Summer 2011

How Do Religion and Belief Systems Influence Traditional Medicine and Health Care in Madagascar?

Whitney Franklin

SIT Study Abroad

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection

Part of the Community Health and Preventive Medicine Commons, Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons, Family, Life Course, and Society Commons, and the Medicine and Health Commons

Recommended Citation


https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/1096

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact digitalcollections@sit.edu.
How Does Religion and Belief Systems influence Traditional Medicine and Health Care in Madagascar?

The Idea

Religion and beliefs consistently shape social structures, laws, and even medicine. In Madagascar, this is extremely evident when considering traditional medicine but also exists in modern medicine. Christianity and traditional beliefs are the two main systems that have shaped traditional medicine to what it has become today. These opposites function as a duality that becomes apparent when looking at certain events in Madagascar’s history and the examination of the evolution and rituals performed in the different types of traditional medicine. Through the methodology of interviewing traditional healers and gathering historical information from experts in lectures, I can make sure to get the most accurate information and the point of view from those participating in the system themselves.

The History

The arrival of western medicine and medical teachings didn’t find its way to Madagascar until the deliberate arrival of people. Because of this, in the early 1800’s, missionaries were the first to bring European medicine to Madagascar when king Radama I introduced Christianity to his people (Randria, 16 June, 2011). This also marked the beginning of religious turmoil between Christianity and more traditional beliefs. The death of Radama I resulted in his widow becoming his successor. She was known as Queen Ranavalona I and began persecuting Christians and expelled foreign missionaries during her reign of 33 years. Her successor, Radama II, restored freedom of religion and the return of religious missionaries. During this time, several schools were created which amplified medical teachings. Then, in 1868, queen Ranavalona II turned the tides by destroying idols and talismans that were tied to traditional beliefs. In hope of a more
Europeanized image free of the habits and the ancestral customs opposite to the Christian
morality she instated the Code of 305 Articles in which the exercise of traditional practitioners
was prohibited (Randria, 16 June, 2011). Only recently has a decree been created to combat the
prohibition. This code is still being reviewed by parliament to confirm the legality. Although
medicine benefited from scientific progress, it has preserved a part of the irrationality and magic
of the beginning. “[Although] man relies on the hospital’s high technology, [he simultaneously
continues to] believe in supernatural cures” (Randria, 16 June, 2011).

Now-a-days, about 55% of the population keep to traditional beliefs while 40% have
adopted Christianity (Von Pischke, August 1994; pg. 4). Furthermore, in many ways, the two
have become intertwined. Such is exemplified in the famous story of circumcision, a procedure
that has been tied to religion in western cultures. As the tale goes, Radama II, whose reign last
for only a short duration of 2 years (1861-1863), banned group circumcision. Later on, when a
mass sickness, Ramanenjana, overcame the population, the people thought that Radama II, by
instating this ban, committed a fady or taboo which was causing the illness. After Radama II’s
assassination, the sickness disappeared. This reaffirmed the idea that the taboo was broken with
his death (Raharinjanahary, 14 June, 2011).

The Relation

The World Health Organization, WHO, defines traditional medicine as the sum total of
knowledge, skills and practices based on the theories, beliefs and experiences indigenous to
different cultures that are used to maintain health, as well as to prevent, diagnose, improve or
treat physical and mental illnesses. To understand how traditional medicine incorporates aspects
of both traditional and modern Christian belief systems, the belief structures themselves must be
understood. While Christianity revolves around the aspect of God, the son, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, traditional beliefs include things such as the existence of a creation god, Zanahary, spirits of ancestors, razana, taboos, fady, charms, and fate. It is thought that death is merely a passing between the world of the living and that of the dead (Quansah, 23 June, 2011), and it is of tradition to believe in close ties between the living and the dead. Ancestral spirits are viewed as a connection between the living and the creator, and they are thought to have an influence on a persons’ fortune which is why they are held in such high regard (Von Pischke, August 1994; pg. 1). Rituals performed have come to include aspects of Christianity while keeping grounded in the roots of traditional beliefs. For example, in Antananarivo, a woman named Mama Zafy is given space in the church in order to see patients after church service. Other such examples come from traditional healers, ombiasy, who believe themselves to be the middle man and may claim to not be the one who is diagnosing the patients’ illness or recommending an herb for it. These traditional practitioners generally pray to God at the beginning of a session and, afterward or simultaneously, pray to the ancestors and use objects with symbolic value. For example, healers who mainly use mirrors in their practice say that they use mirrors because, when they look into it, they see their ancestor and he/she is the one who helps the patient. They will lay a lit candle out during a session to represent light or goodness. This is essential for their method of accurately helping the patient, and their gift cannot work without a lit candle (Lazaina, 21 June, 2011). Other ombiasy may use solely candles with mirrors as accessories. For them, the light helps the ancestor come and represents goodness just as it does with the healer who uses mirrors. They pray to god and their ancestors for the knowledge to help the person. In this practice, the mirrors, however, help pull the information out of their head once God or an ancestor has given the knowledge to the person (Soavimasoandro, 18 June, 2011). Religious incorporation as well
as enhanced stress on traditional beliefs can be seen in each domain of traditional medicine: tromba, sikidy, and fanandroana (Raharinjanahary, 14 June, 2011).

