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A Day-to-Day Family Chronicle with 'Personages' in Madagascar

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Today, Madagascar is facing a serious economic and social crisis, leading to a permanent collapse of old balances and a disruption of kinship organizations connected with a weakening of ancient religious solidarities and practices. In this unsettled context, the development of new kinds of possession cults represents a more or less successful attempt to create concrete forums for dialogue and develop other modes of sociability.

The resulting proliferation of communities of possessed people (or *tromba*) has been accompanied by rapid and often disordered urban expansion. This phenomenon, which can be broadly observed throughout the island, corresponds to genuine attempts to address problems of every kind, often new ones specifically faced by the poorer classes, from economic instability to the evolution of sexual practices.

From the most ancient historical periods to modern times, possession cults have represented an essential component of religious practices. More or less permanent relationships with various authorities of the invisible, particular to a single collective imagination, have enabled (and continue to enable) the most important problems of day-to-day social life to be conceived and managed, by reproducing an ancient political model established in the time of the royals.

The king and his relations are of a different nature than other human beings, being linked to the invisible world through their own genealogy. They are *masina*, sacred, and their visible presence is truth and therefore power. After the dissolution of the monarchy at the end of the 19th century, the deceased kings and princes assumed unprecedented importance in urban possession cults. Through this channel, deceased sovereigns transmit their words, the most senior of them having unmatched influence, which now spreads beyond traditional units of reference (ancient kingdoms, lineages, various regional units), expanding as it were to the scale of the national territory.

It is no longer the quintessential royal political tool, which the possessed royals used during annual celebrations to sensationally reestablish the sovereign's unique link to the divine during each of these festivals, back when the sovereign drew his legitimacy from the far reaches of the cosmos. It was a tool that, in its time, budding dynasties had borrowed and adapted from the lineage groups and political organizations that had preceded the era of the royals.

The profound reality of possession, *tromba*, was thus fashioned into a powerful institution of control, interpretation and communication that had the ability not only to confirm the legitimacy of

social practices, but also to transform them. In the name of the *Fombadrazana*, the “Tradition of the Ancestors” the possessed-by-a-royal-spirit or *sazoka* could introduce innovations that, far from appearing as such, were conceived as the very expression of what had always been done. The role of the ancestor, of the invisible, is that of the unspoken, of invention, of change. The ancestors are true moderns since they legitimize all new ways of doing things in the name of Tradition, because when all is said and done, they alone are its guarantors.

This research was conducted in the western Madagascan city of Toliara, a regional capital with a population of approximately 150,000, where the social fabric is interwoven with networks of small communities of possessed people, which tend to have less than ten members acting as true fictional lineages (in the sense that they reproduce a kinship model to promote transformation) under the leadership of a *tromba fondy*, or possessed mistress, who acts as the head of the lineage. It should be noted that this *fondy* initiates the members of her community, making it part of the urban social game. In this way, she is fulfilling the primary duty of an experienced possessed person.

We should specify that the term *tromba* designates three realities in Malagasy: the person who has duly acquired the “possessed” status, the possessing spirit, and the ritual as a whole. We have chosen to use this term only to designate the possessed person, whether in a state of trance or not. The term “spirit” is used to designate the external agent, and “possession” designates the phenomenon as a whole. The first letter will be capitalized when a spirit is designated by a personal pronoun.

The stock of available spirits—always personalized by their age, gender, character, etc., and predominantly male—is constantly being reorganized, thus revealing the dynamics of modernity in operation as well as the profound logic of this ancient political institution, which, as we have seen, has accompanied and produced the movement of history, from one period to another, in this way constituting a form of reflexivity particular to the Madagascan societies under consideration. Some spirits disappear from the repertory while new ones appear. The frequency with which a given spirit is solicited is a sociological indicator of the profound movements that drive a city that we have investigated systematically. In 1998 in Toliara, out of around one hundred spirits, three or four of them (including Prince Raleva, who “possesses” C.) were more strongly represented than the others. However, there is a hierarchy between the spirits (and therefore also between the possessed) which operates on several levels, depending on whether or not they are a royal, and according to order of birth, specializations, their position in relation to certain periods of Madagascan history, etc.

