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Traditional Healing in Madagascar: A Study of a Tandroy Ombiasa and his Methods of Healing

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SIT Study Abroad

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Traditional Healing in Madagascar: A Study of a Tandroy Ombiasa and his methods of healing



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Spring 2013

Acknowledgements

“I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought, and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder”-G.K Chesterton

There are simply too many things to be grateful for. Since the moment I arrived on this foot-shaped island up until now this semester has been nothing short of an experience. I have learned, I have grown perhaps more than I am aware of, and I have lived through the most fulfilling and challenging four months of my life. For this I must thank Jim, whose patience is probably what got us through many a hair-raising experience, and Barry, whose infinite knowledge of the world around him helped us to understand a little bit more the world we had been thrown into. I would also like to thank N’aina and Mamy for their constant help and support. My gratitude to the SIT staff is endless.

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Abstract:

In Madagascar, traditional healthcare is practiced and used by those who have no other access to healthcare or who simply cannot afford it. This form of healthcare is known throughout in the form of the Ombiasa. These men and women not only have extensive knowledge on the land around them and the healing capabilities of local plants, they are also the mediums in their communities between the spirit world that guides and the human world that is in constant need of guidance. In the Ifotoka and Morafeno region in the south of Madagascar there is a powerful and well known Ombiasa named Manjovala who deals mostly with spiritual ailments, but is also capable of dealing with physical ailments such as colds and bruises. The Ombiasa additionally serves as the go-to man for daily-life issues that arise such as romantic problems, bad fortune, etc. There are several components to the Ombiasa's practice: medicinal plants, sacred objects, sacred places, and the spirit. Each one of these components plays a crucial role in the healing of his patients. After a two week study of the Ombiasa and his methods of healing, several things became clear- all of the various aspects are used together to heal a person, spiritual ailments are for the most part what people come to the Ombiasa for, and that what the Ombiasa does is more than just heal. In Morafeno and Ifotoka, he is the high priest, the leader of the people, and the head of a practice that transcends simple health care and is firmly rooted in a culture and a people.

Introduction

Healthcare practices vary greatly throughout the world, from pharmaceutical drugs and synthetic treatments to the use of the land as a natural pharmacy. This use of the natural world as a source of healthcare is still present in many indigenous communities around the world (WHO,). This form of health care is not simply a relationship between the environment and the people; it is embedded in the very culture and lives of the people who draw from it. In many cases the health care providers are what have been termed “magico-religious” healers, as they heal through the support of a super-natural power that then guides them to the use of the environment around them(Winkelman,1990). This can be found throughout Madagascar in the form the Ombiasa, who rely on the guidance of spirits to treat patients. In the south of Madagascar, a region inhabited mostly by the Tandroy and their zebu, this is the practice that reigns supreme. To understand this system, we must first understand the Tandroy culture itself and how they view concepts such as God and man.

The term “Tandroy” literally means people of the thorns, in reference to the dry, harsh, prickly lands the Tandroy have been known to take root in (book). They are for the most part cattle herders, who attach much importance to their zebu and having as many as possible. The zebu are not only used to represent their wealth, but are also used in the Ombiasa’s healing practices, which we will address a little later on. The land they live on permits them to only grow plants like manioc and a certain kind of potatoes, tough foods with little nutrition. The difficult life of the Tandroy could possibly be one of the factors that shapes their view of God, recognized by the name “Agnahare” in this region. Unlike the popular Christian-theology-dominated view of God as an entity that is always positive, always helpful, the Tandroy see him as someone with

lots of power, unpredictable, and neither good nor bad. He can provide good fortune and he can also be negligent (Josua project). This view of God as something that takes and gives life, destroys and creates at whim, is something that is apparent in the very culture of the people. This must first be understood in order to conceptualize the Ombiasa's practices.

In Ifotoka and Morafeno in particular, two villages in the south of Madagascar, the Ombiasa deals with Andriamena, a Malagasy term that translates into the "Red King". This is his name throughout Madagascar, but here he is known more familiarly by the name Belily. He is considered to be the king spirit or kokolamp of the land, and it is he who the Ombiasa calls upon to heal people and to guide him with his power and knowledge of the land. There are other kokolamp that work with Belily, known as his "spirit soldiers". All of these kokolamp are known and recognized by the Tandroy themselves as dark spirits. In a western context Belily would perhaps be considered the equivalent to what we know as the devil. For the Tandroy, he is the one that responds and is the one that has always been there to support them. Considering how they view God, their view of Belily is similar in that they recognize that he too is a complex being, one that they must always please through sacrifices and offerings of money, rum, and other gifts. Everything must be done with his permission and guidance- through possession of the Ombiasa he listens to his clients and then tells the Ombiasa what he needs to do, what plants he must use and how.

