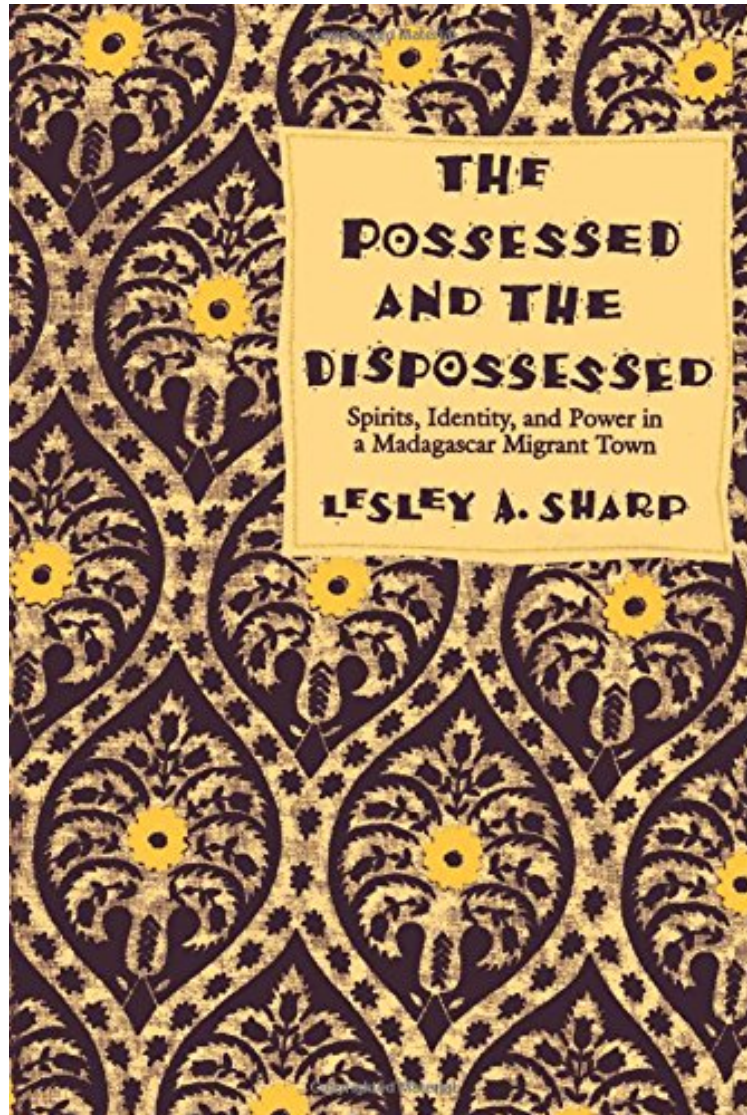


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## **The Possessed and the Dispossessed : Spirits, Identity, and Power in a Madagascar Migrant Town (Comparative Studies of Health Systems and Medical Care**

*Lesley A. Sharp*

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**Lesley A. Sharp : The Possessed and the Dispossessed : Spirits, Identity, and Power in a Madagascar Migrant Town (Comparative Studies of Health Systems and Medical Care** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised *The Possessed and the Dispossessed : Spirits, Identity, and Power in a*

## Madagascar Migrant Town (Comparative Studies of Health Systems and Medical Care:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. "the necessary and the unnecessary" By Bob Newman Up in the northwest part of Madagascar there's a region called the Sambirano which is highly fertile. The French developed plantations of coffee, cacao, and cashews there soon after they occupied the island in the late 19th century. As the local Sakalava did not fancy wage labor, many migrants from other parts of the great island appeared to take up both blue collar and white collar positions. After independence, and with the disappearance of the French, more people came from outside the area to work. Madagascar has one language, but several dialects, and there are many "ethnic" groups separated more by history and culture than by DNA. The outsiders who come to the town of Ambanja find it hard to assimilate into local society. Land ownership is problematic because a) a lot of land is owned by government corporations and cannot be sold to individuals and b) the local Sakalava own much of the rest. Being part of a social network is essential in many societies, all the more so in a poor one like Madagascar. Kinship is usually the basis of social networks in Madagascar, but migrants have no local kin. One way in which people may become part of such a network over time is through entering the fascinatingly complex system of spirit possession in various roles. It is largely women that can do this. Understanding inequality and powerlessness in society is vital to knowledge of health issues. Sharp, in a most interesting study, has detailed the nature of spirit possession (tromba) in the Sambirano region, its history, its various ramifications. She shows the connection between women, migration and power in a migrant society and relates it to health, both mental and physical. Her interest is not a narrow one; some 60% of Ambanja women have been possessed at one time or another. They are possessed by both royal spirits of the old Sakalava kings and by the spirits of popular folk heroes. To be tied to the local kings or heroes through tromba possession is to be assimilated in a way. Sometimes a woman can be considered to be married to the spirit which possesses her, thus truly a part of a kin group. The dispossessed (migrants in poor condition) slowly become possessed by local spirits and so begin to assimilate and improve their status. I would say that anyone who is seriously interested in Madagascar has to read this book. Similarly, if you are a scholar of spirit possession as a phenomenon (and it exists all over the planet), you must read this book too. That said, it is not going to be an easy read! First of all, the style is hardcore academic with references scattered on every page instead of in footnotes. The author, as far as I can tell, is fluent in Malagasy, which is great, but we, the readers, are not much enlightened by the vast number of Malagasy words throughout the text, though I hasten to add that I think a few key terms are fair game. Secondly, I have this gut feeling that this was originally a thesis and got turned into a book. That is common and not a problem, but the style should vary. In a thesis you try to convince the supervisors that you know what you are talking about and you are familiar with the literature. You have collected a good amount of data and you can demonstrate links and connections. When you change to a book, you try to drop that tone and go for a wider, broader audience, for 'the ages' if you will. You pare the "unnecessary" from the "necessary". This was not done. Lastly, though as I said, this is a useful, interesting study, I feel some kind of disconnect between the Sakalava royalty and the actual possessions which Sharp describes. She writes of Mampiany the cowherd, Be Ondry and Djao Kondry the boxers, Mbotimahasaky the prostitute, and so on. There are others, reputedly from Sakalava royal lineages, as "all spirits were royalty when they were alive", but the royal connection is curiously unstressed. The author claims that in this way past and present come together in the persons of the possessed, but I don't see that. It is more that local and outsider come together in that way. She makes this point too, very well. The other claim is not much substantiated. The chapters about spirit possession of children, about evil spirits, and about the connection of foreign religions to tromba (Catholicism, Islam and Protestantism) are interesting. Overall, questions about style and direction arise, but there is no doubt that it's a useful addition to the literature.

