


Fall 2013

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Recommended Citation

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“ILLUSION OR UNUNDERSTOOD REALITY

Spiritual or Psychic Healing and Protection in Southern Madagascar”



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Fall 2013

Introduction

Far from the hospital room and its doctor, the medicine and philosophies of *Lakazy* and its *Ombiasa* pertain to a domain largely untouched by western logic and science. Their practices appear to be effective and unique enough to have survived the advent of compelling new theological and scientific belief systems and the vastly different perspectives on community health and stability which these systems have brought to Madagascar. The prime examples of these new arrivals are Christianity and modern medicine, respectively. Within and without their sacred space, the mission of the true *Ombiasa* is to support their community and for this work they rely neither on physiological tests nor on pre-established pharmaceuticals.

To this date, no scientific and objective evidence can substantiate the practices of spiritual or psychic healers enough to grant them the credibility of modern medicine. This is due to the fact that tools capable of measuring the mechanisms at hand are still inexistent and no laws and formulas are in place to explain such phenomena and consistently reproduce the same results. The lack of investigation in the field has delayed the development of the tools and approaches necessary to evaluate the phenomena. Yet evidence there *is* – having solely remained outside of technological and theological reach. Formula or law there *is* yet *is* has been overlooked : the mechanism underlying the phenomena is directly affected by human intention and this aspect of reality – the malleability of external reality and the influence which consciousness bears on it – is only beginning to find scientific acknowledgement.

Due to the fact that psychic or spiritual healing is not yet understood with the certainty of chemical or surgical intervention, it lacks credibility among the majority of the scientific and medical community. Despite this, the field of noetic sciences is beginning to achieve certainty in these domains. The Double-Slit Experiment has revealed that the conscious observation of a *possible* phenomenon collapses the phenomena into *finite existence*. Furthermore, multiple experiments have revealed that human intention, when projected towards chemical and biological structures affect the stability of these

structures. This study is designed to generate additional momentum towards uncovering the truth behind the power of consciousness since the holistic effect of psychic or spiritual healing may be orders of magnitude greater for reasons explored further down. The phenomena which the *Ombiasa* call “Spirit” must imperatively be studied under greater light for it has the potential to have a significant and positive impact over our reality and more specifically over the health and life events of communities which place positive intent in their interactions such a phenomena.

Methods

In order to explore the conceptions and practices of an underexplored field of study we undertook an anthropological approach. This approach was designed to lay the foundations for further studies regarding the nature of spiritual or psychic capacities by illustrating how such capacities are humanly generated and expressed. To achieve such a preliminary step we examined the beliefs and practices underpinning the phenomena.

Geographically and culturally speaking, our focus was directed towards the Androy and Anosy regions. The Androy region is reputed for the power and authenticity of its *Ombiasa*. During the colonial period, many areas of the Androy avoided significant cultural and religious influence from the French and were thus able to preserve the cultural heritage of the *Ombiasa*. Although the Tanosy specific *Ombiasa* did not disappear altogether, the breadth of their knowledge wained significantly and they have borrowed a great deal from the Tandroy ever since.

While we were based out of the Anosy town of Fort-Dauphin we travelled to Faux-Cap in the Androy region to visit healers present in its vicinity, although many *Ombiasa* in Fort-Dauphin are in fact Tandroy. To cover as broad a range as was possible within the given time frame and budget we visited five healers based in Fort-Dauphin, three healers in the town of Manambaro as well as three healers in Andriamaka – both of which are located within a twenty five kilometer distance of Fort-Dauphin and significantly less urbanized. We visited a total of four healers in the Androy, within four

villages situated less than ten kilometers from Faux-Cap. This led us to a total of eighteen encounters. Although most healers were visited once, three meetings were held with Iada'e from Fort-Dauphin and two were held with his mentor Kivotri near Faux-Cap. Iada'e was able to provide important insight into his mentor's practices and clarity regarding many key concepts regarding the *Ombiasa*. This was in part the fruit of the knowledge transmitted to him by Kivotri over the course of many years of personal mentorship as well as information he has gathered from other healers.

