

ANCESTORS AND THE AFTERLIFE¹

Rita Astuti

London School of Economics and Political Science

Anthropologists have long been troubled by belief. Perhaps the best illustration of their uneasiness is the opening page of Rodney Needham's (1972) *Belief, language and experience*, where the author recounts how he once dreamt that he was trying to converse with his Penan informants, but was dragged from his sleep by the failure to compose the following sentence: 'I believe in God'. Once fully awake, Needham concluded that it was actually impossible to translate this English proposition into Penan. This realization not only undermined his own habitual attribution of belief to the Penan (e.g., they believe in a supreme God, they believe that their God has certain features and possesses certain powers) but, more generally, triggered his suspicion towards anthropologists' confident attribution of belief to the various people they work with and motivated his elaborate study into the nature of belief.

Needham's investigation was self-consciously philosophical, and this same orientation has characterized the debates on rationality and on the interpretation of apparently irrational beliefs (e.g., Wilson 1970, Hollis & Lukes 1982). Arguably, the very abstract philosophical approach to belief has tended to obscure some important facts – for example, that ordinary people are likely to hold inconsistent sets of beliefs (Luhmann 1989, Stringer 1996) – that are in fact highly relevant to the discussion of what it takes for anthropologists to attribute belief to others. My priority in this paper, therefore, is to investigate belief as an ethnographic phenomenon rather than as a philosophical conundrum. This investigation is only a start, but it begins to reveal

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the complexities that lie hidden under the sort of confident attributions of belief that are so common in anthropology and that kept Needham awake.

The ethnographic background

The village of Betania, where I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork on and off since the late 1980s, 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 fishing activities, and on the trading of fish at the Morondava market. Typically, men go out fishing daily with their dugout canoes and, daily, women sell the catch. With what they earn, women buy rice, the staple food, other essential foodstuff and a variety of luxury items. The development of tourism in recent years has made Morondava a much busier place than it was in the 1980s. This has created a new outlet for the fish caught by Betania fishermen, in addition to generating employment opportunities for some of the villagers. Nonetheless, most villagers still regard fishing as their most profitable, if erratic, source of livelihood, and for this reason, like other people who live on the coast and “struggle with the sea,” they call themselves *Vezo* (see Astuti 1995a, 1995b).

Some of the resources that *Vezo* villagers earn from their skilful struggle with the sea are used to finance the work that living people perform for their dead relatives, such as the construction of family tombs and the erection of individual crosses that bear the name of the deceased (see Astuti 1994, 1995a). The work is a service that the living perform for the dead, but is not a service of a voluntary nature for if the living fail to provide the dead with decent “houses” or if they fail to honour them by erecting crosses, the dead can make one or more of their descendants ill or even take their life.

The demanding work that the living periodically perform for the dead is only one of the contexts in which *Vezo* villagers interact with their dead relatives. Many events in the productive, reproductive and social life of any *Vezo* family require that the dead be promptly informed, for example if one intends to move to a temporary fishing location, if one is moving into a newly built house or is launching a new canoe, if one is having a difficult birth or if a newborn is brought out of the house for the first time, if one is about to sit a school exam, if difficult words have been spoken which make people’s heart heavy with anger, if the visiting anthropologist arrives or leaves, and so on. It is the responsibility of the senior head of the family (*bazomanga*, see Astuti 1995a) to call the dead and talk to them, asking for their protection or their forgiveness, and ensuring that they are kept well informed of life’s events – for whenever the dead have reasons to be “surprised,” they will want to ask questions, thereby causing trouble for the living.

The dead communicate with their living descendants through the dreams that they induce in them. This is because when a person dies, the breathing stops, the body becomes stiff, cold and soon begins to stink and to decompose. But when a person dies, the 'spirit' – known as *fanaby* up to the moment of death – permanently departs from the body. In its new disembodied, ghostly form, the spirit – now known as *angatse* – is invisible (*tsy hita maso*), and moves around like wind (*tsioky*). To be seen by living people, it enters their dreams, where it appears together with its original uncorrupted body, just as it was when the person was alive.²

In a sense, it is somewhat misleading to say that the spirit of the dead enters the dreams of the living, since these dreams are more like encounters between fellow spirits. During sleep, the *fanaby* of living people temporarily detaches itself from the body and wanders until waking time.³ If one's *fanaby* travels to market, one dreams about the market; if it travels to sea, one dreams about the sea; if it is approached by the *angatse* of a dead relative, one dreams of that relative. Most of one's *fanaby*'s nocturnal activities reflect one's preoccupations during the day and especially one's thoughts just before falling into deep sleep. However, the encounters with *angatse* of dead people are different because they are originated by the will of the dead, rather than by the thoughts of the living. In this sense, *angatse* can indeed be said to force their way into the dreams of the living, in a way that is perhaps not so dissimilar from the more dramatic and complex forms of spiritual intrusion that go under the name of spirit possession.

