

without stumbling over many incomprehensible translations of the rather complex and often obscure writing of French academics.

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***Lost People: Magic and the Legacy of Slavery in Madagascar.* By David Graeber.** Bloomington: Indiana University, 2007. Pp. 432. \$65.00 cloth, \$25.95 paper.

What makes a story worth telling is the question at the center of David Graeber's *Lost People*. He responds, gradually, with a theory of narrative that in turn informs an analysis of political action in a place seemingly unburdened by state authority or services. He proposes that suspense, mystery, or reversal (unexpected outcome) comprises the formal structure of memorable narrative, and the protagonists of dramatic action possess relatively greater social power than more passive characters.

Through archival research and "dialogic" ethnography, Graeber demonstrates how the power of stories can have an impact on others' perceptions and behaviors, enabling some to accumulate the aura of power even when it jeopardizes their moral standing. *Lost People* is replete with fascinating accounts of the powers of dead ancestors, sexual intrigue, magic, curing, and the intimate and hexed historical relationships between slaves with varying degrees of rank and power, and nobles with varying degrees of rank and power in rural Imerina. Residents of the hamlet Betafo identify as either *andriana* (noble) or *mainity* (black), although the latter never explicitly represent themselves as former slaves (*andevo*). For Malagasy such an admission is tantamount to unmooring oneself from ancestral land, thus becoming a "lost person." As descendants of black slaves or "white" nobles, Betafo villagers express their perceptions of how the community was long ago fractured into two opposing camps.

In 1987, not long before Graeber's arrival, Betafo's communal assembly conducted a ritual, an "ordeal" as it is called, to heal the community after a series of robberies had occurred. As Graeber attempts to put the calamitous outcome into historical context, it becomes apparent that no healing is possible. During the ordeal, dust from the ancestral tombs of two rivals had been mixed in a bowl of water for everyone to drink, as is customary. This time, however, the ritual failed to mend rifts and instead stirred an ancestral feud. Affronted by the mixing of tomb dust, the spirit of Andrianamboninolona reached for his arsenal of evil charms and sent a torrent that flooded the rice crop of his rival, Rainitamaina's, descendants. The significance of their feud seeps into contemporary social relationships. By the twentieth century, the noble families had for the most part become impoverished farmers while the black families had attained wealth and high status. Some had even married into *andriana* families, thereby igniting *andriana* hostilities towards blacks.

Graeber has a gift for presenting complex and inventive analyses in an engaging and accessible way. His style greatly helps him to accomplish his goal of making Malagasy

people appear comfortably familiar rather than conventionally exotic. The ethnographic feat of turning Other into Self is impressive given the moments when life in Betafo seems to morph into magical realism. We learn, for example, that envy-driven acts of sorcery persist there, and that people use colored beads or bits of wood as their instruments. People claim that the envious or spiteful frequently hide evil medicine in spring beds and communal pumps in order to harm those who drink the water. They also claim that envy, in the form of cursed wood bits, has piled up in the freshwater springs around Betafo, coalescing into gnarled monsters that frighten children who fetch water at dusk.

To return to his theory of narrative, the arc of Graeber's ethnography is perhaps not suspenseful, nor do events ultimately surprise the reader. He makes his ethnography memorable in part by revealing the poetics of everyday life in Madagascar, in part by structuring it like a mystery as he sleuths the ancient and lingering causes of Betafo's discord.

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