Route 7: Shaman Highway

On Madagascar, 'ombiasy' act as go-betweens for the living and the dead

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Avoid committing 'fady' as you unweave the African island's mysteries, and you, too, will come under its spell.

For Ravaratra, it's just another day at the office. A few health problems, a few head cases and other tribulations of life in Antananarivo, the metropolis of Madagascar and the city he calls home. Clad in scarlet toga and matching headband, the Malagasy shaman sits cross-legged beneath a poster of Jackie Chan. Ravaratra tells me, through a translator, that he is able to cure just about anything that could possibly trouble a person. "I can tell you what is going to happen ahead of time, how to avoid problems, where not to go. I can help with love problems, and I can also cure people who have medical emergencies like the bite of a scorpion."

His most pressing problem this morning is a boy with a badly swollen foot allegedly from an evil spell that someone cast upon him. Ravaratra dispatches the boy's mother to fetch ingredients for a potion.

Next up is a businessman who has lost a computer disk containing very important material in a local market. He *must* get it back, and the shaman is his last resort. Ravaratra reaches for a small mirror, peering not so much at the glass but into it, eyes darting back and forth as if he's searching for someone in a crowd. "I see it!" he blurts out. "I see the item you have lost. A small boy is playing with the item. He is wearing a yellow shirt and eating at a place near the Anglican church." The shaman's eyes move away from the mirror, toward the desperate petitioner. "I can hold him there. But only for a short time. You must go now. *Hurry*!"

The man scurries out the door just as the lady with the stricken son comes back in. Spreading the requested ingredients across the floor of the hut, Ravaratra gives her instructions for preparing the potion. Wielding a large, sharp knife supplied by the shaman, she taps a magic root seven times (seven being a sacred number in Madagascar) before whittling a pile of shavings. Into the mix go a blood-red powder, gray ash from a cooking fire, the whites from seven raw eggs and seven twigs from a broom "to sweep away the evil spell," says Ravaratra. The woman pounds the concoction into a thin paste.

Lighting up a cigarette and taking a swig from a bottle of beer, the shaman leans back against the wall of his shack and reflects on a question I had asked him earlier. "Yes, there are also people who come to me and want me to do bad things for them," he says nonchalantly, like it's the most natural thing in the world. "But with black magic there are lots of formalities, like sacrificing a *zebu* (cow) or making a fetish. It is not so easy as everyone thinks."

Madagascar is one of those places that sparks wanderlust, and I am not immune. I have been traveling to Africa for 20 years, and though Madagascar had remained at the top of my list, the huge landmass — 1,000 miles from stem to stern — eluded me. Not enough money, not enough time — always an excuse. When I finally got a chance to get that stamp in my passport and see lemurs in their natural habitat, I leapt at the opportunity to visit the world's fourth-largest island, which lies off the east coast of Mozambique.

While it may have been lemurs that sparked my initial interest, it was the island's culture that kept

it burning for so many years. Other Africans always described it as “different” — a word that *always* catches my ear — not so much for the island wildlife which is, incidentally, *very* different from what you come across on the mainland, but different in the human sense: African, but then again, not. The Malagasy trace their ancestors to places across the ocean rather than Olduvai Gorge, in eastern Africa, as mainlanders do. They do many of the things that Africans do but with a twist, especially in their spiritual lives. So I finally ventured here last spring — ostensibly to see the lemurs — but with an ulterior motive of discovering mysterious beliefs.

Like most traveling here, my first contact with the island was Antananarivo, or Tana, as locals are apt to call their capital. Perched in the northern highlands, the city flows over hills and around the edges of plains and marshes now filled with rice paddies. With its French cafés and colonial architecture, Tana is one of the most handsome cities I’ve seen in Africa. And definitely different: Driving into town from the airport, I was struck by its resemblance to Asia. It wasn’t just the landscape. The people working the rice fields and wandering the roadside looked Asian. That’s because they actually are. The highlands around Tana are the homeland of the Merina people, who trace their roots to the Southeast Asians who crossed the Indian Ocean more than 2,000 years ago — a migration every bit as epic as the Polynesian diaspora across the South Pacific. Their language (Malagasy) is closely related to dialects still found on Borneo. And many of their customs, especially their burial rites, are similar to those of Borneo’s neighboring island, Sulawesi.