Dreams about one's dead relatives must be promptly recounted to members of one's immediate family and to the senior person who has the authority to call upon the particular individual who appeared in the dream. The meaning of some of these dreams is plain and straightforward: the dead person complains that she is hungry because her [living] son cannot be bothered to buy food for her, or she says that she feels cold because her house (i.e., the tomb) is falling apart; she might herself offer food to the dreamer or put her cold hand on the dreamer's forehead. All of these are bad, dangerous dreams, which have immediate effect on the dreamer (a fever, an ear-ache, some swelling), and which require immediate action (an offering of rice or even the slaughtering of a head of cattle) to appease the offended spirit. But dreams can be more ambiguous (e.g., the deceased simply appears, staring, but does not say anything) and may prompt no imme-

2 When people recount their nocturnal encounters with *angatse*, they place great emphasis on the fact that they *see* the deceased and on the fact that the deceased appears exactly like s/he was before s/he died.

3 Because of the spirit's departure from the body during sleep, being asleep is like being dead (*olo matory naman' ny olo maty*, literally, people who are asleep are dead people's friends). Several adult informants told me that if a person's face is smeared with *tabake* (a yellow paste derived from medicinal woods) while she is asleep, the spirit will be unable to recognize the body it belongs to and will fail to reconnect with it, leading to that person's death.

diate action, until an illness calls for an explanation and the dream is promptly remembered and reinterpreted. In some cases – typically when children are involved – dreams are only revealed through divination. Given their lack of wisdom and understanding, children are not expected to recognize the significance of dreams, nor are they expected to remember or to recount them. But if children get ill and their illness persists and defies treatment with western medicines, parents will approach a diviner who will be able to see that the child had a dream in which the *angitse* of a certain dead relative touched her forehead or gave her food; an explanation will also be offered as to why the dead relative is angry – her children have forgotten her and they fight all the time, she feels lonely, she is “surprised” by a new residential arrangement she has not been informed of – and what actions must be taken to appease the *angitse* and restore the child’s health.

This brief account of the interactions between Vezo villagers and their dead relatives is based on my observation of several “works” performed for the dead and on numerous instances when elderly *bazomanga* addressed invisible interlocutors, offered them cooked rice, tobacco, rum, or (more exceptionally) slaughtered a cow and offered bits of cooked meat. It is based on the reports and the interpretations of dreams involving dead relatives, and on the course of action that followed. It is based on diviners’ diagnoses of unabating illnesses and on people’s speculations as to why a healthy child suddenly died or a strong young man drowned at sea. And it is based on several conversations with my closest Vezo friends who, over the years, have helped me understand what was going on around me.

All of these sources appear to deliver one clear message: that Vezo believe that a deceased person’s *angitse* continues to want, to feel cold, hungry, lonely or outright angry, and continues to monitor, judge and influence living people – in other words, that some of the person’s sensory, cognitive and emotional (mental for short) faculties survive after death. Although this attribution of belief sounds like a plausible inference, common enough in anthropological interpretative practice, the experimental evidence I present next will call for some significant qualifications. Before I start, though, some terminological clarifications are in order.

What works and what doesn’t

In his remarks on the verb “to believe,” Pouillon (1982: 6) points out that “it is not so much the believer who affirms his belief as such, it is rather the unbeliever who reduces to mere believing what, for the believer, is more like knowing.” When one says that, for example, the Dangaleat believe in the existence of their local spirits, it is because one does not believe that these spirits exist, and one assumes that to do so requires a special disposition, i.e., belief. These observations come with the proviso

that in the case of Christian believers, for historical and ontological reasons, the believers themselves cannot avoid expressing their belief in the existence of God (see also Ruel, 1982). Christians, therefore, most definitively believe in God. But, Pouillon asks (1982: 4), how can one tell whether Dangaleat believe in local spirits and in what way? What questions can one ask them, using what word in their language, in what context?

I am well aware that the same riddles apply to the Vezo. How can I tell whether the Vezo *believe* that the *angatse* survives after death or whether they just *know* it? How can I ask them? To address precisely this kind of questions, Bloch (2002) has turned to historical evidence from 19th century Highland Madagascar. He asks: What happened when Christian missionaries set out to convert the Malagasy? Which beliefs did they identify in Malagasy religion? Which beliefs were they able to eradicate? He notes: the missionaries – unquestionably experts in identifying Christian-like beliefs – targeted and successfully eradicated the “belief” in cult objects known as *sampy*, but they ignored the “belief” in the continuing existence of dead forebears, so that people’s relations with the ancestors were not affected by conversion to Christianity. From this observation, Bloch concludes that for the Malagasy ancestors are not an object of belief in the Christian sense, for had they been so, they would have certainly been targeted by the missionaries.