The interviews we conducted were unstructured or semi-structured. Although a set of questions was available to start or fuel the discussion, most of the information was gained through questions asked in order to clarify or advance statements made by the healers. Widely accepted ideas regarding their beliefs and practices generally lack written documentation and personal interpretations vary regarding these and therefore it was necessary to use certain pre-established questions to cross reference information. However, the presence of contradicting statements between healers meant that following the healer's vision of matters revealed itself to be a more valuable approach in order to extract as much information as possible. Consistently abiding by a pre-established format would have been difficult or counterproductive as such a constraint would limit the continuity of the flow of information. New information would constantly surface with new healers and multiple visits with the same healers would therefore have been an effective way to achieve greater factual certainty. Iada'e was very helpful in this regard as he could clarify contradicting statements or misunderstood concepts. However his views are the fruit of his own interpretation. Yet this will manifest, Nevertheless, the following factors rendered our method as effective as possible in order to extract as much accurate information as possible within the given constraints of time, location, budget, social customs and the oral nature of knowledge transmission. Such methods involved cross referencing between healers, making use of Iadae's knowledge to clarify many statements and bringing the healers to elaborate on their own personal ways.

We abided by certain guidelines to ensure healthy interactions and secure the potential for future

interactions between the healers and other researchers. To respect privacy and time the healers were always warned of our arrival ahead of time of our arrival and a time of meeting was agreed upon. This was done directly or indirectly by my translator one or more days in advance. Many of the healers also mentioned they had been informed of our arrival by their spirit(s). Upon arrival my translator would introduce us and the purpose of our study : to study their beliefs and methods. It was understood our intention was neither to receive healing, to purchase healing powers nor to collect information relative to particular cures and illnesses. Any publications would therefore only contain information regarding their pillar beliefs and practices. Healers all granted their consent to share their names and answer any questions they felt comfortable with. In expression of our gratitude we offered the customary red rum as well as a sum of five thousand ariary. The demand for compensation on the behalf of the healers varied : for some there was no explicit request and for others, the content of the compensation would be the fruit of our own decisions and never was a sum fixed. Either a demand was made at the beginning of the encounter or no explicit demand was made and we made the offering in our own time. Compensations were directly offered to the healer's altar if it was located in the same house as where the interview was taking place or offered to the healer himself. All healers acknowledged our visit with gratitude and pride to share their practice.

My translator, Luis “N'aina” Raevoniaina, has strong levels of Malagasy and French and has done translating work for many years. He was able to understand the subtlety of some of my questions and receive great extents of information from the healers and translate back to me. He was able to adopt good timing and a graceful attitude in order to maintain good harmony during the encounter. While there was necessarily meaning and intention lost in translation, my basic knowledge of the language and our time constraints rendered such a method of having him as an intermediary it the most effective technique achievable at the time. therefore a greater knowledge of the language on my part and more time could have allowed for a greater accuracy of information.

While the town of Fort-Dauphin has a relatively small population of around sixty thousand, the

influence of christianity and modern medicine has created an important stigma revolving around the *Ombiasa*. Although they are still sought after for their knowledge and power they remain an unspoken subject. For these reasons, receiving information regarding opinions of the *Ombiasa* and the effectiveness of their practice was difficult. The number of opinions required to reach a consistent data set and the degree of pre-emptive comfort with the subjects due to the stigma of the subject was not possible to reach in the given time frame. However, I spoke to a doctor who related some anecdotes which can serve as insight for further study.

Results / Discussion

The Ombiasa

Origins

History

Although determining a date or period of emergence of the practice of the *Ombiasa* is difficult due to the lack of written transcripts, certain of its origins can be traced back. All terms of *Sikily* and the system of *Vintana* are of Arabic origin. This is likely to be the fruit of migrational movements which began in south-east Asia, passing along the coasts of India, the Arabic peninsula and finally eastern Africa before reaching Madagascar, picking up various elements of faith and practice in the process. On the other hand, elements such as sacrifices and even the names of the animals themselves seem to stem from the animist cultures of Africa, since the words *Ombi* and *Akuhu* find their origins in the African continent.

The cultural evolution which has lead rise to the work of the *Ombiasa* is not merely the fruit of external influence, but movements internal to the island. Of the eighteen tribes, the Tandroy are known to travel the most throughout the country. Their influence is found both in their strong presence in the Anosy region as well as in factors such as the ubiquitous use of southern medicinal plants in northern

areas such as Diego Suarez. Equally, the population of Arabic immigrants which started in the east of the island wrapped around the south before they moved up the the west coast into what became the Sakalava region, spreading elements of their belief system in a movement which gave rise to the use of *Sikily and Vintana*.