These possessions mostly concern females (85% in Toliara according to our statistics), poorly educated women belonging to the most disadvantaged social strata. Posture then conveys the spectacular change of status enjoyed by the possessed woman, who thus becomes a man and lord at the same time, keeping in mind that by nature, dynastic lineages cannot have possessed people in their ranks, and that only the lineages of commoners and dependents may supply possessed people for spirits belonging to the dynastic lineages. It follows from what has been developed above that living members of dynastic families and the lineages connected with them are of the same nature as royal spirits. The fact of their prestigious ascendancy, which has a divine, “sacred” character, means they already have one foot in the invisible, making it inconceivable that they could embody royal spirits.

In every case, possession is conceived as the process of a spirit choosing a person, generally on the model of an amorous relationship, and it is never the product of personal initiative, and

certainly not a voluntary one. On the other hand, divine healers take a different path, that of knowledge, wrested as it were from the invisible step by step, and in this sense they have less authority. Subjected to exclusive attention, the chosen one, the future possessed person, eventually enters into a very ritualized marriage at the end of an itinerary spanning several years, punctuated by misfortune and afflictions that indicate “divine” intent. The spirit will always occupy the place of primary husband and is therefore master of the house in which he takes his place as spouse. We are examining the traditional form, in which the possessed person is a woman. It is nevertheless important to note that over the past twenty or thirty years, we have seen the appearance of possession through the channel of men. In general, these men have had some school education and are much more quickly legitimized in their role as possessed people than women. In many cases, it is part of a personal political or economic strategy.

Having set up this indispensable framework to support what follows, our aim is to present a particularly significant aspect of the subtlest registers of exchange and reflexivity revealed by the practice of possession. Instead of dissociating everyday events from those stemming from possession as if they were two exclusive spheres, we have chosen to link all the facts together, placing them back in their particular context, in order to understand the particular dynamic that results from the intervention of the possessed person, who establishes herself as the group’s “memory”, recording a set of acts, dreams, feelings, hopes and quiet conflicts, a role that gives her remarkable power of action and genuine social mobilization abilities. The empirical material we have gathered through the cumulative observation of numerous possession sessions represents a more or less continuous scale between affects and social matters, between the simple expression of anguish at one end, and dynamic integration into the social or political game at the other.

In line with the dual perspective we have outlined, our approach consisted in conducting a thorough three-year investigation in *fondy* C.’s family and community, in connection with an extensive supplemental investigation in fifteen other communities of possessed people (including the one presented in “Pourquoi tu pleures ?”), encompassing 128 possessed people, making it possible to conduct a genuine sociological analysis of the network formed by a set of communities in the city of Toliara, though we will not be developing that particular analysis here.

C., 45 years old, is a member of a lineage (*tarike*) of fishermen (*vezo*) that includes several renowned *tromba*, or possessed people, some of whose spirits were inherited from an agnatic line. She has been responsible for her community for about twenty years, and is therefore recognized as an experienced possessed person (*fondy*). She is possessed by twelve spirits belonging to four large, high-status families, specifically princes and a king, half of whom belong to the same lineage as her main spirit and spouse, Prince Raleva, who lived in the early 20th century in the Sakalava kingdom of Boeny in north-west Madagascar. Unlike his older siblings, this Personage is reputed to be receptive to contemporary problems, which he is said to be capable of resolving in original ways. For the past fifteen years, C. has also been married to Justin, a driver working for an electric company. In this triangular relationship, C.’s two husbands are united as “brothers” in a fictional kinship link that carries real weight, since they are both fully-fledged members of the family unit. Since we have broadly addressed this element elsewhere from a comparative perspective, here we will not go any more deeply into an analysis of this specific form of human/spirit bigamy, which is based on status and position asymmetry (the Lord and his commoner brother), the principle of unilateral debt, the opposition between supernatural love and day-to-day life, etc..

