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### Book section

#### Original citation:

Rita, Astuti (2011) *Death, ancestors and the living dead: learning without teaching in Madagascar*. In: Talwar, Victoria and Harris, Paul L. and Schleifer, Michael, (eds.) *Children's understanding of death: from biological to religious conceptions*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-18. ISBN 9780521194594

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Available in LSE Research Online: January 2012

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Death, ancestors and the living dead:  
Learning without teaching in Madagascar

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To appear in:

*Children's Understanding of Death: From Biological to Supernatural Conceptions*

Edited by

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## *Introduction*

At the time of my last period of fieldwork in Madagascar,<sup>1</sup> Brika was 17. I had invited him to my house to participate in the study I was conducting about death and the ancestors (cf. Harris, this volume). As with all other participants, I introduced Brika to the task by telling him that I was going to narrate a short story, followed by several questions. I reassured him that these questions did not have “right” or “wrong” answers since people have different opinions about them. I told him that I just wanted to learn about his own way of thinking.

Brika carefully listened to the story and patiently answered all my questions. And once the formal interview was over, he engaged thoughtfully with a number of additional open ended questions about the meaning of the word *angatse*, the reasons for offering food to the ancestors, the significance of dreams, and the existence of people who, having died, come back to life. He explained that when a person dies, “the body rots and turns into bones,” but that the spirit (known as *fanahy* when the person is alive, as *angatse* once the person has died) “continues to be there.” He knew that the enduring presence of the *angatse* is revealed through its apparition in people’s dreams, and he was aware that such dreams are serious matters that call for ritual action:

It’s like, for example, myself, if my father dies, if there is something that I do that is not OK, his spirit will approach me and will talk to me [...] He comes, like when one has dreams, one has those dreams, it’s like you are seeing him as he approaches you, and one is afraid, and

this is what brings about... it's like he talks to you and says: "this and that is what you've done and I don't like it." And you are startled as you are afraid of that thing [the dead person], and you are all shaken because the dead is what you're afraid of, because you're alive. And so when it's morning, you talk to, for example, your mother or your elder sibling, and you say: "Mother, my father has revealed himself to me" – that is the *angatse* – "he has revealed himself and I'm scared." "Did he say anything?" "He said this and that and this and that." "All right then let's have an offering." This is what causes people to do that [giving offerings to people who are dead].

As for the people who die and come back to life, known as *olo vokatsy* (literally, people who re-emerge from the earth), Brika was careful to stress, emphatically and repeatedly, that he had heard stories about *olo vokatsy* but that he had never seen them with his own eyes. It felt as though, despite asserting, rather humbly, that he was only a child, he was actually distancing himself from what had been related to him. Even so, he was able to imagine his reaction, were he to encounter *olo vokatsy* one day: "if I were to see them, I would probably be scared, because these were dead people – they were dead but they came out of the ground." And Brika was also aware of the relationship between *olo vokatsy* and *angatse*: "*olo vokatsy* don't have *angatse*, for they are [living] people too; they don't have *angatse*, but when they are still dead under the ground, they have *angatse*." In other words, *angatse* is only a state of being of the dead.

Brika was exceptional. No other adolescent, boy or girl, was able to articulate, as Brika did, the various elements that make up the adult representation of what happens after death to the deceased and to the people that are left behind. Impressed by his knowledge and thoughtfulness, I asked him how he came to know all this, whether someone had explained it all to him.

How I came to know this? I came to know about it like this: when you are still little, when people chat – here’s your mother, here’s your father, and you are bound to be sitting near them – and they tell stories about the *angatse*... for example, there are also other people around, like when you go to a funeral, and they also say: “this is what happens to the *angatse*,” “that thing came out of the ground”, and so on and so on. You hear this, and you are still just learning. And so you just get it and you take it with you, you take it with you in your games when you are little. For example, you say: “there is a *biby* [animal] over there!” “there is an *angatse* over there!” And so, in the end, you hear about this thing. And even when one is big like me right now, one is staying with people, with big/old people, and they talk about these things, and so in the end one knows these things. This is how I’ve come to know about it. Since I’m not a person from the past, but a little person, but I’ve heard the stories of my ‘fathers-and-mothers’ [elders] and this is how I came to know about it when I was little. But there was no teaching me this stuff, no there wasn’t.

