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The Ancestral Possession. The Tromba Cult on the Island of Saint-Marie

ABSTRACT: The article examines the *tromba* cult – a spirit possession ritual practiced in Madagascar, with particular focus on the island of Sainte-Marie (Nosy Boraha). Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in July 2024, the study explores the cultural and religious context of ancestral possession, the structure and performance of *tromba* ceremonies, and the essential role of music in facilitating spirit possession. The research discusses the Malagasy belief system concerning ancestral spirits (*razana*), the historical origins of the *tromba* cult among the Sakalava people, and the ritual's contemporary manifestations. Special attention is given to the musical elements of the ceremony, including the use of traditional instruments such as the *valiha*, accordion, and *kaiamba* rattles, and their function in inducing and sustaining trance states through polyrhythmic structures and vocal invocations. The article also addresses the performative nature of *tromba*.

KEYWORDS: *tromba*, spirit possession, Madagascar, Sainte-Marie, ancestral spirits, *razana*, ethnomusicology, ritual music, *valiha*, Sakalava, polyrhythm, trance, Malagasy beliefs, possession ceremony, traditional music

Madagascar is a unique land – both in terms of its endemic species of fauna and flora, which occur nowhere else in the world, and its culturally diverse population formed through centuries of migration. It is the fourth-largest island in the world, located off the eastern coast of Africa, in the western part of the Indian Ocean, separated from the continent by the Mozambique Channel. Two main groups settled on the island: migrants from the Malay Archipelago and from East Africa. As early as the seventh century, there were mentions of settlers related to the Polynesians, while from the eleventh century onwards, Bantu settlers from Africa began to arrive (Adelaar, 1989). Among the ancestors of the Malagasy were also merchants from the Middle East (mainly Arabs and Persians), the Portuguese who reached the island around the seventeenth century, and finally the French colonizers in the nineteenth century. On the island of Sainte-Marie, which constitutes the main research area of this article, European pirates also found refuge in the seventeenth century, making Nosy Boraha their base.

This diversity is significant in the context of the ancestor cult, where, beyond belonging to one of the island's eighteen ethnic groups, lineage and origin play an essential role. Indonesian ancestry is attributed to the proto-ancestors—the first settlers of the island—called *Vazimba*. However, it was the Bantu people who founded the Sakalava kingdoms in the sixteenth century, laying the foundations for the tromba cult (Marcinkowska, 2016, p. 19). The ancestor cult in Madagascar predates the tromba ceremony itself, which was first described in Western literature in the seventeenth century by the French missionary O. Louis Mariano (Krzyżostoniak, 2010).

The mixed origins of the population, along with the colonial history, have shaped the diversity of religions practiced on the island. Most Malagasy people combine traditional beliefs (*fomba gasy*) with organized religions such as Christianity and Islam. The veneration of ancestors is widespread across Madagascar but traces its origins to the Sakalava lineage. Today, the tromba cult is most strongly associated with the city of Mahajanga, where, according to legend, the *mpanjaka*—ancestral kings—are buried and visit the living through contact with mediums (Feeley-Harnik, 1978, p. 404).

In Poland, a publication devoted to the *tromba* cult has appeared: *Re-creating the Past: The Cult of Tromba in Madagascar* by Karolina Marcinkowska, who spent several years on the island conducting ethnographic fieldwork, mainly around Mahajanga. Her research provides a comprehensive account of the belief system of the Sakalava people related to the *tromba* cult—describing spirits, intermediaries, and rituals, as well as confronting them with the perspectives of Mahajanga's inhabitants. However, her extensive study devotes little attention to the musical traditions associated with the *tromba* cult. Another important publication addressing the ritual is Hilde Nielssen's *Ritual Imagination: A Study of Tromba Possession among the Betsimisaraka in Eastern Madagascar* (Nielssen, 2011, p. 2). Comparing both works, it becomes clear that the course of a *tromba* ritual is variable and depends on the region in which it is performed, or even on the individual medium. As Nielssen observes:

Tromba rituals are complex and unpredictable events. Improvisation and play characterise both their cosmology and ritual practice. They are multiple and unstable. The spirits connected to this world are highly individuated and not part of a fixed pantheon. Each medium has a unique group of spirits, and each of these spirits possess individual stories, distinctive features and abilities. Rituals are never performed exactly the same way across groups and across time. The various groups of followers each tends to develop their own ways and styles of engaging the spirits. These manners and styles also change with time. Thus, tromba possession is a practice continuously in the making (Emote, 2002, p. 2).

