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## REVIEWS

### TO THE EDITORS:

One of the main purposes of an academic review is to tell readers what a book is about—as well as, of course, to assess its scholarly significance. In the case of my *Lost People: Magic and the Legacy of Slavery in Madagascar* (AHR, October 2008, 1279–1280), one might imagine historians in particular would be interested in the fact that this is the first ethnographic work that makes full use of the nineteenth-century Malagasy archives, integrating information from government documents from the pre-colonial Merina kingdom with oral histories, and genealogical records preserved from the colonial period, to first reconstruct what local politics in one small community (Betafo) was like 150 years ago, and then systematically compare that picture with how that past is now remembered by rival social groups in the same community today. The archives that make this possible are a unique treasure: a compendium of tens of thousands of documents from the nineteenth-century Merina kingdom, including everything from administrative correspondence to property censuses, grievances, trial transcripts, and local records of the sale of slaves. In Betafo, they provide a fascinating complement to an historical memory full of stories about magical battles, scandalous murders, self-destructive passions, and secret assignations with amorous ghosts. The book itself is in large part a character study of individuals—an ancient astrologer, a disgraced aristocrat, a Trotskyist banana salesman . . . —who simulta-

neously narrate their versions of Betafo's history, and act as historical characters in their own right.

A reader of Gwyn Campbell's review of my book would never learn any of this. He would instead be treated to a stream of condescending swipes directed mainly at subordinate clauses, deteriorating by the end to what can only be described as personal insult.

I'll ignore the latter. Neither will I elaborate on Campbell's evident complete ignorance of both the normal practice of ethnographic fieldwork and current standards of ethnographic writing. Neither will I dwell on his innumerable misreadings and errors of fact (can Campbell really be unaware that the revolt of 1895 started not in Arivonimamo but in Amboanana?), or his puzzling inability to understand that the meanings of words change over time (he faults my use of terms based on how they were used in the nineteenth century, despite the fact that I repeatedly emphasize that I am reporting how they were used in one community between 1989 and 1991). I will not even dwell on the very strong evidence that Campbell has not actually read the book (e.g., accusing me of "allowing" an "outsider" from the capital named Miadana to participate in conversations with residents of Betafo, when not only was Miadana a resident of Betafo, but her family's relation to the rest of the community is the subject of *two entire chapters* of the book).

Let me instead proceed directly to Campbell's chosen home ground of conflict—his area of presumed professional expertise.

Campbell spends much of the review faulting my observations on nineteenth-century slavery. While these observations make up a tiny proportion of the book, they are based on not-insignificant original research: a survey of Malagasy-language local registers, records of testimony in criminal trials, internal government correspondence, and other documents from the royal archives of the time (mainly AKTA, FF, and IIICC series), balanced against the accounts of foreign observers and present-day oral memory. Campbell, however, dismisses my knowledge of the history of slavery as "patchy at best," backing this up with a series of quibbles on slave origins. Most of these are based on misreadings (i.e., pretending that my denying all slaves were from Betsileo means I think none of them were); others would not make sense to anyone familiar with

the archival material. A few are especially telling. I'll focus on just one. Campbell claims that my estimate that slaves constituted about 40 percent of the Merina population in the 1840s is based on a mere two documents from Betafo itself, and that "records for Imerina as a whole" indicate otherwise. Really? What records would these be? My estimate is in fact based on the comparison of an extensive sampling of documents from across Imerina, mainly those stemming from a household-by-household property census carried out by the Merina government between 1840 and 1842. These, as I note (p. 403 n. 16), are now preserved in the EE and IIICC series of the national archives. Campbell, who has written extensively on demography, has never cited any of this census material, or, in his published work, given any indication that he is aware of its existence. How could anyone claim to be an authority on nineteenth-century Merina demography without showing any awareness of the survival of the Merina census? Well, here's a hint: his book *An Economic History of Imperial Madagascar, 1750–1895* contains a bibliography specifically of demographic sources (Appendix C, pp. 344–346) that does not cite a single text written in the Malagasy language. In fact, his book never cites any government documents from the royal archives, of any kind. Neither does it cite any of the voluminous nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century published work in the Malagasy language (the *Firaketana*, *Tantara ny Andriana*) except, occasionally, in French translation. Campbell's "historical record" thus consists almost entirely of the observations of foreigners.

