

TSINDRIMANDRY: NOCTURNAL HAUNTINGS IN MADAGASCAR

—
Anders Norge Lauridsen



The abandoned dance hall in Andramosa where Ralahy's rivalry with Andrianary arose.

Spirits of the dead haunt the living in virtually any society in some way or another, but few are the places where the dead entertain such a pronounced influence on life as they do in Madagascar. Among the Sihanaka of the north-eastern highlands, people remain part of the social fabric after they die; in a sense, the funeral is just yet another *rite de passage* rather than the end of existence. Although the spirits of the dead depart to the *ankoatra* (afterlife), they remain able to communicate and interact with the living in special ways. One such way is spirit possession which has been richly documented in ethnography, but there is another just as common and widespread communication channel between spirits and people that has been largely overlooked by ethnographers in Madagascar – *tsindrimandry*.

Roughly speaking, *tsindrimandry* refers to a diversity of nocturnal encounters with spirits, and in this article, I will take the reader with me on a journey to my field-site, the Sihanaka village of Anororo, exploring the broadness of *tsindrimandry* experiences ranging from vehement ghost encounters and ancestral commands to serene visions and complicated, coercive spirit mediumship.

PRESSURE-SLEEP

"I was asleep... And he came to throttle me. I was choking! A a a!" With his hands in a firm grip around his own throat the grey-haired monsieur Ralahy stuttered painful gasps and rattled "a a a!" demonstrating how he had fought for breath. "I knew this man, a dead man... monsieur Andrianary"¹ "Did you have some sort of quarrel with this man when he was alive?" monsieur Ralahy was asked. "No quarrel, nothing like that, but I went to a ball in Andramosa, and this man came along. I used to be a rice collector back then, and I got this invitation for the ball so I went there. And we... We didn't have a *quarrel*, it was just about a woman, a woman there at the ball..." The other people in the room erupted into laughter, but Ralahy hardened his voice emphasising the seriousness. "Years after Andrianary died, [he came in the middle of the night,] he said 'gotcha!'" In a grave tone, Ralahy

1. Names of people and spirits in this article are all pseudonyms.

recounted how he had trembled in fear, and he insisted that it was no dream and that he had tried to talk to the ghostly assailant but was unable to say a word.

During my first fieldwork among the Sihanaka of Anororo five years ago, I started to learn about my informants' experiences of nocturnal hauntings, which they referred to by the term *tsindrimandry*. I still remember sitting under the coiled-up mosquito net on the bedside next to my field assistant when my eyes landed on the dictionary entry *tsindrimandry*: "Vision, revelation, dream, apparition, presentiment"² The next entry was the no less intriguing verb form *manindry mandry*: "Reveal, appear in a dream or in a vision, anticipate". The concept is formed by two words, the first being *mandry* which I knew means "sleep". The other part, *tsindry*, was new to me at the time, but when I discovered that *tsindry* means "pressure" and *manindry* means "to press", it rang a bell. I had heard or read about something like this elsewhere, outside of Madagascar, hadn't I?

First thing after my homecoming to Aarhus, I looked into what could underlie my vague hunch of recognition. I found the book *Sleep Paralysis: Night-mares, Nocebos, and the Mind-Body Connection* (2011) and realised that Madagascar is anything but the sole place on earth where people experience and conceptualise "pressure-sleep"³ In this book, medical anthropologist Shelley R. Adler juxtaposes a host of phenomena from all over the world: The Chinese *bei guai chaak* ("being pressed by a ghost"), the Moroccan *boratat* ("someone who presses on you"), the Botswanan *sebeteledi* ("someone who exerts pressure or force"), the Estonian *luupainaja* ("the one who presses your bones") and so forth. These are only a fraction of numerous examples from Alaska to Zanzibar in which Adler identifies a set of consistent, cross-cultural features: the experience of being awake, conscious, paralysed, and terrified, having difficulties breathing often accompanied by chest pressure, as well as sensing the presence of a violent entity. As I devoured Adler's book, several *tsindrimandry*

2. Abinal, Antoine and S.J. Malzac [1888]: *Dictionnaire Malgache-Français*, Éditions Ambozontany, 2012.

3. Adler, Shelley R: *Sleep Paralysis: Night-Mares, Nocebos, and the Mind-Body Connection*, Rutgers University Press, 2011.

narratives from my fieldwork came back to me as I could see in them most, if not all, of the above traits, for example in the following case of a Sihanaka widow who was haunted by her late husband in the dead of night.