While certain elements of the ritual remain common, its overall structure is complex. In Nielssen's research, a significant role is played by the annual ritual bath, whereas Marcinkowska notes that *tromba* ceremonies often occur spontaneously and may be arranged on the same day. Our research group participated in such an event during fieldwork on the island of Nosy Boraha in 2024. An essential source of information on music and spirit possession is Ron Emoff's

Recollecting from the Past: Musical Practice and Spirit Possession on the East Coast of Madagascar (Golden, 2014, pp. 258–260).

An outline of Malagasy religious beliefs

According to traditional Malagasy beliefs, spirits are stronger than humans and influence their everyday lives. They can be divided into three types: the creator god, primordial spirits, and ancestral spirits (Rossé, 2021, pp. 115–140).

At the top of the supernatural hierarchy stands Zanahary, the creator God. He is also the only deity in the pantheon who is unambiguously good and impossible to deceive. Two types of explicitly malevolent spirits, whose presence foretells misfortune, are *tsiny* and *lolo*. The *tsiny* bring mortal diseases upon people, while the *lolo* are strongly associated with nature and sudden death connected to it. Another spirit type is the *masantoko*, who is mischievous and capricious rather than outright evil, living among people in villages. The *masantoko* make people's lives difficult—causing lost or stolen items, confusion, or financial loss—but do not bring the same kind of tragedy as *tsiny* or *lolo*. All the aforementioned beings have neither beginning nor end—they are primordial (Rossé, 2021, pp. 115–140).

They cooperate with *mpamosavy*, humans who practice black magic—most notably the casting of deadly curses. These are divided into two types: ancestral curses (*tolodrazana*) and evil spirit curses (*tolotsiny*). The *mpamosavy* may also perform possession rituals known as *ozona*, aimed at a chosen victim to cause harm or death.

According to Malagasy belief, every human being begins life as a good person who may stray from the right path and become wicked. However, it is impossible for an evil spirit to become good. Concepts of good and evil are regulated mainly by *fady*, or cultural taboos, passed down from generation to generation. Their observance is enforced by both the community and the spirits. The colors white and black are associated with good and evil, respectively. For this reason, the term “black-skinned” is avoided, as it could be perceived as a reflection of one's moral character; instead, people say “green-skinned” (Rossé, 2021, p. 261). During our research, the spirit also referred to us as “red-eared” (*mena sofina*) rather than “white.”

Ancestral spirits

Tromba is a term commonly used in academic literature to denote a ritual. The Malagasy also use it as a shorthand for the ceremony or the medium itself. However, as both our interviews and detailed study of the sources reveal, *tromba* primarily refers to the spirit that enters the medium during the ceremony (Rossé, 2021, pp. 115–140).

Random spirits do not participate in a *tromba* ceremony. The medium, who prepares for this role, works with specific ancestral spirits called *razana*. The

number of spirits a single medium can channel is limited. In most cases, *tromba* are the spirits of 18th-century members of the Malagasy royal family—usually kings from the Sakalava, Merina, or Betsimisaraka peoples. The Sakalava constitute one of the three largest ethnic groups in Madagascar, numbering about two million people (Benoit Thierry et al., 2010, pp. 28, 31). The Betsimisaraka count more than 1.5 million (Bradt & Austin, 2007), while the Merina are the most numerous, exceeding five million (Heale & Abdul Latif, 2008, p. 64).

