

Michael Lambek. *The Weight of the Past: Living with History in Mahajanga, Madagascar*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002. xxi + 319 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$29.95. Paper.

The promise of anthropology has always been that by looking at various ways of thinking or being in the world, one can actually learn something new about the human condition. Most of us who ended up as anthropologists were drawn to the discipline by such a prospect; most of us also tend to forget it (except perhaps when teaching undergraduates). But every now and then a book comes along and reminds us.

The Weight of the Past is such a book. It is, on the surface, an ethnography about “living with history” on the west coast of Madagascar, around the ancient royal capital and port city of Mahajanga. As such it is in the great tradition of Malagasy ethnography, which has long focused on the peculiar Malagasy fascination with history. Much of the material here will be familiar to readers of Gillian Feeley-Harnik’s work on a related Sakalava kingdom: the hidden relics of ancient kings, royal spirits endlessly reliving the moments of their death, descendants of slaves and commoners endlessly reenacting royal “services.” The Sakalava become, and remain, a people through the endless celebration of their own subjection to rulers no longer physically among them, at least in living forms. But where Feeley-Harnik grappled (quite brilliantly) with questions of colonialism and the “political economy of death” thrown up in its face by an apparently passive but ultimately profoundly defiant population, Lambek is writing a book about ethics. This is a book about what humans owe to history, about the past as a responsibility, a burden that has to be born, as the Malagasy idiom puts it, even at the same time as it is a source of power, and hence freedom. In this sense, the tacit allusion to Marx in the title is quite exact. Lambek sets out to demonstrate how Sakalava people make history, despite the fact that the weight of the past generations does indeed weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living. He does it, though, less by an appeal to Marxian categories than by a return to the very origins of dialectical thought in Aristotle. The key theoretical terms are *poesis*, or creation, and *phronesis*, the ethical qualities of action.

Sakalava society, like any other, is continuously in the process of its own creation. But the peculiar quality of Sakalava *poesis*, above all its reliance on the practice of spirit mediumship, ensures that this involves the continual invocation of an intricately layered past that becomes continually present in the most immediate ways possible. Much as in the Balinese shadow theater so famously described by A. L. Becker, mediumship creates a space of performance where different historical characters, speaking different languages and representing fundamentally different sorts of time, can meet and interact—the whole being coordinated by a kind of master of ceremonies, Ndramisara, who is not a king at all but a royal diviner said to have been present at every stage of Sakalava history, if usually only in ghostly

form, to preside over the apportionment of lots (fragmentary tasks, privileges, knowledge, powers) that give all a stake but no one a purchase on the whole and keep the entire system in balance. At the same time, Lambek makes clear that he believes it is ethical imperatives that set all this in motion. As a result, the book not only provides portraits of the often quirky and original characters who bring this historical world into existence, but also insists on seeing them as doing so not just in order to seek out some kind of advantage, or to perform some identity, or even unconsciously to work out some structural problem, but to negotiate their way as human beings through what Lambek himself describes as a maze of walls and disguises and conflicting commitments to multiple characters living and dead (often several speaking through the same individual), all in endless struggle to do the right thing.

It is in this emphasis on “phronesis” that Lambek is at his most innovative. In a way this is odd. It is not as if anyone would argue that the moral dimension of human life is unimportant. Yet somehow (perhaps because Durkheim’s argument that sociology is the scientific study of moral life became so closely associated with structural-functionalism?) contemporary practice theory has largely ignored the moral dimension or at least relegated it to a secondary status. One hopes that this work will encourage others to begin to fill the gap. Even if it does not, such an attempt to bring ethnography back to basic questions of the nature of the human condition is not only a first-rate contribution to African ethnography, but also a form of ethical practice in the best sense of the term.

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Laura C. Hammond. *This Place Will Become Home*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press. 2004. xii + 257 pp. Maps. Photographs. Notes. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. \$45.00. Cloth.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Ethiopia experienced adversity unprecedented in its modern history. War, recurrent famine, and political persecution by a ruthless military regime took the lives of countless innocent people and forced hundreds of thousands to flee to neighboring countries. By 1990, the number of Ethiopians who had fled to Sudan had risen to almost a million. Many of these refugees have slowly returned since the collapse of the military regime in 1991. Laura Hammond’s *This Place Will Become Home* provides a captivating story about how a group of repatriated Ethiopians have reconstructed their lives and livelihoods from scratch and against all odds in a place they call Ada Bai. The book is the result of an exhaustive anthropological study that was carried out over a period of nearly two years in northwestern Ethiopia in the mid-1990s.