

Lost People: Magic and the Legacy of Slavery in Madagascar. David Graeber. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007. Pp. 469. ISBN 978-0-253-21915-2 (pbk).

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This is a book about the political acts of telling stories and of getting stories told about oneself. The action takes place in Betafo, a rural community in central Madagascar comprising people of slave and noble descent. In the ethnographic present of 1989-1990, the people of noble descent, *andriana*, have lost much of their land and wealth to people of slave ancestry, *mainty*. Under these circumstances, one might expect the political action documented by Graeber to be characterized by open hostility between clearly defined factions of *mainty* and *andriana*. But this is not the case. The intriguing feature of this tale is the extent to which people appear to work quite hard at keeping their animosity below the surface – but just below the surface. They do not want to fight openly, but they also do not want past indignities to be completely forgotten. Indeed, much of the political action described in this book is contradictory, and one of the strengths of the book is Graeber's ability to capture the community's ambivalence about how to manage their pasts.

The plural "pasts" is appropriate here, because one form of political action is telling stories about the past, hoping one's own version will influence others' interpretation of present events. In Chapter 9, Graeber provides an example of how this works, repeating five versions of one story as told to him by five community members. The story is about a conflict between a *mainty* ancestor and an *andriana* ancestor, and Graeber speculates about why some individuals would prefer to emphasize some details, while others would minimize those details and highlight others. Almost everyone is uncomfortable forthrightly discussing past slave-noble relations in the community, even though their very anchoring in the present depends upon maintaining some memory of that past. This is a recurring theme throughout the book. Some acts, and the stories that circulate about them, seem designed to overcome past injustices, and their political effectiveness depends upon shared knowledge of the violence that was inflicted upon slaves by nobles. Yet, for the community to remain a community – a "moral community", as Graeber describes it – the underlying divisions within Betafo cannot become an overt organizing feature of community life. Therefore, other acts seem aimed at glossing over past hostilities, obscuring the very different paths that brought *mainty* and *andriana* ancestors to reside in this space.

Many of the stories recounted to Graeber detail the ways particular people gained and lost control of space and of land. These stories are inflected with moral lessons about violating taboos, marrying inappropriately, treating others disrespectfully, and the like. The stories pulse with accusations of witchcraft and sorcery, which, when given the chance, the accused only half-heartedly deny, knowing, Graeber says, that their political power depends upon others' uncertainty about their actions and abilities. There are two key characters whose rise and fall are documented in the book (one *mainty*, one *andriana*), and in each case, local theories abound regarding the ways in which the individuals' own actions led to their demise. In the case that is most central to the book, the ultimate result is also the demise of the community as the underlying fissures are forced to the surface.

Graeber's writing style parallels certain themes of the book. The author writes in his preface that he set out to produce a classic ethnography, to present a people's "total way of life" (p. xi). He does not aim to develop a particular theory or to engage in building a social science model. He writes of individual "characters", not of abstract "actors". The author distinguishes his work from social scientific research, which, he says, is in search of regularities and predictability. In contrast, he describes his writing as more akin to history, which "tends to focus on the very opposite, on the irregular and the unpredictable, on events that could no more be predicted, before they happened, than the production of a novel or a work of art" (p. 380). The book's style reflects this point of view. Chapter 10's title, "It Must Have Gone Something Like This", refers to the ways local people in Betafo interpret the past by making their own logical connections, understanding the unknown by drawing on the known. But it also is a reference to Graeber's own approach: "the basic structure of this book has been almost precisely the same as that of speculative frameworks" used by people in Betafo – "using one's knowledge of how things worked to imaginatively reconstruct how it must have come about" (p. 327). To illustrate his speculative process, the author introduces into the text extensive personal observations about his own path of discovery during his research. Despite the frequent references to his own thoughts, however, the author is not entirely clear about what prior knowledge or beliefs support his many speculations about why characters act as they do. For example, he writes of one character that "it was altogether in his interest" to achieve a particular outcome, and goes on to write that "it must have been particularly personally satisfying" when he did (p. 333). In this case, and in others, some more straightforward discussion of the author's own theories of human motivation would have been helpful.

Graeber's decision not to engage much existing theoretical work presents opportunities and challenges. Without being constrained by the author's explicit integration of other scholarly writing on the topics he addresses, the reader has the opportunity to draw her own connections. There could be links, for example, to F.G. Bailey's analyses of the politics of sorcery and rumor, to Clifford Geertz's studies of the politics of cultural forms, and to a large literature on the political power of narrative. However, for those who want to follow up on some of Graeber's more interesting theoretical claims, there are few signposts from the author himself about which writings would be most compatible or incompatible with his work. Nevertheless, this book will be useful for those readers seeking a detailed analysis of the workings of everyday politics in a small community, a politics that involves creating stories that combine the everyday with the eternal, giving mortal characters the possibility for eternal influence over their descendants.