MADAGASCAR

Island of the Ancestors

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Funerary sculpture

Some funerary sculpture is directly commemorative in character, whereas in other cases the intention seems rather to be that of reflecting aspects of the symbolism of the mortuary process itself. Some images appear on cenotaphs properly speaking, but more often perhaps they are placed on tombs, even though they may, nevertheless, serve some more general commemorative purpose. The subjects may be human or may include birds, animals and manufactured objects such as aeroplanes and motor cars, sometimes as part of some more complex scene.

All the sculpture examined here is in wood, although cement sculpture, either in relief on the side of funerary monuments, or as an object in its own right, is beginning to become familiar, particularly in southern Madagascar. Indeed, with the exception of the Sihanaka in the north-east of the plateau, all the traditions of funerary sculpture that have been documented occur in the south and west of the island. This is perhaps predictable. After all, these are areas where second burial is not found. Commemorative sculpture, in so far as it isolates and honours individuals,

Mahafaly tomb of a noble family showing the range of subjects traditional on *aloalo* interspersed amongst the cattle horns on the top of the tomb.

Mahafaly *aloalo* displaying a number of scenes recalling the life of the deceased and resulting in a highly complex sculpture.

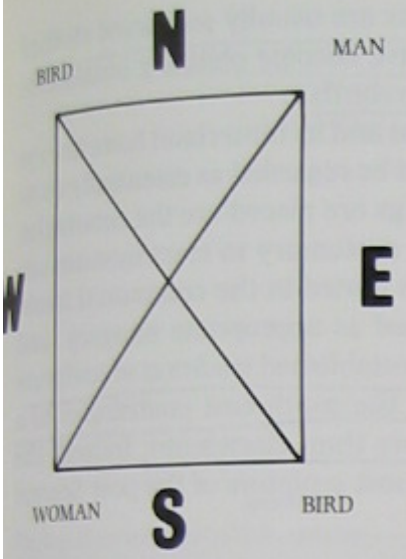
emphasises particular deceased relatives as opposed to the community of ancestors. Second burial, however, and especially the *famadihana* process in grouping and reshuffling ancestral bones moves more in the direction of the anonymity of the dead. This is most evident in the case of the Merina where it has been stressed that the tomb is so regarded that over time individual dead housed within it merge conceptually with the tomb istelf: 'The focus is shifted from an actual person, whether alive or dead, to a non-individuated ancestor, and then to a thing – the tomb' (Bloch 1971, p. 122). The Merina traditionally make no funerary sculpture.

There is in Malagasy no single word by which to distinguish sculpture, either as a general category of object or specifically as a funerary artefact. Those terms that are available are all compounds of the word *sary*, which has the general meaning of 'an image'. However, the term *aloalo* has gained some currency in some of the art books where it is often used as if it were generic. *Aloalo* comes from the word *alo* which carries with it the sense of an intermediary or messenger (Decary 1962, p. 278). It therefore refers to the function rather than the form of an object, so that not all sculpture found in association with burials is necessarily *aloalo* and not all *aloalo* are necessarily sculptural. The term has been taken over from the Mahafaly, amongst whom it refers to one specific form of funerary object, and has been extended to other objects where its use may be inappropriate.

Aloalo are strictly the polar sculptures referred to above which certain royal Mahafaly clans reserved to their own use. They have been the subject of a number of preliminary field studies, and the sites in which they occur are well photographed and recorded. Yet few who have studied them have felt able to venture any conclusive interpretation of their significance (Boulfroy 1976, Woulkoff 1976, and, as a more general survey, Decary 1951 and 1962). Furthermore, whatever their original intent, this may well have altered for not only have the rights to the use of *aloalo* been extended but the form of the *aloalo* itself has evolved.

The classic style associated with the older tombs is a single naked figure with, above, the projection already referred to with its geometric motifs topped usually by a carved zebu or bird. In more recent times, however, the style has developed to the point where a whole series of scenes and images are now employed. Among the newer motifs are cyclists and horse-riders, aeroplanes and *taxi-brousse*, gendarmes arresting thieves or sorcerers, a colonial judge, hunters and warriors, drinkers, or a funeral cortège. What this suggests is a shift of emphasis from the earlier forms of funerary sculpture which all appear to comment on the kinds of transition involved in burial practice – in this they resemble the funerary sculpture of some of the Sakalava. The later sculpture, however, in referring to events associated with the dead are more directly commemorative and as such are more comparable to the cenotaphs of the Antanosy and particularly the remarkable series of memorial sculptures dating from the 1930s and 40s and attributed to the prolific and gifted Antanosy sculptor Fesira.

Sakalava tombs are varied reflecting both the diverse origins of the Sakalava themselves and hierarchical divisions within their society. Royalty possess spirit mediums at their death and in this respect retain



Sakalava tomb.

