



Healing Ministry in Madagascar

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For nearly one hundred years, the Malagasy Lutheran Church (MLC) has been engaged in a ministry of healing and empowerment through its revival movements. Especially in these last twenty years, the shepherd ministry (*Mpiandry*) of the revival has had a strong impact on the total experience of the church.

The shepherd ministry is an indigenous movement which has grown within the Lutheran Church and has strengthened both its outreach and pastoral ministry. To have a better understanding of the role and significance of healing ministry in the lives and witnesses of Malagasy Christians, however, we need to acquaint ourselves with the Malagasy traditional (cultural/religious) concept of healing.

I. SICKNESS, MISFORTUNE, AND HEALING

Most Malagasy people, Christians included, share the common African view that sickness, like all cases of misfortune, finds its true explanation in mystical cosmic reality.¹ Like the Akan of Ghana, the Douala of Cameroon, and the Shona of Zimbabwe (among others), the Malagasy people insist on inquiring about the why of a misfortune even though the how is quite obvious; for it is in the understanding of the why that the appropriate cure can be prescribed.

A. Life Force, Wholeness, and Religion

Placide Tempels' interpretation of the Bantu philosophy of life² (i.e., Being is force) and Vincent Mulago's view of *participation vitale*³ have a lot in common with

¹John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heineman, 1969); Hubert Bucher, *Spirits and Power: An Analysis of Shona Cosmology* (Cape Town: Oxford University, 1980); Kofi Appiah-Kubi, *Man Cures, God Heals* (New York: Friendship, 1981); Eric de Rosny, *Healers in the Night* (New York: Orbis, 1985).

²Placide Tempels, *La Philosophie Bantoue* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1949). See also R. P. Rahajarizafy's discussion of "Ny Fanahy no olona (The soul is that which makes one human)" in *Filozofia Malagasy* (Antananarivo: Imprimerie Catholique, 1963) 13-22.

³Vincent Mulago, *Un Visage Africain du Christianisme* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1965). Mulago's view of participation is comparable to Rahajarizafy's view of *fihavanana* (kinship and belongingness).

the Malagasy view of life. Life constitutes a wholeness in which every individual participates through mutual sharing and mutual empowerment. The life of the individual has meaning only in this vital participation in the bundle of life.⁴ Through this participation, life force is increased and strengthened for both the individual and the community. Increase in life force is good, diminution is bad.

Religion is the effort of the human community to enlist the help of all positive forces (the spirit world: ancestors and divinities; the symbolic world: blessing and curse; and God) to protect life. Harmony must be kept permanent. Religion, then, is also the effort to mend any ruptures in the fabric of life by removing their causes and thus healing the weakened life force through reconciliation.

B. Sickness and Misfortune

Misfortune (*fahavoazana*)⁵ is primarily understood not as a loss of vital force but rather as an invasion of destructive forces. (Thus, there is the possibility of repulsion or removal.) Sickness is considered a misfortune.

The Malagasy know of three possible causes of sickness. First, there are direct observable causes, those which can be established by ordinary observations.

Second, there are direct “unobservable” causes, those which are usually attributed to witchcraft or sorcery. The Malagasy people, like most Africans, believe in the effective destructiveness of sorcery; they regard it as a constant in their diagnosis of any case of misfortune. Sorcery can be effected either through the use of charms⁶ or by spirit possession (as in homeopathic magic).⁷ Both forms of sorcery are feared—even by Christians—to be capable of inflicting great damage on people, both physically and mentally.

Third, there are indirect unobservable causes, those which are revealed by divination to be *tsiny* and *tody*.⁸ *Tsiny* is blame set against an offender by the offended party. It is the objectification into the mystical cosmos of the sadness of the one who suffers injustice. This sadness is believed to turn into a negative force which will not rest until justice is done. Malagasy people in general, Christian or otherwise, are obsessed with the fear of *tsiny*.⁹ Some are so terrified by it they are paralyzed into inaction. This fear comes from the belief that there is no protection

⁴Dominique Zahan’s discussion of the African view of the human being (“becoming,” not simply “existing”) is very helpful in understanding the importance of vital participation. Cf. D. Zahan, *The Religion, Spirituality, and Thought of Traditional Africa* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1970) 9ff.