What's interesting about the Ombiasa is that he deals mostly with spiritual ailments. Though he is capable of asking Belily for help with certain physical ailments, grave illnesses like cancer or anything that's not easily treatable is directed towards the hospital. His expertise lies in the healing of those possessed by bad spirits, or who have been cursed by either other Ombiasa or those who know how to use sikily, a different sort of spirit channeled through the

seeds of the Voafany plant. The study began with the intention to understand and analyze the various ways in which the Ombiasa heals, thus several categories of healing were constructed: the use of the spirit, medicinal plants, objects, and the use of certain spaces. Two weeks with the Ombiasa revealed that these categories are not as segregated as was previously believed, as it is the spirit that commands the use of the other three categories. It is this use of the spirit that we will analyze in conjunction with plant use, sacred objects and spaces, all of which play an important role in the treatment of those who go to and believe in the Ombiasa and the spirits that guide him.

Methods:

This study was conducted in the village of Morafeno(Figure 1-2) over a two week period from April 9th to April 23rd. Several anthropological and social research methods were used to try and understand the practice of the Ombiasa- observation, participant observation, semi-structured qualitative interviews and discussion (Bryman,2008)

The Ombiasa

Manjovala is around his late fifties and is one of three other Ombiasa in the region. He is also considered the head of Morafeno and is well respected in Ifotoka.

Observation:

Observations ranged from the Ombiasa's daily life and relations with his community to what takes place in ceremonies and how they function. This was done by taking photographs and simply recording whatever was taking place. All observations were jotted down in a small notebook, and then later on in the day transferred to another notebook where the observations were expanded upon and clarified.

Participant observation:

On more than one occasion I was able to participate in the ceremonies, not only as a spectator but as the center of the ritual. During these times, all proceedings were mentally recorded and questions were held until the end. This method allowed for a different perspective on the practices of the Ombiasa. After being in several ceremonies, certain patterns and customs became clear as they were repeated many times. This allowed for a deeper understanding of the customs and rituals that take place in this village. After participating in a ceremony, all thoughts were explained and reviewed in a notebook.

Semi-structured interview and Discussions:

Semi-structured interviews with the Ombiasa took place in certain settings, such as the places in which ceremonies took place or in the forest during a search for medicinal plants used often by the Ombiasa. Discussing the practices of the Ombiasa in certain settings allowed for deeper questioning and gave the opportunity to ask about the various objects used in that setting or the importance behind a certain setting. A lot of questions came naturally during discussions, during and after ceremonies, and when in or near sacred places, though many were pre-planned. Questions ranged from identifying objects to plants and their properties to personal questions about Manjovala and how he became involved in this line of work.



Figure 1: Map of Madagascar, Ifotoka is located in the southern region, marked here by a red star.



Figure 2: Map around Ifotaka, Morefeno is a village off to the north-east of Ifotaka.

Results:

After two weeks of observing, questioning, and attempting to understand the complex, many layered system of the Ombiasa's practices, initial views of the Ombiasa as simply a health care provider morphed into a man who not only was the head of his village, but a powerful medium through which the people could communicate with and receive aid from the Spirits of the land. The Ombiasa deals with a variety of ailments, from spiritual to physical, but specializes in the spiritual. Spiritual ailments look just like actual diseases but stem from a bad spirit and can be cured simply by the removal of this spirit. He is also the remover of curses and diviner of futures, when asked. In order to understand the various components of this practice, we will first review the role of the spirits and how they are dealt with. With this as our background, we will then look at the other aspects of the practice that are also controlled and affected by the spirit: ceremonies, sacred spaces and objects, and medicinal plant use.

The Role of the Spirit:

There are about 100 or so spirits, known throughout as kokolampo, that the Ombiasa works with. Eight of these kokolamp are considered not only important but are also used the most often. Belily is the king of all the kokolamp, they must all consult him before they give any advice or try to heal others. He is known to live in a mountain to the west of Morafeno called Avohimyroro, but can be anywhere in the forest or in the mountains throughout Madagascar. The other seven kokolamp are Alimbe, Manjakamena, Vorimena, Andriamano, Saihova, Marosolohotse, and Pelamanintsy. These kokolampo, along with many others, are known to inhabit the sacred forest Talifaly, in which ceremonies for the gravely ill (spiritually) are held.

Each kokolampo has a certain specialty, and are called upon depending on the ailment or request of the client.