As Ron Emoff writes, “foreign visits” are also possible—for example, for members of the Betsimisaraka, being visited by an ancestor from the Sakalava lineage serves this function, but such visits can also involve figures from “distant lands”, such as George Klinsky (Clinton) or Sadam Hoseny (Hussein) (Emoff, 2000, p. 53). Emoff highlights the *tromba*’s importance as a vehicle of historical transmission, while also noting its unreliability—the fluidity of time, space, and events, which are performed as expressive and emotional motifs rather than as documented facts.

He discovered that the woman who communicated with Clinton and Hussein was the only one in the region who owned a television, and the current political news revolved around those two figures. Consequently, she was the only medium capable of communicating with those particular ancestral spirits. The medium through whom Hussein (called *Hoseny*) spoke lowered her voice and added guttural sounds to Malagasy pronunciation—imitating what she perceived as an Arabic accent. Hoseny preferred a foreign musical repertoire played on the *valiha* during the ritual; these were not direct renditions of Western melodies, but adaptations of familiar pieces to a four-beat meter and with the abandonment of polyrhythm (Emoff, 2000, p. 57).

The spirits visiting the living display distinctive personality traits. The ancestor we encountered during a *tromba* ritual, called Kotovola, was described as a water spirit who loved women and strong alcohol. He could behave freely because of his royal lineage. There is little information about him in the literature, making it difficult for an external observer to determine his exact origins. Emoff’s Hoseny also behaved despotically—keeping expensive incense nearby, engaging in quarrels with ritual participants, and speaking in a peculiar manner (Emoff, 2000, p. 57).

Hilde Nielssen observes that the structure of *tromba* resembles Claude Lévi-Strauss’s bricolage. Elements of the ritual, particularly those concerning collective memory, are fragmented, deterritorialized, and reassembled to create an entirely new representation (Nielssen, 2011, p. 264). The bricoleur strives to present a complete picture of reality using only the materials currently available—discarding incompatible meanings and replacing them with new ones. This is well illustrated by the example of the spirit Hoseny. The medium adapted her acquired knowledge and reshaped it to fit ritual principles, abandoning the original context of that information. Thus, *tromba* is a performative event loosely based on historical figures. The medium embodies the traits of the summoned *razana*—particularly their manner of speech, movement, gestures, facial expressions, as well as their preferences regarding offerings, food, and alcohol.

Course of the Ritual

Robert Jaovelo-Dzao distinguishes five main stages of the *tromba* ceremony. Each is highly varied, very long, and must be repeated until the desired outcome is achieved.

1. Initial meeting – This stage includes a series of preparations such as the cleansing of the medium, the arrangement of ritual objects, burning incense, and chanting invocations to the *razana*.
2. Touch (*misafosafo*) – The patient remains waiting while the steps from the first stage are repeated. The music becomes louder and faster, and the invocations grow more insistent.
3. First word (*vaky vava*) – The spirit signals its presence through its first utterances. Participants communicate with the *razana* and discuss the causes of the illness. They are accompanied by vocal-instrumental music, clapping, and singing.
4. Self-presentation (*l'ampitonosana*) – The spirit moves among the participants, signaled by loud shouts and sudden, vigorous movements. It introduces itself, accepts or refuses to help, and may also send minor spirits in its stead, which the participants usually protest against.
5. Joy of the offerings (*valy-hataka*) – A moment of gratitude toward the spirit for its participation and for resolving the problem. The spirit then announces its fee for the service—negotiations may follow. Today the payment is usually money, though in the past it could be, for instance, a sacrifice of a zebu (Jaovelo-Dzao, 1996, pp. 342–351).

Sainte-Marie Island, known locally as Nosy Boraha, lies about 10 kilometers off the coast of the Toamasina province and measures only 50 kilometers in length. In July 2024, we arrived in Ifototra, a village in the northern part of Sainte-Marie, after an almost two-hour journey by motor rickshaw, locally called *tuktuk*.

