

The Malaso of Madagascar

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On arriving at Ihosy, we leave the Central Highlands of Madagascar behind. We have departed from the land of the sedentary rice farmers and are now in the land of semi-nomadic herdsmen - the land of the great pastures of the *horombe* swept by the Eastern winds where it is said that the cattle outnumber the people seven to one. Indeed, in 1653, Flacourt called it the richest cattle land on earth.

Although I expected to find some sort of competition with bulls among the Bara, Antandroy and Mahafaly populations of southern Madagascar (similar to that of *savika* among the Betsileo people), my search was fruitless. I did discover, however, that until recently in certain Bara regions, virility, courage and ability to marry was connected with *halats'omby* (institutionalized cattle theft). Can we consider this activity to be a combat game?

The Bara people, now largely sedentary, are of many origins; but according to Louis Michel, one of the sub-groups and perhaps the name of the macrogroup trace their origin to a great African warrior called Rabiby who crossed the Mozambique channel with 1,000 warriors. Andriamanely, a historical figure well-known throughout Southern Madagascar was said to be his son. It is believed that the word "Bara" is also of African origin and, indeed, there is an ethnic group in the West Nyasa region that is called Mbara or Mbala,

Originally a nomadic people, the Bara of Madagascar, as might be expected, have a wide domain. Their principal cities are Beroroha, Ankazoabo, and Sakaraha to the West; and Ihosy and Betroka to the East. The Bara, however, are not city people and prefer to live in small villages which are far from one another. They are said to be divided into five principal groups: 1) the Ianatsantsa ("Force and Agility of Sharks") in the East; 2) the Bara Be ("The Many Bara") in the center; 3) the Imamono ("Those who Kill") in the West; 4) the Vinda ("a kind of plant used to make mats") in the Southwest; and 5) the Tivonjy in the South.

In his *Histoire des Bara*, Pierre Nankany says that 55% of the Bara are of pure African descent and that the remaining 45% are of mixed African, Melanesian, Polynesian, Arab, and Portuguese origin. He goes on to say that they are a tall, dark, slender, well-built, and courageous people who, armed only with spears, are excellent Zebu herders. Until recently (in certain regions) their virility, courage, and ability to marry was connected with "**halats'omby**" ("institutionalized cattle theft"). Surprisingly, in spite of their courage and daring, they submitted to Merina rule in 1873 without war.

Despite their somewhat semi-nomadic existence, they have strong ethnic cohesion and frequently employ *fanange* ("blood brotherhood ceremonies") to increase inter-family solidarity and the "blood-brother" tie is considered to be even stronger than family ties. Within the family, the division of labor is still very traditional, Men prepare the rice-fields, raise cattle, sheep and goats, construct houses, harvest, hunt, and fight; whereas women collect and gather, fetch water, clean house, cook, weave mats, and care for infants. Females also have certain prescribed duties in the rice-fields.

The first time I heard about this tradition as a test of virility came via Mr. X. who informed me that when he was a youth of 18 he was, without prior knowledge, taken on a cattle raid by an acquaintance. He stated:

As a youth, I was known in the community as a fast runner. One evening, after a boxing match, I was taken by a group of boys on an expedition which they informed me was to test my strength and endurance. When we got to a particular place, they told me to wait for them there. My cousin then returned with 20 stolen cattle and we were obliged to run for our lives for nearly 60 kilometers. My extra strength came from the fear of being caught; and we successfully evaded those in pursuit. I was angry with my cousin for doing this to me and my body ached for a full seven days.

Theft is theft, however, and I hesitate to give it legitimacy by calling it a tradition, or a sport, or a test of virility. Nevertheless, for some Bara speaking people it was all of this and more. Indeed, of the five elements characteristic of nearly every major African Combat Game (i.e. drumming, dance, combat, medicines, song), the *malaso* utilize all five. Moreover, in the first volume of my Black Martial Arts series, weren't hunters and *tauri* (tough skin) performers legitimately held to be performers of combat games? Indeed, the only difference between a hunter and a cattle thief is the identification of the owner of the prey. In the case of the hunter the prey belongs to the "lord of the forest" whereas for the *malaso*, the prey is belongs to people of a different clan.

