

Introduction

Encounters with ancestors

This story starts with a moment of violence and confusion in Madagascar's capital city on 6 November 1995. That evening an alarm was raised: the Queen's Palace was on fire. The blaze sent shock waves through the city. Its hilltop position at the heart of the capital meant that the fire could be seen for miles around, drawing a crowd of people who tried to dampen the flames and salvage what they could. The then-director of the Museum of Art and Archaeology, Jean-Aimé Rakotoarisoa, recounts how "on the night of the fire, a bizarre event took place. The body of one of the queens was found in the public square in the centre of the city."¹ Somehow she had made her way out of her tomb and down to the *Place 13 Mai*. Some identified the body as the last highland queen, Ranaivalona III, who had been deposed and exiled by the French after colonization in 1896. The remains were carried to the sports stadium at Mahamasina, ancient site of military maneuvers and royal speeches, on the west of the city. The next day, a vigil was kept over the body while crowds came to pay their respects in an improvised and tragic ceremony.² The blaze had attacked a potent symbol of the ancient state, or *fanjakana*, of the central highlands and had the potential to inflame already fraught relationships between those members of the political elite who claimed descent from the monarchy and other groups, both within the highlands and beyond.³ Many questioned whether this was an act of arson, coming the day after municipal elections in the capital and in the wake of recent constitutional changes that had allowed the president to replace the prime minister.⁴ Newspaper reports of the fire claimed that flames had been seen taking hold at several sites within the compound and that attempts were made

by some elements of the crowd to promote a certain “tribalism” and encourage rioting in the streets of Antananarivo.⁵ The doubt over who had caused the fire led to another suspicion: perhaps ancestral agency had been involved in some way. Was the ruinous fire another manifestation of the royal dead, a sign of their anger at the living?

This is a book about such ambiguous signs of the dead and the ways in which the living dwell among them. The stories that I tell here traverse the highland landscape that was ruled by the sovereigns (*mpanjaka*) who lived and were buried in the royal enclosure that burnt to the ground in 1995. I deal mostly with the nineteenth century – a period of social and political upheaval, a time of warfare, of slave raiding, of population movement and of encounters with Europeans, Africans, and traders from the wider Indian Ocean. At the end of the eighteenth century, King Andrianampoinimerina had forged a powerful kingdom (*fanjakana*) from the polities vying for power in the highland region of Imerina. The *fanjakana* would expand aggressively into other regions of the island under his son Radama and successive monarchs. Although the central highlands had been tied in to global circuits of trade and exchange since at least the twelfth century CE,⁶ during this period relations with the exterior intensified. As European presence in the Indian Ocean expanded and plantation economies developed on Mauritius and other neighboring islands, demands increased for cheap labor from Madagascar. By end of the eighteenth century, large numbers of enslaved people were being exchanged for imported guns or sold for foreign currency, markets proliferated, and the central highlands saw more Europeans and other strangers arriving in search of goods and slaves.⁷ In the midst of these changes were ancestors and other ghostly manifestations whose perceived presence also shaped and was molded by these encounters.

Accounts of nineteenth-century Madagascar are full of invisible presences, revenants, and ancestral spirits. British missionaries in the 1820s recounted students turning up at school possessed by the dead or told how the door to King Andrianampoinimerina’s tomb was left ajar so he could join his son in battle. Oral histories recorded in the later nineteenth century describe how sacrifices and speeches were made at standing stones to ask for and return ancestral blessing; they also recall how the spirits of the dead sovereigns walked abroad and possessed young women in the 1860s. Such invisible actors were understood to have real effects in the world and to be an important part of daily life, yet acknowledging

