of the most fundamental aspects of the Merina notion of descent. This however does not mean that it is 'merely' an empty material illustration of an abstract concept. When dealing with metaphors we not only have to understand what they stand for, but why the image has evocative power, a power which enriches what is paralleled by suggesting other connexions with culturally constructed emotional states, culturally constructed experiences and culturally constructed knowledge. In order to understand the source of this evocative power it is thus necessary to turn to yet further Merina meanings, surrounding descent and eating.

As in many other Austronesian cultures, eating a meal for the Merina, as opposed to merely eating a snack, must involve eating rice. The phrase used to say that one is eating a meal literally means to 'eat rice' irrespective of what else might also be eaten. The centrality of eating rice is a familiar theme to the Merina. It is recognised in endlessly repeated phrases such as, 'Rice is the basis of

everything', 'Rice is life'. Rice for the Merina is not just an instrumental way of staying alive; it is much more; it is 'holy', *masina*, and this holiness extends even to the water in which it is cooked, which must not be polluted by unsuitable uses. The Merina so totally identify being a proper human being with eating rice that no question is asked of a foreigner more often than whether in his country people eat rice, the implication being that only under this condition can one be sure that he is a moral being. Similarly, in daily discourse there is no more powerful way of pointing out the ultimate depravity of the French, the colonising power for sixty years, than by saying that they eat bread and not rice. For the Merina rice is food, life, everything else that is eaten is a luxurious extra.

This 'staff of life' is inevitably linked to the source of life: the ancestors, and therefore to the descent groups. The link is evoked in a number of ways. The most important is that the rice one eats should be the product of the land of one's own ancestors.

The 'land of the ancestors', *tanin' drazana*, is a powerful and complex notion in Merina thought (Bloch 1971: ch. 4). First of all, it is the land which the living have inherited from the ancestors, more particularly the irrigated rice fields which the ancestors once owned and were responsible for terracing. However, the 'land of the ancestors' is also so called for a much more direct reason. It is the land into which the ancestors are placed in their tombs, and where the descendants will similarly be 'placed' after their death. The notion of 'land of the ancestors' is to the Merina a totally self-evident material concept, quite unlike the more abstract formulations we might find in other parts of the world. Because of this material identity the concept merges the idea of descent and locality in a physical way. The product of this land, rice, is therefore at one and the same time the product of the soil and of the material ancestors placed in it by the tomb.

It follows that many of the same principles which govern ancestral lands and the material substance of the ancestors themselves also apply to rice itself, especially the emphasis on lack of division in ancestral substance and the horror of dispersal. Sharing rice is an outward sign of kinship and common descent, and since the Merina only envisage moral relations as kinship (Bloch 1974) to refuse to eat rice in a house which one has visited is to deny all possibility of a moral relationship. This is one of the most offensive actions imaginable.

It also follows that it is wrong to alienate rice to those with whom one has no moral relation. Ideally, one should neither buy nor sell rice, or at least, one should not sell rice before one is sure that all one's relatives have plenty. This opposition of rice and exchange is well expressed by the reported remark of the famous Merina King Andrianampoinimerina, who was complaining that his subjects were selling rice to buy chewing tobacco. 'Rice is my friend and the friend of supernatural beings; rice is life. If people alienate it in order to exchange against chewing tobacco I shall condemn them to death. How can you exchange tobacco which after a short while you spit out, for rice? If you do this you are losing your wives and your children. It is wrong to exchange life for spit' (Callet 1908: 761, my translation from the Malagasy).

II

With this background it is now possible to examine the myth which was to form Molet's central evidence for the supposed ancient practice of eating the ancestors. This myth is one of the two with which this article is concerned. The myth has appeared in a number of published versions, but the most famous, used by Molet, appears in a compendium of Malagasy tradition edited by Father Callet which appeared in a number of editions, the fullest appearing in 1908. The following version is my shortened translation from the Malagasy of that edition. (Callet 1908: 267).