In what follows, I shall take Brika's observation that learning about the afterlife does not involve any overt teaching as my entry point into the learning environment in which Vezo children construct their understanding of death and of what lies beyond it. While agreeing with Brika that children gather bits and pieces of information as they overhear adults' conversations, I shall argue that the process of learning is more complicated than his account suggests. In particular, I shall explore whether children might not bring to the task of learning rather more than their alert ears and whether, along the way, they might not construct representations of the afterlife that are rather different from those of their parents and elders.

*"They don't know a thing" – and it's better that way*

Vezo adults were generally bemused by the fact that I spent so much of my time asking children questions about what happens after death. It is not that they regarded my questions about the death of a made-up character as inappropriate or upsetting for the children; rather, they thought that I wasted my time asking questions to children who patently did not know any of the answers – for children, they insisted, do not know a thing.

More than once I asked adults whether they ever attempted to explain to children what happens to people after they die, the way they explained things to me: what happens to the body, what happens to the *angaste*, where it dwells and how it behaves, how it reveals itself in dreams, and so on. They always replied that they do not, and they typically invoked two reasons, one general and one specific.

The first, general reason is that children lack wisdom and, consequently, understanding. It follows that it makes no sense to explain to them what they are unable to understand. Of course, there are things that adults expect even the youngest of children to learn. For example, as soon as children are able to hold objects in their hands, they are taught that if they are offered something, they should extend their right hand, palm up, slightly cupped, with the left hand holding the right one from below. Children quickly learn by having their left hand hit if it is presented first and, initially at least, having both hands placed in the correct position by an adult or an older child. In adulthood, this submissive posture will be incorporated in a wider pattern of bodily and verbal behaviours aimed at neutralizing, while also conceding, the hierarchical nature inherent in many acts of giving and receiving – those who give will approach the recipients slowly and tentatively, will avert their gaze, will belittle what they are giving; those who receive will extend both hands, like children, stressing the magnitude of what they are receiving and acknowledging the kinship-like bond that is being created with those who are giving. But of course, no one expects young children to understand the deeper implications of the hand action – all they are expected to do is to perform it. Similarly, adults do not expect children to be able to understand the actions they witness, and themselves perform, during ancestral rituals – all that matters, as we shall see, is that they are present in large numbers, as the multiplication of life that they instantiate, the noise and laughter that they generate, are what the ancestors are imagined to long for and to want to enjoy for the duration of the ritual (cf. Astuti, 1994; 1995).

The second, specific reason why adults do not talk to children about what happens after death is that they wish to protect them from the ancestors' unwelcome intrusion

into their already vulnerable lives. If children were to be told, for example, about the continuing existence of dead people's *angatse*, they would end up carrying in their heads thoughts that are far too "difficult" (in the sense of dangerous) for them. Such a state of mind would put them at a greater risk of being visited by the *angatse* of a disgruntled ancestor, who would appear in the child's dream, offer her food, touch her and perhaps even lead her away; as a result, the child would fall ill and even die. It is thus safer if children are told nothing, which is actually not so hard to do since, several adults remarked, children are only interested in eating, playing and sleeping.

*"When you are still little, when people chat..."*

Vezo children enjoy a remarkable degree of freedom. Depending on their age, sex and position in their sibling group, they may be expected to perform various chores, ranging from fetching water and firewood, doing the dishes, washing clothes, or carrying fish to the market. Even so, they have control over a lot of their time (school provisions being extremely erratic), which they spend in large groups of full and classificatory siblings, the older looking after the younger ones. Within the village, there is no clear demarcation between adults' and children's spaces, nor are there public contexts from which children are banned. Whether adults are gathering for a casual chat after a day at sea, for a discussion about a serious ancestral matter or an important financial decision, for some gossip about a neighbour's infidelity or for a conversation with the resident anthropologist, there are bound to be children around. Adults may get irritated by children's rowdiness, leading to some shouting and aggressive posturing; dutifully, the children run off to a safe distance, only to creep back into their original position. While some are oblivious to the adults'

conversations, others follow them intently. It is probably because they assume that children lack wisdom and understanding that adults do not bother to prevent them from listening in, irrespective of the topic under discussion. Thus, although they are adamant that children are best kept ignorant of ancestral matters, children do get a fair exposure to them, as they hear about a dream in which the spirit of a deceased relative asked for food and complained of being cold, or about the fears that a baby's illness may not be due to a simple malaria attack but to the intervention of a disgruntled grandmother whose tomb has laid unrepaired for far too long. Still, children are never more than passive (if noisy) listeners, never asking a question or requesting an explanation.

