

Reviewed Work: *Lost People: Magic and the Legacy of Slavery in Madagascar* by David Graeber
Review by: Rosabelle Boswell [The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute](https://www.jstor.org/stable/40541832), Vol. 16, No. 1 (Mar., 2010), pp. 186-188 (3 pages)
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186 Graeber, David. *Lost people: magic and the legacy of slavery in Madagascar*, xiii, 467 pp., maps, figs, bibliogr.
Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2007. \$65.00 (cloth), \$25.95 (paper)

David Graeber's *Lost people: magic and the legacy of slavery in Madagascar* will be of interest to scholars of postcolonial identity, slavery, and violence. Graeber begins by making a strong but important statement that anthropologists and other academics should remember: 'People don't live their lives to prove some academic's point'; paying attention to the totality of our informants' lives is 'more respectful than reducing the lives of one's former friends to illustrations of a single theoretical argument' (p. xi). This approach allows Graeber not only to produce a detailed account of Malagasy living in Betafo, but also to foreground the ethnography and to draw readers into the lives of his 'former friends'. Ancestors, astrology, and magic feature prominently in the account, and are seen as mediating the relationship between the descendants of nobles and slaves. Chapters 2 and 3 set the scene for the reader, explaining the principles of Malagasy society and providing a discussion on royal authority and negative authority. Royal authority appears to have been particularly coercive. The Merina monarchy relied on a vast slave labour force kidnapped from beyond the highlands. Royal authority was also underscored by the use of amulets (ody and sampy) containing 'harnessed' spirits meant to protect the monarch and to realize their desires. Under Merina rule, the population was strictly divided into andriana (descendants of nobles), hova (free), and mainty (slaves). The andriana decided who could lay claim to any of these statuses, and their decisions were marked by important standing stones which stood as memorials of agreements made. For negative authority, a useful explanation is given of how ancestors and the elders exercise such authority, constraining thieving and the young, appearing to them in dreams, and intervening to prevent them from exercising certain options. Graeber argues that these relationships were profoundly interdependent. The elderly and ancestors relied on the memory of the young and the living for their identity and presence to be sustained, while the young and the living depended on the elderly and ancestors for guidance and moral control. The account also reveals how, long after the abolition of slavery in Madagascar, categories of domination remain but are somehow 'blunted' by use of euphemisms. Graeber tells us that these categories are never explicitly articulated and that, in fact, the term *termandevo* is treated as an obscenity and is hardly used in conversation. Even in reference to slave-owning families who had slaves buried with them to take care of them in the afterlife, the euphemism of 'soldiers' is used to describe slaves and their labour is described as 'service'. After the abolition of slavery in 1896 (fifty years after abolition in the rest of the Indian Ocean islands), the divisions between royals, free, and slave became more blurred. As noted previously, the notion of 'service' remained and taboos (*fady*) persisted regarding marriage to slave descendants (such marriages would defile the *deme* and bring contamination). The ethnography centres on Betafo, a town in Arivonimamo, on the outskirts of the capital city, Antananarivo. The community is divided between the descendants of nobles (*andriana*) and slaves (*mainty*). In the past, *Andriana* typically lived in the city and arrived in places like Betafo only to collect a part of the harvest,

to perform famadihana (an ancestor-appeasing ceremony), or to be buried. In present-day Betafo, slave descendants have gained control of large portions of land and resources. The

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community is turned upside down when Miadana, whose name means 'tranquil' in Malagasy but is in fact a talkative woman of noble descent, arrives from Antananarivo with her husband, a government worker. It is hoped that by returning to Betafo the husband's health would improve and they would be able to regain control of their lands. But as newcomers unused to the constraints of cultural life in the rural area, Miadana's family begin to violate the town's various fady. She attempts to justify their faux-pas by arguing that the fady were either 'made up' or not really part of custom. Their lives progressively become more difficult, not only because they are breaking taboos but also because Betafo residents actively resist their resettlement in the town. Miadana's trials are not described in those terms but in terms of witchcraft: 'black people bewitched white ones so the white people would be in constant distress' (p. 190). Historical acts of aggression are also brought up to torture Miadana's family (p. 194), to the extent that her family is forbidden to draw water from a communal spring or to pass by a community member (slave descendant) house. The dispute is 'resolved' only after Miadana's daughter becomes pregnant with Norbert's (slave descendant) son and Miadana's family bequeaths a portion of land to their son-in-law. In the account, Miadana's voice dominates, replicating historical relations of power, where the 'subaltern' (slave descendant), Norbert, speaks but not in a language understood by everyone. Thus the trials of Norbert are not as fully articulated. He is presented as unreasonable and 'pig-headed', described as someone who is not very intelligent and a person who 'just can't get over the fact of slavery' (p. 197). The chapter 'Lost people' and the account of Rainitamaina's descendants attempt to reverse this portrayal of slave descendants. Graeber briefly outlines the broad legacy of slavery and gives more attention to the active resistance of Betafo residents to the return of noble descendants. For slave descendants, land is imperative for subsistence and necessary for the burial of their descendants. The agency of slave descendants is demonstrated in their striving to gain property and other resources. The astrologer Ratsizafy, an important figure in the story (who appears every now and then as a drunk who sometimes makes insightful comments), not only obtains land purchased from monies earned as an astrologer, he also marries an andriana and has two sons by her. Ratsizafy fails, however, to convince others to Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.) 16, 164-208 © Royal Anthropological Institute 2010 Book reviews 187 support his half-andriana son, Pano. Despite his success, there is continuous mention of Ratsizafy's slave ancestry. Reflecting on the growing literature on slave descendants in the southwest Indian Ocean and the Mascarene islands, Graeber's work contributes significantly to critical discussions on contemporary experiences of slavery. As someone from Mauritius, seeking to understand contemporary experiences of slave descendants in the islands, I found Graeber's book to be an illuminating read. It certainly unravels the complexity of hierarchical relationships in the 'ex-slave' society and demonstrates how such relationships may endure, poisoning future generations. However, he notes in the epilogue that 'by the time of writing, something falling-out'. In this detailed ethnography, I felt that something had indeed fallen out. In his self-reflexive account of ethnography the author argues that in the past the embarrassing or unpleasant subjectivities of one's informants were often omitted in the hope of achieving a seamless and objective ethnography. These erasures prevent us from acknowledging the essential

humanity of those we encounter. Graeber sought to reintroduce these subjectivities in Lost people and to present the Malagasy as they 'are'. However, this is not wholly possible, and it seems like the Malagasy become caricatures embedded in ethnography styled à la Pynchon and Dostoevsky. This has produced an entertaining if somewhat labyrinthine account that detracts somewhat from the reality of slave descendants in Madagascar. In order not to marginalize the slave descendants further, I would have liked to hear their stories about people like Miadana and her husband. Furthermore, the responses of the Betafo and evos to the incoming andriana do not come across as unco-ordinated, though Graeber seems to present it this way. Finally, the author tells us that it is neither possible nor desirable to know everything about what was going on in Betafo. He also says that 'no-one was ever liberated inside a text, least of all within a text that they did not write' (p. 387). By letting us see the legacy of slavery out of the corner of our eyes, by privileging the storyline of the andriana, Graeber (perhaps like the anthropologists he accuses of producing a linear narrative bound in a singular theoretical framework) constrains the stories of slave descendants. Thus, what begins as an account in which once slave-owning noble descendants are the 'lost people', with neither state nor community support, ends with slave

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descendants as the real lost people', who even after gaining resources and 'defeating' the Andriano become predatory in their dealings with each other and continue to erode communal solidarity.

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