Myth 1

It is said that in the past when someone died all the people of the family gathered together. Then, once the family had gathered, the father of the family spoke thus: 'Our beloved relative is dead! What shall we do with him since he was so kind and loving?' And some people answered him saying 'Since the beloved has died, let us not bury him but eat him, since we would be sad if he were to rot under the ground'. And so the corpse was eaten . . .³ And so, it is said, that this is what was done with corpses very long ago: they were eaten . . . But one day, it is said, a child of very rich people indeed died and the family gathered, and when the family had gathered, it was said by the gathered family 'You are now gathered, do as is our custom—for the day is passing into night'. Then the father of the child spoke, 'Wait a moment, if the family wants to do it, I too want it to be so, but if the gathered family wants it to be otherwise, I too want it to be otherwise. What do you ladies and gentlemen think to be fit? If you like I shall substitute cattle for the corpse of my child and we shall keep it . . .'⁴ Then all and everyone began to think about this since this was a new idea to substitute and they thought so long that they were caught by the dawn, still the family was thinking it over. And so, in the morning the family spoke: 'It perhaps is right since people's attitudes seem to have come together, for if it was not right they would not have come together and so this is probably the view of the family, ladies and gentlemen. The return of a child to his ancestors so that he may be passed on to the next generation is an exceptional event, but the return of a beloved older relative is common enough. So it does not matter that you substitute cattle for your child.'⁵ And so the father substituted many cattle for the corpse of his child since he was rich indeed. And then people ate the cattle which *replaced* the dead child. And the name of this meat was called bad meat, because in the past people ate the body of dead people.

Molet interprets this myth as though it was some real historical story, something which we need not linger over, but he also does something more. Following other writers he then takes this story as the basis for a Judaeo-Christian explanation of the eating of cattle as a sacrifice of substitution. This I believe has been largely misleading, especially because this is a story of eating cattle instead of a dead person—almost the opposite of the Judaeo-Christian concept of sacrifice which substitutes the victim so that the sacrificer may live. There are, however, certain elements of this myth which more directly connect with more general theories of sacrifice. For these to emerge several aspects of the myth must be considered in greater detail.

The myth sets up two alternatives: one is consumption of the dead, the other is consumption of cattle. The opposition between these two alternatives is stressed by associating them with dusk and dawn. This is a symbolic device often found in Merina myth and ritual. The dusk is always negative while the dawn is always positive. This emphasises the general impression that the second alternative, the substitution of cattle is good, while the former, the eating of the corpse of the child, is bad. This conclusion would at first sight appear to be

problematic if the notion of 'eating the dead' is to be seen as the very epitome of the representation of descent. In nearly all contexts descent, implying the abolition of all boundaries between and within generations, is defined as the absolute good, while here this idea is represented by the notion of eating the dead, which is bad.

On closer examination, however, the myth conveys a more complex image. First, there is no suggestion in the myth that there was anything wrong with eating the dead *for the ancestors*, quite the contrary; it is for the *new* generations that this would be unpleasant or bad. Secondly in a most interesting fashion the myth reaches its conclusion with emphatic hesitancy. The alternative is only 'probably' better. The actors cannot make up their minds, they are not really sure. Thirdly, although substituting cattle becomes the general practice, the myth stresses the exceptional character of this particular case where the normal relationship between generations is reversed. The changeover occurs for the death of a child. This implies a reversal of the previously conjured image of eating the dead. The old situation which applied to previous generations, was that the young ate the old. The myth, however, evokes the image of the reverse, the images of the old eating the young. The implications of the identity of succeeding generations in the continuing unchanging world of descent is seen in its positive aspect in the normal situation: the new generation receiving the blessing of life from the ancestors; feeding on the ancestors. According to the myth, this is what happened in the past, in the time of the ancestors. But suddenly the myth reveals a nightmarish second aspect of the dogma of descent, the old feeding on the young. From this perspective descent appears not only as the ultimate good but also as a threat to the young who are to be consumed in their individuality before they have lived a full life.

To understand this problem further it is necessary to look at another element in the myth, the wealth of the parents of the child. The emphasis on the 'wealth' of the parents of the substituted child is very great in the original Malagasy, in a way which is not easy to render into English.

