

Road to a 'cure' costs and pays Tanzanians

By Jon Rosen
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

ARUSHA, Tanzania — Even for the seasoned Africa traveler, arriving at this city's bus park is a harrowing experience.

A gateway to some of the world's best game parks and the famed Mount Kilimanjaro, Arusha is Tanzania's de facto tourism capital — and the aggressive touts that line its grimy stage will not let any arriving Westerner forget it.

Over the past year, the peddlers have been persistent as ever — though their clients have been mostly African and their prime destination only recently put on the map. It's known as Loliondo: a far-flung village on the Tanzania-Kenya border, which is home to one of the year's most sought-after men in Africa.

It all began in late 2010 when Ambilikile Mwasapile, a retired Loliondo pastor better known as "Babu" or "Grandfather," went public with the series of dreams that would make him a sensation. God, he claimed, had revealed an herbal cure for virtually any chronic illness — including cancer, AIDS, and diabetes — and instructed him to offer the remedy, for a small fee, to the public. Within weeks, he was inundated with visitors, drawn by tales of "miracle healings" that spread across East Africa.

By June, when I decided to investigate, local officials claim Loliondo had received nearly 4 million visitors — an average of 14,000 per day over a nine-month period. Pilgrims included the rich and poor, the sick and dying, the healthy seeking prevention, and the simply curious. Many had traveled for days, under significant financial and physical strain.

On a Friday evening, just outside the Arusha bus park, I found myself inside a Loliondo-bound Toyota Landcruiser, joined by Jonathan Kalan, a fellow New Englander and Kenya-based photojournalist. From where I live in neighboring Rwanda, I had already bused more than 600 miles to Arusha, where Kalan and I contacted Rafael Kashimbiri, a



PHOTOS BY JONATHAN KALAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Tanzanians going to be "cured" by Ambilikile Mwasapile in Loliondo. Ol Doinyo Lengai, an active volcano some Maasai believe is God's residence, is visible on the Loliondo-Arusha route.

slight, bearded driver who plies the Loliondo route three or four times a week. For \$50 each, we crammed inside his vehicle with 14 other passengers. With 200 miles ahead — including 100 on rugged dirt paths — the journey was not going to be comfortable.

For the next seven hours, we hurtled through an otherworldly landscape, past the cow-dung huts of Maasai villages, the moonlit waters of Lake Natron, and the eerie silhouette of Ol Doinyo Lengai, the conical Maasai "Mountain of God." As Kashimbiri did his best impression of a rally driver, we chatted with Max Magafu, an Arusha native we had recruited to come along, who versed us on the latest Babu folklore. There were the witch doctors who had come to Loliondo and been struck by lightning, the cellphone thief who drank two cups of the supposed cure-all instead of one and started going deaf, and the Babu "imitator" in the nearby town of Moshi who was driven to insanity.

"The cure only works in Loliondo," Magafu said. "Otherwise it will be poison."

Despite evidence to the contrary, this claim is the crux of Mwasapile's enterprise. As I had



read before traveling, the main ingredient in his liquid concoction had been used as an herbal remedy for centuries by the local Maasai and Sonjo people, and in places as distant as Ghana, Thailand, and Japan. Past scientific studies had shown the plant, *Carissa edulis*, to have a therapeutic effect on a variety of ailments and to lower blood sugar — temporarily at least — in diabetic patients. Yet only through Mwasapile would it actually cure, or so God had supposedly instructed.

Just past 3 a.m., we rolled into Samunge, the small Loliondo hamlet where Mwasapile lives and dispenses his cup of medicine. Ahead of us, hundreds of vehicles lined the road: four-wheel drives, derelict minivans,

and brightly painted buses. Before, residents told us, the jam was worse, stretching miles into the desert, and forcing cure-seekers to camp out for days. At least 50 had died in transit.

Teeming with a steady stream of visitors, the Samunge we explored was a makeshift boomtown. Strolling up the road, we passed crude, wooden-bench cinemas, teahouses under tarps, and red-robed Maasai warriors-turned-entrepreneurs charging the equivalent of 30 cents — the same price as Mwasapile's cup — to use a hole-in-the-ground toilet. Deciding not to sleep, we sat down for tea with Rehema Msigala, a boisterous woman from the coast who had traveled to Loliondo with her diabetic mother.

If you go . . .

Getting there

Kilimanjaro International Airport, 20 miles outside of Arusha, receives direct flights from Amsterdam, Frankfurt, and various locations in Africa. Most vehicles depart Arusha in the evening, arrive in Loliondo before dawn, and return to Arusha by late afternoon the following day.

Prices range from \$50 per person in a shared four-wheel drive or minibus (don't expect comfort) to \$500 for a private vehicle. Most hotels in Arusha can help arrange a ride. Expect to pull an all-nighter as there are no hotels in Loliondo.

We asked her why she had faith in the cure.

"Jesus Christ heals in my life," she said. "It's not about the cup. It's the power of God delivered through Babu."

After sunrise, we trudged to the gate of Mwasapile's house with the continually arriving masses, now numbering in the thousands. Soon, Mwasapile appeared, a slight man in a rumpled nylon jacket. Delivering a 10-minute version of his divine encounter, he instructed members of the crowd not to bring cups home to relatives, and warned that any witch doctors present would be punished. Refusing to take questions from skeptical foreign journalists, he dismissed everyone back to their vehicles. Creeping forward in the queue, we would slowly maneuver back to his gate and drink our cups inside our cars.

After an hour of bumper-to-bumper traffic, our moment arrived. As Kashimbiri pulled to the front of the line, one of Mwasapile's assistants dispensed a tray of red plastic mugs, each filled with a dose of green-tinged liquid. While a few passengers said prayers, I sipped the elixir slowly, detecting a bitter, ashy fla-

vor. Singling me out, the second in charge demanded I drink faster. With a long line of cars behind us, the usual plodding pace of Tanzanian life no longer applied. I chugged the rest down and we were off again hurtling into the desert.

Back in Arusha the following afternoon, I set out to find a local cynic. Wandering through the town, I stumbled upon the St. Thomas Health Center, a three-story building teeming with patients, mostly young mothers with children. There, I met Julius Msuya, a doctor trained in India. Eager to chat, Msuya told me he had treated hundreds of patients who had been to Loliondo. Not one had been cured. Worse, he said, many had stopped taking their medication. Some were afraid to admit the "cure" had failed, lest they be branded a witch doctor.

"We have lost a lot of people," Msuya said. "It's one thing for people to believe, but when it costs life, there should be great concern. Aristotle taught us that belief must go with logic. This is mass ignorance. Mass stupidity."

Msuya had a point. Yet as I walked back to my hotel, the logic to me was clear. As even Msuya admitted, Tanzania's modern health care system has serious deficiencies. Unable to afford even basic government services, many people have little to lose by turning to traditional remedies, to superstitions, or to God. Then there are those with much to gain. Though the Loliondo craze has passed its peak, Mwasapile's operations continue and his beneficiaries — from vehicle owners, to drivers, to Loliondo residents — are still plenty.

Dwani Mshani is one of them. A loud, barrel-chested tout, he accosted me as I passed the bus station on the walk back to my hotel. After insisting I didn't want to book a safari, I asked about his sales to Loliondo.

"Business is so good," he said, grinning. "Everyone in Tanzania is sick. Except me."

Jon Rosen can be reached at jonathan.w.rosen@gmail.com.

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