Checking into the French-colonial Hotel Colbert, I tossed my bags into the room and took a taxi to the Rova, the hilltop palace of the Merina kings and queens. Tana was established in the early 1600s by King Andrianjaka, leader of a powerful highland clan, one of a number of Merina kingdoms that existed on Madagascar at that time. By the early 19th century, Tana had become the capital of a single Merina kingdom that eventually extended its authority over every other major tribe on the island.

The Rova, which was finished in 1867, served as both a residence and a powerful symbol of royal power. But, unfortunately, there’s not much left. All but the outer walls of the palace were destroyed by a mysterious 1995 fire that’s never been properly explained. The structure is undergoing reconstruction, and royal regalia saved from the blaze is on display at a nearby museum.

“It was taboo to take the blood of royals,” guide Mamy Andrianasolo explained as we strolled around the museum. “But some people were very clever. One of the prime ministers used a silk rope to strangle King Radama II and thus avoid breaking the taboo. He took the king’s widow as his wife and became the most powerful man in Madagascar.” This was my first indication that Malagasy life is governed by an intricate system of superstitions and taboos (*fady*) which, I would learn, derives from both Asian and African roots.

The following day I had an even greater revelation: I visited a market on bustling Rue Rainibetsimisaraka in the heart of Tana, the stalls overflowing with roots, seeds, herbs, heaps of powder and objects that defied immediate description. Crowding around me, the vendors were eager to explain the mystical qualities of their various wares. The items generally fall into two categories: those that could be used to cure physical ailments and those that are used to either create or curtail magic spells.

“This is *tanifotsy*,” said a young vendor, placing a small white ball in my hand, soft and pliable like dough or clay. “It comes from the west of Madagascar. Ladies like to eat it when they are pregnant because it protects their unborn child from evil spirits. But anybody can put this on their skin to prevent *tromba* — possession by a spirit.”

Over the next few days, poking around town, I learned as much as I could about the complex web of beliefs that underlies everyday life. Ancestor worship is the best-known of these, a belief that people don’t just disappear when they die, but enter a sort of parallel universe from which it’s

possible for them to visit and advise those who are still living. During rituals of the Malagasy cult of the dead, highland families exhume the bodies of their dead relatives to move them to new tombs or to wrap the bodies in new shrouds for a joyous celebration called *famadihana*.

Other universal beliefs among the Malagasy are that the northeast corner of every structure is considered sacred because northeast is the direction from which the ancient ancestors came (Southeast Asia). Also, as my guide explained, the front door of every house must face west toward the setting sun, the source of life, rather than east toward the place where the dead are thought to reside.

Ravaratra and his brethren are the link between ordinary people and the old-time religion. Shamans, witch doctors, sorcerers, priests — they're called different things in different parts of the world. But in Madagascar they are called ombiasy, a profession that combines aspects of divination, faith healing, homegrown pharmacology, channeling and black magic. Like Eskimos and snow, the Malagasy have evolved terms for the various types of ombiasy. A *rain-jaza* is a general practitioner. A *mpanotra* is a combination chiropractor and massage therapist. Some specialize in *raok'andro* (herbalism) while others specialize in divination. You might also focus on *fanandroana* (astrology) or *fahitana* (having visions or seeing into the future).

Even the country's leading businessmen and politicians abide by fady. I heard that President Marc Ravalomanana, who is a Malagasy, a devout Christian and a Swedish-educated businessman, tools around the island in a limo with sacred number seven as the license plate.

"We are considered one of the most Christian countries in Africa," a Malagasy confessed to me, referring to the religious legacy bestowed by nearly two centuries of French and English missionary work. "But sometimes I ask myself how Christian are we. Our heart is actually in between. On Sunday we go to church, and on Monday we go to the alms tree and sacrifice a zebu."

Soon I left the city behind, striking off along National Route 7 on a road trip that would take me nearly the entire length of the central highlands, all the way down to Fianarantsoa. There are lemurs at the end of the road, a couple of days down the highway. But once again I found myself sidetracked by human life around the island's most famous highway.

It didn't take long to come across the first of many shamans, a mpanotra on the outskirts of Antsirabe, a highland town known for its rickshaws, hot springs and bygone French colonial spa. Nearly a hundred people were lined up outside a wood-and-cardboard shack at the side of the road, including the occupants of a white Mercedes, a local bigwig come to see the ombiasy. Like many Malagasy names, the shaman's name was a mouthful: Razafimahatratra Sylvan, a lanky fellow with boundless energy and the wild eyes of a revival preacher.