In this region, the Ombiasa works with either a kokolampo or a tromba spirit. The difference between the two is that the kokolamp is simply a spirit, a being that has been around since the beginning of the practice of Ombiasa in Madagascar. Tromba are ancestor spirits,



which in this region means the spirits of the Tandroy that once lived there. From what I gathered, the Ombiasa can communicate with several different spirits, but works regularly with only one of these spirits. Not all have access to powerful spirits. The Ombiasa that I studied with, Manjovala, was the only Ombiasa in the area dealt with and could work with Belily, which was also why he was considered the most powerful in the region. Unlike some Ombiasa, Manjovala's title was inherited, passed down from generations of fathers and sons working with the "Red King". The objects that Manjovala uses come from the first Ombiasa in the family somewhere around the 1700s, who crafted almost all of the materials that he uses today. Some things were added to the collection over the years by later Ombiasa, but most of the practices and objects were inherited. There are many Ombiasa who buy their way into the practice, few have the chance to inherit sacred objects and ancient practices. These Ombiasa usually deal with much weaker spirits, and their objects, all of which were bought or given to them by the Ombiasa they apprenticed under, are considered to not have as much power as those who inherited theirs. Just as the spirits work together, the Ombiasa also work together on occasion, and all consult Belily when they are unsure. During a ceremony for a small child who was afflicted by some sort of spiritual ailment, the child and his mother came to Manjovala with a

female Ombiasa who worked with a tromba spirit. She had come with the family to thank Belily for guiding her to heal the child. This shows how all spirits and Ombiasa heed and respect Belily, and, par rapport, the Ombiasa that can channel him.

There is a distinction made between bad and good kokolampo, the kokolampo is not considered to always be an evil spirit as the Josua project's study of the Tandroy implies. The



type of spirit that the Ombiasa deals with depends on the quality of his own spirit. As my translator explained, an Ombiasa who wants to use the power to hurt others, attracts and uses bad spirits, known as “Ratsyfanahy” in Malagasy. The Ombiasa has

the option to choose whether or not he wants to work with a bad spirit. Though, all spirits have the potential to provide both good and bad services.

This also depends on how the Ombiasa's powers are acquired. For Manjovala, he knew early on that he would have to take his father's position as Ombiasa one day, but at the time he had qualms about dealing with the spirit and refused to inherit the post. His story is that at some point before his father's death, the spirit gripped him and made him very sick. He visited several hospitals throughout the south of Madagascar, none of which could treat him. His family convinced him to return to the village where he was who tricked into going to a ceremony. The minute the music began to play and the spirit was called Manjovala began to dance the dance of the spirit, which meant that he had the kokolampo within him. From then on he accepted his fate



as the next Ombiasa. For him, dealing with the spirit was not something that he chose or could avoid dealing with.

Ceremonies and Sacred Spaces:

A large part of the Ombiasa's practice happens in ceremonies. It is through these ceremonies that he is

able to get into contact with the spirits that guide him. Ceremonies take place only in certain sacred spaces, depending on the gravity of the illness and the will of the kokolamp.

Sacred spaces:

There are two sacred spaces in which ceremonies take place in Morefeno- the Valolalana and at Talifaly. The Valolalana is a house located on the north-east side of the village, north-east being a very sacred direction, and is basically where most gatherings and ceremonies happen. The word Valolalana translates into "House of eight doors", describing the two doors located on each side of the building. During a ceremony all of the doors are opened, symbolizing the fact that the spirit can enter from any direction. This is house is home to all of the Ombiasa's tools, medicinal plant stock, and sacred objects that he uses to communicate with the spirit. In the center of the Valolalana is an area reserved for the spirit where many kokolamp-related objects, such as two bird-house type structures and ancient zebu horns filled with medicinal plants, rest. This area is called



“Miambesatse” and is considered the home of the spirits when they enter the Valolalana. Only the Ombiasa is allowed to touch things in this area. There are objects all around the Valolalana, from the plants that hang along the ceiling to the sacks of medicinal branches that sit on a hook on the wall, to the very costume of the Ombiasa, donned only on certain occasions. This building is located right outside of the Ombiasa’s household and next to a tamarind tree that is also considered sacred. Every ceremony is held inside the Valolalana unless otherwise directed by Belily, which in that case would be for someone who is gravely ill and has been advised to visit the second sacred space for ceremonies: Talifaly.

Talifaly refers to a large section of forest located near the corn crops the village cultivates. It is all primary forest, as it is fady to cut down or even enter the area unless you are the Ombiasa, and therefore has remained untouched for many years. Only the Ombiasa of Belily is allowed to enter, and even he must ask permission from the kokolamp. Just about everything in this forest can be used for medicinal purposes and can treat the spiritually ill. The sacredness of this forest was designated under the command of Belily by the first Ombiasa in the family and has stayed off limits since then. The entire forest is considered to be the home of all kokolamp, except Belily who lives in Avohimyroro, but occasionally is believed to come to visit his soldiers or to be at a ceremony. The Tali is the most important part of this forest, it is a tall tree around which these ceremonies take place. The forest itself is thick and clearly rich in biodiversity, the wide range of plants allowing quick access and a variety of materials for the Ombiasa to use in the ceremony. He also comes here when told by the spirit to collect medicinal plants or to restock.