The Malagasy word translated here as wealth is *harena*. *Harena* is wealth in a very special sense. It contrasts with ancestral property which is inherited and is typically irrigated rice lands, because it is property which has been acquired individually. Furthermore, not only has it been acquired individually but it must similarly be distributed *inter vivos*. The Malagasy-English dictionary of Richardson (1885) actually defines *harena* as wealth which must be distributed before death. *Harena*, therefore, stands in sharp contrast to the inheritance coming from the ancestors which it is the supreme duty of all not to alienate and disperse. Not only does *harena* contrast with descent property, there is also a sense in which it is anti-descent. This is because the possession of *harena* causes that anti-descent element: differentiation. *Harena* makes some members of a descent group rich and others poor, unlike rice land which in theory, though not in fact, is shared equally by all descendants. It is not seen negatively, however, because if descent is the supreme element of the 'good', *harena* is the 'desirable' which needs not be good. For the Merina, the main characteristic of *harena* is that it is enjoyable. Also, in opposition to descent property, which is thought of as eternally associated with the continuing unchanging group and therefore as

itself stable and unchanging, *harena* is characterised by the way it endlessly flows. *Harena* makes some people get rich, others get poor. *Harena* changes from hand to hand, it circulates, especially along affinal lines.

The association linking the flow of *harena* and affinity is complex but highly significant since it further heightens and illustrates the opposition between *harena* and ancestral property. This is because affinity is a notion which is opposed to consanguinity, descent and the unsquandered transmission of ancestral rice lands (Bloch 1974a). This link between affinity and descent is largely due to the fact that in the past, and to a certain extent today, the typical *harena* is cattle.

Cattle are sought by all aspiring Merina men; they are the clearest sign of individual success. The stereotype of the 'rich' man is one who has a large herd, 'whose cattle cover the hillside'. There are, however, other sides to the association of success and cattle which are less focused on property but which nevertheless inform the general notion of *harena*. Cattle, especially oxen, are admired for their strength and difficulty of control, virtues much sought after by Merina men and associated with notions of virility reminiscent of mediterranean ones. The owner of cattle seems somehow to share in this strength with its overtones of sexual and economic success. This communication of strength and success can be obtained even more directly by eating. Eating meat, and more especially drinking cattle fat, as the Merina say, are evocative images of wealth, of acquiring strength and of individual well-being; in other words, of having *harena*.

But cattle are not just evocative of enjoyment, vitality and strength; they are also closely linked to the Merina concept of affinity. For the movement of cattle is largely due to the fact that they must be given amongst close relatives at important rituals and this obligation falls particularly strongly on in-laws, especially sons-in-law (Bloch 1974b).

If we bear in mind these various associations surrounding *harena* and cattle some aspects of the myth become clearer. The fact that the father of the child should be rich and that he should offer cattle for consumption are two linked themes. But we can go further. A man rich in cattle represents an ideal of existence which is quite different from the austere ideal of descent which implies the dissolution of the self in time within the descent group, an ideal where the individual, and individual action in so far as it implies individual creation, is negated. The man rich in *harena* is, in contrast to the pure descent being, one who enjoys his pleasures, one who develops his individuality and his creativity whether sexual, political or economic. He is involved in exchange and in affinity; he truly lives in this world not in the timeless eternal world of the ancestors.

The myth therefore evokes and puts side by side two models of existence, one ancestral and the other worldly. For ancestral existence, individuality is irrelevant or wrong, since individuals are mere substitutes, or rather incarnations, one of another. This in the myth is represented by necrophagy. Worldly existence is about enjoyment, exchange, sexuality, strength and individuality. In the myth this is represented by wealth and meat eating. This simple contrast represented by the two types of eating is the starting point for much more

complex ideas. Not only are the two types of existence represented, they are both shown to be self contradictory and potentially dangerous.

The ancestral ideal, the consumption of older generations by junior generations, is represented first of all in a positive light. It is a way of overcoming decomposition and, by implication, death itself since through the practice of necrophagy the old live again in the young. This is the symbolism of the tomb, the central symbol of descent, which also represents the victory over death. The tomb is a structure made of megalithic rocks which symbolically ensures that the group lives for ever irrespective of the disruptive lives of individual members. As a descent being, a Merina overcomes the problem of individual death by means of group immortality and this is symbolised by the tomb in this world and by the image of eating the dead in the myth.

There is, however, a negative side to the ideal of descent. For the individual, the image of descent is also inescapably destructive since it reduces him/her to mere substance in the tomb or food for succeeding generations. This negative side of descent existence is conveyed in the myth. It is the image of the old consuming the young instead of the old feeding their substance to the young. The problem is that, as a descent being, the ideal is being dead and dry in the tomb. This negative side of descent naturally introduces the alternative existence suggested in the myth: the individual enjoyment of wealth. The myth presents an alternative to the horrifying ideal of being consumed by one's ancestors in the enjoyment of individuality in this life, that is in the eating of cattle and by association in personal, as opposed to ancestral, creativity. This is in some ways better than the ancestral alternative as is shown by the fact that the myth explains why people at funerals now should not eat the dead but instead eat cattle.

