

From a geographical, biological and ethnical viewpoint, Madagascar is certainly one of the most diverse, colorful and fascinating places on earth. However, many of the island's people are still practicing a form of ancestor-worship that holds them in constant fear and spiritual darkness.

Fomban-razana: Malagasy Traditional Religion

Supreme Creator-God

As in the case of most tribal religions where the "spirits" (called fanahy) of deceased ancestors (called razana) are worshipped or venerated, the traditional religion of Madagascar, known as Fomban-razana (meaning "ancestor-worship"), acknowledges the existence of the Supreme God.

Known as Andriamanitra (or Zanahary in some areas), he is believed to have created everything that exists. They also believe that he has supreme power in the universe and is therefore able to manipulate nature, punish people who offend him and bless those who please him.

Very little else is known about Andriamanitra, and practitioners of this religion certainly do not claim to be living in any kind of a personal relationship with him. Although he is therefore never approached directly, but always via the "spirits" of the ancestors, ritual prayers would sometimes be ended with the words "Hahasoa ahatsara Andriamanitra andriananahary" (meaning "Bring us good blessings, oh God the Creator").



Spirits of the Ancestors

The central roll-players in Fomban-razana are definitely the fanahy - reputed spirits of the dead ancestors (razana). It is believed that when a person dies, he or she simply crosses over to the Spirit World where they continue to live as a spirit (called fanahy) with those who are already there. Although these spirits seem to lead a fairly "normal" life in most respects (see par "Life of the Spirits"), they are believed to wield considerable power over the living.

There is a definite hierarchy of fanahy. The most important or senior fanahy are the spirits of the tribe's dead kings or other leaders. In some parts of the island, the whole tribe through special rituals venerates these at specific times (See par "Rituals and Feasts"). The next orders of fanahy would be the spirits of the great-grandparents, then the grandparents, the parents and finally those of dead brothers and sisters or of children.

Because God (Andriamanitra) is seen as practically "inaccessible" to human beings, the ancestral fanahy acts as mediators between humans and Him. The spirits are believed to somehow have access to Andriamanitra, and are able to influence Him into bestowing special favors or blessings on their living relatives.

For this reason, it is very important for humans to honor and respect their ancestors, and always to be very careful not to offend them in any way.

Life of the spirits

Although practitioners of Fomban-razana do believe that the human soul continues to live as a spirit when the body dies, they do not believe in the Christian concepts of heaven or hell. They believe in the existence of a Spirit World – seemingly a parallel dimension to the human world – where the fanahy of each family live together on the traditional land of that particular family (see par "Funerals").

Interestingly, an individual's conduct during their life as a human being seems to have little or no influence on the type of life he or she would be living in the spirit-world. In fact, they could expect to continue living in pretty much the same way that they have been living in the flesh, as life in the Spirit World is believed to be quite "normal" and very similar to life as it was before.

This means that in the Spirit World, the fanahy still have to work their lands, plant and harvest crops, fetch water, eat, drink and do whatever is needed to survive. The ancestral spirits of a particular family does not only live in the same area as those who are still alive, but they remain very much part of the family. They are therefore believed to not only be able to help or punish the living, but also to actively

partake in every aspect of family life, including family meetings, feasts and rituals. The land on which a family and their razana lives, is called tanindrazana, and may never be sold.

Worshipping the Ancestors

It has often been stated that the term “ancestor-worship” is incorrect, as practitioners of ancestral religions venerate and honor rather than worship their dead family-members. However, if one looks at the way in which the traditional Malagasy fears, obeys and honors these spirits through sacrifices, prayers, obedience, atonement for transgressions and just about any other religious action conceivable, it could hardly be called anything else than “worship”.

Ruled by Taboos

Although the details differ among the various tribal groups on the island, daily life of those who practice Fomban-razana is governed by a myriad rules and regulations, known as taboos or fady. As the Malagasy had no written language or records of their own, taboos are traditionally carried over from one generation to the next in the form of oral proverbs.

As is indicated by the name, taboos often indicate which actions are forbidden, and not necessarily which are allowed. Many of these rules regulate conduct related to the relationship with the fanahy, although many others have to do with daily activities and make no sense to the outsider (or most insiders!).