*"Like when you go to a funeral..."*

A couple of elderly villagers told me that in the past children were not taken to funerals, but that since people nowadays die so often, it has become quite impractical to keep children away. Whether or not this is a correct depiction of what happened in the past, the motivation for the old ways should by now be familiar: it would be better if children did not have to think about things that are too difficult for them. As it is, children regularly attend two of the three main components of a funeral, the communal meals and the wakes, but they are usually not allowed to join the procession that takes the corpse to the cemetery for burial.

Funerals are centred around the house where the deceased is laid out on a bed, protected by a mosquito net and guarded by close relatives. Villagers typically approach the gathering around the house in small family groups, the men finding a

place to sit in the male section of the crowd, the women and children in the female section. For the wake – which consists of uninterrupted singing from sunset to sunrise – people bring mats and blankets and each family group colonizes a small patch of sand. For a few hours, children stay awake, playing hand games or just talking among themselves; the older ones might join in the singing, and, if the organizers have managed to rent a generator and are able to provide some light, they might be allowed to run around at a safe distance from their patch. Eventually, they all fall asleep, bundled up next to each other, apparently undisturbed by the loudness all around them.

Children have more freedom of movement during the communal meals, which happen twice a day for the duration of the funeral. The food – a large mountain of rice, topped with a few pieces of meat and wetted with broth – is served in large bowls, to be shared by four or five people. Adults are eager to stress that because the food is cooked in the presence of death it does not taste good (although every effort is made to cook it well) and that they only eat it out of respect for the bereaved family. Their body language<sup>2</sup> says it all. When the food is delivered, the five or six people who are to share from the same bowl move hesitantly, as they shuffle on their bottom to come closer to the food; but somehow they always seem to purposefully end up in rather awkward positions, which make reaching for the food just a little difficult. Once they are settled, they wait a while before, somewhat reluctantly, picking up a spoon with which they slowly scoop up a small quantity of rice and timidly dig down for some of the broth. The movements are exaggeratedly measured, with spoons travelling from bowl to mouth and back again at an unusually slow pace.

This is the adults' experience. The children's is markedly different, as they eagerly circle around the food and dig into it with gusto. They eat plentifully, first the food that is designated for them, and then what is left by the grown-ups. I have never seen adults making any attempt to contain children's greediness and stop them from wolfing down whatever food they can get their hands on. The reason, I suggest, is that they find comfort in children's carefree behaviour, since it confirms their view that children are only ever interested in having a full stomach. In other words, children's single-minded focus on the food confirms that they are safely unaware of their closeness to death. But is that really so? Sure, when they dig their spoons in the food, they seem oblivious to the fact that a dead body is laying only a few metres away and to what that might mean. But there are other moments when children confront the physical and emotional reality of death, and seem to take notice.

In the heat of the summer, corpses decay fast. If people can afford it, they will inject the body with formalin, but they will also resort to more traditional and less expensive methods to delay the onset of decomposition – little openings are made in the walls of the house to create a gentle breeze around the body and leaves with cooling properties are placed all around it. And when the body starts to decompose, small piles of cow dung are burnt near it to mask the stench. Unlike adults, who sit in the proximity of the house and politely endure the rotting smell, children relocate themselves and their games in order to avoid it – and in the process presumably learn something of the consequences of death.

If children move far from the house for one reason, they move closer to it for another. On approaching the gathering for the first time, people are expected to enter the house

to view the corpse and give their condolences to the bereaved relatives. These visits provoke bouts of wailing, which erupt from the inside of the house and carry on for several minutes, as more men and women join in the lament. These events typically attract small groups of children, who come close to the house and try to gain a view of the inside by climbing to a window, squatting next to the door, or peering between the cracks of the wall. Their demeanour is serious, curious, somewhat frightened. They watch intently, no doubt taking in the distress of the living and the eerie stillness of the deceased.

Some of the children will get a much closer look at the corpse. Depending on the age of the deceased, either sons and daughters, or grandsons and granddaughters, will be called into the house just before the coffin is closed. In the instance I witnessed first hand, the deceased was a thirty-seven year old woman and a mother of two – a girl who was about two and a boy who was just under five. The girl was to be raised by her father's sister and she was deemed too little to miss her mother; by contrast, there was much concern about the boy, who was very attached to her. Still, for the duration of the funeral the boy had been playing around as usual, seemingly unaware of the fact that the wailing, the singing, the cooking that had taken place over the course of two and half days had been caused by his mother's death. But this was going to change. At a pre-arranged time, behind closed doors, the corpse was lifted off the bed and into the wooden coffin. Several items of clothing, some chewing tobacco, a little bottle of perfume were neatly arranged around the body, in the hope that the spirit of the deceased, on finding her favourite possessions, would refrain from coming back to bother the living by asking for more. After several sarongs and a few blankets were laid over her body, only her face remained visible – and she looked strangely