Etymology

As the abbreviation of three Malagasy words, *Ombiasa* is derived from *Oluna Be Hasina* which means “Person of Great Sacrality”. Traditionally, such people were also called *Tsymaito*, meaning “Who never fails” or *Kazinambo*, a word invented as a respectful gesture to refer to the *Ombiasa* indirectly so as to avoid tarnishing their word by overusing or misusing it. This dedication to the maintaining the purity of *Hasina*, the “Sacred”, is the essential concept underpinning the capacities of the traditional Malagasy figure. It is therefore necessary to explore the significance of such a concept as well as its means of expression before we can understand its impact on human communities.

Beliefs

Mission

Ombiasa are conceived of as living messengers from *Zanahary* – the Creator – and channels for the spirits – the entities which induce the healing. Their role is to protect and heal the community. Since they are chosen by the spirits to carry out a mission, they may be reprimanded if they fail to do so or misuse the tools they are given. Many explain that the spirits possessing them are firmly rooted against evil and thus the *Ombiasa* cannot accept to cause harm with their power because the spirit working with them would refuse. In other cases, if they see such a position as a means of gaining wealth and lose sight of their priority as healer and protector of the community they will lose their power. In cases where they chose to do harm unto others, they will personally – or members of their family will – face severe consequences. Still, there are some who appear to perpetuate wrongs unto

others without suffering direct consequences, yet any harm can always be undone, for the spirits which truly serve the Creation are the most powerful. *Ombiasa* who cast evil spells are known as *Mpamosavy* whereas those who protect and guide are known as *Mpagnamaligne*. The idea of their mission was illustrated by Kivotri when under the possession of a *Doany* : “the World is like a tree. The leaves, branches and fruit represent the people and all elements of Creation visible to the human eye. The roots represent the spirit realm that brings life to the treetop. Just as the roots source nutrients to the rest of the tree and yet remain hidden, spirits are essential actors in the stability and prosperity of the visible world yet they are invisible to the human eye. What connects the roots to the treetop? Only through the trunk can link both worlds meet in a most desirable way. Thus it is healer who assumes the role of bridging the two realms, linking people to the unknown and acting as the mediator for protection and guidance from the spirits.” Those who are truly following such a Divine mission do not see the purpose in boasting their powers for they view themselves as inherently of service to others. In fact, many insist they *have* none as they are merely the tools for the spirit – their pride lies in the satisfaction of their customers. The symbolic nature of Kivotri's explanation is a common theme among all elements of the *Ombiasa's* practice and its sacrality. Destinies are the first element of symbolism of the *Ombiasa's* practice for they determine when and what can be undertaken for any given intervention.

Destinies

The *Vintana* system is the Malagasy equivalent of the Zodiac : it is a system of “destinies” revolving around a twelve sign cycle. Each sign occurs once per a day, per lunar cycle, per a year and even once every twelve year cycle yet the most important cycle is the lunar cycle which lasts twenty-eight days. Each destiny has particular characteristics and taboos which must be respected. Equally, there are propitious and ominous moments within the timeframe of each destiny and a great deal is done to avoid birth at an ominous time or to relieve the negative consequences of such a birth. The *Ombiasa* can not work during their ominous days and must determine the destiny of the person visiting

in order to alleviate their destiny if it is ominous or reinforce it if it is propitious. Traditionally, each destiny was placed inside the house – within its corners and along its walls – and this placement is directly related to the four cardinal points.

Cardinal Points

Each cardinal point has a particular meaning which determines the placement of various objects and acts of the *Ombiasa*. The first cardinal point is the east – where the sun rises – the eastern corner of the house is where the first destiny, *Alahamady*, is placed. It represents the light and energy of life; new beginnings and purity. The north is the area of the sky which harbors the sun for the longest period of time and thus represents that which is most precious – all signs of wealth and prosperity are placed in the north. The south is the area of the sky which the sun revolves around but never enters, representing that which is grand and which oversees. The west is where the sun sets and takes life from the world and is therefore a direction dedicated towards that which is impure. The symbolism revolving of the cardinal points determines the placement of sacred objects and areas inside and outside *Lakazy* as a means of maintaining sacrality and to avoid infringing taboos.