Holistic Practitioners

Tromba

Tromba is a type of traditional medicine that interprets, diagnoses, and alleviates diseases through the chaman, possessed person (Raharinjanahary, 14 June, 2011). A person begins by dancing in front of a burial tomb, whether it is literal or symbolic, as it is considered the primary link between the living and the dead among the Malagasy (Von Pischke, August 1994; pg. 1). Music is played, blessed items are offered, and the persons trying to become possessed chant and dance in front of the tomb. Only one of the persons may become possessed, and, after that time, the diagnosis and healing can commence. There are many tombs at which the chaman can attempt to become possessed; it is not a single specified tomb. For example, during one of these sessions at Kingory, two men and a woman were attempting to become possessed by following the dancing and chanting rituals in front of a representative tomb of a past traditional healer to a former king and whose legend attributes him to have great strength. It is possible that one of them could have become possessed by the healer by dancing in front of the king’s tomb as well. Ergo, it is not required to be at the tomb of the one you wish to become possessed by. After the ancestor has possessed the person of their choice, this chaman’s actions are under the control of the possessor. It is this ancestor who then can help the patient through the chaman’s body. The ancestor knows what is wrong with the patient and therefore knows what traditional remedy or herb the patient must take to get better. The session in Kingory exemplified the incorporation of
Christianity when the chaman prayed to God before beginning the dancing ritual as well as praying to God and blessing the ancestors’ offerings in a holy well prior to arriving in the company of the chaman (Quansah, 23 June, 2011).

**Sikidy**

Sikidy is a divine art by use of grain or seeds (Raharinjanahary, 14 June, 2011). It comes from an Arabic background where fruit seeds or grains of corn are put in rows of eight. Once the seeds/grain has been configured, the different combinations indicate the future, sickness, love, business, and other things of the sort (Von Pischke, August 1994; pg. 3). In this way, this type of healer, the mpisikidy, can tell someone’s destiny or provide a remedy for an illness. The influence by Christianity was made apparent through an observational and participatory session in Andasibe where a catholic man named Ndrema practiced this art. He spoke of how he did not ask for this gift nor did he learn it. God gave him this gift and, in a dream, told him that he should begin its practice. It was also in this dream that god revealed that he should use albezzia seeds; however, any type of grain or seeds can be used by other ombiasy. After laying out the seeds in a pattern, he is able to diagnose one’s illness as well as recommend an herbal treatment. On the other hand, traditional thinking towards taboos and sorcery remain; he can advise if a fady was committed or if the person has been bewitched by another (Ndrema, 29 June, 2011).

**Fanandroana**
Fanandroana holds truer to traditional ideals. It is tied to the concept of vintana which asserts that fate is ordained by the position of moon, sun, and stars. Accordingly, different values and forces are credited to each fraction of time (Von Pischke, August 1994; pg. 3). In this fashion, fanandroana exemplifies ones destiny to be subject to the hour, day, months, or year of the person. This branch, along with Sikidy, is an element considered to be of the magic/religious domain of traditional medicine (Raharinjanahary, 14 June, 2011).

**Dualistic Practitioners**

Furthermore, there are dualistic traditional practitioners who take care of diseases also but do not dabble in magic, fortune telling, curses, fadys, etc. They believe sickness stems from natural causes as opposed to social disequilibrium or fadys, and they use traditional remedies such as herbs to help cure. Contrasting the holistic way of diagnosis, these practitioners do not declare to know what is wrong with the person through some spiritual means but, instead, might insist that the person be diagnosed by a doctor first. Their niche is to help with a cure itself through traditional means. As for the religious aspect, many of them believe that god gave them these gifts to help others. A few of these areas include mpanaotraokandro, reninjaza (traditional midwife), or even people such as the mpanao ody may (burns healer) who believes that their saliva helps heal burns more quickly (Randria, 16 June, 2011).

The mpanao raokandro branch consists of a medical herbalist who strictly uses plants for therapy. In Andasibe, Mama Bozy is this sort of herbalist. She has practiced this skill for a long time but has since converted to Catholicism. It is to this period that she attributes her change in perspective. Since then, she believes that herbs have been put on Earth by God, and therefore she
should use them to help others. She elaborates that they are gifts from God which is why she does not charge for her services (Mama Bozy, 27 June, 2011).

Another example comes from Andasibe as well. Marie Josephine, a woman who positions babies in the womb but also sets dislocations, declares that her talents are gifts from god. After having unfortunate accidents with her children dislocating joints, she prayed to God to be able to fix her children’s injuries herself in order to avoid having to always take them elsewhere to be tended to. In the same time period, her daughter was pregnant so she had simultaneously prayed for the birth attendant/positioning gift as well. She uses coconut oil to help position the babies, and she uses a mixture of honey and white clay to help massage and then set and wrap dislocations into place. She contributes both of these ideas to God and further continues to say that he too gave her the idea for the amount to charge for the service. She only accepts payment in amounts of twelve as she believes it is a holy number. Whether it is twelve coins or twelve 10,000 ariary bills, all payment must be multiples of twelve in some fashion (Marie-Josephine, 27 June, 2011).

**Conclusion**

Traditional medicine has been around since the dawn of man. It has been glorified, and it has been prosecuted with the coming of new religions and beliefs. It has survived and thrived by learning to adapt and incorporate new aspects into its foundation. Payment, diagnosis, treatment, materials used, and even the type of specialist seen are all influenced by more than secular
components in Madagascar. From holistic healers of tromba, sikidy, and fanandroana to the
dualistic practices of herbalists, midwives, and massagers, it is apparent that the religious and
spiritual beliefs of people influence medicine. Its chameleon characteristic will serve it well as
the Malagasy world continues to change both through both religious and political means.
Works Cited

Lazaina. 21 June, 2011. Interview


Marie-Josephine. 27 June, 2011. Interview.

Ndrema. 29 June, 2011. Interview.

Quansah, Nat. 23 June, 2011. Interview.


Soavimasoandro. 18 June, 2011. Interview.