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their agency offers a challenge for accounts of the past. How can something imaginary, invisible, or intangible be recognized and included in historical narratives? The blessing of the ancestors was fundamental to the sovereign's achievements, but it was also important for the success of ambitious commoners at the court or local elites in regions conquered by the king; even missionaries sent from Britain could not act effectively without ancestral blessing. In seeking ways to recognize these dynamic and contingent copresences in the past, I look to the signs through which the dead were made present and brought into relationship with the living. To do this, I take an interdisciplinary orientation that is staked in anthropology, broadly conceived, but which foregrounds an archaeological and semiotic sensibility as a starting point from which to interrogate the problem of ghostly presence. In tracing these signs, I move between different forms of encounter in a series of loosely linked histories. Starting with an exploration of the ancestral sign of fire, I move on to consider the arrival of European missionaries in the 1820s; the role of kinship and history in conquests on the frontier a decade or so earlier; exchanges with the dead at standing stones in the second half of the century; and, finally, evidence for the abandonment of villages, tombs, and ancestors in the years before French colonization. All these changes in landscape and history are tied in different ways to shifts in the structure of external trade, the movement of enslaved people and encounters with strangers. In exploring how these relationships played out at different moments, I reflect on the semiotic coming into being of landscape and history.

Archaeology is the exemplary discipline of signs, spinning narratives of past worlds around the material detritus left in the wake of human lives. Archaeological work attends to the tangible but underdetermined signs of the dead; it provides a starting point to explore their ambiguity and force. Yet recently, there has been a shift away from the semiotic dimensions of archaeology toward a concern with material agency. This has entailed a critique of interpretive strategies that focus on the cognition that lies behind archaeological traces; instead, the current concern is with the materiality of the trace itself – on the footprint or posthole rather than on the meaning behind it. As well as shifting away from attempts to identify an imagined originary idea behind the trace, this foregrounds the material world and the non-discursive ways in which it is caught up in human lives. But to echo Jacques Derrida, we can also say that the trace is always already about what is absent – it points to a supplement, and an

understanding of its presence must also be approached through that which is missing. In these terms, the trace is as much about the foot that made the print, or the post, the hole. These in turn are understood through the path that was walked and the house that was inhabited. In this sense, presence is always dispersed as well as located. This is the insight on which archaeology was founded: that we can tell about the absent dead and their activities and practices from the traces they leave behind. Archaeology is all about the semiotic supplement, and in this book, I work to develop a better understanding of how that supplement relates to material traces. Derrida has been important for drawing attention to the dispersed nature of presence, and his appeal to spectrality as an anachronistic moment, in which neither living nor dead, presence nor absence is privileged, has prompted a growing interest in the destabilizing potential of “hauntology.”⁸ But Derrida doesn’t provide much help for thinking about how absence is made present in the tangible trace. To explore this question, I draw on a range of semiotic theory but focus in particular on the semeiotic of Charles Sanders Peirce as providing a way to think about the material characteristics of signs.⁹ Peirce’s work also expands the realm of semiosis to consider how interpretation itself can be material, gestural, and affective. This shifts interpretation out of the realm of human minds alone and into bodies and things. In tracing the crossings between people, things, and the invisible-intangible, I situate signs as entities that bring different elements of the world into relation in ways that cannot be easily defined as material or mental. Such sign relations are located in time and space and have both material and immaterial dimensions and effects.

Recognition of the dead as active presences fosters an awareness of the ways in which they structure and act on the present and future, as well as of how the living seek ways to continue to act after death. This active role of the ancestors prompts a questioning of historical agency and a turn away from the usual historical actors toward those locales and institutions through which the dead could act. How might recognition of the influence of the dead force a reconsideration of historical narrative itself? The highland dead were not ephemeral presences but part of the landscape that the living inhabited; the realm of the dead and the ancestors was the ground on which life took place. To act within the world of the highlands involved careful negotiation with the dead and with the landscape and material things with which they were caught up. A

