



Soanierana- Ivongo,
East coast of Madagascar.

'Staring with witchdoctors'.

9th July 1997.

Stradling the tropic of Capricorn between 43° & 50° south and 12° & 26° east and located in the navel of the Indian ocean lies the island-continent of Madagascar. Known in the time of its ancestors as the fabled "Land of Mu" it is one of the last vestiges on the planet where taboo (referred to locally as 'Fady'), voodoo and animist customs and beliefs remain the sole governing principles by which clan-life and village/community affairs are conducted.

You can keep your Indian Sadhu's and your Amazonian Yage cults, even your Haitian voodoo too, for Malagasy 'Fady' (pronounced Malagash Fhad-ay) is unrivalled for the sheer menace, sorcery and superstition omnipresent at its very core. So much so, that a journey through Madagascar inevitably becomes a journey through the occult...

Populated by eighteen distinct ethnic groups and countless splinter-clans descended from Malay-Polynesians who over 2600 years ago crossed 6500 km of Indian ocean from Java and Sumatra on the seasonal south-east trade winds in 'sarimaniks' (traditional wooden sailing crafts of the time) and landed in the Baie d'Antongil. They were later joined by other southern Pacific tribes who travelled around the edge of the Indian ocean and settled along the west coast of Madagascar.

Though the Portuguese were the first Europeans to weigh anchor off Madagascar, they failed to establish a rapport with the Malagasy and were promptly urged to leave... Ironically it was a fleet of pirates and buccaneers who first won favor with the tribes. They requested and were granted permission to use the thickly wooded shores and safe bays of the north-east as a base from which they plundered the fleets of the British, French and Dutch east-India companies.

In the mid 17th century a French Indian ocean conquistador called Olivier le Vasseur (knicknamed "La Buse") in league with a defrocked Italian monk called 'Father Carraccioli' and another rogue called 'Mission' set about creating a utopian pirate republic on the northern tip of Madagascar. They called it Libéria and the colony flourished for forty years until 1695, when without warning a war party of Antakarana tribesmen attacked and slaughtered every inhabitant of the town except for Mission and his crew who were away on a raid in the Indian ocean. When word reached him he never returned to Madagascar and what became of him remains an unsolved mystery.

'Fady' customs & rituals have been passed down through successive generations of ancestors within each clan and tribe. Different 'Fady' prevail for different tribes and in different regions. In rural areas 'Fady' is entrenched in fundamentalist proportions and there is a widespread reluctance to admonish animist beliefs and embrace the spoils of progress. Although feuds, raids & abductions are still the accepted methods of conflict resolution in inter-tribal quarrels, for the most part, clans strive to respect each others territory and 'Fady' traditions in order to assure respect for their own...

- 'Famadihana: the turning of the bones'

...every seven years or so, each clan holds a Famadihana ceremony. Each corpse is removed in turn from its grave, given a change of shroud and is then paraded around the village so the major events of the years since its death can be whispered to it before being reinterred. After, the living turn to a three-day celebration of eating, drinking, fucking & dancing, foreigners who insist on taking photographs are not welcome, if invited to attend, one must bring an offering of rum, flowers, seeds and money to appease the ancestors for the intrusion...

- never step across the sleeping mat of a woman or child.

- never touch or look at anything wrapped in a red box or red cloth.

My own encounter with 'Fady' was a fairly innocent affair. Here in the village of Soanierana-Ivongo I fell ill with a relapse of Malaria the day after arriving. The head of the village became very distressed about this as to have a 'Vahiny' (foreigner, VAZA- white man) fall sick or bring sickness into the village was bad 'Fady' for everyone, I was taken to the outskirts of the village to await the Shaman. In the morning he came to look me over, smoking a cigarette as he walked in circles around me for ten minutes before leaving. Returning later, his expert diagnosis was malaria in the primary stages and he promptly proceeded to administer an injection of unicef quinine and aspirin to the village.