⁵The root is *voa* (being hit or hurt; compare with *diboa* in Douala which has the same meaning). Cf. de Rosny, *Healers in the Night*.

⁶A charm is a symbolic icon, containing a sequence of symbol-bearing objects in ascending values, which serves as a gateway or port of entry for the things symbolized (good or evil) into human reality. For more details about charms and charm making, see L. Vig, *Charmes, Specimens de Magie Malgache* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969).

⁷Mbiti, *African Religions*, 200. Bucher’s discussion of *shavi* among the Shona as harmful possession by a stronger spirit parallels the Malagasy understanding of *mosavy* (*Spirits and Power*, 105ff.).

⁸For an extended discussion of *tsiny* and *tody*, see Richard Andriamanjato, *Le Tsiny et le Tody dans la Pensée Malgache* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1957).

⁹Hundreds of Malagasy proverbs and wisdom sayings support this assessment. Among Christians, reference to *tsiny* varies from simple apology (*miala tsiny*, “excuse me”) to the threat of placing *tsiny* on someone (*manome tsiny*, “placing blame”). For further reading on Malagasy proverbs, see G. de Meritens and P. de Veyrieres, *Le Livre de la Sagesse Malgache* (Paris: Editions Maritimes et d’Outre-Mer, 1967).

against *tsiny*, for it is God himself who guarantees its effectiveness. Thus, even Christians are open to the sanctions of *tsiny*.

The *tody* is understood to be the working out of cosmic retributive justice. Good and evil deeds have their ways of repaying their authors in kind. An evil act mayor may not evoke *tsiny*, but it always brings about a *tody*. A good deed may be thankless, but its *tody* is forthcoming. Malagasy Christians also believe in *tody*—not only its existence but also its legitimacy as a cosmic form of justice.¹⁰

Tsiny and *tody* are explanations of the why of misfortune. Therefore, what Appiah-Kubi says of the Akan is also true of the Malagasy, namely, that “health and disease are inextricably connected with social behavior and moral conduct.”¹¹

C. Curing and Healing

To gain a better understanding of the Malagasy philosophy of life, we need to make a distinction between curing and healing. Appiah-Kubi’s distinction is very helpful. For Appiah-Kubi, curing is an event, while healing is “a process entailing a long, complicated interaction of other human beings, the community, and above all the intervention of God.”¹² Any Malagasy will agree with Appiah-Kubi when he says:

The individual illness is derived from a sick or broken society. Society becomes the point of departure for individual diagnosis, and the damage in the society must be repaired before the individual regains his health.¹³

D. Diagnosis

When a misfortune in the form of sickness strikes, a Malagasy will invariably seek to know the root cause of such misfortune. Diagnosis and prescription of cure are available through divination. The Malagasy mystical tradition has three strands of divination: the *sikidy*,¹⁴ the *fanandroana*,⁵ and the *fahitana*.¹⁶ These forms of divination are believed to help in determining whether a sickness is caused by witchcraft (What kind? Who did it? What is the cure?) or by *tsiny* (From whom—human, spirit, or God? Why? What is required as restitution?) or by *tody* (What wrongdoing is being sanctioned? How shall the penalty be removed?).

E. The Healers

The healing process starts with the diviner’s attempt either to repair or to recycle the patient’s track of life on the mystical level.¹⁷ Repair can be done by way of a powerful charm (in the case of witchcraft). Recycling, on the other hand,

¹⁰In Acts 28:4, justice is translated as *tody* in the Malagasy Bible. For an introductory study of *tody*, see R. P. Rahajarizafy, *Filozofia Malagasy*, 40-47.

¹¹Appiah-Kubi, *Man Cures*, 14.

¹²Ibid., 81.

¹³Ibid., 14.

¹⁴The *sikidy*, like the *ifa* system of the Yoroba, deals with mysteries, the cosmic texts, by way of ciphers. See Mbiti, *African Religions*, 117.