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sophisticated and sensitive historical consciousness was vital in this world because history both explained present-day conditions and guided future action. Alain Delivré has shown how powerful descent groups in highland Madagascar were understood to be blessed with history and with powerful ancestry. His analysis of the layered meanings of the Malagasy word for history (*tantara*) as it was used in the nineteenth-century highlands shows that its translation as “history” or “story” fails to capture its full range of meaning. The word may also be translated as “privilege,” something won by the loyalty of one’s ancestors to the sovereign and by the services they had rendered to the crown.¹⁰ Delivré observes that *tantara* could also be translated as “tradition,” in the sense that it was not something that belonged to a vanished world but rather was visible in the here and now, manifest in the privilege of any particular descent group, in its customs and practices. As against the conception of highland Malagasy society as unchanging and static that the term “tradition” evokes, he notes that radical changes were “consciously . . . rooted in the thought of the ancestors to such a degree that monarchs could always justify a new project by the fact that it had been conceived by the preceding royal person.”¹¹ History was thus the source from which present-day changes must be drawn. To understand how change could enter into a world in which all practice had to be embedded in the traditions and expressed desires of the ancestors, I work to delineate what Reinhart Koselleck has termed the “space of experience” in which the past was made present. I do this by exploring how time and place were understood to be bonded together, playing out through landscape, history, and descent. Koselleck observes that the experience of the past may be understood as “assembled into a totality, within which many layers of earlier times are simultaneously present.”¹² Koselleck’s emphasis on the “contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous” resonates with perceptions of landscape in highland Madagascar, where the past is understood to have a vibrant and ongoing existence in the present through the tangible traces and traditions of the ancestors.¹³ For Koselleck, historical consciousness emerges from the tension between this “space of experience” – composed in part of the material traces of the dead and understood in the highlands to be knowable and accessible – and the “horizon of expectation,” in which the future is made present through “hope and fear, wishes and desires, cares and rational analysis, receptive display and curiosity.”¹⁴ The landscape is not a static entity but may be conceptualized as an ongoing event,

as Edward Casey has suggested, or as Barbara Bender puts it, as “time materializing.”¹⁵ As the *fanjakana* reconfigured relationships among the living, the dead, and the world they inhabited, it intervened into both the past and the future. The state projects of expansion and consolidation of power were thus embedded in explicit negotiations over history as the sovereigns and others sought ways to institute new projects in a world oriented toward historical continuity. I suggest that understanding how the signs of the dead were recognized and articulated opens new avenues for exploring this “privilege” of history and the ways in which change could enter into highland life.

To introduce these issues, I explore in Chapter 1 the history that underwrote the fire at Antananarivo in November 1995, when the historic royal palaces and tombs in the center of the old city were destroyed. The burning of the palaces and tombs raises many of the themes discussed in this book: the ramifications of the nineteenth-century encounter with European missionaries, the violence of the precolonial state and its pervasive effects, the relationship between the kingdom’s center and its periphery, and the encounter with ancestors. The sovereigns of Imerina worked throughout the nineteenth century to locate their capital and kingdom as the unifying point around which the social and political worlds of the island turned. This has had lasting repercussions for Madagascar and for the perception of the lands and peoples outside the heartland of the *fanjakana*. How this chronotopic formation structured encounters with others throughout the highlands is another theme of the book, as is the question of its lasting effects on the historical narratives that we write. In the first chapter, I trace the multifaceted and rich associations that such violent fires bring to mind in highland Malagasy contexts, looking at their association with times of political upheaval. This articulates the “space of experience” within which fire was located in the nineteenth century and reveals the “horizon of expectation” that allowed change to enter into an apparently timeless past. This account also introduces the Peircean semeiotic theory that I draw on to think through the characteristics and dynamics of the signs of the dead. An American philosopher-scientist who grew up in the heart of the New England intellectual establishment, Peirce may seem an odd choice of interlocutor for an account that deals with the landscape and history of highland Madagascar. Born in 1839 and dying eighteen years after Madagascar became a French colony, Peirce lived his life in parallel with many of the events that I describe in the

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following chapters. Certainly, his frequent choice of archaeological or geological imagery to illustrate the workings of sign relations resonates with my interests in material traces, but beyond this, and as I explore in the following chapters, Peirce's treatment of "the essential nature and fundamental varieties of possible sem[e]iosis"¹⁶ resonates with highland sign concepts and is helpful for opening up the traces of the dead for analysis and elaboration.