We have retained several examples that show a few systems that C. uses to bring the possession game to life, in the sense that this ritual is the foundation of the *tromba*'s recognized authority in all areas of the social game. The examples are borrowed from the corpus we assembled by systematically recording (without any kind of pre-selection) public consultations over an 18-month period (1990-91), at an average rate of twenty sessions per month. This made it possible to bring out the importance of possession in the extended family context. In fact, in more than half of cases, the consultations concerned members of the actual family unit (circle 1) and their allies as a group (circle 2). Circle 3 encompasses family members and their allies in the community of possessed people in which C. is the *fondy*—possessed people being recruited on the basis of kinship between spirits. Circle 4 groups together all non-kinship or unallied persons who have an economic relationship with the Raleva/C. duo (employees, farm workers, sharecroppers, wood sellers...). As an experienced *fondy*, Prince Raleva is also consulted (circle 5) by strangers to the region or personalities, first-time visitors and visitors with no links to C. whatsoever.

For our present purposes, we have decided only to explore the field of multiple interactions between humans and spirits in the context of circle 1, with an extension to circle 2, that is, where all of the possible permutations of roles and statuses play out, since each member of the immediate and extended family has two relationships with the same person and vice versa. For example, C., as a person who is “two-faced” (but in a necessarily alternating way), concurrently plays not only the role of spouse to her human husband, but also that of his brother as Prince Raleva. Similarly, she is both the daughter of her parents as well as their son-in-law, the mother of her daughter as well as her spiritual father, etc. This allows her to involve herself—always in a specific way—in the lives of the members of her family, with whom she can shift from being herself (as C. and wife) to being several Personages, which she can embody on demand during the same day according to need. In the sacred ritual space inside the home where her transformation takes place, she dresses in the clothing of this or that spirit. Her relatives then act as if they no longer recognized the relative or spouse in her, but now saw an entirely different being that is incomparable, sacred, *masina*, like a king.

The exchanges are based on a mirroring of the two lineages, *tariky*, that of Prince Raleva and that of C. in the everyday life of her family. This allows the most complete circulation of information possible, the most diverse revelations, the expression of numerous rivalries, conflicts, desires, ambitions, strategies, etc, thus prefiguring the transformation of this family's world both in terms of its organization and its conceptions: relationships between couples, gender, relationship to money, the social division of work, etc.

The reason why Raleva's intervention can be this subtle and circumstantial is that his status is relative to a generational order. C. is possessed by seven members of Raleva's *tarike*, or lineage branch, including two of his older siblings and four other brothers who have a specific effect not just on relationships between humans, but also between the two lineages. Prince Raleva is all-powerful in C's lineage, but he cannot be so in his own lineage since he occupies the place of a younger brother and thus risks appearing to have faults. This situation activates a subtle system of non-linear changes with alternating phases of resistance and legitimization (applied for example to gender relationships, sexuality and reproduction, marriage...), and all of this in the name of the most classical principles of “tradition”.

The fiction of Raleva's dual position (powerful among humans and dependent within a still-active lineage) brings a kind of necessary adjustment to the dynamics of possession and to the

excesses that might result from the absolute power of a possessed person like C. Understandably, the more she is assumed to be responding to the Prince's injunctions, the more she benefits from the impunity of his acts, and the more feely she herself can speak and act. Moreover—and this is one of the forms of this “regulation”—C., in the prince's place, is supposed to suffer the punishments directed at him by his older brothers when they accuse him of being pig-headed, of being transgressive, of acting like he has no family...