beautiful. When the door was sprung open, several men walked in with the coffin's lid, a hammer, the nails. They stood to one side of the coffin, while too many other people crowded around. And then the two children were ushered in. The girl looked confused and tried to run away; the boy looked terrified. Both of them were forced into position, near the head of the coffin. The girl, too little to stand on her own, was held up to face her mother; the boy, strong enough to resist, had his head held down, almost touching his mother's face. An old woman shouted: "Do you see, that's your mother, she is dead. You shall never call her name again!" As soon as the statement was uttered, the children were rushed out of the house, leaving the men to close the coffin and hammer in the nails.

Both children were to see the coffin one last time. Having exited the house from the eastern door, feet first, the coffin was placed on the ground. Standing on the north side was the woman's husband, with the two children clinging on either side, and on the south side her sister and her brother's wife. They held two strings over the coffin, knotted loosely together. In a final act of separation, the strings were pulled on both sides and the knot was undone. At this point, in the midst of a frenzy of crying and wailing, the coffin was lifted and taken away. The husband collapsed and was dragged away; the children were swiftly picked up and taken to a relative's house. They were not allowed to join the procession that delivered the body to the cemetery, as it was thought that their mother would not let them come back.

When I asked the deceased's sister if she thought that bereaved children understand what it means for a parent, a grandparent, or a sibling to have died, she responded that children are told that some one close to them has died and that, as a result, "they

know, but don't know fully." As we have seen, children are unquestionably made aware that someone close to them has died, as they are forced to stare into the face of the deceased and ordered never again to call his or her name. Perhaps the reason they are told with such forcefulness is that gentler, symbolic acts of separation, such as the loosening of a knot, are too subtle for them. Even so, adults seem comforted by the fact that children "know, but don't know fully." For example, a few weeks after the funeral, the little boy heard someone trying to get a cat's attention by calling out "*piso, piso, piso!*" – *piso* being the term for cat. The boy, whose mother's name was *Ka-piso*, complained loudly, saying that it is taboo to use the word *piso*. In recounting this episode, the adults who witnessed it were pleased that the boy had interiorized the prohibition of never calling out his mother's name, while they were also amused by his naivety, commenting on the fact that he clearly understood nothing. The fact that the boy took the prohibition far too literally and over-extended it demonstrated that he did not understand that the ban on his mother's name was meant to target his lingering attachment to her, which could cause her spirit to seek him out with ill consequences. As far as I could gather, the combination of zeal and naivety was, for them, the best possible outcome: a boy who knows what he should not do but does not understand why.

*"All right then let's have an offering"*

As I mentioned earlier, it is desirable for children to be present whenever the living interact with the ancestors. This is because dead people are imagined to have an insatiable longing for life, which their living descendants try to appease by staging ritual events that momentarily bring the world of the dead into contact with the world

of the living (cf. Astuti, 1995 for further details). At these moments, the ancestors delight in seeing the children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, great-great-grandchildren, and so on (the Malagasy language names up to seven generations of descendants) that have been generated since their death. It is therefore essential for large numbers of noisy, exuberant, lively children to be present, as they *are* the life that the ancestors long for and want to enjoy.

By now it should come as no surprise that children's participation in such ritual activities is largely untutored. Children might be told, factually, that they should not stand to the east of the pot where the rice is being cooked for an offering, or they might be chased away if they step inside the tomb enclosure. But these injunctions are not accompanied by an explanation as to the reasons for the cooking or the opening of the enclosure. In one instance I witnessed during my last period of fieldwork, an offering of rice was presented to an ancestor who had appeared in a dream to one of her descendants and had caused her a severe case of earache and swelling. In such cases, only five small balls of rice are offered to the ancestors – one thrown to each of the four cardinal points and one to the sky – while the rest is passed on to the children, who wait expectantly for the formal offering to be over. When the pot is handed to them, they crowd around it, digging their fingers into the scorching rice, devouring it in no time. In this particular occasion, I had my tape recorder on and I tried to talk to the children about what had just happened – why was the rice cooked outdoors? Why did their grandfather throw balls of rice in the air? Who was the rice for? All I got on my tape was the children's joyful laughter and a boy's high-pitch concluding statement: "let's go home now that we are full!"