Before turning to the semeiosis of highland fires in the next chapter, I begin by providing a little background on Madagascar and on the invisible and ancestral presences that populate its highlands. I then describe the conceptual framework that informs the book, touching on some of the recent debates around representation, presence, and material agency in so far as they are relevant for the problem of the signs of the dead. I finish this opening chapter, as is conventional, with an outline of the structure of the book.

Themes in the historiography of Madagascar

Madagascar has an enthralling history that is little known outside of academic circles, overshadowed as it is in the North Atlantic imaginary by the unique flora and fauna endemic to the island, particularly its photogenic lemurs.¹⁷ It's a huge island, almost a thousand miles from one end to the other, encompassing diverse environments. The spine of high ground that occupies the center of Madagascar falls off rapidly to the east into a steep forested escarpment, while to the west the downward slope is more gradual as the highlands soften into grassy plains and mangrove-fringed coastline.¹⁸ Located off the southeast coast of Africa, the island itself has a relatively shallow human history. The first evidence of early human presence dates to sometime before 2,000 BCE, and includes rock-shelter forager sites with microlithic technology, and butchery marks on subfossil fauna.¹⁹ This is followed by later evidence for changes in landscape and ecology that were probably driven by human action.²⁰ More substantial village sites are not found until the later first millennium CE, but by the early part of the second millennium CE small coastal settlements were more common.²¹ Around the same time, the urban center of Mahilaka developed and flourished on the northwest coast. This and later Islamized port towns were contemporaries of the stone towns of the "Swahili" world. Madagascar was undoubtedly tied in to

the trading network of the East African coast and the broader Indian Ocean, but little is understood as yet of how this played out. Settlers seem to have come from Indonesia and coastal Africa; recent genetic studies suggest that the population shows roughly equal African and Indonesian ancestry in both paternal and maternal lineages.²² Malagasy is classed as an Austronesian language, sharing many cognate words with the languages of the southeast Barito Valley, in Indonesian Borneo.²³ A connection with maritime Southeast Asia is also found in the plants and material culture that were introduced to the island. The latter includes the double piston-bellows common in the highlands and the outrigger canoes found on the west coast; both have affinities with Indonesian traditions.²⁴ Nineteenth-century oral histories recount tales of migration as populations arrived and were displaced.²⁵ They also recall the arrival of “Arab” and Indian traders as well as enslaved Africans. Divinatory and calendric systems used on the island deploy Arabic terms and categories, although there is debate about how these were introduced to the island. Early archaeological research focused on these questions of origins, often working on the coast, and historians assessed oral histories of migration and of displaced autochthonous predecessors.²⁶

The central highlands have been another site of historical and archaeological inquiry, with special attention given to the region of Imerina and the powerful highland state that emerged under king Andrianampoinimerina in the late eighteenth century.²⁷ It is this highland region that I consider in the present book. In writing about the history of the highland polity, I prefer to use the indigenous term *fanjakana*, but in some cases, I keep the term “state” (or indeed “kingdom”) in play to emphasize the tension – present in any anthropological account – between imposed categories that make the sense of the world in terms that are familiar and locally grounded language that has very different concerns at its heart.²⁸ Although I don’t want to place the Malagasy *fanjakana* in a box of its own uniqueness that refuses any comparisons with that privileged entity we call “the state,” at the same time, I want to remember that the state concept comes with a heavy load of intellectual baggage that can quash the distinctive identity of local forms and ideas of governance. Indeed, for highland Malagasy, the term *fanjakana* meant both those less centralized polities that existed before Andrianampoinimerina came to power and the highland state that he created. It thus affirmed continuity in political forms in contrast to the rupture that the state

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concept articulates. This account does not place the *fanjakana* at its heart as the major character and driving force of the narrative but rather focuses on varied encounters in which people, landscapes, things, language, ancestors, and institutions participated. The *fanjakana* enters into many, if not all, of these encounters. I hope that by exploring the various ways in which it was inserted into such relationships, an oblique view of its character and nature will develop over the course of the book's chapters.