We stayed in bungalows managed by a French host and his Malagasy wife. The local residents were friendly and generally treated us with polite curiosity. We quickly developed a good rapport through shared music-making, walks around the island, and playing with children. Of particular importance was our contact with Stefano, a local guide who arranged our participation in ceremonies that would have been difficult to access without his mediation.

Because it was the dry season, Stefano managed to secure an invitation for our group to a famadihana, a secondary burial performed five years after the initial funeral. Participation in a *tromba* ceremony, however, was not so easily arranged—perhaps because it requires active participation, whereas the Malagasy

initially viewed us as passive observers (or journalists; during the *famadihana*, we overheard whispers from all around: “Journalists! NatGeo!”).

Due to this perception, our first encounter with a performative representation of the *tromba* came through a performance by a local women’s group, Viavy Mitambatra Ifotatra. The women were invited to our lodging area to present traditional dances, including a staged version of the *tromba* ritual. Since *tromba* itself is a highly performative event, it raises the question: Where lies the boundary between theatre and the authenticity of ritual? The obvious distinction is the presence of the ancestral spirit, the *razana*.

For possession to occur, it is not enough to perform the sequence of ritual actions. The place is also of crucial importance—the *tôny* (or *doany*) (Golden, 2014, p. 261), typically a specially designated hut. Inside, an altar is placed in the eastern or southeastern part of the room, and participants sit facing east. Ancestral spirits are connected to specific locations, which makes it impossible to summon a *razana* outside of the designated space. These sites also allow for communication with Zanahary, though He never responds verbally. The *razana* speak directly through the medium. Just as *lolo* inhabit forests and *masantoko* dwell in villages, the ancestors are bound to particular places. This sometimes provokes controversy regarding the performance of *tromba* outside its traditional centers, such as the city of Mahajanga. Each medium, however, has a limited number of ancestral spirits it can contact, unique to a given region.

On the property grounds, we thus witnessed the entire ritual enacted without the presence of an ancestral spirit. The event began with the preparation of the space and the assignment of specific roles among the women: medium, assistant, musical accompanists, and ritual participants. The assistant prepared a bowl of water mixed with clay. One of the women, assigned the role of the medium, had her hair covered with a blue scarf in preparation for the *tromba*. A half coconut shell burned with thick incense smoke. The musical accompaniment consisted of three men—two playing *bingy* drums and one playing kaiamba rattles made from repurposed insecticide spray cans. The musicians observed one another closely, adjusting rhythm changes to match the dancers and singers. The women also clapped rhythmically whenever they were not dancing.

At the moment when the spirit enters the medium, she lets her hair down and falls into a trance. The women of the association re-enacted this as well. It could be observed that although one woman had been designated as the medium at the start, the spirit seemed to travel through the other participants—their dance became more expressive, their rhythm faltered. This phenomenon also occurs during some actual *tromba* ceremonies: though the ancestral spirit primarily speaks through the main medium, it may also temporarily possess others. The entire performance unfolded in a joyful atmosphere—*tromba* is a long-awaited encounter with an ancestor who, in exchange for the pleasures of earthly experience, offers advice and healing.

Our true encounter with an ancestral spirit took place—after another tuktuk ride—in the northern part of Sainte-Marie, in the village of Ilanivato. The island’s most famous medium had no time for us (or perhaps simply did not wish to receive us), but another medium, Nefa, offered her services. No instruments



Figure 1

Women performing the ritual.

Note. Author's own photo.

accompanied the ritual, though a small crowd quickly gathered outside the hut, listening to the radio.

Nefa and her assistants prepared for the ritual. She wore a white shirt and a *lamba*, a traditional wrap. We were all asked to tie a *lamba* around our waists before entering the hut. The assistants prepared an altar with alcohol, cigarettes, money, incense, and a plate. At the bottom of the plate, they placed a silver coin, added white clay, and mixed it with water. The medium washed her face, rinsed her mouth, and let her hair down. The previously mentioned Kotovola entered Nefa's body, announcing his presence by asking her assistants who we were and why we had come.