And yet, children are not as clueless as adults think and no doubt hope. The following day, once the excitement had died down, I asked my questions again. True, none of the children knew the exact reasons why this particular ritual offering had taken place, but a few guessed that it might have something to do with one of their uncles, the relative to have died most recently, and that a dream must have been the trigger for what they were well aware was not your every day cooking or eating. Their narratives were not as well-informed or coherent as those of the adults, but demonstrated some awareness that dead people can make demands on the living and scare them by appearing in dreams.

One plausible account of how children come to know this much is that, as described by Brika, they pick up bits and pieces of information as they overhear adults' conversations. While this is certainly the case, in what follows I want to suggest that the process of learning about the existence and properties of the ancestors is less linear than this account suggests.

*Could Vezo children escape knowing about the ancestors?*

In his book on Kwaio religion, Roger Keesing (1982) offers a rare description of how children are introduced to the world of the ancestors. In a way reminiscent of Kopytoff's argument (1971) that ancestors in Africa are not significantly different from elders – they simply require a slightly different mode of communication since they happen to be dead – Keesing brilliantly evokes the immediacy of Kwaio ancestors as full participants in, and members of, the community in which children grow up. From a very young age Kwaio children, especially girls, learn that there are

things, places and foods that are prohibited because the ancestors have made them so, and in the same way in which children learn to obey their parents, they learn to obey the ancestors. Children also hear that people are sick because they have displeased the ancestors, or that they are rich and healthy because they have pleased them. They hear of dreams in which the ancestors reveal themselves, asking for, or complaining about something. By seeing their parents talking to the ancestors, offering food to them, obeying their rules, Kwaio children “come to understand in a general sense that a realm of the invisible lies behind and parallel to the visible, material world” (Keesing, 1982: 35). Keesing concludes: “no child could escape constructing a cognitive world in which the spirits were ever-present participants in social life, on whom life and death, success or failure, depend” (1982: 38).

By contrast, Margaret Mead (1932) famously contended that Manus children grow up totally unaware of, and immune from, the animism that infuses the thought of their parents and elders – while adults will attribute the unmooring of a canoe to supernatural forces, children will attribute it to human error and stupidity (1932: 185). Mead’s explanation for the absence of animism in children’s thinking is that Manus adults encourage the development of children’s “physical adjustment” to the environment, while holding back on instructions regarding the social and religious aspects of their lives (1932:188). Thus, Mead reports that it is only around puberty that Manus youth learn to adopt the animistic stance that is characteristic of adult life.

Both Keesing’s and Mead’s accounts apply to the case of the Vezo. As with Kwaio’s children, it is hard to imagine how Vezo children could ever escape noticing the existence of the ancestors. Nonetheless, if instead of taking the learning outcome for

granted, we investigate the active process through which children engage in the construction of their knowledge of the ancestors, we discover that, as with their Manus counterparts, Vezo children's point of departure is the exploration of the natural world.

Moreover, we discover that children entertain ideas about what happens after death that are very different from – and not just immature version of – those that they will eventually come to share with their parents and elders. I shall substantiate these two claims in the next two sections.

*“I cut its head off”*

As reported by Harris (ch.xx; cf. also Astuti & Harris, 2008), the results of the death studies, in which children of different ages were asked to judge which properties cease or continue to function after death, reveal that there is a moment in the life of Vezo children when they view death as causing the annihilation of every aspect of the person. Thus, while 5 year olds were as likely to predict continuity as discontinuity of functions after death (and they were as likely to attribute continuity to bodily as to cognitive, emotional and perceptual properties), 7 year olds were uncompromising in their judgment that all functions cease when a person dies. In other words, the first systematic understanding of the consequences of death is one which leaves no room for the ancestors, their desires and interventions. Such a biological construal of death is likely to be rooted in Vezo children's very direct experiences of both human and animal death.

As discussed earlier, children have close encounters with human death when they observe the stillness of a corpse, avoid the stench of decomposition, or come face to face with a lifeless parent or grandparent. Granted the importance of these experiences, it is arguably their interactions with animals which are of greater and more immediate significance.