He ushered me into his hut where I watched him perform deep-tissue massage and bone-cracking therapy on more than a dozen people. "Raza" rolled the skin on their backs and stomachs, jammed his fingers into their eye sockets and ribs, cracked their backs over one knee. Some of the lighter folks he held upside down by their ankles, literally shaking away their troubles. You could see the people wincing in pain. But nobody complained. "I feel better already," announced an elderly man the instant his treatment was over.

I assumed that shamanism was something that ran in Raza's family, but he quickly set me straight. "I did not have the power to cure when I was young," he explained to my translator. "Then about 10 years ago I was possessed by a demon, what we call a *vazimba* in Madagascar. He asked me to do bad things to people. But I opposed this, and this caused a great fight between us. I resisted the demon and, in the end, he went out of me, and I got this power to cure."

A few days later, in the granite hills south of Fianarantsoa, I finally gave in to the urge to see

lemurs at a little gem called the Anja Reserve. Nestled at the base of a granite dome, the park preserves a patch of forest habitat for around 100 ring-tailed lemurs. Having never been hunted, they have little fear of man. They came straight up to my feet, looked me up and down with those big golden eyes, and then went bounding off into the undergrowth.

If there were no fady, however, there wouldn't be wildlife to ogle. "The reason these lemurs are here is that it is taboo for us to kill them," said ranger Samuel Randrianasolo.

Yet it was also in the south that I stumbled upon the only people I would find on the entire island who didn't believe in fady and other old ways. In the late 19th century a group of Betsileo, the other big highland tribe that traces its roots to Southeast Asia, cast aside their beliefs in favor of a Christian cult founded by a local farmer who had been exposed to Christianity by European missionaries. Most of his followers now live in a secluded village called Soatanana, about an hour's drive off National Route 7 along a deeply rutted dirt road. They call themselves the Church of the Awakening of the Lord's Disciples. Outside the village, they are most often called the "White People" because the members never wear anything but white clothing, even while they're working in the rice fields, herding their zebu cattle or sleeping in their orange-adobe homes at night.

I arrived just in time for Sunday rites, a procession of hundreds of dark-skinned people clad in bright white gowns and cream-colored fedoras, making their way to a red brick church in the middle of the village. Sitting beside me for the duration of the two-hour service, the English teacher from the village school explained how the people of Soatanana had found the light and now lived their lives according to a strict set of rules laid down in the Bible. It seemed to me they had created just another kind of fady.

For instance, I learned that the people of Soatanana feel obliged to feed anyone who visits their village, partially out of the goodness of their hearts and partially because they think that bad things will befall them if they don't. After the service, three French backpackers and I were swept up in a meandering procession to the village dining hall. But before we ate, we had to be cleansed, which entails members of the congregation removing our shoes and socks and, in the manner of Jesus, washing our naked feet with perfumed water. We were then seated along one side of a huge wooden table and served a meal of rice, pork and bananas while the congregation watched us in rapt attention, all the while crooning hymns in Ladysmith Black Mambazo fashion — an African version of the Last Supper in which I was an unwitting apostle.

Retracing my steps along national Route 7, I spent another night in Tana and then hopped an hour-and-fifteen-minute-long flight to Madagascar's northeast shore. My destination was Maroantsetra, one of the few places along the island's nearly 3,000-mile coastline where you can easily mix lemur-watching and beach-lazing. I expected a different vibe from the highlands, and that's exactly what I got: steamy tropical weather, white-sand strands, fishing boats instead of bullock carts and wooden shacks set along the shore rather than adobe dwellings around the edge of rice paddies. The biggest difference was human; people here looked straight out of Africa. But the coastal people were just as caught up in superstition as those in the highlands.

Maroantsetra sprawls along the shore of Antongil Bay, separated from the open ocean by the pristine Masoala Peninsula, which harbors the largest spread of coastal rain forest left in Madagascar — thus its cache: raw and unencumbered nature, including hundreds of humpback whales that give birth in Antongil each winter, chameleons that cling to branches along the shore and lemurs that wander both the mainland and Nosy Mangabe in the middle of the bay.