In the same way, however, that descent contains its ultimate negative, so does individual sensual existence represented by meat eating. The problems it involves are in Myth 1 mere suggestions or shadows. There is the fact that if necrophagy was originally introduced to *overcome* putrefaction, it follows therefore that the substitution of necrophagy by meat eating implies the reintroduction of human putrefaction. This point is not elaborated in the myth. The only hint we have of a problem in the myth is the insistence that the meat eaten at funerals is *bad* meat. Somehow, the primary blessing of descent is in danger of being lost, though not altogether. Descent is still present in the new meat eating alternative because we have the repeated image of the gathered together family, the tomb, and the respect for authority, but it is diminished by the new suggestion and not altogether convincing.

The emphatic inconclusiveness of the myth is not accidental. It is probably the reason why we have a myth at all. The myth reveals itself as a kind of speculation on an irresolvable problem for living Merina posed by the notion of Merina descent itself. Descent in its pure form is ultimately destructive but the alternative which this suggests, vitality, also seems to imply death and putrefaction. The following part of this article examines how some attempt is made to resolve this dilemma, both in mythology and in Merina ritual practice. First let us turn to Merina ritual and especially the ritual of blessing in the context of descent.

Descent, as we saw, is the merging of the living, the dead and the ancestral land in order to produce an enduring, ideally eternal, entity. Given, however, the nasty habit people have of being born and dying, this still eternity requires continual movement in order to ensure the transmission of substance. In the myth this transmission is achieved through necrophagy. In real life the transfer is achieved through rituals concerned with the transfer of the blessing of life potential from generation to generation. This is a type of movement necessary to stay still. It is achieved by the ritual blowing on of water which is called *tsodrano*, a word which literally means 'blowing on water', but which is usually translated as blessing.

In such a blessing, water which has previously been associated with the ancestors (e.g. by being placed on the tomb) is taken into the mouth of an elder and blown on to the younger generations who are in this way blessed. It is the ritual equivalent of mythical necrophagy. The flow of blessing is therefore a matter of passing on blessing from generation to generation so that the descent group will reproduce itself in the living. This is the logic of descent at its simplest. There is in this ritual, however, an element other than the mere contact of different generations. In an ordinary blessing this other element is symbolised by water.

Water for the Merina is associated with the power and strength of non-human living things, plants and animals. The Malagasy word for this power is *mahery* (from the root *hery*) which is normally translated as strength, vigour, energy (Abinal & Malzac 1963: 238) and which has also associations with wildness and fast growth. Not only is water *mahery* but so are animals, particularly strong animals such as cattle which are nearly always described as *mahery*. *Mahery* beings are also characterised by their type of filiation since they are only related to the parental generation through their mother. This is also true of human infants at birth who are also thought of as purely matrilineally related in a biological way (Bloch 1985: 84–105) but as children go through life, and as they receive the blessing of the ancestors they become mystically related to parents on both sides. It is this mystical descent which *mahery* beings lack.

Finally the *mahery* element has also a historical referent. The Merina believe that in the past, before their ancestors came and conquered Imerina there lived there autochthonous people without culture, who were *mahery* in that they were strong, matrilineal and masters of wild plants and animals. These semi-nature spirits are called *Vazimba* and their cult, centred on water, is still of great significance today. The *Vazimba* are worshipped both for themselves but also indirectly through water. This is the water used in rituals of blessing. At the great annual national ritual of blessing, the ceremony of the royal bath, for example, the water was actually obtained from lakes in which the *Vazimba* were thought to be immersed (Bloch in press).

The Merina notion of blessing, which is first and foremost the transference of the power of the ancestors through the generations, is therefore also blessing through life-giving *Vazimba* water. It is as if what was being said in a Merina blessing is that it is necessary to receive both descent from the ancestors and strength from the *Vazimba*. This is a solution to the problem set by the implication of the ideal of descent: that one should be like the ancestors, in other

words dead. For the living at least this drastic solution is qualified by saying that we should be like the ancestors, but *also* alive through the strong *mahery* water of the Vazimba.