To an observer with modern, urban, Western sensibilities, Vezo children's treatment of animals might seem shocking. Gorgeous swallowtail butterflies and any small bird unlucky enough to fly by the village are chased by hordes of children, stoned to the ground, attached to strings, and made to fly as if they were kites; small beach crabs are dug out of the sand, have their pincers removed for safety reasons, and are made to run at the end of a string; lizards are ambushed and "fished" off the sand with the use of slip knots. In all of these instances, animals are used as toys, their entertainment value being provided by the fact that they move – just like the battery operated toys of First World children. Unsurprisingly, the movement does not last for long. In one memorable instance, a 3 year old boy ran to his grandmother, holding a decapitated bird in his hand and crying desperately because the bird was no longer "going". His grandmother got him to sit in her lap, wiped his nose and face, and reassured him that everything was all right, paying no attention whatsoever to the bird. When the boy calmed down, still holding the bird tight, I asked him what he had done to it, and he replied: "I cut its head off." He threw it away, and ran off to play.

Aside from these playful, if cruel, interactions, children are always keen to take a close and investigative look at animals. When a sea turtle was brought back to the village, a small group of boys gathered around it, waiting for the moment when it was

to be ritually killed by its hunter (cf. Astuti, 2000). The boys inspected it in great detail, poking its eyes, blocking its nostrils, forcing its mouth open, pulling at its neck, fingering its genitals, touching its wound; as they did this, they shared interesting anatomical and physiological discoveries. Eager to get their share of tasty meat, the same boys were of course also present at the dramatic moment when the turtle was ripped open, revealing its heart, lungs and other vital organs. Their eyes remained glued to the still beating heart until its gradual and final arrest.

Crowds of children are present whenever any other large kill occurs. They are partly motivated by the hope that they might get some tasty shreds of meat, but they are also clearly fascinated by the process of dying. When a large bull was killed to provide meat for the funeral of a well respected elder, the children surrounded the grounds where the slaughtering was to occur, and they gasped at the raucous noise that erupted from the cut throat, shrieked at the last expulsion of excrements, marvelled at the amount of grass contained in the stomach, and stared at the glassy eyes.

It is my contention that these very close encounters with death, especially that of animals, provide children with the raw material that enables them to construct a coherent understanding of the biological causes and consequences of death: that death is caused by the break down of the bodily machine and its various components and that it causes the cessation of all the functions that make life possible.<sup>3</sup> My further contention is that it is the emergence of this understanding which, in turn, enables children to construct the view that some functions remain viable after death.

Logically, there is no reason why young children, who do not yet have a coherent understanding of the biology of death and live in a world in which people talk to the ancestors, offer them food, worry about their intentions and desires, could not just simply learn the facts: that dead people can hear, that they need food and have intentions and desires. Indeed, children's ignorance of the biological consequences of death could facilitate the assimilation of the idea that cognitive, emotional and perceptual capacities remain viable among the ancestors. And yet, our studies suggest that children come to represent death as the end of everything before they learn that something can survive. In other words, they build their understanding of the properties of the ancestors on their knowledge, not on their ignorance, of the biological consequences of death. Thus, while it might well be the case that Vezo children cannot escape learning about the ancestors, they get to know them in their own non-obvious ways – not just by passively absorbing fragments of adults' conversations about dreams and spirits, but also by actively and inquisitively working out how the bodies of birds, turtles and bulls work and die.

*“They were dead but they came out of the ground”*

As explained by Harris (ch. Xx), one of the death studies administered to children (aged 8 to 17) and adults (aged 19 to 71) was designed so that half of the participants were told a “hospital” story (priming them to think of death as a biological phenomenon), while the other half were told a “tomb” story (priming them to think of death as a transition to an ancestral existence). Both adults and children were sensitive to the narrative manipulation: while in both instances they differentiated between bodily and cognitive/emotional functions, they were more likely to judge that

functions had ceased when they heard the “hospital” story than when they heard the “tomb” story.

A closer look at the way adults and children shifted their judgements, however, reveals that adults’ judgments regarding the viability of the deceased’s bodily functions were not significantly different in the two conditions, whereas children’s were. In other words, the ancestral priming made children, but not adults, more likely to attribute a partially working body to the deceased. There was also a qualitative difference in the way adults and children presented their judgements that bodily functions would be viable after death. Whenever adults made such judgments, they spontaneously explained them by reference to the survival of the deceased’s *angatse*. For example, a 24-year old man answered the question whether the deceased’s stomach needs food by stating that “food will be needed, but it is not him that needs it but his thoughts will need it”. Even more explicitly, a 19-year old woman answered the question whether the ears work by asserting that “with regard to his being dead (i.e., to the corpse) the ears don’t work, but with regard to his spirit that wanders around his ears work.” Thus, in the case of adults, continuity judgments for bodily properties were not meant in any literal, physiological sense, since the eating or the hearing were not attributed to a physical body but to an immaterial spirit.