Taboos

Malagasy culture is governed by a comprehensive taboo structure represented by forbidden acts and places named *Fady*. These are the fruit of ancestor's will, the system of the Vintana and orders of the *Ombiasa*. Although their origins are various origins, they seem designed in part to maintain community order and stability. However, with respect to the practice of the *Ombiasa*, *Fady* seem designed to ensure the purity and sanctity of people, objects and places in order to maintain good relations with the spirits. While the *Ombiasa* have certain taboos to respect regarding the time and nature of their acts, they also prescribe taboos to those undergoing treatment in order to ensure the effectiveness of their remedies. As such, *Fady* are an important means of maintaining sacrality.

Sacrality

No gesture or object destined for healing is void of meaning, merely transactional or clinical. In Jean-Marie Estrade's words [“C'est une médecine religieuse qui, (...) lorsqu'elle recourt aux plantes, se fonde beaucoup plus sur leurs vertus symbolico-magiques que sur leurs propriétés chimiques. (...) Les “*tromba* instruits” ordonnent (...) une médication à base de remèdes et de gestes symboliques.”] “It's a religious medical practice which, (...) bases its use of plants in their magical and symbolic aspects rather than their chemical makeup. (...) The knowledgeable *Tromba* prescribe a treatment revolving around symbolic gestures and remedies.” The notions of symbolism and purity emphasized by Estrade determines the quality of the relationship with the spirits and therefore the quality of the fruits of the relationship.

Sacred Places

Outside

The presence of spirits in certain natural environments will determine their sacredness place. These environments are usually unique for their grandeur, beauty or history – anything which makes them striking and memorable. Habitats range from bodies of water such as rivers, lakes and waterfalls to grottos and trees and *Ombiasa* will come to worship such places either upon initial discovery or through initiation from another healer, usually a member of their family. Occasionally, spirits will guide healers to areas which are unknown to them in order for them to sacralize these areas and transform them into areas of worship, guidance or healing. Such sacralization may occur through the erection of a totem, the rising of stones or the attachment of symbolic white or red cloth to a nearby tree or stone. Certain steps are taken by the *Ombiasa* when entering such areas to greet and appease the spirit such as words of reverence to, the diffusion of a pleasant scent with soap, incense or perfume and the pouring of red rum in specific places or towards the four cardinal points starting with the east. Although

Ombiasa may not always have a designated sacred space outside, they will always render sacred the indoor place where they conduct their interventions.

Inside

Lakazy, which refers both the house where the *Ombiasa*'s practice unfolds as well as the altar within the house is an essential sacred space. The house always has more than one door, and sometimes up to eight. First, these are to maintain the sacrality of entry and exit points : one door will be designated solely for the access of healer and an assistant – usually pointing towards the north-east – and another for the entry of those who seek guidance and intervention – usually in the north-west. The altar is usually placed on the Eastern side of *Lakazy* and in the Androy there will often be a window above it where the spirit will enter. It contains all of the the sacred objects and is therefore both as a storage space and a place of worship. These objects all serve distinct purposes and since symbolism permeates all aspects of the work of the *Ombiasa*, before we consider their application we must examine their meaning – in which color plays an important role.

Sacred Colors

The three most sacred colors are those present on the Malagasy flag : white, red and green. They each hold specific connotations and manifest themselves in various ways.

White represents purity and re-birth. It is untainted and untarnished, representing an open slate and new beginning. *Tany fotsy mahavelo*, the white sacred earth serves to purify the *Sikily* and through this process the *Sikily* grants the earth its healing properties which are then transferred to the remedy shortly thereafter. The Malagasy word for silver – *Volafotsy*, meaning “white money” – also contains the word “white”, illustrating the purifying qualities of the metal. In Anja Bas, the *Ombiasa* donned a white shirt and covered his knees with a white *lambaoany* as a preparation to call the spirit. Other healers may wear red clothes when they call the spirit.

Red represents life and strength. It is the color of blood and fire – the heat and movement inherent in both of these examples are manifestations of the symbol. A sacrifice is usually done as an offering to the spirit and a means of devotion to the healing process, since blood distributes heat and various elements throughout the body. When calling the spirit, a fire is lit in the form of a candle or in order to burn incense. Red rum will be poured towards the four cardinal points and up towards the fifth element – the spirit. It will be passed to members of the assistance as a means of entering into communion with the spirit. The rum brings heat to those who consume and the volatility of its fumes are reminiscent of the motion of blood and fire – these elements carry the ideas of life and strength.