¹⁵This is a form of horoscope which aims at determining the relation of one’s life force vis-à-vis the impact of *rohontany* (a powerful energy field which regulates all individual destinies and fortunes). This form of divination is held in high esteem by people who need assurance about a propitious time to do something of importance.

¹⁶*Fahitana* here does not only imply clairvoyance but also spirit possession. Mbiti calls diviners of this strand mediums because they serve as media between the world of the spirits and ancestors and the living human community.

¹⁷A diviner can be a healer if he/she is also a charm maker. Healing at the mystical cosmic level is the same

requires sacrifices (a goat or an ox). This applies for both witchcraft victims and *tsiny* patients. For a *tsiny* patient, however, the effectiveness of recycling is contingent on reconciliation between the offended and the offender. The offender must restore harmony by begging the forgiveness of the offended party. Sin is viewed as a concrete obstacle to the good; thus, it is the concern of the whole community and must be addressed and removed in a public manner.

To cure the sick is a Malagasy preoccupation. Most Malagasy communities possess a whole array of healers, each one a specialist in a particular field. The herbalist specializes in *raok'andro*, the *renin-jaza* is an expert in mother and child care, the *rain-jaza* is a general practitioner, and the *mpanotra* can be a chiropractor or a bone setter. The healing process also includes the family and the immediate neighborhood. Everyone sharing the same environment (land, air, water) with the patient must "clear the heart" in order to allow the force of the good to flow freely and abundantly. The "presence" of purposefully united life force is believed to be valuable for the sick, for human presence brings power.¹⁸

Curing takes place only within the process of healing. Healing (mending what is broken, caring for the disabled and the old) is deeply rooted in the souls of the Malagasy. It is central to their community life; it gives meaning to their religious symbols and rituals; and it shapes their understanding of the Christian faith.

II. HEALING MINISTRY IN THE MALAGASY LUTHERAN CHURCH

Healing ministry in the Malagasy Lutheran Church is carried out almost exclusively by the shepherd ministry of the revival movement. The shepherd ministry came into being in 1894 following the awakening of Dada Rainisoalambo.¹⁹ A ministry of evangelism through healing and mutual empowerment began. Fifty years later, two other revival movements sprang forth: the *ankaramalaza* movement (1941) led by a lay woman, Neny Volahavana Germaine, and the *farihimena* movement (1946) led by a Lutheran pastor, Dadatoa Rakotozandry Daniel. Despite the uniqueness of the charisma of their leaders, these two new movements followed the blueprint established by Rainisoalambo.

A. The Shepherd Ministry and Healing

Rainisoalambo did not want to start a new church; he remained in the Lutheran Mission. But he felt that proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ should not be divorced from the demonstration of Christ's power to heal. Being a good organizer, he trained his followers to be *iraka* (apostles) and *mpiandry* (shepherds). The *iraka* were itinerant evangelists, sent throughout the island. The *mpiandry* on the other hand were in charge of nurturing the new converts. Both *iraka* and *mpiandry* were preacher-healers.

Rainisoalambo was also the founder of the *toby* ministry. A *toby* is a place where healing takes place in the context of a caring community. Rainisoalambo's *toby* was modeled after Acts 4:32-35—a self-reliant community of production and just distribution, where "no one is rich and no one is poor." Families which

¹⁸For an extended discussion of the power of human presence in African culture, see John V. Taylor, *The*

Primal Vision (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963).

¹⁹A. Thunem and Joela Rasamoela, "Soatanana," in *Ny Tantaran'ny Fifohazana eto Madagasikara* (Antananarivo: Trano Printy Loterana, 1972) 13-23. *Dada* means father, a title given to male leaders in the revival movement. *Neny* (mother) and *Dadatao* (uncle) are also used.