By contrast, there is no evidence that children who judged that the deceased maintains some viable bodily functions meant it in anything other than a literal sense. Of course, the fact that less articulate children failed to specify what their answers referred to – an immaterial spirit or a physical body – is not, in itself, evidence that they reasoned any differently from the adults. Nonetheless, several informal conversations I had

with children individually or in small groups, gave me reasons to believe that when they envisage a person's survival after death they attribute to it a palpable and visible body, which craves for food, looks old and decrepit, stinks, but walks about on legs.

Children's attribution of a physical body to the dead is likely to originate in the very popular stories and eyewitness testimonials about *olo vokatsy*, the people who, after been dead and buried, come back to life. The stories about *olo vokatsy* describe what happens to these unfortunate people: they die and they are buried as usual under the sand; after people have left the cemetery, a swirling wind removes the sand on top of their coffin, an explosion rips the coffin apart, and the *olo vokatsy* stand up and walk away. Such people are typically rejected by their families, and are destined to conduct a miserable life in hiding, roaming the forest in search of wild fruits or entering the village at night to steal leftover rice intended for the pigs. If sighted, they are easily recognizable because they smell bad and they are draped in white cloth.

Predictably, there are endless variations to the basic story, which children recount with gusto, mixing fear and excitement, and adding tales of their own sightings and nearly missed encounters. It should be noted that Vezo adults are equally fascinated by *olo vokatsy*, and that they mostly endorse their existence either by stating that they have themselves seen them "with their own eyes", or by deferring to other people's first hand experience with such ill-fated and scary people. Either way, it is obvious to adults that *olo vokatsy*, with their visible, material bodies are *not* the same as the immaterial spirit of the dead, the *angatse*, which they dream of, talk to, cook for, and seek protection from.

My suggestion is that, by contrast, this distinction remains elusive for most children. Thus, whenever I asked them to explain what the word *angatse* refers to, I either received firm “don’t know” answers or lively descriptions of people who wander around the forest searching for wild fruits, steal pigs’ food from the village troughs, stink, wear white, and so on – the telling signs of *olo vokatsy*. Children’s characterizations of what happens when food is offered to the ancestors points in the same direction. Admittedly, children are not inclined to reflect on the exact nature of the offerings’ intended recipients, probably because, as we saw, they themselves are their primary and most voracious consumers. Nonetheless, when they were asked to do so by my probing questions, most children ended up giving me recognizable descriptions of *olo vokatsy*. For example, I asked a 9 year old girl whether she thought that dead people hear the words spoken during a blessing, and she replied that “No, they don’t hear, because their ears are plugged up.” I then asked her whether dead people get the stuff that is offered to them, for example the rum, rice or meat. She replied “No, they don’t get it, but all they do is to wander around looking for left over rice” – the food eaten by *olo vokatsy*.

As noted in the introduction, 17-year-old Brika was well aware of the difference between *angatse* and *olo vokatsy*. In this he was not exceptional, even though he was able to explain it as no other person his age. The open-ended conversations I had with him and his contemporaries suggested that the differentiation between the two beyond-death-entities is driven by the realization that *angatse*, unlike *olo vokatsy*, are invisible. Thus, while a 10-year-old would maintain that one cannot see *angatse* because they hide in the forest (which is what *olo vokatsy* typically are forced to do),

a 16- or 17-year-old would maintain that one cannot see *angatse* because they are like air – they move about but they are invisible to the eye.

To return to the results of the death studies, we can better understand why children were more likely than adults to attribute physical properties to the deceased in the “tomb” condition. This is because, when primed to think ancestrally, children brought to mind the image of a stinky, hungry, thieving *olo vokatsy* rather than the image of an immaterial *angatse* – hence they reasoned, understandably, that the stomach needs food or that the legs move (none of the 17-year-olds did so). But of course, if this is the image that children bring to mind, their knowledge about the ancestors, while inescapable, is very different from that of the adults.

*Conclusion – “I don’t know, I’ve never been dead”*

When considering how Vezo children come to know that some properties of the person survive after death and that, consequently, dead people remain actively involved in the lives of their descendants, one is struck by the fact that Vezo adults intentionally refrain from teaching their children what happens after death. As a result, children take their own, largely untutored steps to create *their* understanding of the afterlife. While early on in this constructive process children take the view that nothing at all survives after death, they are later attracted to the idea that dead people can come back to life, body and all. By their late teens, they realize that most deceased people do not escape from their abode under the sand, but that they continue their existence as disembodied, if powerful, spirits.