Outside of ceremonies and rituals, there is another sacred space that only the Ombiasa is permitted to visit : Avorimyroro. This mountain to the west of the village is considered to be the home of Belily. A large cave in the mountain is the dwelling of the king kokolamp and is visited on occasion by the Ombiasa, further explanation of why will be in the sacred objects and medicinal plants section. Some of the medicinal plants he keeps in stock come from this mountain, but not many. It is believed that Belily generally inhabits mountains, and has many dwellings though out Madagascar.

The tamarind tree in the center of the village is another sacred location. No ceremonies take place underneath, it is generally used as a hangout spot. It is taboo to spit or perform any sort of unclean act underneath this tree. There are goat horns in various places, and a nest of birds. The story behind this tree and the birds that inhabit it begin with a very young Manjovala trying to decide where to build his home, sometime shortly after becoming the Ombiasa. According to the Ombiasa, Belily told him to build his house next to the tamarind tree, and that once he did a certain type of bird would come and live in it. A couple days after the house was built flocks of these birds began to build nests and live in the tamarind tree. At the time this was a blessing, as these birds are considered good luck to the young. It is believed that they do not like older people, and that if they appear outside of the home of an older person, it usually means death. These anecdotes are just an example as to the role the kokolamp or spirits in general play in the Tandroy culture, daily life, and how that intertwines with the land around them.

Ceremonies:

Ceremonies are a crucial part of the Ombiasa's work. This is how he communicates with the spirit and determines the ailments of his patients and how to heal them. In Malagasy the term for ceremony is "Fivoriana" and can be used to refer to any type of ceremony. Every ceremony begins the same way- the Ombiasa burns amber from the tree Ramy and lays out his or the client's offerings (rum, money, honey, etc). He then sits in his chair that is located in the north-east corner of the Valolalana and turns his head in that direction and waits for the spirit to arrive. Once the Spirit arrives he talks to him, welcomes him, musical instruments are generally playing at this point. After a conversation with the kokolamp, the Ombiasa then becomes possessed by the kokolamp, who then begins to ask about the problem at hand. The first wife of the Ombiasa is the one who responds, explaining the situation and thanking him for coming. From this point the ceremony can vary, sometimes a case is made by the person representing the client, or the Ombiasa begins to dance, or he begins to talk to the person right away. In the cases that I observed, once he was possessed he would become very animated and depending on what the client was there for, would crouch in front of them and begin to either predict their future or tell them about their predicament (if someone had cursed him or not). The spectators would play music on and off during the ceremony depending on what was happening, and would initiate dancing, which the spirit would always eventually join in on. The purpose of the music and dancing is to make the



Spirit feel at home and welcomed. After the problem has been solved (the kokolamp has offered a solution) or futures have been predicted and many thanks and handshakes are exchanged, the kokolamp dances one last time before leaving. The Ombiasa is back in his chair sometimes with little recollection as to what happened.

There are several very important ceremonies that can take place in the Valolalana : the welcoming ceremony, Atihena, Marriage, and “Fahasiarovana ny kokolampo”-the birthday of the kokolampo. The welcoming ceremony, which is simply just called “Fivoriana” like most other ceremonies, must be performed for every new person who enters the village and Valolalana. The point of this ceremony is to introduce the person to Belily and to explain why that person is in house of worship. It is believed that this ceremony must be performed to avoid angering Belily. During the ceremony, a sheep is brought in and placed in the Miambesatse, the middle and most sacred part of the Valolalana, before the new person. A tamarind tree branch is placed on the sheep along with a bowl below its neck. The ceremony begins as it usually does, with the Ombiasa conversing and then becoming possessed by the spirit. The spirit welcomes the guest, predicts good fortune and requests a payment when the good fortune comes about. The goat is then sacrificed, with his blood collected in a bowl. The Ombiasa takes the tamarind branch and bowl and begins to fling the blood firstly on the guest and then on the spectators. The guest is officially welcomed into the house of Belily.