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experience healing at the *toby* may choose to live there permanently. Today, there are more than 7,000 shepherds in the Malagasy Lutheran Church, some of them living in more than 200 "tobys" throughout the island.²⁰

All the revival movements agree on three theological perspectives regarding Christian healing. First, the Malagasy view that sickness always requires a deeper, mystical explanation is accepted as a *point de depart*. But, for the shepherds, the reality which provides the explanation of health and sickness is the relationship to Jesus Christ. Sickness is explained as either an indication of a broken relationship between the patient (including his/her family) and the source of life or an attack of the demonic on the faith of the patient and a challenge to the Christian community and its Lord. A shepherd will never turn away from such challenge.

Second, shepherds believe that in order for a cure to be effectual the healing process must already have taken place (thus, Appiah-Kubi's phrase, "Man cures, God heals"). Human curing is dependent upon God's healing. This means two things: (1) broken relationships must be mended, i.e., sin must be removed by way of thorough repentance, and reconciliation must be established among people and between them and God; (2) faith-healing and medical treatment (curing) are not mutually exclusive. Malagasy Christians generally believe that medical treatments, modern or traditional, are ineffective without the help of God's healing power; for it is God, they say, who guides the doctors in their diagnoses and blesses the medicine prescribed. Thus, Christians in Madagascar have the habit of bringing medical treatments and faith-healing together. Patients call on shepherds to hold a service of healing for them in hospital wards, while tobys have built their own dispensaries and included medical services in their total ministry. Christians maintain as basic, however, that God's healing power will not effect curing unless the root relation is restored.

Third, revival theology emphasizes the centrality of the healing process in all Christian experience, i.e., the healing of one's relation with reality through Jesus Christ. This "root relation" is the most important thing in a person's existence—far more important than being cured of an ailment. A healed relationship with Jesus Christ (within the bundle of life of the community of faith) is of eternal worth and outweighs by far any temporal good. This does not mean that being cured is unimportant. Not at all, a cure helps anchor people's hope firmly to the grace of God—"He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?" (Rom 8:32). The one who can and is willing to heal can also cure! This theological view permits two possibilities: (1) curing can take place in the process of healing without medicinal help or beyond the limitations of human knowledge, as God's direct intervention; (2) curing may not take place (as in the case of Paul, 1 Cor 12:9), but the lack of cure would not void the reality of God's healing.

B. Healing Services

As in the case of indigenous churches in Ghana,²¹ the shepherd ministry offers four occasions for healing: (1) healing during church services with a set liturgy and vestments; (2)

healing during hospital or home visitations; (3) healing through

²⁰We will talk about the *toby* ministry later.

²¹Appiah-Kubi, *Man Cures*, 94.

private counseling sessions with the leader; and (4) healing at a distance (*in absentia*). These strands of healing are performed according to the needs of people; their forms and contents remain basically the same.

1. *The Toby Ministry*. A *toby* is a camp, a village set apart, where healing is the preoccupation of all the inhabitants. But it is only a camp; it aims at helping dysfunctional people resume normal life in society. Tobys are organized, run, and financed by the shepherds themselves, while remaining under the supervision of the Malagasy Lutheran Church.

To become a shepherd, a communicant member (male or female) of the Lutheran Church (or of the Reformed Church)²² follows a two-year training program at a designated center. Shepherds are commissioned by the Lutheran Church as unpaid workers. The responsibilities of a shepherd include preaching and teaching the Bible at local congregations, evangelism in cities and in the countryside, and diakonic services for the poor, homeless, orphans, and diseased. A shepherd's home is an open house for Christ and his "little ones." Some shepherds choose to live in the tobys, permanently or only for a season. Those who decide to take up the life of the toby dedicate themselves totally to the healing ministry. Shepherds are expected to provide for their own families. In addition, each is entrusted with the care of four to five patients whom he or she will feed, clothe, clean, educate, and pray for three times a day. These patients live together with the shepherd's family in the one-room house allocated for them (whatever the pathological states of the patients).²³ What do the shepherds get for their work? Nothing in terms of material remunerations. They do what they are called to do out of gratitude for what God has done for them and the whole world in Jesus Christ. It is regarded as a joy and privilege for a shepherd to work alongside Jesus Christ.²⁴

Those shepherds who work in the community at large, bringing the power of healing in the midst of congregations, do no less than those in the tobys. Most shepherds accept into their homes patients who need constant supervision, abandoned children, and delinquent youths. In addition, they send material and financial assistance to the tobys.