For instance, the taboos would determine from which direction a person may enter a house or which way the doors are supposed to face. For many, it is forbidden to eat pork or lamb, while the way in which certain foods are to be prepared is also determined. By keeping within these rules and prescriptions, a person supposedly shows respect to their ancestral fanahy.

Closely associated with the taboos is the vintana, a religious calendar that prescribes certain actions and activities to be carried out on certain days of the week.

Asking for help from the ancestors

Ancestors can be petitioned to help the living with just about any problem or need, which could typically include cases of barrenness, drought, sickness or material need. The fanahy can be approached directly by the person in need. If a man plans a journey, he can simply offer some food or drink to the ancestor he wants help from and ask to be kept safe during the journey. The offering would usually be made at the village altar (called a doany - see picture), and the fanahy is addressed by its (human) name.

However, in most cases, the entire family approaches the ancestors with the village eldest (called the ombiasa), chief or head of the family leading the proceedings. Typically, members of the family would gather at the village-altar where they would sing and dance while placing offerings (a cup of rum, fruit, honey, sweets and even coins) on the fanambanambato (the flat altar-stone). In some cases, such offerings would be insufficient and a chicken or other animal would be sacrificed at the altar to satisfy the spirits.

The family chief would then lead the “prayers” to the ancestors by calling the names of the fanahy who are implored, then praising them and then making requests on behalf of their living relatives.



CAPTION: A typical doany (village altar) in the Toamasina Province. Note the totem-like pole with cattle-horns and the four-legged flat stone altar (called a “fanambanambato”) on which the offerings are left or sacrifices made.

Messages from the ancestors

It is interesting to note that, when the fanahy are petitioned by an individual or by the whole family, it is “taken in faith” that the ancestors have actually heard the prayers and would respond to them. In other words, in these cases, unlike where mediums (called mphimasy – see par “Consulting Spirits via mediums”) are consulted, the spirits do not manifest or answer those calling for help.

However, the fanahy are believed to sometimes communicate with their relatives through dreams . In these dreams the ancestor could share news from the Spirit World, send messages to relatives, or

give specific commands to the living. For instance, a person could claim to have dreamt that an ancestor appeared to them and said that it needs new clothes for an upcoming festival. In order to appease the ancestors and prevent disaster, that request or instruction has to be taken care of immediately and a new set of clothes would be left at the fasana (family tomb – see par “Funerals”).

The strange “relationship” between the living and the fanahy often manifests in the simple actions of daily life. For instance, a practical way of paying respect to the fanahy would be to offer the first sip of drink or a piece of food to them. When a person opens a bottle of locally brewed rum (“toaka gasy” a favorite of both the living and the dead, it seems) or any other drink, he or she would go to a specific corner of the house where he would pour a bit of the drink onto the ground for the ancestor!

Consulting spirits via mediums

As mentioned, in rituals where the ancestors are approached by the family or an individual, the person (e.g. the chief of the family) never acts as a medium for the fanahy. However, spirits could also be approached via persons acting as mediums, known as mphimasy. In such cases, it is usually not the person’s ancestor-spirit that is implored, but whatever spirit or spirits that manifests through the specific medium.

A medium is usually consulted when a person is struggling with a very serious personal problem. Groups or several members of a family or village who has a common problem can also consult these mediums.

An amount of money is paid to the medium and the spirits are then summoned through rituals that include singing, drumming and traditional rhythmic dancing. At some point, the mphimasy enters a trance where he or she completely loses consciousness while the spirit takes control of its body.

Depending on the personality and sex of the spirit that manifests, the medium could suddenly start speaking in the voice of a man or woman, its personality and behavior would undergo a complete change (e.g. behaving like a young braggart, a wise old lady, etc.). In some cases, the spirit would start speaking in a different language from its own – a language not known to the mphimasy when it is conscious. Often, the spirit would ask for rum or some other alcohol, and would sometimes consume as much as a liter of this very potent spirits during the consultation. (Strangely, when the spirit later departs and the medium returns to consciousness, he or she often appears to be 100% sober and shows no sign of having consumed such a large amount of alcohol!)