Finally, green represents abundance and prosperity. It is the color of vegetation which is an important source of the Ombiasa's remedies and sacred spaces. It is less present in the processes as white and red although the bulk of the treatments is composed of plants. The plants are usually not used for fixed properties : their prescription depends on many symbols such as cardinal direction of their collection with respect to where the illness was contracted and in reference to *Lakazy*, the destiny of the patient, the plants with which the spirit works. Sometimes the same plants can be used to treat different illnesses depending on information from the *Sikily*, and in other case different plants will be used to treat the same illness. Since their use and meaning extends beyond their isolated properties and into their cultural or spiritual role they become sacred objects rather than transactional objects.

Sacred Objects

All of the items used by the Ombiasa are either sacred in and of themselves or participate in some way in fostering a sacred environment. The altar generally contains the following essential objects *Sikily*, *tany fotsy mahavelo*, *volohazo*, *mohara* and other fetiches or necklaces, *hetsoro* (if their use by the Ombiasa has been recommended by the spirit), *volafotsy*, a bowl or plate, a container for honey and a small furnace to receive incense. Each of these objects serves a purpose which will be examined not sequentially but through their role in the practice – what they represent and how they are

used.

Practices

Divination

In order to diagnose illnesses, the *Ombiasa* use *Sikily*, a divination system using seeds from the *fany* tree. With the *Sikily*, all necessary information can be found regarding the patient, the nature of the illness, its place of contraction and a much more information still. Although there is an established system to the *Sikily*, interpretations vary from between the Androy and Anosy regions. The first step is always to hear the patient's introduction and cause for their visit. While the initial discussion with the patient is being held, the healer will be hold the *Sikily* and speak to them in order to embed them with the patient's situation. *Sikily* may or may not be executed in the presence of the patient in order to avoid unnecessary shock or confusion. If the *Sikily* is completed – this is not always the case, occasionally the sikily will indicate that no solution is possible before it is complete – the healer will call upon the appropriate spirit to help find solutions and empower whatever remedy has been deemed appropriate.

The science itself is a binary combinatory system. Setting up the *Sikily* works as such : the *Ombiasa* will ceize a handful of seeds and cast them unto the mat. Since the purity of surfaces such as the floor and a table are easily tarnished, *Sikily* are always conducted on a mat as it can be preserved and hung on the wall. Once a small pile is available, the healer will subtract seeds two by two from the pile until one or two seeds are left. Once this remaining group or individual is isolated, it is placed in a grid and the process is repeated. The grid consists of three parts : first comes the Mothers – four columns and four rows ; a square of sixteen occurrences of one or two seeds. Then come the Children, with seven columns and four rows ; a rectangle of twenty four occurrences. Although the disposition Children is determined by that of the Mothers, the ways in which the dispostion of the Children is defined differs between practitioners from the Androy and the Anosy. The final colum is the result and is found by

combining the first column of the Mother and the last column of the Children.

Reading the *Sikily* is an elaborate method, as every row and column has a specific meaning and the meaning of each of these is completed by that of other rows and columns. Interpretations are either memorized or they are illuminated by the spirit and it is unclear whether such interpretations are specific to individual spirits or specific to their region of origin of such spirits. As many combinations as possible must be examined under as many lights in order to determine the most effective means of treatment. Certain spirits only work with specific *sikily* combinations and some will forge their *sikily* with these pre-established combinations in order to receive help from those specific spirits. Although the specific spirit(s) may be effective with regards to the particular case, this technique seems very limiting.

This description merely offers an overview of the arrangement of *Sikily*, for the reading itself is a matter of volumes of information which go beside the purpose of the study. Nevertheless, all *Ombiasa* stress that *Sikily* is the basis of their practice. While only one *Ombiasa* among those we met worked without the seeds, a divination system will always be present.

Purification

A patient must be purified in order for the remedy to have a potent effect and this process occurs in various ways. Once the *sikily* have been set up, a pinch of *Tany fotsy mahavelo* is placed onto each seed. This is designed to sanctify and purify the seeds and transfer the intent of the *Sikily* into the remedy as the earth on the seeds will be gathered and blended with the remedy. White earth is always used as a means of purification and is occasionally dabbed onto various objects present in *Lakazy* for this purpose.

