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Edited by Victoria Talwar, Paul L. Harris and Michael Schleifer

Excerpt

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Death, Ancestors, and the Living Dead: Learning without Teaching in Madagascar

RITA ASTUTI

At the time of my last period of fieldwork in Madagascar,¹ Brika was seventeen. I had invited him to my house to participate in the study I was conducting about death and the ancestors (cf. Harris, Chapter 2). 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, because 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. 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 the spirit (known as *fanahy* when the person is alive and 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

¹ 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 1,000 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).

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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 reemerge 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." 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

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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. Although I agree 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 bring more than their alert ears to the task of learning, and whether, along the way, they 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 of 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 in the same way they explained things to me: what happens to the body, what happens to the *angatse*, 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 and slightly

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cuffed, 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 behaviors 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. However, 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, because 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 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" (meaning 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 might 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 because, 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, including fetching water and firewood, doing the dishes, washing clothes, or carrying fish to the market. Even so, they have control over much of their time (school provisions being extremely erratic), which they spend in large groups of full and classificatory siblings,

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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 neighbor's infidelity, or for a conversation with the resident anthropologist, there are bound to be children around. Adults may become 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. Whereas 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: They may hear, for example, 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 rather to the intervention of a disgruntled grandmother whose tomb has lain 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 because people die so often nowadays, it has become quite impractical to keep children away. Whether or not this is a correct depiction of what happened in the past, the prohibition against their attendance was motivated by a belief that 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 centered 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

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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 and is 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 language² says it all. When the food is delivered, the four or five people who are to share from the same bowl move hesitantly: They shuffle on their bottoms to come closer to the food; somehow they always seem to purposefully end up in rather awkward positions, which makes 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 traveling from bowl to mouth and back again at an unusually slow pace.

This is the adults' experience. The children's is markedly different: 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 behavior, because 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. Yet is that really so? Sure, when they dig their spoons in the food they seem oblivious to the fact that a dead body is lying only a few meters away and to what that might mean. However, 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

² Because I never sat with men, the description that follows only refers to women.

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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. When the body starts to decompose, small piles of cow dung are burned 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 demeanor is serious, curious, and 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 the mother of a girl of about two and a boy 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, singing, and cooking that had taken place over the course of two and half days had been caused by his mother's death. However, this was going to change. At a prearranged time, behind closed doors, the corpse was lifted off the bed and into the wooden coffin. Several items of clothing, some chewing tobacco, and a little bottle of perfume were neatly arranged around the body in the hope that the spirit of the deceased, on finding her favorite 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. Then the

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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 because 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 someone 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 – 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, yet they were also amused by his naïveté and commented that he clearly understood nothing. The fact that the boy took the prohibition far too literally and overextended 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

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with ill consequences. As far as I could gather, the combination of zeal and naïveté 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, because 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. However, 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 – and 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 and devouring it in no time. On 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-pitched concluding statement: “Let’s go home now that our tummies 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

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have something to do with one of their uncles, the relative that had died most recently, and that a dream must have been the trigger for what they were well aware was not their everyday cooking or eating. Their narratives were not as well informed or coherent as those of the adults, but they 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. Although 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 because 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, and 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, p. 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, p. 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: Whereas adults will attribute the unmooring of a canoe to supernatural forces, children will attribute it to