In Jean Faustin's thesis for the Ecole Normale Niveau III EPS (University of Antananarivo) entitled La Forme de l'athlete, he describes the "magic ritual" observed by the cattle thieves of southwestern Madagascar to better achieve their aim. He wrote (pg. 7-9):

In southwest Madagascar, as in the case of other regions as well, it is customary to consult an *ombiasa* (a sort of combination fortune teller / sorcerer / healer) before undertaking a difficult enterprise. Such enterprises include the construction of a house or boat, harvesting crops, going on a long trip, sitting for an examination, making a court appearance, etc. It is an ancient practice which continues even in present times; and the habit of wearing a protective *gris-gris* (amulet) is not forgotten.

Thus many athletes wear amulets that they believe will give them strength. Local boxers and wrestlers in southern Madagascar are proud of their victories in which they secure the affection and admiration of local girls and it is thanks to the utilization of “magic” that a number of them managed to defeat their adversaries.

The *malaso* (cattle thieves), never forget to consult an *ombiasa* (also known as *ambiasa* or *ombiasy*) before going out on a raid. The night before their departure, the cattle thieves go into seclusion to apply or ingest the concoction that their *ombiasa* has prepared for them. This secret preparation is often a mixture of wild plants and honey which serves to fortify the leg muscles of the thieves. It is also their custom that night to eat grilled fresh manioc with *kitoza* (grilled meat) rather than greasy foods which may slow them down.

This preparation is accompanied by a prayer that one makes before midnight – a prayer which is preceded by a *sikidy* reading by a diviner [Note: for a detailed description of the *sikidy* divination system see my Lore of Madagascar pg. 301 – 318 or my Black Religiosity pg. 66 - 75]

Then armed with spears and axes, the thieves leave their village to spread the blood of an old cookoo bird along the trail that the owners of the cattle will probably use to pursue them. As they do this they utter a ritual prayer which goes something like this:

Ho soa ty liay!
Haleme ty manarakanay!
Tsy ho hita zahay!
[i.e. “Let our journey be favorable!
May those that follow us become weak from fatigue!
May they not see us!]

The seclusion of the thieves at the place of their *ombiasa* is considered necessary to obtain the “green light” to pursue the mission. They are not permitted to sleep with girls because if they did, the power of the amulet or gris-gris would be nullified. This, in itself, has a correlation with modern science in that it is well known that sexual intercourse before a competition typically diminishes the strength of a competitor.

The choice of the cookoo bird for the performance of the blood rite is motivated by the fact that this bird is considered lazy and incapable of continuous flight. It always flies low from bush to bush and often looks to the left and right before preceding. Moreover, it always stops to rest after only have covered a short distance. Thus, anyone who steps in its blood (here the pursuers of the thieves) will (by the effects of sympathetic

magic) behave in a similar manner. Honey of course is a natural product used to fortify, massage, and heat the muscles whether they are in need of it or not.

Thus the combination of the elements of this ritual directed by the *ombiasa* both physically (abstention from sex, resting, eating honey and grilled food) and psychologically (eradication of fear of pursuers through ritual prayer, cookoo blood, and gris-gris or amulet) prepares the thieves for their undertaking. Moreover, the diviner also tells the thieves exactly where to go to effect the theft. This, in short, is the explanation for the unparalleled successes of the *malaso*; since very few of them are caught.

For additional information on this subject see my Combat Games of the African Indian Ocean (pgs. 230 – 237) or pg. 66 – 75 of my Black Religiosity. See also the BLAC Foundation article on **Umlabalaba**, a popular board game of the Zulu of South Africa based on cattle stealing.