As another important aspect of purification is silver. A healer will always wear a bracelet – either silver for purity or bronze for protection – and in all cases silver will be present in some shape or form, sometimes as a coin. The silver element will be placed in a bowl with water for its purification

and this is done while establishing a connection to a spirit in order to for the water to be blessed. The liquid is then then sprayed towards the four cardinal points and unto those assisting the ceremony and drunk by the *Ombiasa*.

Water is also used in outdoor locations for purification. Sacred bodies of water are usually used for this purpose and patients will be brought to them by the *Ombiasa*. Generally full submersion is not necessary yet this depends on the gravity of the problem and the will of the spirit.

While these are all manifestations of the color white, the color red plays a role in the purification as it represents dedication to the spirit which has the power of purification. Red rum is generally given as an offering to the *Ombiasa* who will pour a small quantity unto the altar and in various directions – towards the north or towards the assistance – in reverence to the spirit. Depending on the gravity of the illness and the capacities of the patient, various types of sacrifice will be demanded, the most important animal being the Zebu – the Malagasy horned cow – followed by the sheep, the rooster and if an animal is not available, honey is the final alternative.

Remedies

Unless an exorcism is required in order to chase evil spirits from a person, remedies are almost exclusively plant based. The *Ombiasa* will grate various dried plants and collect their powder into a container in which he will place the *tany fotsy* and honey – occasionally red rum and the blood from the sacrifice may be included as well. This remedy can be used in a shower, as an embalm, can be consumed orally or be placed in corners of the house.

It is difficult to assess that which is acting upon the person within the remedy. The plants are generally known for their spiritual properties rather than their medicinal properties – a distinction is made since medicinal plants can be used without ceremony. These examples allude to a form of energy in the plant beyond fixed chemistry : chemistry is consistent while these remedies are dynamic. Natural factors which can alter chemistry are not deliberately controlled by the healer and can thus not be

considered as the determining factors of the treatment. On the other hand, the remedies do undergo a deliberate focus of the *Ombiasa* when they are purified and sanctified by the spirit. Moreover, they are specific to the patient's situation – not just the illness itself. However, the patient's purification and sanctification does not necessarily occur through the intermediary of plants.

In some cases an exorcism is the means by which evil spirits are chased from a person. The *Ombiasa* will enter a state of trance usually accompanied by musicians. During the possession, the spirit communicates through the *Ombiasa*, who is no longer conscious. In the exorcism we witnessed, a mirror used to communicate with the spirit was placed on various areas of the patient's body – their head, back and shoulders – while the spirit was chased verbally with projected saliva and a waving red cloth.

Treatment can also occur in sacred places such as grottos and trees. The *Ombiasa* will demand healing from the spirit and usually accompany the process with a sacrifice. Elements of the person such as their nails, hair or clothes will be buried in the vicinity of the sacred place as a symbolic gift – as an alternative to the very life of the patient. In all these cases the spirit plays an essential role and the means by which the spirit is called must be understood.

Spirit Calling

In order to call upon spirits, an environment is set up in order to foster a favorable environment for them. This is usually done after the *sikily* has been drawn so the spirit can illuminate aspects of the *sikily*, purify the patient and activate or strengthen the remedy. The next step is that a fire and incense are lit – in some cases perfume is used as an alternative to incense. The *Ombiasa* will then bring out the appropriate *mohara* and call the spirit. To call the spirit, a whistle or conch is blown or a bell is rung. At this point the *Ombiasa* will generally look into a mirror, the most common means of communication. Sometimes the mirror can be used without direct possession as the *Ombiasa* will see colors in it bearing certain meanings or images. When the spirit has been called the *Ombiasa* will progressively lose

consciousness.

Communication

Once the connection has been established the communication begins. Although the *Ombiasa* may hold the mirror during this process, his eyes are often closed. This is the process during which the spirit will ask questions regarding the purpose of the call, the patient, the audience and will answer many questions. Often the *Ombiasa* will begin to speak in “tongues” or in another dialect and someone must be there to translate – usually someone within the immediate family who is accustomed to the process. Although it may take time and many possessions to understand elements of the dialect, the spirit will always make sure it is understood – through re-iteration or explanation – before changing topics.