Merina religion is, however, even more complex than this simple solution might suggest. The reason is that the vital, strong, *mahery*, element has also a dark negative side which makes adding it to blessing problematic. The simplest expression of the negative side of the Vazimba *mahery* world is found in the historical myth which explains the establishment of civilisation by the Merina as the result of the driving out of the wild matrilineal Vazimba and their queens. This was necessary before the order of the ancestors could reign. The symbolical and ritual construction go further. The Vazimba are associated with non-human force, vigour and creativity and this is thought to be characteristic of the feminine element of the person which is seen as 'wet' in accord with the association of the Vazimba and water. Newborn children who have not yet received the blessing of the ancestors are entirely 'wet', they are called *zazarano*, children of water, and in the case of boys, at least, they have to be 'cleaned' of this element in order to become closer to the 'dry' ancestors in the tomb. This is done through a ritual which symbolically separates the boys from the world of women: the ritual of circumcision (Bloch 1985: ch. 5). The same notion is manifest in the various funerary rituals (Bloch 1982) which are concerned with 'drying' the corpse so that it can enter the eternal tomb and join and merge with other dry ancestors. In the funerary rituals the wet, vital element, is again associated with women but there it is represented in a totally negative light. This is because the 'wet' here connotes putrefaction. For the Merina it is only when the corpse has lost this wet side that it will stop rotting, and the funerary rituals are concerned with hastening this drying process. In the circumcision ritual in part, and in the funerary rituals altogether, the vital element is therefore a matter of death and putrefaction.

That the ritual should be associated with both individual creativity and strength, on the one hand, and decomposition, on the other, is not surprising. After all one cannot have the one without the other. It is also not surprising that the totality of the vital is opposed to the eternal existence of the tomb. In eternity one has neither creation nor decomposition; but the fact that the two sides of vitality are linked presents a difficulty for Merina religious thought as it applies to the living.

In the blessing, ancestral transmission is strengthened by the symbol of vitality: water. But does this mean that this element also implies that receiving vitality means receiving death? This problem is clearly evoked in much Merina myth and ritual, but at the same time a kind of a solution to the dilemma is also suggested in these very myths and rituals.

It will by now be clear that the two elements in the blessing, contact with the ancestors and water with its associations with strength, vitality and cattle, are the same as the two alternatives we saw in Myth 1: necrophagy and cattle-eating. While in the myth the contradictions of descent come to the fore this is less obvious in the ritual of blessing. In the ritual, however, the contradictions of vitality are more apparent than their shadowy form in the myth about necrophagy where this was glimpsed only in the unformulated implication that the

substitution of the cattle for the corpse required the reintroduction of putrefaction. This was only a suggestion in Myth 1. When we turn to Myth 2 the problematic ambiguity of the Vazimba vital force represented by beef eating comes to the fore.

The second myth concerns the activities of the founder King of the Merina royal dynasty, Ralambo, and celebrates his discovery of the edibility of beef. It is one of the best-known Merina myths and has recently even appeared in cartoon form distributed to all Malagasy schools. It appears in so many versions that the variations cannot be discussed here. I give a summary of the various versions which are given in the compendium by Callet already referred to (1908: 145–7). Here, as before, the vital Vazimba force is represented by cattle qualified as strong: *mahery*. In a shortened form the myth goes like this:

Myth 2

Before King Ralambo cattle were known by the name *jamoka* and were all owned by the Vazimba who did not eat them but buried them when they died of being too fat. After Ralambo had driven away the Vazimba the cattle were left. Whenever they died they caused an awful stink of decomposition and so, on an occasion when one died, Ralambo ordered a slave to bury it downwind. The slave however, in spite of the great danger that was involved, had the idea of cooking it and he cooked it upwind. As a result a delicious smell of roasting meat developed and so the slave ate it and told Ralambo about how good cooked beef was. Ralambo then ordered the cattle to be killed and cooked. He realised how good beef was and as a result he told his subjects of the edibility of cattle and they have been grateful for this revelation ever since. He also said of the cattle that they were his and ordered the meat to be distributed to his subjects regularly once a year on the occasion of the royal bath, eating only the best (fattest) part for himself. He changed the name of the *Jamoka* to *Omby* (Callet 1908: 145–7).