The second most important ceremony is Antihena- the blood ceremony. This is a ceremony in which the Ombiasa, under Belily's command, chooses someone that he considers worthy to become something like a blood relation. This person is never a family member, usually an outsider who the Ombiasa considers a very close friend. The blood ceremony is meant to tie together both parties until death, both of which are not allowed to commit hypocrisy or to lie to one another risking seven deaths on both ends if either were to do so. This ceremony is rare, Manjovala has only done this three times in his life. The ceremony is performed by another Ombiasa, who takes a knife and nicks both the Ombiasa and the other person. As the blood rises



to the surface, the Ombiasa performing the ceremony requests a sum of money to offer. This he places around a bowl filled with sacred water and begins to chant, sprinkling a bit of the water around the bowl and into the air. He then wets his hand and takes a dab of blood from the

Ombiasa and presses it into the chest of the other person and then does the same to the Ombiasa. After promising to never lie or commit hypocrisy, with the risk of seven deaths on either side, the Ombiasa and his now considered blood relation must exchange gifts. The Atihena means that the person is now not only considered family to the Ombiasa, but also to Belily.

Marriage is another ceremony that takes place in the Valolalana and is probably one of the simplest ceremonies. The couple comes into the Valolalana before the Ombiasa holding hands. After the Ombiasa goes through his usual rites, he, as Belily, takes his hand and slices the

couples hands apart. The couple is officially married under Belily and must return to him whenever they are having problems.

The last ceremony, and probably one of the most important, is the “Fahasiarovana ny kokolampo”, a three day ceremony celebrating the birthday of the spirits. A zebu is usually sacrificed and eaten, and every day ceremonies are held in the Valolalana to celebrate the spirits. Each spirit comes in, one by one, to possess the Ombiasa and dance and celebrate.

In terms of ceremonies and sacred places, there is a ceremony to enter the Talifaly that is a bit different from the average ritual. It always starts off in the Valolalana, and it is Belily who must say if the person is sick enough to go to Talifaly. After this has been decided, the client, spectators, and Ombiasa make their way to the forest. The Ombiasa must go in before everyone else enters and beg pardon of the Spirit, he does this completely naked and must crawl into the area. Once Belily has given his permission for the others to enter he calls the rest of the crowd over. The sick must bring a sheep to the ceremony, they cannot enter without a sheep to offer. Once around the tree, the sheep is tied to the top of Tali while the sick is placed underneath, sitting at the base of the tree. The spectators circle around and play music. They cut the throat of the sheep whose blood showers the sick. He spreads the blood around his body and the music continues. At that point they must wait to see whether or not he will have a reaction to the blood and music. If he begins to tremble and dance, then he is indeed spiritually sick and can be treated. If he does not react to the ceremony, then he is actually sick beyond the Ombiasa’s capabilities of healing and must be sent to the hospital. For the spiritually sick, the cure lies in the very forest of Talifaly. The sheep is cooked and eaten entirely on spot, sometimes it is brought back to the Valolalana, that again depends on Belily’s orders. Every ceremony has a fee, the Talifaly is the most expensive ceremony from 40,000 ariari with a sheep to a zebu and

100,000 ariari minimum for those who are gravely ill. For general ceremonies in the Valolalana, the bills were generally small , from 100 to 2,000 ariari. It is belily who requests payment.

Sacred objects and Medicinal plants:

The Ombiasa relies heavily on various objects and medicinal plants to perform everything from healing his clients to removing the bad-fortune from their lives. Every object and plant that he uses is under the guide and command of the spirit, in this case the kokolamp Belily.

Sacred objects

Sacred objects can range from ancient zebu horns filled with medicinal plants and passed down for many generations to rocks baptized by Belily. The most important of these objects are the collection of zebu horns located in the Valolalana. Each horn represents one of the many kokolamp the Ombiasa works with. Belily and Alymbe, the strongest and most sort after kokolamp, have the biggest horns and are used often in Manjovala's ceremonies. Each horn is filled with medicinal plants and objects that represent what they are capable of helping clients with. For example, the horn representing the kokolamp Marosolohotse has a crocodile's tooth in it, which means that it can protect against crocodiles or venomous creatures. These horns also have their own healing properties. Marosolohotse's horn for example can also be used to treat those who cough up blood. To treat this, the Ombiasa would lick the top of the horn during a ceremony and then spit into the mouth of the sick. Licking the tops of horns is something that occurs often during ceremonies. Sometimes this is preceded by the saliva being placed somewhere on the client, and sometimes it is simply just the request of Belily and nothing is done afterwards. The horns that represent the kokolamp Marosolohotse and Pelamanintsy were the first horns to be created and are considered the parents of the kokolamp, even though they are

weaker than Belily. According to the locals, these horns were used back when the French were still in control, and were selling slaves to Reunion. The Malagasy who worked in this trade with the French would rub the horns on their faces, making others weak when they see them and easy to kidnap and sell to the French. Though these horns are rarely used in ceremonies today, this not only shows the variety of powers these spirits are believed to have, but also the various ways in which this power can be and has been used.