A friend of mine whose husband was dead used to tell me about how she felt his hand *clutching* her. Sometimes it was as if she 'dreamt' of them having intercourse, but when it was over, he was nowhere to be seen (...). It went on for about a year, and every night she was so scared.

According to Adler who builds on folklorist David J. Hufford,⁴ all these suffocative experiences may in fact spring from a common neurophysiological source, namely sleep paralysis. Sleep paralysis is when two normally separate states of consciousness overlap: wakefulness and dreaming. Psychologists explain it as a "waking nightmare" caused by neurotransmitters accidentally waking up the person without "turning on" the body's ability to move (hence paralysis) and without "turning off" the dream-state of imagining freely (hence the sensed malicious entity).⁵ As sleep paralysis researchers estimate that 25-30% of the world's population experiences sleep paralysis at least once in their lifetime, it is hardly unimaginable that this parasomnic condition could have something to do with dreadful and suffocative *tsindrimandry* experiences like Ralahy's and the widow's. However, what puzzles me as an anthropologist when I pore over my heaps of field material from five fieldworks in Madagascar is that an astounding number of the collected *tsindrimandry* narratives are utterly void of the *tsindry* part - the sensations of pressure and suffocation. As we will see, they rather revolve around something very different, namely messages from spirits — injunctions, orders, and demands as well as various kinds of guidance, revelations, and prophecies.

4. Hufford, David J.: *The Terror That Comes in the Night: An Experience-Centered Study of Supernatural Assault Traditions*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982.

5. Cheyne, James Allan and Gordon Pennycook: "Sleep Paralysis Postepisode Distress: Modeling Potential Effects of Episode Characteristics, General Psychological Distress, Beliefs, and Cognitive Style", in *Clinical Psychological Science*, no. 1, 2013: s.135-148.

“THAT’S HOW IT IS WITH ANCESTORS HERE, THEY ACTUALLY APPEAR”

While the biomedical category of sleep paralysis is clearly distinguished from dreaming in that the person is awake, when it comes to *tsindrimandry* it is far from easy to draw a clear line between dream and reality. According to traditional Sihanaka thought, the soul can leave the body during sleep, wander off to even far-away places and communicate with the souls of others. “Dreams to the Sihanaka are actual occurrences,” British missionary Thomas Lord wrote in the 1880s.⁶ When I talk to my informants in present-day Anororo about dreaming, I encounter a variety of views on what dreaming is, but the idea of wandering souls indeed recurs in many of the conversations.

Some of my informants explicitly state that their *tsindrimandry* are unlike dreaming; they insist, like Ralahy, that they are fully awake and conscious when it happens. Others try to explain *tsindrimandry* by likening it to dreaming. “It’s like a dream, but it’s not a dream” many of my informants say, or, as a woman whose sister-in-law often has *tsindrimandry* once put it: “She has this in her dreams, all of it true, but hers aren’t dreams, it’s something she sees.” Although *tsindrimandry* and dreaming sometimes converge and sometimes diverge, my informants agree that *tsindrimandry* is a common means for spirits to express themselves to people. Occasionally, the *tsindrimandry* are merely expressions of feelings between spirits and people, one example being anger in the case of Ralahy and his dead rival, another being affection between the widow and her late husband. However, as my field material bears witness



6. Lord, Thomas: “The Belief of the Sihanaka with Regard to the Soul”, in *Antananarivo Annual and Madagascar Magazine* no. 7, 1883.