During the consultation, the spirits would give advice or commands to the individual. For instance, it could tell the individual not to eat pork, a specific species of fish or chicken. It could also tell them to use a specific potion (which the mphimasy would later supply), or that the person should go back and consult their ancestors whom they have offended in some way or another.

As mentioned, the mphimasy has no memory of what happened during the manifestation once the spirit departs. They therefore have an assistant who relays the event afterwards and tells them if the spirit gave any instructions (e.g. to collect specific herbs and plants for a potion that has to be given to the person who consulted them).

It follows therefore that the mphimasy also acts as “herbal doctor” (or witchdoctor). Unlike the case in most African traditional religions where a person undergoes years of training in herbal medicine before becoming a herbal doctor (called Sangoma among the Zulu of South Africa and N’anga by the Shona of Zimbabwe), the Malagasy mphimasy needs no formal training. Once taken hold of as a medium, the spirit or spirits that controls him or her simply directs them as to which leaves, roots or other materials should be used to prepare their “medicine”.

Sinning against the ancestors

The traditional Malagasy concept of sin relates closely to the way in which a person behaves towards the dead ancestors. Although Andriamanitra (God) can be offended in theory, in practice most transgressions are related to offending the dead ancestors in some way or another.

“Sins” against the fanahy could include just about anything. Typical examples include saying something offensive about the deceased, not honoring them in some way or another, not partaking in rituals, or failing to carry out a command or instruction given to the family by appearing to someone in a dream. Of course, not adhering to a taboo (see par “Ruled by Taboos”) would also be an offence against the fanahy.

Perhaps the worst “sin” a practitioner of Fomban-razana can revert to, is to convert to *Biblical Christianity. Because such a conversion means that the new Christian would no longer worship the spirits or “honor” the ancestors, it is seen as a complete rejection of not only the religion, but also of everyone in the family and especially of the deceased ancestors. Other members of the family, fearing retribution from the fanahy if the transgressor is not punished, often bans the Christian convert from the family. In many cases, it means that such a person is disinherited and completely rejected by the whole clan for the rest of their lives.

Rituals and Feasts

Some rituals and customs of Fomban-razana vary among the different tribes on the island, while others are generally observed by all.

Male Circumcision

One generally observed custom is that of male circumcision, called *fora*. This is important ritual is usually performed when the child is between three and seven years of age. However, in some cases when the family is too poor to afford the feast during which *fora* is performed, it can be postponed for years, and is sometimes only performed when the person has reached adulthood and is able to pay for the feast themselves!

When *fora* is to be performed, all family and friends are invited to attend. A feast is prepared with lots of food, drink, music and dancing. At some point, a *mphimasy* (who is well paid for their services) performs the ritual of removing the foreskin with a knife. The spirits are then implored to protect and bless the child.

Family Funerals

A funeral is also a very important ritual in Fomban-razana. Although the details may vary, the body of the deceased is usually kept in the village *tranobe* (literally “big house” – a large building where communal gatherings etc. is also held) for three days. During this time, the closest members of the family stay with the body day and night. Other members of the village join the wake during the evenings and large quantities of locally brewed rum (called *toaka gasy*) are consumed.



CAPTION: A *fasana* (funeral house) of a wealthy family in the Midwest.. On the East Coast, funeral houses, like the houses for the living, are constructed of bamboo.

If a family is wealthy enough, they would have a fasana (a special house outside the village on the family-land that functions as family-tomb) The body is wrapped in cloth and placed in the fasana together with all its personal possessions such as clothes, shoes, watch, radio, etc. This is done so that the person could continue using these items in the Spirit World! If the family does not have a fasana, the body and its possessions are simply buried in a hole in the ground.