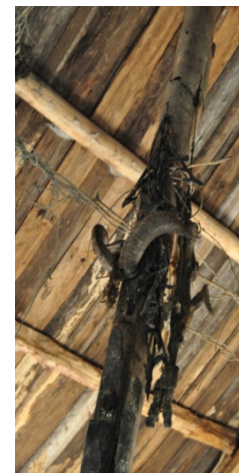
Along with zebu horns, the center of the Valolalana is also home to two bird-house type houses made of wood, called “Chano hery” or “House of the Spirits”. These houses are said to



be the temporary homes of the kokolamp that visit. They are used in ceremonies and are also a source of medicine. During a ceremony, the Ombiasa may take a cup of some sort of liquid intended for the client to drink and circle it a couple times around each house, sanctifying the liquid. In

terms of healing, for those with respiratory problems, the Ombiasa will turn and grate the sides of the houses, then place the shavings into water which the client must drink.

The Tohambalo is a pole in the Miambesatse that is considered extremely sacred. The pole has eight steps carved into it, along with goat horns and bones of a sheep. At the very top of the pole is a hook upon which Belily’s horn is placed during ceremonies. The idea is that when he comes in to the Valolalana, he walks down the eight steps to communicate with his



clients. This pole is also used to sanctify liquids and is sometimes touched during a ceremony.

In the far south west corner in front of the pole is the vory, a wooden well that holds the sacred water of Belily. This is used to purify the Valolalana, to baptize people, and is also oft used as



an ingredient in treating the ill. In terms of music, the drum used to welcome the spirit in ceremonies is called Longoro. Made of zebu skin and wood, this drum can be played by anyone during a ceremony, but is generally in this instance played by the Ombiasa's second wife.

Sikily are both objects and a sort of ceremony. Sikily are a collection of seeds from the Voafany plant, and are considered to contain a spirit different from that of the kokolampo or tromba. They can be consulted and used by anyone who knows how to read them, not just the Ombiasa. Sikily are used to deal with everyday problems, for example a couple requested Manjovala use the sikily to see why they were having bad luck with their shop lately, and to figure out how they can remove the bad luck. The sikily can also be used to divine the future or help someone either to gain something or the affections of someone. The ceremony is simpler than those that deal with the kokolampo. The Ombiasa spills the seeds from a sack, grabs a couple spits on



them before placing the seeds back into the pile. He then begins to turn the seeds and chant. Eventually he takes a group of seeds from the pile and sets them a part, taking two seeds from the smaller pile until 1 or 2 are left. These remaining seeds are the beginnings of what will be four rows and four columns of seeds. He does this until the set is complete. This first four by

four square is the question. He then does this over again, creating another square of eight columns and four rows, the spirit's response. If the response predicts bad luck, he scratches the pile and starts all over again. He does this until the sikily predict good fortune. The ceremony for the couple with bad luck had three parts to it. It began with the sikily which took the Ombiasa a couple of hours to find a positive divination. The sikily informed the Ombiasa that they had been cursed by Gris-Gris. Gris-Gris can basically be viewed as the magic or spell of the sikily. It can be either good or bad depending on what the person uses it for- a curse or a wish. Apparently someone used Gris-Gris to give the couple bad luck, and the only way to remove this would be to sacrifice a chicken, and drink a little of its blood in a honey and rice powder mixture. The next day was the last part of the ceremony, where the Ombiasa nicked the forehead, arms, back, and chest of each person and then spread the rest of the mixture onto them. This was supposed to remove bad luck and insure good fortune. Another example of how sikily can be used is in the case of unrequited love. If a client is looking for a way to get the person they like to notice or fall for them, the sikily will provide the mixture they must use and how to use it. It usually involves honey, and either placing it in ones palm and shaking hands with the desired person or rubbing it on your face and looking at the person, depending on the spirit's instructions.

Medicinal Plants:

These objects are generally used in conjunction with medicinal plants. The forests of Morafeno are filled with medicinal trees and low lying herbs that treat both spiritual and physical ailments. It was made clear that serious ailments, such as cancer, are not within the realm of the Ombiasa's healing ability. Spiritual afflictions and basic physical afflictions (from stomach problems to a cold) are things that he can treat through the guidance of Belily. Many of the plants that were shown by the Ombiasa could be used for both types of ailments Voafaria,

tsimena, and sarongaza are a couple examples of plants that can be used for spiritual as well as physical ailments. The leaves and stems of the voafaria vine can be boiled in water and drunk to treat gastro-intestinal ailments and children's fever. On the other hand, if it is boiled in water with a few sikily seeds, and consumed, it is said to protect the person from adversaries. Tsimena is a small, low lying herb that treats menstrual cramps and whatever spiritual ailment Belily recommends it for. Sarongaza is used for constipation and those possessed by a bad spirit. This too is boiled and consumed through drink. Other plants such as relefo, jabihy, and sognombarike are used uniquely for physical ailments. Relefo is one of the many plants used to treat soft spots in the skulls of newborn. Jabihy, interestingly, can almost be considered a sort of birth control. Women use it by rubbing it on private areas, making it dry and difficult for intercourse to take place. Sognombarike treats broken bones along with back problems, and is applied by taking the red layer underneath the bark of the tree and rubbing it on the area where the bone is broken.