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. The Possessed and the Dispossessed: Spirits, Identity, and By Frederick M. Smith This deeply contextualized ethnography of possession deals with women, migration, and power as frames for both spirit possession and the construction of identity in the booming migrant town of Ambanja, in the Sambirano valley of northern Madagascar. The Malagasy word for the possession experience is tromba, which refers as well to the royal ancestral spirits of the Sakalava (the ethnic group under study), the institution of possession, and the spirit mediums themselves. Sharp is particularly sensitive to issues of power and political agency, and examines possession as a mode of political consciousness that is embedded in religious experience. Possession among the Sakalava is highly formalized, and spirits who are the agents of oracular possession are often part of family inheritance. Thus, it is important to identify and name spirits, a phenomenon which is important elsewhere in Africa as well. This naming provides a link with the local culture, including political and religious traditions, as well as with the land itself. With the rise of "Malagasization" in the postcolonial period (following a revolt against the French in 1947), tromba possession has increased and the number and variety of tromba spirits has expanded. It is no accident, then, that the prestige and power of tromba spirits, suppressed by the French, has been enhanced. Perhaps because tromba rituals have been a primary instrument for preserving and interpreting the history of the island, Malagasization has brought the tromba spirits and institution closer to the centers of Malagasy political authority and economic production. Indeed, the surprising power and prestige of the female tromba spirit mediums has enabled them to dictate the direction of national economic development projects. One of Sharp's observations is that contrary to the dominant

assumptions in anthropology, Sakalava possession is not necessarily a province of the marginalized and weak. Though Malagasy women are chided as weak or soft, while men are regarded as strong or hard, it is the women who, through their spirit voices, determine the pace and organization of the culture. Tromba mediums are also widely consulted healers who appear to have an amicable and respectful relationship with other medical practitioners on the island. Tromba are not the only spirits on Madagascar. There is another category of volatile and unpredictable spirits (njarinintsy) responsible for negative, unwanted possession, as well as for mass possession, largely of adolescent migrant girls, in the public schools. In one instance documented by Sharp, a powerful healer (moasy) was consulted. He reported that the local ancestors were angry because the French paid no regard to the sacredness of the ancestral ground on which the school was built, moving and destroying tombs. The healer recommended the performance on the school grounds of a ceremony honoring the deceased ancestors, including the sacrifice of an ox. Following this performance, the possession diminished considerably. Another interesting feature of this book is that it addresses the topic of the interface of local possession with Christianity. The Protestant Church is dominant in much of Madagascar, and has highly developed forms of healing rituals and exorcisms, even sponsoring exorcism retreats. Sharp has demonstrated that the clientele, whom she calls the dispossessed, consists to a great extent of those who cannot cope with either the status or the multilayered identity of the Sakalava defined through the dominant institution of tromba mediumship. In short, anyone with an interest in the phenomenon of spirit possession will learn quite a lot from this book.

This finely drawn portrait of a complex, polycultural urban community in Madagascar emphasizes the role of spirit medium healers, a group heretofore seen as having little power. These women, Leslie Sharp argues, are far from powerless among the peasants and migrant laborers who work the land in this plantation economy. In fact, Sharp's wide-ranging analysis shows that tromba, or spirit possession, is central to understanding the complex identities of insiders and outsiders in this community, which draws people from all over the island and abroad. Sharp's study also reveals the contradictions between indigenous healing and Western-derived Protestant healing and psychiatry. Particular attention to the significance of migrant women's and children's experiences in a context of seeking relief from personal and social ills gives Sharp's investigation importance for gender studies as well as for studies in medical anthropology, Africa and Madagascar, the politics of culture, and religion and ritual.

"Sharp's monograph earns a distinction by focusing on a multicultural community of migrants rather than on a particular ethnic group."--"Social Behavioral Sciences About the Author Lesley A. Sharp is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Butler University.