Bodies of male and females are laid on opposite sides (often in racks) of the fasana, and the spirits of these ancestors are believed to always stay in the vicinity. When a fasana burns down or is destroyed by a cyclone, it is rebuilt as soon as possible and a special ceremony is held to invite the ancestral spirits to return. When a fasana is full, a new one is constructed. However, as a recently-dead body is regarded as impure, the new tomb must be inaugurated by first placing a body from the old tomb into it. This ritual is ca

Another kind of " famadihana " occurs when the family tomb is full. The new tomb should not receive directly recent dead because they are impure. Thus the tomb must be inaugurated by a " famadihana " where an ancestor from the old one is transferred and placed on on the bottom shelf. For reasons of hygiene, the famadihana are always done during the dry season, in winter.

Curiously enough, more money and care often goes into the construction of a fasana than into houses of the living members of the family. The size and decoration of the fasana reflects the wealth and prestige of the family. Many fady (taboos) has to be considered when a tomb is constructed. For instance, it may not be built when the rice is shooting and it may not be constructed at the northern end of the village as the north is considered a place of joy.

Turning the Dead

A bizarre ritual observed by some Malagasy tribes is the so-called Famadihana, literally meaning "turning of the dead". Some say that this ritual evolved from the custom to dig up the bodies of dead ancestors who were buried in the ground in order to place them in newly built family tombs (fasana). However, its origin probably dates back much further as similar rituals are observed in Tahiti and elsewhere.

Every two years, the extended members of a family gather at the fasana for a Famadihana on a date previously determined by consulting a mphimasy (medium). A lot of food and drink is prepared, and it is expected of everyone who attends to make a financial contribution to help cover the costs.

At about 9 o'clock in the morning, all the bodies are removed from the fasana and laid on the ground outside so that they could partake in the festivities. During the day, the each of the living would speak to them and touch them. Later in the day, the old cloth (called landy –a material woven locally) in which they were covered is removed and each body is then carefully wrapped in new landy. Although the landy is normally white, other colours are also used and it is considered a very special honor to be covered in red landy.

The newly dressed bodies are then laid on a new bamboo mat, and then the party really starts with those attending eating, drinking and dancing around the bodies. At some point during the afternoon, the bodies are picked up to join the dance . Three men would hold each body, and everyone would start rhythmic dancing in a snake-formation around the fasana, of which the inside had also been swept and cleaned by this time. Once the fasana had been circled seven times in this manner, the bodies are carefully put back inside.

Once this had been done, the family continues the feast with more eating, drinking and dancing.

Pillars of Stone



CAPTION: Villagers in the Midwest with a stone-pillar erected to call home the spirit of a family member who died during the Second World War.

In some parts of the island, curious stone-pillars can be seen that are often mistaken for gravestones by outsiders. These pillars are erected to call home the spirits of those who died in foreign countries or under unknown conditions.

In the event of someone dying far away from home where the body cannot be recovered, a pillar is constructed and the deceased's name is carved into it. The pillar is placed near the family fasana so

that the spirit can be close to its relatives . A ritual is then held where the chief of the family calls the spirit (by its human name) and invites it to come and stay at the pillar. From then on, offerings or petitions to that fanahy would always be made at the pillar.

Feast of Death

The Betsimisaraka-tribe of the Toamasina Province on the eastern coast observes an interesting feast that is basically a combination of the Roman Catholic Feast of Saints and ancestor traditions. Like the Feast of Saints, this feast, called Fete de Mort (French term meaning "Feast of Death"), starts on the first day of November each year.

On this day, all family-members (including children) would go to their fasana (ancestral tombs) or graves to clean and clear them of any weeds or rubbish. The next step is then to leave specific offerings to specific fanahy according to their likes and preferences during life. For instance, sweets would be left for a deceased child, new clothes for a woman and rum for someone who liked to drink. Once this is done, the fanahy is petitioned by the chief of the family to help with whatever is needed by the living members.

The fete de Mort may last for several days. Ironically, as large quantities of rum is consumed during the ceremonies, the feast often ends in chaos as drunk members gets into fights with each other!

* The term "Biblical Christianity" is used to refer to all Christians who believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the only Mediator between Man and God. This is in contrast with some New Age forms of Christianity that sees Christ as one of several possible "Masters", and also in contrast to claims that one could serve Christ within the traditional believe-systems of ancestor-religions such as Fomban-razana.

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