Having come this far in the story, I want to conclude by taking a critical look at one of the assumptions of my analysis, namely that if Vezo adults were differently minded – if they held different beliefs about children’s lack of understanding and vulnerability – they could teach their children about the ancestors. What this scenario assumes is that adults hold a coherent body of knowledge that they could transfer to their children. In the course of anthropological fieldwork, one is compelled to search for coherence since one’s first undertaking must be to make sense of the peculiar. Coherence, however, can be both a distraction and an imposition, as I was forced to realize when I began to combine traditional ethnographic methods with a simple experimental tool such as the death interview.

For example, adults who participated in the death studies revealed that, depending on context, they can summon up different, even contrary representations of what happens to people after death – believing that nothing at all survives *and* that the *angatse* survives (Harris, this volume; Astuti & Harris, 2008). Moreover, those adults who judged that something of the deceased would survive varies in the number of functions that they deemed to remain viable after death (ranging from all seven mental properties that were probed to only one). In other words, there was remarkably little agreement about what exactly the survival of the *angatse* entails, which suggests that the belief in its survival is appropriated by different people to compose very personal and idiosyncratic representations of what happens after death.

But even this rendition might turn out to be too much of a distraction and an imposition. For what became apparent in the course of the informal conversations that were sparked by the death interviews is that most adults hold very tentative

representations of the afterlife. True, some elders had clearly spent a lot of time thinking about the ancestors' ways of being, their way of communicating, of eating, and so on. When pressed by my relentless questioning, they hardly faltered, giving evidence that they had themselves, at some point, reflected about the hows and whys, and had come up with their own answers (different, perhaps, from those of a brother or a husband I had approached a few hours earlier). But they were the exceptions. Most people found it hard to articulate what kind of existence the ancestors enjoy, how exactly the *angatse* acts on the living, whether dreams are a necessary vehicle for their interventions, and so on. Some were indifferent, even sceptical novices, while others struggled to produce a coherent account, and readily gave up by asserting: "I don't know, I have never been dead."

It is hard to imagine that such hesitant knowledge could effectively be imparted to the children, even if adults were motivated to do so. And this brings me to my final point about the pivotal role of ritual in ensuring that the ancestors are kept alive in children's and adults' minds. For the endemic difference of opinion – or even the absence of opinion – regarding the ways of the ancestors, does not stop people, children included, from coming together and actually talking, offering food, drinks and shelter to them. When this has to happen, the focus is on performing the correct actions, on using the correct utensils, on saying the correct words on the right day and at the right time. The fact that different participants bring with them very different personal interpretations of what they are doing never seems to interfere with the smooth orchestration of the ritual. This is a remarkable achievement, based on what Bloch (2005) calls 'deference'. As people gather to get things done, they are likely to stop speculating or doubting or not caring about the ancestors' ways of being, their

way of communicating, of eating, and so on. Instead, they defer to whomever it was that, a very long time ago, originated this way of doing things and they just align themselves with it.

By so doing, they not only honour the ancestors, placate their anger and avoid their interference. They also provide the crowd of excitable children with indirect but all important testimony of the existence of invisible yet powerful entities that need honouring, placating and have the power to interfere one's life<sup>4</sup>. Thus, as long as the rituals are staged, children will eventually construct an understanding of what lies beyond death that will motivate them to be interested in much more than the food.

## Acknowledgments

The research on which this paper is based was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council, UK (Research Fellowship R000271254, 2002-05). I wish to thank the villagers of Betania, adults and children, for allowing me to learn with and through them. Thank you to Sean Epstein for joining me in the process and to Maurice Bloch for discussing its outcome.

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<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork was conducted in the coastal village of Betania in Western Madagascar where I have undertaken anthropological research since 1987. The village has, at present, a population of about 1000 people. It lies a few miles south of Morondava, the main town in the area, which hosts governmental offices, a market, a hospital, a post office, and an airport. The livelihood of the village depends on a variety of small-scale fishing activities, and on the daily trading of fish at the Morondava market. For this reason, like other people who live on the coast and “struggle with the sea,” Betania villagers call themselves *Vezo* (cf. Astuti, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Since I never sat with men, the description that follows only refers to women.

<sup>3</sup> Given their predatory approach to animals it is perhaps not surprising that, when asked about the causes of a bird’s death, most children (68%) aged 5 to 7 invoked human factors such as “people cut off its wings,” “throwing stones at them,” “sling-shots,” “twisting its neck or cutting its neck with a knife,” or just and simply “people.”

<sup>4</sup> I wish to thank Paul Harris for suggesting this point to me.