This myth is complex and a number of elements, especially the significance of royalty in it, cannot be discussed here. Nonetheless the central ideas expressed are close to our concerns. One element is common to the edibility of cattle myth and the necrophagy myth. In both, eating meat is a favourable outcome. But there are a number of themes in the second myth which, although perhaps present by implication in the first, are much more prominent.

First the cattle in Myth 2, as in many others, are explicitly associated with the Vazimba, thereby making clear one of the associations mentioned above linking the Vazimba to cattle, strength and wealth (*harena*). Secondly, the ambiguity of the vitality represented by cattle and the Vazimba is much more elaborated. In the myth, the cattle are both the source of the stink of death and of the delicious strength-giving perfume of roasting meat.⁶ The fine line dividing those two results could hardly be more graphically represented than here by the contrast of the two smells and the upwind/downwind opposition. This illustrates well the central contradiction of all things Vazimba, wet, and *mahery*. At one moment they are to be driven away, like the Vazimba themselves and like the wet decomposing element of the body in the funerary sequence or the cattle in the myth, at the next moment these things are brought back to increase strength and vitality, like the Vazimba water of the blessing and the cooked meat of Myth 2.

Apart from these themes, all of which have been touched on above, a totally

new element emerges from the second myth and becomes its focal point. This element is the apparent resolution of the problem caused by the proximity of death and individual creativity and strength in the Vazimba world. The resolution lies in the ordering of the killing and cooking of cattle by Ralambo the king. This idea is particularly emphasised by the fact that this myth is the origin myth for the annual ritual of the royal bath which was the occasion of a grandiose distribution of cattle by the sovereign so that the cattle could then be slaughtered, cooked and eaten by the subjects on royal orders (see Bloch in press).

The significance of killing cattle is clarified if it is put in the context of Merina ritual. It is part of a sequence of violence or threatened violence which in rituals accompanies all things *mahery*. In rituals of blessing such as the circumcision ritual or the ritual of the royal bath, the *mahery* water itself is continually threatened by a spear until it is used for blessing. The fate of the Vazimba themselves also shows the subjection to violence since they had first to be defeated and killed before their vitality could be used safely for blessing through water. Nowhere, however, is the image of the necessity for violence towards *mahery* things more elaborated than in the way cattle are killed.

The Merina kill cattle for ordinary butcher's meat as well as for rituals and in both cases the same procedures are followed although they are much more elaborate for rituals. All Merina rituals should include two foods: rice and beef. Although rice is always eaten as it is the 'basis', beef is normally only eaten on grand occasions. The killing of cattle on such occasions has been called sacrifice by all writers on Madagascar, but in my own work on the Merina I did not use the word. The reason was that these ritual cattle killings and eating seemed totally different from what I had been taught to regard as typical of sacrifices. When a bull or cow is killed for a marriage, for example, it is first selected from the herd. Then a very dangerous bull fight always occurs. Young men tease the animal by prodding it and wounding it, encouraging it to charge at them. At the last moment as the beast is about to reach them, they trip it up with a rope tied to its hind legs. These bull fights may be very violent, with the youths chasing the animal, or animals, round the village and attacking it with knives, axes and spears, often cutting bits off, such as its tail. In the end, the animal, in a sorry state, is mastered and tied up. It is then placed on the ground to the north east (the direction of the ancestors) while the invocation of blessing which begins all ritual takes place. This is done without reference to the animal which is largely ignored. When the blessing is finished people go away and the young men kill the animal without much ceremony, cut it up and prepare to cook it. There is nothing which could possibly be called ritual or religious about the actual killing which is why I was reluctant to see such an act as a sacrifice. What there is an aggressive jollity. The feeling of having conquered and obtained the strength and richness of the power of the beast dominates. This atmosphere of violent conquest continues when the animal and especially its fat, its 'richest' element, is eaten; that is when conquest turns to consumption. The focus of the killing of cattle is therefore this violence done to the animal and its consumption; what happens afterwards is largely irrelevant.