2. *Form and Contents of Healing Services*. Basic to every healing service are proclamation of the Word of God, repentance, and prayer/exorcism. A healing service usually begins with a hymn of invocation of the Holy Spirit;²⁵ then one of the shepherds prays, another reads the "liturgical" texts (Mark 16:14-18; John 20:21-23), and a third delivers a short but powerfully moving exhortation. The main theme is generally repentance and trust in the love of God in Jesus Christ. People respond by opening themselves to Christ and to the inner searching of the Holy Spirit. Most of the people present weep openly and loudly, asking forgiveness of God or of one another. Then, the shepherds move in. Together, with a loud voice, they command the demonic powers to depart. This is called the general challenge,

²²The revival movement has not been contained in the Lutheran Church. It is also officially recognized by

the Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar and has been well received in the Episcopal and Roman Catholic Churches. Thus, there are shepherds belonging to and working in these three denominations, but they were trained and commissioned in the Lutheran Church.

²³In the case of violently mentally disturbed or demonized patients, the shepherd must often remain awake day and night until a cure is forthcoming.

²⁴Concerning the activities in the tobys, see Zakaria Tsivoery, “Ankara-malaza,” in *Ny Tantaran’ny Fifohazana*, 64ff.

²⁵It is customary to seat all the sick people on the floor in front of the shepherds.

because it is addressed to the whole assembly. This is deemed necessary, according to some shepherds, because of the deceptive nature of the demons, who hide themselves among the Christians; they must be challenged to show themselves.

After scriptural lessons and repentance come laying on of hands and prayer. A shepherd lays his or her right hand on the head of the kneeling person and says: “In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, I have the authority to perform this ministry to you.” Then, the prayer follows; the service concludes with a word of encouragement from Scripture.

Sometimes, shepherds are faced with cases which they describe as demonic possession. They then engage in exorcism—a fierce battle in which, in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, the exorcisers shout at the demonized, bidding the unclean spirit to depart. Exorcism and singing continue as long as the possessed person is still acting erratically. Demon possessions are always attributed to sorcery; shepherds, who have seen many lives destroyed by sorcery-induced possession, do not take it lightly.

III. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, three things need to be said with regard to the healing ministry in Madagascar. First, many people, Christian or otherwise, have seen their terminally ill relatives cured through the ministry of the revival movement. Skepticism and cynicism meet their limits when confronted with this fact. Dreaded sicknesses which are attributed to sorcery—to which Western medicine has no response—are often cured through the church’s ministry. Reported cures in the tobys include patients with cancer (brain tumor), leukemia, stroke, and advanced mental illness.²⁶ It is true that some patients are not cured (including some shepherds), and yet Malagasy Christians, especially the Lutherans, believe the Lord has visited his church with the power of his healing Spirit.

Second, the healing ministry of the revival movement provides both an open window into the tradition of early Christianity (as expressed in the book of Acts) and an open door into the Malagasy culture and soul. Healing—mending the broken, caring for the disabled and the old—is a deep-seated habit among the Malagasy; therefore, it must be apart of Malagasy religion. A Christianity which banks only on intellectual piety will not be received among the Malagasy as good news. Early Christian tradition kept the proclamation and the demonstration of the Lordship of Jesus Christ together. The shepherd ministry of Madagascar attempts to maintain that tradition and thus serve the needs of the people.

Third, the centrality of healing in the revival movement of the Malagasy Lutheran Church is expressive of away of life revealed in Jesus Christ: reconciliation with reality and a life of mutual empowerment in and through a caring community. In the theology of the revival movement, God’s healing takes place through the hearing of the good news, through the

experience of his renewing power, and through his historical acts of liberation and reconciliation of people in communities. God heals, and God empowers people to be instruments of healing.

²⁶Zakaria Tsivoery, “Ankara-malaza,” 23-38.