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Alahamady Be – Malagasy New Year’s Eve

Madagascar, the fourth biggest Island in the world, have a diverse range of cultures and traditions which are different among its 18 ethnic groups. Along with most of the festivals and holidays celebrated all around the world, there are others that are unique to Madagascar, for instance the Republic Day, the “*Santabary*” (celebration of the first rice harvest), the “*Famadihana*” (exhumation), the “*Sambatra*” (a collective circumcision) and “*Alahamady Be*”. While Malagasy people ring the bell on New Year’s Eve with the rest of the world, they also have their own called *Alahamady Be*, which is one of “*Merina*” celebrations. “*Merina*” (literally means “Highlanders”), is the largest ethnic group, people living in the capital Antananarivo (meaning “Town of a thousand warriors”)

Family bonds are really important for Malagasy, and “*Alahamady Be*” is a day when family members and friends get together to celebrate the beginning of a year. The celebration date varies according to lunar calendar that only “*Mpanandro*” (foretellers) can say the exact date, but it is usually held on March when the first moon in the first month of the year (*Alahamady*) called “*tsinan’ny Alahamady*” appears, and is celebrated for two days long.

There are twelve royal hills in Antananarivo, where all the Kings and Queens reigned, but usually people travel into and gather on the hill of Ambohimanga, where the powerful King Andrianampoinimerina (The-King-In-heart-of-Imerina) reigned, to celebrate “*Alahamady Be*”. On their way, people revel in loud, animated and traditional music, with their best clothing usually bright-colored with traditional “*lamba*” (like a scarf but it is worn differently in a manner particular to each person’s rank and mood).



“*Mpihira gasy*”: band performing Malagasy traditional song

The celebration starts with a “*Kabary*”, a profound speech, giving benediction to audience, and then people bring offering for their ancestors. They combine Christian beliefs with traditional customs and practices, and usually end greetings during holidays with the sentence “*Ho tahian’Andriamanitra sy ny razana*” (God and the ancestors will bless you!). In fact, a relative who passes away assumes the status of an ancestor. Ancestors are very important to Malagasy because they believe ancestors have the authority to affect disasters and bring good fortune. They are also believed to be the messenger between the Zanahary (God, literally means “I created”) and the living people, so they are well-respected.

Part of the ceremony includes a “*nofon-kena mitam-pihavanana*” (the piece of meat which unites families) whereby a zebu (local domestic cattle) is killed and the meat is shared among each other as a sign for keeping the “*fihavanana*” – kinship or fellowship, one of the core values of Malagasy society. After prayer, worship, and offering, people are watching traditional games while enjoying traditional festive foods: rice, zebu meat (a festivity without rice and meat is lame for Malagasy), with “*romazava*” (a soup of herbs and greens)



Zebu: sign of wealth and social status, always present in all Malagasy festivities.

Unfortunately, like most of Malagasy traditions and customs, the celebration of the “Alahamady Be” became uncommon and lost (some Merina people don’t even know the existence of this custom), since the venue and spread of Christianity, because it is considered as idolatry or some-kind of god worshipping, and is therefore only celebrated by few people who are still keeping our values and cultures. Hopefully, some cultural organizations are re-promoting this festivity as it is part of our cultures despite of everyone’s beliefs. This year, the “Alahamady Be” celebration will be held in the king’s hill in Ambohimanga on March 16 and 17, 2010.

References:

- Ellis, R. et al. 1999. Festival of the world – Madagascar
- Stories from mouth to mouth