Many of these plants are common knowledge to the people in the area, but not many know as much as the Ombiasa who claims his knowledge comes from the spirit. Those who have not been accepted by or baptized by Belily are not allowed to take anything from the forest. Only his clients and followers may profit from his forest. For things like soft-spots on the skulls of infants or bruises, people generally know enough to treat themselves without the Ombiasa's help. It is the more grave diseases and ailments, spiritual and physical, that the Ombiasa is consulted for.

Further Study:

Each aspect of the Ombiasa's practice could be expanded into a deeper study. I would recommend a future student to pick one section, in conjunction with the spirit since they are inseparable, and try to learn as much as possible about how that works. For example, the

medicinal plants that the Ombiasa uses, a student could do a more in depth study of what he uses and how, making a sort of field guide to medicinal plants in the Morafeno region. There could also be a study done on the conservation aspect of the beliefs that surround the Ombiasa. Two areas in Morafeno are taboo for people to enter :Talifaly and Avorimyroro, a forest and a mountain. It would be interesting to see if they are biodiversity-rich areas because of these taboos. A study on the spirit could also serve as a full-fledged study, as the spirits are a large part of what the Ombiasa does and there is still much that has yet to be understood about how that works.

Conclusion:

The practices of the Ombiasa vary from region to region, between ethnic groups and even within. What seems to hold true for all practitioners is the use of the spirit to determine illnesses and treatments. How the knowledge has been required, how the practice is done is what varies the most. The Tanosy, for example, who had to relearn these practices from the Tandroy after losing a lot of their knowledge under French oppression and colonization, depend on what they call the raza for guidance. The raza are considered ancestor spirits unlike kokolampo and similar to tromba, and the Ombiasa use plants to induce a sort of trance to communicate with them. What's interesting about the Tanosy Ombiasa is that they are mostly consulted for spiritual ailments (Lyon&Hardesty,) This is not unlike the Tandroy Ombiasa Manjovala who specializes in spirit ailments. In Lyon and Hardesty's study of the Tanosy Ombiasa they noted that faith in the Ombiasa is necessary for the patient to be cured. In the end, this is what it comes down to- faith.

Lyall Watson says sums it up well in his review of traditional healers throughout the world:

“I believe that we are involved in everything that happens. Each one of us takes part in what Nicholas Humphrey calls “weaving the illusion of reality.” Only part of what is perceived comes through our senses; the remainder comes from within, and it is very difficult to decide which is which.”

In the end, what takes place in the Valolalana is a reality for a people who have lived by this spirit and land for generations upon generation. It is a reality not unlike those who drink the blood of Christ or pray five times day. It is not only a belief but an alternative to the distant hospital and far-too expensive western medicine. Though he cannot treat all ailments, he treats what he can, using the resources at hand. The Ombiasa is a traditional healer first, foremost, and always, who relies on the spirit of the land to take care of him and his people.

Appendix:

Plant name	Description	Type of Ailment	What it does	Treatment
Voafaria	Vine, fruit in leafy fold, edible	Spirit/Physical	-Protection against adversaries -Children's fever -gastrointestinal ailments	For protection, boil plant in water with sikily -For fever and other ailments, boil and drink
Tsimena	Small, low lying plant, fruits during April-May	Spirit/Physical	Varies for spiritual, depends on what Belily recommends it for -Menstrual cramps	Boil the plant (leaves root stem and all) in water, then drink
Sarongaza		Spirit/Physical	-If someone is possessed by a spirit -Constipation	For both ailments, boil and drink
Romba	Minty scent	Spirit/Physical	-Depends on Belily's command on how to use it for the spiritual -Treats colds	For colds, simply smell the leaves of the plant
Trongatse	Bitter tasting leaves, long pea-pod like fruits. Flower is dark pink, also known in other regions as the plant used to treat childhood leukemia	Spirit/Physical	-Belily -Headaches -Also used as antibiotic -	Drink -Rub leaves on bruises
Relefo	Tree/bush	Physical	-Soft spots on newborn skulls	Drink -Take root rub on rock, take the powder that is created and place on roof of mouth
Malaifere	Arbuste, fruits in october	Physical	Treats cuts	-Mash up the leaves then mix with water and place on cut, you could also chew up leaves and place on cut