After listening to the ailments of the ritual participants, each of us was given the clay-infused water from the plate to drink six times; the remainder was poured over our heads. The assistants made sure the plate was refilled with water and the incense kept burning. During the ceremony, Kotovola drank alcohol and spoke freely with our guide Stefano and his assistants. Because of the language barrier, we relied on simple translations. The possession ended with a ritual cleansing of the face and mouth.

Meanings of Music during the Tromba Ritual

During our research, we frequently encountered musicians participating in the tromba. The instruments most commonly used in the ritual were identified as the *valiha* and the accordion. Their sounds facilitate trance and

enable the use of polyrhythms described by Emoff. In addition, Emoff mentions other instruments associated with specific ethnic groups: the *kabosy* among the Betsimisaraka, and the mandolin or guitar among the Antandroy. The *kabosy* is a chordophone similar to a guitar. It can be played with fingers or a bow. It has six strings, often made from bicycle brake cables. Its resonating box is usually handcrafted, giving the instrument various shapes—from rectangular to rounded.

Melodic instruments are accompanied by kaiamba rattles, clapping, and dance. For most instrumentalists, tromba music is a secondary occupation. An example is a member of the group Tarika Bé, who, apart from performing with the band, was also known for his participation in *tromba* rituals. The material collected during fieldwork was complemented for the purposes of this study with recordings from the album *Airs à danser pour cithare: Sud-Ouest de Madagascar* (“Airs à danser pour cithare,” 1981) and with tromba ritual recordings available on YouTube.

Ron Emoff writes about the role of music in shaping time during the tromba ritual:

“The manipulating of musical time is an important component in the effectiveness of tromba ceremony, a component which entails both a taking control over time and a giving into it, a constant reworking of musical time concurrent with a surrendering to historical times (by bodily taking in ancestral spirits). Tromba possession means in part stepping beyond the spatial and temporal coordinates of the present moment, yet it is the acoustic intensification of this present moment that brings the past into it. Musical performance specific to tromba spirit possession ceremony does not freeze time, it conflates varied times into an interactional past/present. The musical performance itself creates the temporal structures of such empowering timelessness: the long duration over which one composition is drawn out, the shifting in- and then out-of-phase between kaiamba shaker and valiha or accordion as well as the cross-rhythmic capacities of the valiha and accordion themselves, the essential improvisation which takes place inside more defined short-duration phrase structures which are replicated numerous times, and a complex tripartite rhythm which is a vital component of most Malagasy ceremonial music (see Figure 1). Historical time thus is brought into synch with everyday time through manipulations of musical time.” (Emoff, 2000, p. 54)

During *tromba*, music plays an essential role in inducing trance and sustaining it. Rhythmic accelerations are coordinated with the behavior of the possessed person—who gradually loses control over their movements, which become expressive and vivid (YouTube, 2025a). Participants also dance, clap, and sing, as the spirit moves between their bodies. Tromba music is characterized by polyrhythm and the repetition of melodic-rhythmic structures. The kaiamba rattles maintain a quadruple meter, while the accordion or valiha may employ both triple and quadruple meters. The rhythmic lines of the instruments and accompanying clapping are distinctly separated—if not by meter, then by differing tempos, freely flowing throughout the ritual. For a brief moment, they may converge, particularly when accompanied by vocalizations or singing; this is a characteristic moment of full trance, when the meter becomes unified, and the medium reaches a state of complete possession.

Tromba music is vocal-instrumental, and the words of the accompanying songs hold particular meaning. At the beginning of the ritual, vocal invocations are performed, for example: “This is the call of Zanahary, we come to beg Him