I have never met Campbell, never before tangled with him intellectually, and have no idea why he chose to write such an extraordinarily ungracious and uncharitable review. But since he did, and since he decided to make an issue of command of historical material, I see no reason not to point out the obvious. To write a book like Campbell's is a little like writing a history of Tudor enclosure movements without making use of a single primary text written in English, or an economic history of Weimar Germany using only documents in Italian or Chinese. It could be done. It might even be interesting in its own way to see what such things looked like entirely from foreigners' perspectives. But for an historian who has built his authority on such unusual qualifications to write scathing reviews accusing others of ignorance of the primary sources is a little like someone sitting on a pile of dynamite flicking matches at random passersby.

To borrow a phrase from Campbell's own review: "be warned!"

DAVID GRAEBER

#### GWYN CAMPBELL RESPONDS:

Further to David Graeber's letter concerning my review of his book *Lost People*, the vehemence and scope of his response are salient reminders of the gap which exists between the disciplines and methodology of anthropol-

ogy and history. I am not an anthropologist, I am a historian, and thus was asked to comment upon his book in terms of the criteria applied to works of history. I am, however, familiar with the leading anthropologists working in the field, and will simply re-state that he has not the rigour of Lambek, Evers, or Feeley-Harnik. Nor does he possess the impressive prose style of historian Pier Larson—although passages of his glowing review of his own book (as included in his rebuttal of my review) are strongly reminiscent of the latter. Let me assure Graeber that I read every word of his 469-page tome, including the many asides, allusions, imaginings, and hypotheses which constitute this impressionistic treatment of a complex subject. If my critique stung, it is only because his lax approach to historical methods and definitions rankles. Surely the purpose of academic review is to flesh out our differences and, hopefully, begin to bridge the gap between two important roads, leading to a fuller understanding of a rich and complex subject.

Turning to my own book, *An Economic History of Imperial Madagascar, 1750–1895*, as Graeber does at length, it is alarming how little he understood, although given his demonstrated unfamiliarity with historical analysis, perhaps not surprising. His main point is that my book should have been based upon the royal Merina archives. Of course I consulted these archives, but as my research proceeded, I realized that they were highly problematic, for two main reasons. Firstly, they possess virtually no information about economic activity in the two-thirds of Madagascar largely independent of Merina rule, or the substantial commercial relations of this vast area with the wider regional economy, including Réunion and other French-held islands, South Africa, Mozambique, and Zanzibar. Secondly, and more critically, the Merina economy rested not on slavery but on fanompoana, a system of unremunerated forced labour for the state applied to all non-slave subjects. Fanompoana meant that all Merina officials derived a living by exploiting what privileges their office could offer. Consequently, official reports and statistical returns were systematically falsified. In addition, many Merina garisons—the main instruments of information-gathering—were for much of the period isolated, often under siege from hostile Sakalava or Bara war bands—who increasingly from the late 1870s also launched devastating raids into the imperial heartland. Indeed, what was at best a ramshackle and highly corrupt administration had largely crumbled by the 1880s.

By assuming that the Merina court possessed an efficient bureaucracy with accurate records, Graeber underscores his ignorance of Malagasy history. The Merina royal archives are a hopelessly inadequate basis for forming an accurate picture of economic activity in Madagascar. Because of this, it is incumbent upon the historian to also research as wide a variety of other sources as possible. Graeber comes close to making a fetish of Malagasy language sources, which he implies are largely confined to the royal Merina archives. (The *Firaketana*, by the way, is an incomplete secondary work

of limited use published in the late 1930s.) It may therefore come as a surprise to him to learn that much of the correspondence and many reports found in the main missionary archives—which again I consulted—are in Malagasy, as are some in the local consular archives. These, and a wide-ranging number of other rich sources, also contain material written in a variety of European languages by people—many of them traders or missionaries—who had a profound knowledge and experience of Madagascar, and whose competitive interests it served to give as accurate as possible a picture of the island's material conditions and commercial activity. The overwhelmingly positive reviews of my *Eco-*

*nomic History* (see <http://indianoceanworldcentre.com/people/director.php>) I consider to be testimony to the final result.

Finally, regarding his attempt at damnation by colourful analogy, let me say that David Graeber's approach to historical research is rather like writing a history of the Tudor enclosure movements by meditating on the possible identity of Shakespeare's Dark Lady—potentially interesting, but in the end, not terribly useful.

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