to, *tsindrimandry* contain messages more often than not. “In this place, it is custom to grieve for the dead”, a group of villagers told me a couple of months into my first fieldwork in Anororo. They described to me the Sihanaka tradition of *saona* (wake), an institution that enables the bereaved to mourn for a series of days, but after the ritual closing of the *saona*, they must let go of their sorrow, lest the deceased be prevented from departing this world and reaching the *ankoatra* (afterlife). It happens though, the informants admitted, that the woe lingers on in which case the deceased has no choice but to step forward before the family: “Once, there were two dead men who said [to their mourning family] ‘you have to let go of the



Ritual erecting of a *fototra* (forked tomb pole) ordered by means of *tsindrimandry*.

sorrow; it prevents us from uniting with our friends [the ancestors]” Clearly, this case of *tsindrimandry* differs significantly from the previous examples given that there is no suffocation, violence or fear. Yet, it is still referred to as a *tsindrimandry*.

When the dead slumber serenely in the ancestral tombs, they are indeed separated from the living. Yet, they are far from uninterested in the affairs of their living descendants. Gerontocratic rule runs deep in rural life in Madagascar, and in villages like Anororo much of the power is in the hands of elders – both living elders and their dead antecedents, the ancestors. Unlike the living elders who can execute their authority directly through speech, when the dead desire sacrifices or mortuary rituals, they express themselves by means of *tsindrimandry*.

“Tomorrow we will have a family meeting”, a key informant of mine told me one day during fieldwork. “You see, my uncle who is an elder was *nanindry mandry* [pressed in his sleep]: We have to erect a *fototra* [“foundation”, the local term for a tomb pole] by our



The body of the dead is laid to rest in the ancestral tomb; its spirit will depart to the afterlife, lest emotional bonds will restrain it.

ancestral tomb, because the other tombs already have one! 'If you don't do that you will have a bad foundation for your lives!' After that, he called a meeting on Wednesday which is an auspicious day". His brother-in-law filled in: "It needs to be done. This was a *tsindrimandry* from the ancestors, not from God".

Cases of ancestors ordering descendants to perform rituals have also been reported by other anthropologists further up in the Malagasy highlands among the Merina people.⁷ Here, elders also receive *tsindrimandry* about rituals to perform, and sometimes the spirits are highly specific in their nightly instructions; they may dictate exactly which waterhole to appoint for the sacred site, order a monolith to be erected, tell which ancestor is attached to the place and command a tomb to be built for that ancestor instruct a tomb for him or her is to be constructed. Such orders and directions are common, but what is even more common in human-spirit relations in Madagascar is what anthropologist David Graeber calls *negative authority*; more often than telling people what to do, the ancestors tell people what not to do.⁸ They constrain the living with various prohibitions and punish violators with sickness. In Anororo, the ancestors keep a vigilant eye on the observance of the local *fady* (taboos) in particular and do not hesitate to interfere if these are disregarded.

"'You! You're doing something that is not okay!'" With her hoarse voice, a retired schoolteacher mimicked how outraged ancestors admonish *fady* violators. "That's how it is with ancestors here, they actually appear"; she explained and illustrated her point with an example from a contested issue that has given rise to conflicts between charismatic Christians and traditionalists in recent years: the *fady* against pork. "There was a doctor who was raising pigs, everybody told him that it is *fady* here [in Anororo, even bringing pork to the village is forbidden]. Once, someone knocked the door in the middle of the night, and the couple thought it could be someone sick. They opened the door, but there was nobody. They

7. Blanchy, Sophie, Jean-Aimé Rakotoarisoa, Philippe Beaujard, and Chantal Radimilahy: *Les Dieux au Service du Peuple : Itinéraires Religieux, Médiations, Synchrétisme à Madagascar*, Karthala, 2006.

8. Graeber, David: *Lost People: Magic and the Legacy of Slavery*, Indiana University Press, 2007.

thought it might be a witch and closed the door, but when they turned around, they saw two beautiful women in the north-eastern corner of the room [north-east is associated with ancestors]! 'How the...?!' The wife went mad as she thought the women were her husband's mistresses. 'Who are you?' 'We are the 'landowners' [ancestors]! You already know that it's *fady* to raise pigs on this land!' The following day, they [the couple] fell sick..."