Sakalava grave with wooden human and bird figures.

Perhaps one of the most eloquent statements of some of the elements involved in such a set of sculptural references occurs in a discussion of Bara ritual by its leading modern interpreter. Sakalava funerary sculpture is yet to be regarded in this light, but some indication of the kinds of concern that might be anticipated may be gauged from Huntingdon's words (1973, p. 82):

> It is not enough to bury someone, merely to dispose of the body. The survivors must bring about a successful conception and rebirth of their deceased kinsman into the world of the ancestors. This process, like the conception of an infant, is a difficult and risky endeavour for both the deceased and his survivors. Should this transition fail, the consequence is nothing short of catastrophic infertility with the deceased remaining like a dead foetus in the womb of his survivors' world.

Amongst the Mahafaly the number of traditional *aloalo* with their naked figures indicated both how the particular deceased was regarded in life and also how intensely rebirth as an ancestor was sought. In modern times, however, these references have disappeared. *Aloalo* are now carved with serious or humorous imagery, often recalling a riot of events which charac-

terised the life of the deceased. The subjects are usually portrayed clothed and the purpose is biographical. *Aloalo* have become obituary announcements when formerly they were notices of rebirth.

The Antanosy in the area of Fort Dauphin and its hinterland have always regarded funerary sculpture as what might be regarded as essentially commemorative. The sites at which the carvings are placed are the cenotaphs, the places of commemoration, where it is customary to erect monuments in stone, cement and wood to each person buried in the communal tomb. Both birds and human figures are reported as appropriate imagery, and certainly there does seem to have been an established tradition of sculpture in the area (although the wet climate in the south-east contributes to a more rapid deterioration of wood sculpture than elsewhere). Indeed, the carver Tsivoloa, who was one of the foremost sculptors of the post Second

Below right Memorial to a man who served with the French authorities and who is also remembered as owning the first motor car in this remote village. The sculptor, Fesira, has shown him seated beside two images recalling these biographical details. Antanosy.

Below Modern figurative carving of a woman developed out of the traditions and subjects of funerary sculpture. Sakalava. H. 98 cm. MAA 63–1–6.

World War period in the Sakalava area was Antanosy by origin (Mallet 1963). Virtually all the sculpture remaining in the Antanosy area at the moment, however, is the work of a single itinerant carver, Fesira.

Most of Fesira's work would seem to date from the immediate pre-war period and includes occasional references to the major local events of the time – the introduction of the first Antanosy-owned motor car in one remote village, or a canoeing accident in another. As with the carvers of the more recent of the *aloalo*, his method of commemoration was not the production of sculpted portraits but of other references to the lives of the deceased. It was not what people looked like but who they were and what they did that made them significant. In practice, however, Fesira's method of work was such that he may well not have known personally those whose cenotaphs he created. He worked on a commission basis, payment being

The top of a memorial which, among other events, commemorates an accident in which a canoe overturned and its occupants drowned. By the Antanosy sculptor Fesira.

made by the descendants of the person commemorated. His practice was to move into the village itself where a house was built in which he would work. Older people recall him as staying for periods from six to nine months, the time it would take to execute the more complicated work. It was the duty of those commissioning him to feed and keep him. They would also relate the events of the life of their dead relative and decide which should be recorded sculpturally; whether it was to be a complex work, or which identifying features should be included if a sole figure – a medallion in the form of a cross, for instance, for the first catechist in a family. Beyond that, however, the conception and execution of the work were the inspiration of Fesira himself.

His sculpture seeks to show its subjects in a conventional light. The figures are carved appropriately clad in pursuit of virtuous tasks or in comfortable repose. Like the portrait painters in the Western tradition who choose to overlook the blemishes of their subject, Fesira consistently presented culturally appropriate images. Who, after all, would wish to commission memorials to their ancestors portrayed otherwise? But, while the eroticism of other sculptural traditions is no part of Antanosy practice, is the purpose and process of creating such a cenotaph purely and simply commemorative?

In documenting Fesira's works and asking in those villages where he had carved about his methods and the circumstances in which he worked, a number of details were constantly related. No one apart from the immediate descendants of the deceased was allowed to see the work while it was being carved. Fesira always worked indoors, in secret. Furthermore, he is often recalled as having worked at night and rested by day. Most strikingly, however, he is reputed to have carved naked. The significance of this is unmistakable: his nakedness reflects the process of conception which the act of carving represents. At another level, however, his nakedness is the prelude to the rebirth of the ancestor commemorated when, for the first time, the finished work is displayed publicly at the cenotaph. The nakedness of the Antanosy *sculptor* recalls the nakedness of the Mahafaly and Sakalava *sculpture*. Fesira was not simply carving memorials but creating ancestors. In that he was heir to the distinctive feature of Malagasy culture practice.