Analysis of consultations shows that the farther removed one is from circle 1, and therefore from a kinship relationship, the more the interpretation of problems or events is based on the classic theory of persecution by an external agent (witchcraft, lineage ancestors, etc), as opposed being based on the interpretive logic applied to everyday events within circle 1, that which accompanies and engenders social and urban development. Thanks to Raleva's authority, within the family unit there is, strictly speaking, no longer any interpretation in terms of witchcraft or malevolence on the part of lineage ancestors, especially in the case of C., who now recognizes nothing but relationships of dependence on spirits, particularly on Prince Raleva. Members of circle 1, including the human husband—the negative image of Raleva—are therefore subject to new intra-family rules of conduct “verbally” decreed by Raleva (or by the Raleva/C. duo), who makes them known to the relevant person according to certain mechanisms. This procedure obviously encourages the emergence of individual responsibility linked to that of a more marked individuality in a truly romantic form, and it therefore also fosters the development of a feeling of personal culpability in face of threats of punishment, expressed not only in terms of sickness but also in terms of the risk of impoverishment, and this in a family community that is always on the verge of a precarious situation, something that is a constant source of worry in the most disadvantaged areas.

This procedure shows the lineage group operating like a real business integrated into the urban economy and managed by the Raleva/C. duo. Not only has the prince, through his multiple activities—particularly the consultation office—made a certain accumulation possible (house, electrical appliances, cart, pirogue, grocery store, saline, manioc and maize plantations), but some family members, including C.'s husband and brother, have jobs as a result of Raleva's intercession and are therefore indebted to Him for a situation that is never permanently secured; the power of the intercession can always weaken, and it needs to be revived... Moreover, this method enables an accumulation of capital that will be made as profitable as possible, since it is considered to be under the spirit's name and would not be mixed with that of any other member of the family. No one, including C., is allowed to access it without the consent of Prince Raleva, embodied by C.. The prince also contributes to the management of the business as a control authority that regulates the sale of grocery store products and other merchandise on credit to all relatives, an attitude that is considered very transgressive on C.'s part, since it does not conform to principles of family solidarity. It is obvious that C.'s remarkable authority within her familial world is accompanied by a significant weakening of lineage cults in this same world. In this way, the shifting of authority is evidence of an irreversible evolution of social relations in the urban environment.

This type of situation often generates conflict between human couples, and it also has the consequence of noticeably changing the composition of domestic units based on matrilineal kinship. For example, C. might decide, via the prince and therefore as the head of a family, who will be taken care of and integrated into the family. She adopts her sisters' children while at the same time using this very effective tool to evade the constraints associated with the rules of marriage in her personal situation, knowing that problems stemming from the contradiction between marriage

principles and those of filiation are the subject of many consultations in every part of the community.

Although the Personage, in this case Prince Raleva, makes it possible to set the rules of the game, he never exists until he has been embodied before a given audience. Embodiment is the intelligence of the social game in all its complexity, but in our view it is therefore one of the most subtle and creative encounters between a person, approached in the movement of her singularity, and her social space, conceived both as the site of her expression and the substance of her being.

A few elements of the system

Intermediary, business manager, negotiator, intercessor... or the thousand facets of the social game

As in any system of this kind, C. has a duty to pass through an intermediary, not just to find out what was said during the possession, but also to speak with her spirit if necessary. The required intermediary can appear in two different configurations: Raleva, the person seeking consultation and a third party or the servant in this ritual in its traditional form, specifically responsible for telling C. the story of what was said and done during the trance. A second configuration, as is generally the case when the person seeking consultation is a close relative of C. (such as her father, mother, or especially her husband), establishes a one-on-one relationship without any witness or translator, so that in some circumstances, one might wonder if the consultation really took place. The lack of any transmission of the event solicited by the trance activates a particularly complex register based on pretense, made of hypotheses and assumptions about what could have been said, introducing various nuances into everyone's interpretations and positions.

This is a key element of the narrative processes that allow C. to openly express her boldest or most personal thoughts, by introducing Raleva for this purpose, using him as an absent, virtual third party. C. implicitly refers to elements of a drama she is supposed to be undergoing with Justin, and in this way she engages only her own personality and not the spirit, whose "words" are inconsequential in this case.