The solution, proposed in the myth and heightened in the killing of cattle, to

the problem of the contiguity of strength and putrefaction in vitality is, therefore, violence. The living cannot be fully like the ancestors before they are dead and have been dried by the funerary rituals. Before this they want an enjoyable strong and rich life and indeed this is necessary for the continuation of descent among the living. This desire for strength and vitality, however, is dangerous; the living might become like the *mahery* beasts which embody it and which do not endure through time as descent beings and which therefore rot completely without tombs. So how are the living to resolve the contradiction of the need for both descent and vitality? The answer is given in the myth and in the sequence of Merina ritual. The living may have vitality but it must be conquered by descent. The vital element must be subordinated and consumed by the descent element in order to be strong and moral. If people are to have an enjoyable, strong and rich life they must have vitality, but they must conquer it. They must first threaten vitality like the water of the blessings, like the cattle of the bullfight, then they must kill it like the bulls, cut it up and then ingest it. Then, they can be descent beings *and* have the strength of this life without undue danger. In this way the sequence of Merina ritual and the story of Merina myth becomes a lesson in the development of the moral life.

We can now understand the emphasis on violence and killing. This is very different from the aspects of sacrifice which have been emphasised in the anthropological literature: substitution, atonement, communication. Perhaps, however, the reason for my initial unwillingness to identify the Merina practices with classical sacrifice lies in the fact that the literature has ignored in other sacrificial rituals precisely the elements emphasised here, although I believe they are often also present and of central importance.⁷ If violence and killing in sacrifice were emphasised as they should be, it would then be possible to return to the Merina killing of cattle and to consider how far it follows the same logic as more classical sacrifices, as has recently been done for the Spanish *corrida* by Pitt-Rivers (1983).

The ambiguity of descent and of its alternative, vitality, is displayed in the two myths, but Myth 2 gives an apparent solution to the dilemma through violence. One should not simply add vitality to the ancestral flow of blessing, but add vitality conquered by violence, subdued like the Vazimba, like the threatened water, like the killed cattle. It is this subjugation which Myth 2 and the rituals which repeat it celebrate. This myth is not so much a celebration of the discovery of the edibility of cattle as a celebration of the discovery that conquest through violence makes the consumption of vitality safe. In other words Myth 2 offers a solution to the problem which in Myth 1 had been introduced by the substitution of cattle for the dead.

The two myths considered in this article can therefore be seen to be related in a sequence of speculation about the nature of human existence. The first myth begins with an explanation of the virtue of the concept of descent by showing how the identity of succeeding generations abolishes individual death and putrefaction. This is illustrated by the image of the young eating the old. Then it considers the negative side of this proposition; descent ultimately means that the living should be too much like the dead, without strength, creativity, enjoyment, richness. Against this over-austere ideal it proposes the reintroduction of

vitality in this life through the eating of cattle. This reintroduction is however also problematic; the very things which descent had overcome, putrefaction and death, are reintroduced. Hence neither alternative is really satisfactory and this explains the hesitancy of Myth 1. This dilemma is merely hinted at in the first myth, but developed in the second where it takes the form of the close proximity of the images of the decomposing putrid fat cattle and the delicious strength-giving potential of their roasted flesh. But the second myth then offers a solution to that dilemma. It tells us that if vitality is mastered by royal violence, and controlled by descent, as the Vazimba were once vanquished by the Merina, then strength can be enjoyed without undue danger and the living can have it for the duration of their life without compromising their descent being.

Even this solution however is never fully satisfactory. The problem once resolved only reappears under another form. This explains the wealth of the mythology which, as Lévi-Strauss has taught us, is not a matter of giving us lessons about simple and resolved matters but is a continuing speculation on problems which are irresolvable; so the hesitancy continues. The Merina have, after all, not discovered, any more than anybody else, a way of having life without death.

NOTES

I should like to thank both the intercollegiate seminar of London University on the symbolism of food organised by Dr J. L. Watson and the social science seminar of the University of Tananarive for useful suggestions. In particular I benefitted from a productive comment by Dr P. Logan at the London seminar.

¹ The Malagasy word *razana* covers both our meaning of the word ancestor and our meaning of the word for the corpse, especially after it has entered the tomb (Bloch 1971: 111–113).

² It may also be noted that for the Merina, as I believe universally, such acts as eating and other basic bodily processes are a common source of metaphor. Anthropologists have long noted how bodily activities are used again and again for metaphors, and in the same sort of way Lakoff and Johnson have developed this argument systematically (Hertz 1909; Lakoff & Johnson 1980).

³ I have missed out here a section discussing royalty and nobles, not because it is irrelevant to the concerns of this article, but because it cannot be dealt with within these narrow confines.