to come!” Then the tempo increases, and the pleas become more insistent: “Just come! Do not delay, Koezy!” (Jaovelo-Dzao, 1996, p. 338). Between the invocations, participants add words and exclamations of respect such as “Welcome! My king! Bless us!” If the spirit still does not appear, it is addressed with further questions, such as “What is your fady?”—a cultural taboo. Once the tromba arrives, it is greeted with more exclamations: “Our king... (name of the summoned ruler); welcome!” (Jaovelo-Dzao, 1996, p. 340). Sometimes, a litany is also performed during the ritual, serving to preserve collective memory by naming in song the succession of kings remembered by the singer. The litany may last for many hours, and participation in the ritual is never perceived as tiresome—it is considered a great honor. The therapeutic role of the *tromba* and its accompanying music is also crucial. The ancestral spirit is usually invoked for a specific reason—most often illness or curses. If someone is seriously ill, it is recommended that women and children watch over them day and night, singing without interruption. The songs are meant to prevent evil spells from being cast upon the patient (Jaovelo-Dzao, 1996, p. 340).

Participants often remain seated, yet still move their bodies to the rhythm by stomping, swaying, clapping, or dancing while sitting. As Richard Jankowsky (2007, p. 187) notes, in the 1960s numerous hypotheses were proposed linking specific repetitive rhythmic structures to trance. Of particular importance were Andrew Neher’s 1961 laboratory studies, which attempted to find scientific proof of rhythm’s influence on human pulse. These theses were later refuted, and Gilbert Rouget’s famous statement entered history: “half of Africa would be in trance from the beginning of the year to the end” (Rouget, 1985).

An interesting adaptation is the inclusion of the accordion among the sacred instruments used during *tromba*. The instrument was likely introduced to Madagascar by French colonizers after 1896 (Emoff, 2002, p. 90). Today, recordings of Malagasy popular music or radio broadcasts are sometimes used instead of live instruments (YouTube, 2025b). This was the case in the ritual observed by our research group, although the sound source was located outside the hut where the tromba took place.

As noted by Karolina Marcinkowska during her research, music is not an indispensable element of the *tromba* ritual but plays a significant role in interaction with ancestral spirits:

The utterance of an invocation or short formula inviting the *tromba* spirit may be accompanied by music. Nowadays, this choice largely depends on the clients: ‘Some prefer silence, others something spoken (*maresaka*), and others want to pay for an accordionist. My interlocutors clearly preferred the sound of the accordion and singing as accompaniment. It is believed that they are linked to the fomba cult tradition and are best for ‘lulling ‘the *tromba* spirit. ‘The accordion is needed so that the tromba can work peacefully. It can then calm down, like a child who is rocked and prayed over. ‘However, due to the need for an experienced accordionist, the ritual is often held to the sound of music played from the radio, tape recorder, or television. According to my interlocutors, some tromba spirits even prefer contemporary music to traditional songs. This depends on the spirit’s origin, status, and preferences. Popular Malagasy hits, salegy music,

and disco are often preferred by so-called officials and young tromba spirits.” (Marcinkowska, 2016, p. 188)

The author mentions the pleasure that listening to music brings to ancestral spirits—it is part of their earthly emotions and a means of participating in the world of the living. Marcinkowska also describes a case in which a tromba spirit appeared prematurely to a medium preparing for the ritual, reacting to televised clips of a salegy star. She also notes the special significance of silence—music gathers people around its source, whether it be a radio, television, or live musicians. Some tromba ceremonies are held in secrecy, and therefore no music is performed during them (Marcinkowska, 2016, p. 189).

Summary

During fieldwork in Madagascar, we observed various phenomena related to music, which allowed for a deeper understanding of seemingly unrelated subjects—at first glance, what could *salegy* or a popular world music band have in common with a possession ritual such as tromba? As it turned out, quite a lot. Informants added new contexts to the topic of the ritual in almost every conversation. An instrument maker played accordion pieces used during tromba, just as the group Vola Soa performed music on the *valiha*. This demonstrates that the tromba ritual is widespread and deeply rooted in the consciousness of the community, regardless of education level, ethnic background, or place of residence. This article merely outlines the topic, which would require more extensive, long-term research in a specific area. Another fascinating issue concerns the impact of globalization on contemporary reinterpretations of the ritual—both regarding the ancestral spirits (*razana*) present and the music accompanying the *tromba*.

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