For example, on November 27th 1990, C. explains to a confidant that "Justin wouldn't have said anything to him, probably because the Prince would have complained that he was going behind his back, selling certain household appliances, refrigerators and fans that belong to him".

According to a process similar to that outlined in "Pouquoi tu pleures ?" ("Why Are You Crying?"), one story reveals another, leading to the heart of the conflict between C. and Justin, concerning the financial constraints imposed by the rules of marriage through the performance of rituals, the construction of houses, etc., especially as on this occasion, C. is expressing her tense relationship with her in-laws, who attribute the most negative qualities to her, belonging as she does to a low-status group, *tromba* and therefore "under influence", infertile, and—an unspoken serious fault—responsible, through the Spirit, for the redistribution of goods in her own house, but also indirectly in her husband's family. All of these issues are very difficult to address directly, and no less so through the mediation of possession.

Shell games

In 1991, C.'s husband Justin caught gonorrhoea as a result of an adulterous relationship, something that was not unusual for him. The act was supposed to have taken place within the family compound, which is strictly unforgivable. To get treatment, Justin consulted Letianarivo, Prince Raleva's older brother, a specialist in these problems. But Justin had to obtain forgiveness from Prince Raleva before he could receive treatment. Raleva remained stubbornly absent and refused to descend upon not only C., but all of the other *tromba* spouses solicited within the network of communities. C. then found herself possessed by Prince Raleva's father, a very old man who spoke in a faint, nearly inaudible voice, suffering from pain in his joints. An intermediary in the family asked this elder to speak to his son and ask him to forgive Justin so that his other son Letianarivo could prepare the medicine that was urgently needed...

The resolution of a trivial problem of adultery reveals the meaning of this kind of scenario, with many characters, forcefully dealing with sudden developments, feelings and dramatic effects that are part of a reality that is not just C.'s, but is rooted in her, weaving the plot of a whole social and emotional life in the city of Toliara.

As we have seen, C., via the prince, does not have the uncontested authority of an eldest sibling, nor the experience of Letianarivo, who died of syphilis, so that his arrival on the scene can seem a little worrying, since he has such a transgressive character, doing what none of C.'s other spirits is in a position to do, such as make direct, raw allusions to the sexual practices of one or another family member, or provoke sudden possession crises simply through the touch of his finger! He embodies libido, while also revealing it, and is the "spirit-husband" of many partners in Toliara. Finally, he also represents sexuality unconnected to reproduction, a central marriage issue and therefore a reflection of rapidly changing gender relations.

A daughter's metamorphosis and the reversal of roles (mother/daughter; father/daughter, etc.)

C's possession offers close relatives an unusual chance to directly and subjectively express acts, intentions and emotions that cannot be known by any other member of the family, including C., who is thus exempt from any responsibility for resolving the expounded problems. "C. must not know that...". This is the standard preliminary when C.'s father or mother has a one-on-one interview with the Prince, which takes the tone of a confidential conversation, the Prince assuming the very strategic role of a "good advisor", who conciliates and displays a kind of benevolent neutrality while listening to detailed descriptions of everyday micro-events.

The image of C. (the oldest of eight siblings) as it is conveyed by her parents, presents her as a very reserved, rather taciturn child forced into the role of domestic helper, exploited at will. One imagines her as the little girl in "Prince Charming" who goes to fetch water and cries out under the weight of the bucket: *marary*, it hurts! To say how heavy it is for a little girl.

A kind of role inversion occurs as a result of the acquisition of *tromba* status. C. gains autonomy from her mother, triggering an original position-displacement process within the kinship system. First, she became the identifier of the Spirit that "hovered over her mother", which was none other than Raleva's older brother Letianarivo, the figure of sexuality. Through their spirits, mother and daughter found themselves in the role of "sisters-in-law", whose rank depended on the primogenital order of their respective spiritual husbands, who were brothers. C. held the status of younger sister-in-law and Prince Raleva was forced to assume the role of a younger brother in

possession sessions in which both mother and daughter were present through their spirits. When in a state of possession, C.'s mother essentially continued to embody parental authority.