⁴ I am not sure of my translation 'and we shall keep it'. The original Malagasy is *tehirizy* which is either a misprint or a word I do not know. The translation into French by Chapus and Ratsimba (1953) seems to assume that this is a misprint for *tahirizina* which means: to keep or maintain. I have followed these two usually reliable translators here.

⁵ The translation of this passage is very difficult. The translation given by Chapus & Ratsimba is meaningless (Vol. 1, p. 506). The translation given by Molet seems to me quite unjustifiable. I have been guided in my translation by the meaning of the key word *tody* and the discussion of its meaning in Andriamanjato (1957: 66–86).

⁶ The parallel of the opposition of the cooked and the rotten here and the symbolism of Amerindian myth discussed by Lévi-Strauss in the first two volumes of *Mythologiques* is striking (Lévi-Strauss 1964; 1966). This, however, cannot be discussed here except to note the symbolical substitution of royalty in the Malagasy myth for the symbol of fire in the Amerindian myths.

⁷ The continual and threatening of the sacrificial animal is particularly clear among the Dinka (Lienhardt 1961: chs. 6 & 7).

REFERENCES

- Abinal, R. P. & Malzac, R. P. 1963. *Dictionnaire malgache-français* (first edition 1888), Paris: Éditions Maritimes.

- Andriamanjato, R. 1957. *Le tsiny et le tody dans la pensée malgache*, Paris: Présence Africaine.
- Bloch, M. 1971. *Placing the dead: tomb, ancestral villages, and kinship organisation in Madagascar*. London, New York: Seminar Press.
- 1974a. Property and the end of affinity. In *Marxist analyses and social anthropology* (ed.) M. Bloch (A.S.A. Stud. 2). London: Malaby Press.
- 1974b. Madagascar seen from Roti: a comment, *Bijdr. Taal-, Land- Volkenk.* **130**, 348–52.
- 1975. Introduction In *Political language and oratory in traditional societies* (ed.) M. Bloch. London, New York: Academic Press.
- 1982. Death, women and power. In *Death and the regeneration of life* (eds) M. Bloch & J. Parry. Cambridge: Univ. Press.
- 1985. *From blessing to violence*. Cambridge: Univ. Press.
- in press. The ritual of the royal bath: the dissolution of death, birth and fertility into authority. In *Pomp and power: royal rituals in pre-industrial societies* (eds) D. Cannadine & R. Price (Past and Present Series). Cambridge: Univ. Press.
- Callet, R. P. 1908. *Tantara ny Andriana eto Madagascar*. Tananarive: Académie Malgache.
- Chapus, G. S. & Ratsimba, E. 1953. *Histoire des Rois* (translation of the above). Tananarive: Académie Malgache.
- Dama, Tsoha 1957. *L'évolution occulte des races malgaches*. Tananarive: Privately Printed.
- Hertz, R. 1907. Contribution à une étude pour la représentation collective de la mort. *Année sociol.* **10**, 48–137.
- 1909. La prééminence de la main droite: étude sur la polarité religieuse. *Rev. phil.* **68**.
- Keenan, E. 1975. A sliding sense of obligatoriness: the polystructure of Malagasy oratory. In *Oratory and political language in traditional societies* (ed.) M. Bloch. London, New York: Academic Press.
- Lakoff, G. & M. Johnson 1980. *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: Univ. Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. 1964. *Le cru et le cuit*. (Mythologiques 1). Paris: Plon.
- 1966. *Du miel aux cendres*. (Mythologiques 2). Paris: Plon.
- Lyons, J. 1981. *Language, meaning and context*. London: Fontana.
- Molet, L. 1956. *Le bain royal à Madagascar*. Tananarive: Imprimerie Lutherienne.
- 1979. *La conception malgache du monde, du surnaturel et de l'homme en Imerina*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Pitt-Rivers, J. 1983. Le sacrifice du taureau, *Le Temps de la Reflexion*, 281–297.
- Rasamuel, M. 1948. *Kabary*. Tananarive: Ny Antsiva.
- Richardson 1885. *A new Malagasy-English dictionary*. Antananarivo: The London Missionary Society.
- Sibree, J. 1889/91. The oratory, songs and legends of the Malagasy. (*Antananarivo Annual*) **4**, 28–38, 171–80, 357–67.