Hento		Varies	Treats whatever Belily says it can treat, generally not used-poison	
Jabihy		Physical	Birth control	Women rubs it on private areas which become dry, makes entering /intercourse difficult
Sognombarike		Physical	Broken bones and back problems	Use the red layer beneath bark, rub on skin where bone is broken, also can rub on back
Darosiky	Tree used by sifaka	Physical	Vitamin	Use the white layer underneath bark, place in milk and drink, strengthens you -Maki use same part of plant and place it on genitals after birthing
Kepake	Bush, branches have reddish tips	Physical	-Coughs -Treats women when "the cold enters them after birth", warms them up	Boil branch and leaves, drink
Rohondroho	Shaped like fingers, no leaves	Physical	-Diarrhea	Boil plant, drink
Tamboro		Physical	-Stomach ache	Chew plant, leaves and fruit, swallow liquid, spit out the rest
Feka		Physical	-Vitamin -cuts	Take off skin of branch, boil and drink -Take off skin, rub onto wound
Hazolava		Physical	-Eyes -Gastrointestinal -Back problems -Bruises -male erection	Boil in water, drop a little in eyes -boil and drink for male erection and back problems

				-For bruises take piece of bark and put in water, rub
Totongagne	Vine, bitter	Physical	-Gastrointestinal ailments	Boil and drink
Manongo	Tree with thick, short, spikey bark	Physical	-After birthing, warms those who are cold -Tooth aches	Use bark or roots, boil and drink -for toothaches -men use roots, women use bark
Singena		Physical	-Gastrointestinal ailments	Boil and drink water with branch
Mangnary (Palisandre)		Physical	-Dysentery -Bruises	Boil wood and drink -Boil and rub liquid on cut
Tsiongake		Spirit	-Belily specifically must recommend this, never used without him asking for it -kokolamp lives within -Used in a ceremony	Prevents displacement, so that you will never be displaced, from your home or job, etc.
Mosese		Physical /Gris-Gris	-Bobo, bruises that won't go away -People you don't like	Use roots, rub on bobo-can also make a drink from branch and leaves -To get rid of someone you take bark and scratch sikily pattern into it, throw in their courtyard, it will chase them away.
Sandrisandry		Physical	Gastrointestinal	Boil and drink branch with leaves and flowers
Kita	Vine	Physical	-Children with stomach pains or diarrhea	Boil and drink once a day, only for children
Sahondra	All green plant,skinny, low to the ground	Physical	-Treats soft spots (infants) and if the eyes roll back -dysentery	Boil and drink
Ampolibe	Tree	Physical	-Gastrointestinal	Boil and drink

			-blackouts	branch and leaves
Fangitse	Vine	Physical/Spirit	-Gingivitis -Spirit healing	-Boil the bark, rinse and spit
Sangnira	Tree	Physical	Softspot, infants	Mash up leaves and smother head. Closes open softspots
Valihondro	Tree	Physical	-Headache	Carve bark, rub against stone, then rub on forehead
Kopoke	Tree	Physical	-Poison -Can be used to treat cuts	If you place the leaves under your armpit, you will die, but liquid from leaf can be used to treat grave cuts
Zira		Physical	Eye problems	Boil leaves and wash face, must demand Belily before using this
Sarihisase		Physical	Dysentry, diarrhea	Use entire plant boil and drink
Vahiamalo	Vine, found growing around daro tree	Physical/spirit	-Erectile dysfunction -Spirit ailments -Weak muscles in general	Boil and drink

Dictionary

1. Ombiasa- Traditional healer throughout Madagascar
2. Kokolampo- Spirits of the land
3. Tromba- Ancestor spirits
4. Ratsyfanahy- Bad spirits, dark spirits
5. Valolalana- House of eight doors, where all ceremonies take place
6. Miambesatse- Center of Valolalana, home of the spirit
7. Atihena- Blood bonding ceremony
8. Fivoriana- General term for ceremony
9. Fahasiarovana ny kokolampo- Birthday of the kokolampo, three day festival
10. Sikily- Sacred object and ceremony, seeds of the voafany plant used for divination, solving problems, performing Gris-Gris
11. Gris-Gris- Spell, curse, magic of Sikily seeds. Can be used for both good and bad.
12. Vory- Wooden well that holds the sacred water
13. Silimo- Dried out Voatavo shell with seeds inside, used to protect pregnant women and to dislodge things from throat
14. Tohambalo- Pole in the Miambesatse
15. Antsiva- Horn used before and during ceremony, calls the spectators as well as the spirits
16. Taritarike- Dried out vine hung around Valolalana, believed to be the necklace of Belily. Used to attract the spirit.
17. Salika Tohira- Necklaces worn by Ombiasa during ceremony.
18. Trano hery- House of the spirits, located in the Miambesatse.

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