Later, the *fondy* C. ritually "dismissed" the spirit of a mother she considered too old, depriving her of authorized speech. Through her six spirits, members of the Raleva lineage, C. consequently acquired power, speech and right of interference in family affairs, in a sense occupying the place of her parents. Her siblings became "her children", especially given that, as we have said, she adopted her sisters' children. In consultations, Prince Raleva, on the strength of his gradually acquired roles as the whole family's advisor, doctor and conscience, only uses "words that carry weight", and does not use the language of talismans or divination that He/she tends to use during consultations with people from circles 4 or 5.

In this new configuration, C.'s mother, who regularly consults the Prince, has inadvertently become a special informer since she confides to her daughter only a fraction of the story shared with the Prince, especially when it concerns her highly conflictual relationships with her granddaughters, who are attributed every flaw in this context. She accuses them of plunder, laziness, of only knowing how to "lift the cover of the rice pot", etc. Her most serious reproach is that they do not show her enough respect. Sometimes an unexpected thought brings more play back into the exchange:

- People in the family criticize me for giving preference to the one possessed by Raleva, but I swear it isn't true.

And the Prince replies:

- But what makes the children think such a thing!

It is certainly worth pointing out that we personally believe that C., by definition, controls most of the game introduced by Prince Raleva, but only up to a certain point, and it is this that interests us, the threshold beyond which something else happens. Possession helps open a forum for "free speech" between the two interlocutors. First, in C./Raleva's case, she makes concrete adjustments to the family's day-to-day life through her way of listening and answering, as we have just seen. Most of the time, these adjustments concern situations that may be trivial, but they foreshadow elements of social reorganization at work in the city: alcoholism, drugs, juvenile insolence, frivolous behavior by boys and girls, unbridled sexuality, thefts, jealousies, greed... All things that Raleva confronts as the head of the family, who must ensure its cohesion and its social and economic survival.

This is precisely where the threshold appears: by playing Raleva, C. is led to run behind her concretely active Personage, who gets C. herself involved in the family setting. The prince's words are not simply a diagnosis, an external judgment. They constitute an act that carries weight in a situation where, for better for worse, everyone is playing the game. All of this implies an acceleration of the process, which naturally leads C. to make mistakes that can only be corrected by the arrival of a spirit that has authority over Raleva, as we have seen. Moreover, Raleva's role is much more gratifying in many cases than her position as C., but it is only possible for her to play this role if she respects the alternation. The more effective she is in the role of Raleva, the more she finds herself forced to play the role of C....

Then the central question that arises is the following: when C.'s father consults Prince Raleva, does he no longer recognize his daughter (like Maltina's father in "Pourquoi tu pleures?"), but only see the Prince? And how could that be possible? Of course, we have no straightforward answer to

this question, but a thorough consideration of two essential points is necessary if we are going to give ourselves any chance of finding a possible way forward.

The first concerns the fascination that this question of possession arouses in anthropologists and historians, not to mention philosophers, writers, filmmakers... These phenomena are often generally perceived as a direct relationship, a “primitive” contact with something that haunts more or less everyone: questions about Origins and their mysteries. And the search for origins is just as much a search for the self. In fact—and this is worth noting—the implicit axioms that underlie discourse on possession, whatever its nature, even the most positivistic texts, preserve the “divine’s” share, thus enabling the operation of the religious, which is always hiding somewhere...

This naturally leads us to the second point: both in terms of sensibility training and the acquisition of know-how, the learning processes necessary in a given culture and society enable everyone to immediately take their place in a world of exchange that is no less real than that of merchandise: the world of the imagination. This is where the religious nests, but the arts certainly nest there as well, and we believe that it is by exploring this avenue that we can try to find answers to this beautiful question.