A particularly rich source for the history of the highland *fanjakana* is provided in the form of a voluminous collection of oral and written histories in Malagasy made in the 1860s by a Jesuit priest, the Révérend-Père François Callet. This publication, known as the *Histories of the Sovereigns* (*Tantaran' ny Andriana*), comprises a collection of genealogies, judicial directives, commemorated speeches, and mythical histories.²⁹ Combining personal reminiscences of contemporary events and inherited traditions concerning ancient times beyond living memory, the collection illustrates the salience of David Cohen's argument against overly formalist classification of oral tradition. The knowledge of the past, Cohen notes, "is not simply given or handed down but is continuously and actively gathered and dissected."³⁰ Most of the accounts glorify Andriampoinimerina and his ancestors, but Callet collected little information about who was speaking, or what their interests were in recounting the stories, so it is difficult to assess the context of any particular account.³¹

Pier Larson has observed that the *Histories* pay relatively little attention to the international trade in enslaved people that underwrote Andriampoinimerina's rise to power.³² Equally there is little discussion of the injurious effects of the king's conquests on the highland region. Fortunately the *Histories* are complemented by an alternate account written in English by a disillusioned Malagasy noble in the early 1850s. Raombana had been taken to the United Kingdom as a child to be educated by the London Missionary Society (LMS); on his return, he worked as a secretary for Queen Ranavalona I. His narrative recounts stories passed down to him by his family, as well as his opinion on historical events.³³ In contrast to the somewhat hagiographical tenor of the *Histories of the Sovereigns*, Raombana's account is rather more critical. He and his descent group disputed the claims to the throne of Andriampoinimerina ("the usurper"), and in his *Histories*, Raombana laid out what he viewed as the

faults of Imerina’s rulers. Written in English to ensure that he was not exposed, Raombana’s account provides an important counterpoint to the oral histories collected by Callet. A European perspective is provided by traders’ accounts and those of other visitors, including missionaries.³⁴ Archives in Europe and Madagascar also hold a wealth of letters and journals written by missionaries; traders; and, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the rulers of the *fanjakana* and their subordinates. The archaeological evidence I draw on comes from research carried out by Adrien Mille, Henry Wright, Susan Kus, and colleagues in central Imerina; and Victor Raharijaona in the Betsileo region of the southern highlands. It also includes my own research in the Vakinankaratra region of the highlands, undertaken between 1997 and 2010 with a team of colleagues, including Ramilisonina of the Museum of Art and Archaeology in Antananarivo and Brian Boyd of Columbia University. I do not go into the detail of our archaeological research in this book, but the results of this fieldwork are in preparation to be published as a monograph elsewhere.³⁵

Encounters

To theorize encounters between people – living or dead – is to think about relationships, both between people and with the material world. In this book, I focus on the period before French colonization of Madagascar in 1896 and explore the interactions between people, places, and things at a time when European strangers were still exotic and available to be drawn into the reproduction of political power by Malagasy sovereigns. The co-option of strangers and their exotica into strategies of prestige building by indigenous elites has been demonstrated in a range of precolonial contexts. The same is certainly the case for Madagascar, as has been noted by a number of scholars.³⁶ In their work on the “Swahili” coast Adria LaViolette and Jeffrey Fleisher have demonstrated that these formations are not straightforward and require that close attention is paid to their particular historical contexts. Stephen Ellis points to how relationships between Malagasy and strangers shifted over time, from the first arrivals of foreigners in the sixteenth century, people “whose goods and skills were used as materials for political construction,” to a dramatically different configuration when the British appeared on the political scene.³⁷ This happened during the Napoleonic Wars, after the British seized the