Outside of such ceremonies, the *Ombiasa* will come into contact with his spirits through other means. They may appear to him in dreams or in broad daylight, yet only he is able to see and communicate with his spirit. Kivotri was possessed by around a thousand spirits which is an exceptionally high number and this meant a quasi-constant communication with them. He frequently had to travel to their meeting points and pay reverence to them and the responsibility and duties increase the more spirits by which one is possessed. Occasionally the same spirit may possess multiple people and such spirits such as the *Kokolampo Andriamena* and the *Doany Andriamasara* or *Boribe*. Should spirits chose to accept, they are occasionally introduced by one *Ombiasa* to another after request of the latter to being to work with the given spirit or spirits.

Transmission

The gift of healing is either embedded within a lineage, the outcome of an unexpected event or it can be purchased from other healers. Those *Ombiasa* who inherit their gift will receive teachings from whomever was chosen by the spirits to be a healer within previous generations of the family and

receive power from the same person. They must be taught the science of the craft before they undergo possession – they must learn to draw and read the *sikily*, learn to recognize a number of plants and understand the essential concepts of the *Ombiasa* : the mission, destinies, cardinal points, taboos and sacrality. If they become possessed before the previous *Ombiasa* has passed they must leave the area and practice elsewhere or they risk diminishing the power of the previous one.

Not all healers are part of lineages and the gift can be received by spontaneous possession. Some feel as though they have always had an intuitive calling for the role while others had never conceived of it. A possession is not always viewed as such when it first occur between the ages of fifteen and twenty one, since it manifests itself through tremendous physical weakness. Some may be sick for months before it is realized that a spirit is the cause of the weakness. This is one reason why totems are used to receive the spirit because full integration in the body is difficult to bear because of the power of the spirits. When such a realization is made, only a specific ceremony can break the weak spell should the *Ombiasa* accept to work with the spirit – being chosen as the *Ombiasa* is usually a great honor and non-acceptance is fatal. The ceremony must be presided by another healer and once it is complete the weakness will subside and the person may begin to work with the spirit.

In some cases it is personal curiosity which pushes a person to actively seek to possess the knowledge and power of the *Ombiasa* which can be purchased from another healer. Although it is not a merely transactional exchange, a deal must be struck between both *Ombiasa* according to the will of the spirits of the “selling” one. The possessed *Ombiasa* will conduct a *sikily* session after the request has been made in order to determine if such an exchange is possible and he will receive confirmation or rejection from his spirits. A price must be determined as well as a sacrifice and if the *Ombiasa* possessing the spirit has the intention of spreading his mission effectively he will ensure the new *Ombiasa* has good knowledge of *sikily*, *volohazo* and the basic concepts and a good intent of his own – not one of abusing his authority and power.

Many will purchase additional powers despite an initial possession, in order to increase their

capacities for the more spirits by which one is possessed, the more solutions reveal themselves in response to the demand of the patient and the more potent these solutions become.

Spirits

The *Ombiasa* speak of two types of spirits : the *Ataondraha* or *Mijeky* which are spirits of the ancestors and *Helo* or *Zanahary* – a word which can refer to the Creator or its messenger spirits – which are sent by the Creator and this second category contains various types of spirits. Messengers from the Creator were not previously human and yet the nature of their interactions with people seem influenced by similar factors as those determining the behavior of the ancestral spirits in that they seek two principle : reverence and a worthy resting place. In order to ensure the respect of these conditions for the ancestral spirits, burial ceremonies and other tomb related rituals are essential practices in such a worthy resting place. Regarding natural environments where *Helo* reside, if their sacrality was not respected, that is, if one commits an impure act in a location where one or more spirits are known to dwell, they will attack the given person. The wrath of these spirits may vary and will subsist until the violator shows forgiveness. Such an act of undoing a committed fault must always be conducted by the healer for only he can communicate with the spirit, understand what is requested, or communicate to another spirit which can chase that spirit. This is also a reason why the destruction of natural habitats is so dangerous for it destroys their dwelling place and sends them wandering which will cause them to bear a negative impact on the people. Some spirits, such as *Andriamena* and *Andriamisara* are ubiquitous among the spirits of the *Ombiasa* as they were Kings of Madagascar. As they were once rulers whose purpose was to assure the health and stability of their nation they will be ever present as potent agents for the *Ombiasa*.