SPIRITUAL POWERS

Breaching taboos has consequences as this example touches upon, and this has to do with the dead's position in the aforementioned hierarchy. Not only are spirits above humans, they are in proximity to the divinities at the apex of Sihanaka cosmology. This divine position endows spirits with more-than-human powers, which they sometimes use to punish humans with misfortune, illness and death, yet other times to help humans. Much of this aid from spirits comes in the shape of *tso-drano* (blessing) by which fertility, prosperity and protection against misfortune on a most general level is supported. However, spirits also provide help with all sorts of specific problems, most often through the Sihanaka institution of *tsanganan-draha* (spirit mediumship) in which *tsindrimandry* plays an important role. Spirit mediumship is initiated when spirits choose humans to be their corporeal hosts, so that in ritual settings they can manifest themselves by possessing their human mediums. "Having spirits live in one's body"; as it's often called, can provide extremely useful resources: the gift of channelling spirits' abilities to heal, divine, and so on. However, it takes time and negotiation — or rather, considering the supremacy of the spirit over the human — struggle and coercion for the spirit and the human to reach a stable level of coexistence. To begin with, many mediums-to-be try to refuse to let spirits "take seat" in their bodies for a number of reasons; one must obey the will of the oftentimes wayward spirits, one can be forced to do shameful things, one must observe the spirits' *fady* against, for instance, a number of food items. *Tsindrimandry* of the terrible, suffocative kind are then used as an instrument of coercion by the spirits to punish refusal and disobedience and to force through their will to possess. The first many months or even years of a relationship between a human host and a possessing spirit are usually full of these violent *tsindrimandry*, and only after many years of align-

ment between these multiple subjectivities sharing one body, will the *tsindrimandry* be free of coercive pressure.

Eventually, spirit mediums' *tsindrimandry* become increasingly about access to spiritual powers. As can be seen in the ethnographic literature on Madagascar, it is common throughout the country that spirits cause *tsindrimandry* visions of a medicinal plant that the spirit medium should pick and use as medicine. Another common motif is visions of the components that should go into the making of a protective amulet. Likewise, in my field material from Anororo, *tsindrimandry* often serves as a means of internal communication between spirit and host, as, for instance, the young medium Njaka exemplifies: "For me to heal," he explained, "the spirit comes at night to tell me what to do (...), for example, when a patient comes and I'm to take care of him". Njaka's *tsindrimandry* used to be painful, "they made me suffer" he recalled, but now he and his spirits coexist and collaborate more smoothly. Established and esteemed spirit mediums also receive revelations and prophecies in *tsindrimandry*. One example is a woman in her 40s by the name Soamiary. Having seen her repeatedly taking an active role in possession rituals, I one day went to her house to hear who this obviously spirit-possessed woman was. Initially, her cousin took the word: "For Soamiary here... when there are 'things' [common appellation for spirits] who *manindry mandry* ['presses her in her sleep'], she tells people about it and they can't believe it, they are like..." The cousin puts on an amazed expression emphasising how outstanding insights Soamiary sometimes receives at night. Then Soamiary leans forward and takes the word: "Last year when there was no rain [the rainy season began much later than usual], the 'things' spoke to me, they said: 'You will not succeed in being full of rice, but you will be full of money! Prepare yourselves, for in the beginning of March the rain will fall!' (...) It's like something that speaks to your mind". The prophecy came true, and one could sow in time for the rain in March.

As this brief exploration of *tsindrimandry* in contemporary Madagascar has shown, only a minor share of the experiences actually contains any *tsindry* – the painful sensation of being pressed. These include spiritual coercion into mediumship as well

as expressions of spirits' anger or affection. More often, spirits show themselves without laying hands on humans, keeping their demands or admonitions to words only. Most are merely voices or visions that deal with healing, divination, or ritual activities. Here, the *tsindrimandry* are not only free of pression, but entirely incorporeal, mental, or in Soamiary's words: "It's like something that speaks to your mind"



A Sihanaka spirit medium explains how his medical practice is guided by nocturnal instructions from his spirits in *tsindrimandry*.