Suzette Botovato, who was raised in a village on the Masoala coast, was my guide on Nosy Mangabe. We hooked up at the Relais du Masoala, the palm-shaded beach resort where I was staying, and rode a motorboat across the mile or so of open water that separates Nosy Mangabe from the mainland. Making our way along a twisting trail through the thick woods that cloak the mountainous island, we came across a lone black-and-white lemur that purred like a big cat and

troops of brown lemurs munching fruit in the trees right above our heads.

But like everywhere else in Madagascar, it was impossible to avoid the parallel universe. For at the end of the trail were about a dozen tombs, secreted inside a cave. Suzette quickly explained, lest I commit a faux pas, that it’s fady to point your finger at tombs or touch them. “It’s also taboo to bring dogs to this island,” she added, “because the spirit of a child who was killed by a dog is said to live here.”

The saying goes, “seeing is believing,” but what if the things you witness are beyond the realm of what you consider logical? That was exactly what happened on my last day in Madagascar on an early morning trek to a mountaintop about an hour north of Tana. There, descendants of Andriatsivongo, a celebrated royal astrologer, are said to dwell.

My driver and guide told me of this place, but had never been there and weren’t exactly sure we could find it. Reaching the hilltop town of Ambohimanga, first capital of the united Merina kingdom, we asked around. A boy offered to lead the way. Driving around the back side of the hill, we reached an even smaller village and set off on foot along a dirt path. Higher and higher we climbed, into sunshine and blue sky, to a ridge perched high above the plateau. All of the northern highlands seemed to stretch out before us: rice paddies, ocher-colored villages and, in the hazy distance, a glimmer of Tana.

Even higher up was a cluster of thatched-roof adobe homes and a shrine built around the tomb of Andriatsivongo (scholars believe he died between 1830 and 1840). Two of his kinfolk tend the grave, both of them veteran ombiasy.

“Even the king [King Andrianampoinimerina who ruled until 1810] had to climb up to this mountaintop to see the astrologer,” said Eugene Ranaivo, one of the two descendants. “That is how important my ancestor was. If the royal astrologer says it is not an auspicious day, the king will not move or do a thing. But if he says the day is good, the king can move around and make decisions. Today people come from all over Madagascar to make a sacrifice and ask something from this astrologer.”

As we spoke, a steady stream of people arrived at the shrine, each out of breath from the steep ascent but eager to “see” the astrologer. Nearly all of them were young, under 30, and many wore Christian symbols, such as crosses, dangling from their necks. Some had even brought their own shamans to act as go-betweens with the spirit world. “They ask my ancestor to solve any problems they have,” Eugene explained. “People ask for wealth or good crops, for a baby boy or girl. But *nothing* bad against other people. This is not an evil place.”

Inside the cinder block shrine, the remains of the royal astrologer rested in a cement tomb covered by a red cloth on which devotees had placed candles, money and food offerings. One by one they came, kneeling before the grave, summoning Andriatsivongo with song, making their requests and then silently withdrawing.

All fairly routine, by Malagasy standards, until the arrival of a young woman in braids, the white clay that I had seen in the ombiasy market smeared behind both ears and the tips of her thumbs. Lighting a white candle that she placed upon the tomb, she asked the spirit to appear. Moments later, her entire body started to shiver, her eyes rolled back into their sockets and she began to speak in a demon-like voice, a gravely discourse that I didn’t think could come from her frail body. “The spirit is inside her,” Eugene whispered into my ear.

The woman doubled over, her body heaving up and down, whimpering words that no one could understand: the words of the ancient astrologer? Suddenly, as if someone invisible had snatched her from behind, she lurched backwards, into the arms of a companion who quickly smeared her

forehead with more of the white clay. Moments later she came out of the trance, eyes wide open, sweat pouring from her brow, utterly exhausted in both mind and body but quite obviously pleased: she was beaming. By all appearances, she got her answer — whatever it was she climbed up this mountain to ask.

As she departed, walking back down the mountain, I was left to ponder what I had just seen. I had no logical explanation. Was the young woman acting, was she hypnotized, or was she prey to her own extreme psychological suggestion? Had the spirit of the royal shaman possessed her, or had he maybe even exorcised a demon from her body?

I would have never thought so beforehand, but after two weeks in Madagascar, my various encounters with shaman and the deep conviction in a parallel universe that flowed from nearly everyone I came across, I was inclined to believe that the ancient — and long-dead — astrologer was in the room with us. My notions about life *and* death would never be the same.

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