Messengers from Creator

The spirits of the Androy region are referred to as *Kokolampo*. They are terrestrial spirits which inhabit trees or grottos and are known to be slightly aggressive spirit. The term *Kokolampo* means “who enjoys attaching itself” and they will occasionally possess or torment people. Many *Ombiasa* are possessed by *Kokolampo* and although they may be known to display aggressive behavior they respond positively to sacred dedication. As with most spirits, if they find no resting place or human dedication they will wander and torment people until they do find a resting place and worship. They will respond to the demands of a person who shows dedication to them.

Doany

The *Doany* are known as spirits from the Sakalava region in the north-west of the country. As opposed to the *Kokolampo* they are aquatic beings and are known to be more pacific. Although they will present themselves as beings from the *Sakalava* region they have been “brought” to the south of the country with the rocks and other elements from the bodies of water they inhabited. Due to this movement, *Ombiasa* from the Androy and Anosy regions call upon them as they call upon *Kokolampo*. Many *Ombiasa* can be possessed by both *Kokolampo* and *Doany* and call upon them depending on the necessity of the intervention.

Tromba, Angatsy, Lolo

Finally, the *Tromba* has multiple connotations. On the one hand, the term refers to the spirits of the Anosy region who and on the other hand it is a broader reference to the phenomenon of possession, the ritual itself as well as the person undergoing the possession throughout the country. In the Anosy, *Helo* are referred to as *Agnatsy* or *Lolo*.

One healer was commanded by his spirit to go to the beach and seize the highest vertebrae of a wale which had washed up. This vertebrae symbolically rested at the top of the foundational structure

that held up the body of one of the largest animals on earth and therefore served as a symbol for the strength of the spirit. The vertebrae was also on the Eastern most side of the animal's backbone.

Conclusion

The practices of the *Ombiasa* are the fruit of a complex belief system which manifests itself through symbolic acts and objects and which stems from a single uniting principle : sacrality. The *Ombiasa* abide by this principle in order to establish a strong connection to the spirits, for they are at the source of the healer's power.

Why does the devotion involved in maintaining sacrality appear to be the spirit's currency of choice? What is the substance, energetically speaking, exuded in the act of human intention to create a sacred atmosphere? Which parts of the brain are active in this proces, along with other energetic centers of the body? How is the electro-magnetic field in the immediate area around the healer affected? What are the patterns of neuronal firing in the brain and other energetic centers? When are the frequencies of such neuronal firing and electro-magnetic radiation most stable, at the highest and at their lowest?

Measuring these phenomena would advance studies of psychic and spiritual practices, in their nature and their impact on human health.

Appendix

Messengers from the Creator upon which *Ombiasa* call :

Name	Information	Speciality
<i>Andriamena</i>	<i>Kokolampo</i> . Means “The Red King”	Is an advisor. Helps chase evil spirits. Is very powerful.
<i>Beroba</i>	Means “who wears great garments”	
<i>Kelimoro</i>	Means “who inhabits the banks of water bed”	
<i>Volobe</i>	Means “the hairy one”	
<i>Bakolahy</i>	Means “the handsome one”	
<i>Pelakombo</i>	Manifests as a cipated woman, means “crippled lady”	Treats crippling from evil spirits
<i>Pelamanintsy</i>	Means “cold woman”, when one is “cold” means one is in good health and is approachable.	Docile spirit who brings good fortune and health.
<i>Bibilahe</i>	Means “who is very powerful”	Heals insect bits and other animals injuries.
<i>Pelamena</i>	Means “red lady”	
<i>Belomboke</i>	Means “who has authority and governance”	
<i>Maroanake</i>	Means “many children”.	Helps with fertility and delivery.
<i>Andriamisara</i>	<i>Doany</i> . Name of a powerful King of the Sakalava.	Treats grave illnesses such as poisoning.
<i>Boribe</i>	<i>Doany</i> . Lieutenant of <i>Andrimisara</i>	Counsels whether to conduct a sacrifice and which kind.
<i>Tsihoara</i>	Means “he who cannot be defeated or dominated”	Protects against violence but also judicial cases.
<i>Magnekemare</i>	Means to cherish, to cradle.	Brings affection, protection, acceptance.
<i>Magnaogne</i>	Means “he who brings value or who is considerate”	Judge, helps those victim of discrimination, tyranny, injustice, unrelenting attacks.
<i>Toetsagnomby</i>	Means “Zebus appreciate his presence”	Brings fertility for women, success for work, happiness.
<i>Lahibesagnagna</i>	Means “great fire”.	Treats mental illness due to evil spells.

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