Though convincing, Bloch’s analysis leaves us with a negative conclusion: that the way Malagasy “believe” in the existence of their dead forebears is different from the way Christians “believe” in the existence of God. But it provides us with little evidence of how Malagasy do in fact represent to themselves the existence of their dead forebears. My intention in this paper is to begin to provide some of this evidence. But to be able to do this, I need to make the following stipulation: that I use the word belief in the simple sense of “holding something to be true.” I shall take as evidence that people hold something to be true the fact that they use it is as a basis for novel inferences. For example, evidence that people believe that after death the body decomposes but the *angatse* survives can be found in the novel inferences they are prepared to make about which of a person’s properties remain viable after death. From this perspective, whether Vezo believe in the survival of the *angatse* becomes a question that *can* be investigated empirically.

The experimental tool I have used to carry out this investigation was originally designed by developmental psychologists Paul Harris and Marta Giménez (2005) to study Spanish children’s understanding of death and the afterlife. In the first instance, I used it to interview 23 Vezo men and women, aged between 19 and 62 years (mean = 33 years). I first asked them to listen to a short narrative about a fictional character

called Rampy. They were told that Rampy was a very hard working man, who one day fell ill with high fever and was taken to the hospital by his wife and children. The doctor gave him four injections, but after three days he died. Participants were then asked a set of 14 questions, half of which were about the continued functioning of some of Rampy's body parts and bodily processes (e.g., now that Rampy is dead, do his eyes work? does his heart beat?), and the other half were about the continued viability of some of his sensory, emotional and cognitive functions (e.g., now that Rampy is dead, does he hear people talk? does he miss his children? does he know his wife's name?).⁴

For want of a better, more intuitive phrase (such as the statement often heard during Vezo funerals: "when one is dead, one is dead!"), in what follows I shall refer to participants' *negative* answers (e.g., Rampy's eyes do *not* work or Rampy does *not* hear people talk) as *discontinuity judgements*: judgments that state that life and death are *discontinuous*, that what works in life no longer works in death, that what was felt in life is no longer felt in death, and so on. By contrast, I shall refer to participants' affirmative answers (e.g., Rampy's ears work or Rampy knows his wife's name) as *continuity judgements*: judgments that state that life and death are *continuous*, that what works in life continues to work in death, that what was felt in life continues to be felt in death, and so on.

On the basis of the ethnographic evidence reported above, one would expect participants to judge that Rampy's bodily processes come to an end when he dies and that at least some of his sensory, emotional and cognitive functions remain viable, since these are the properties routinely attributed to the surviving *angitse* (as when people worry that their dead relatives might be feeling cold or that they will soon demand to hear the latest news). As expected, participants differentiated between bodily and mental processes: on average, they gave a smaller number of discontinuity judgments for mental than for bodily processes. However, the most striking finding was that just under half of the participants gave discontinuity judgments for all the mental processes they were questioned about. They reasoned, in other words, that death extinguishes the person and they made no room in their reasoning for the survival of the *angitse*.⁵

In view of this result, we can begin to qualify the conclusion reached above that Vezo believe that a person's mental faculties survive after death. As measured by my

4 The complete list of properties was as follows: BODILY: Do his eyes work? Do his ear work? Does his stomach need food? Does his heart beat? Do his legs move? Does a cut on his hand heal? Does he age? MENTAL: does he see things around? Does he hear people's talk? Does he feel hungry? Does he know his wife's name? Does he remember where his house is? Does he feel cold? Does he miss his children? Participants were asked each set of 7 questions in one of two random orders. Half the participants received the bodily questions followed by the mental questions and half received the reverse order.

5 Statistical analyses of the data presented here can be found in Astuti & Harris, in preparation.

informants' judgments about the fate of Rampy, this belief is clearly present, but its spread is far from universal. As I show next, however, this first qualification does not go far enough.

To someone who has lived in Betania for extended periods of time and has seen people save significant sums of money to finance the construction of tombs and crosses that were meant to appease the anger of their dead relatives, and who has witnessed numerous monologues directed at a recently dead grandmother, at a long dead father or at long forgotten forebears, the fact that nearly half of the participants in the death interview failed to attribute any mental properties to the deceased is puzzling. In some cases, I knew for a fact that the people who emphatically stated that Rampy would be rotting under the ground with no possibility of seeing, hearing, feeling, knowing or thinking because his head would be filling up with worms, had encountered the *angaise* of a dead relative in a dream, which had prompted an offering of rice to the deceased, or had sponsored the repairs to the family tomb, following a sudden spread of illness in the family.

Many anthropologists might want to argue that the puzzling outcome of the death interview is an artifice of an inappropriate experimental tool which forces informants to give stark yes/no answers about a fictional character they do not know and cannot relate to in meaningful ways. Before embracing this line of argument, however, I shall explore a different possibility, which is motivated by the hypothesis that people will bring to mind the belief that a person's mental properties survive after death when the belief becomes contextually relevant. From this perspective, the reason so many participants took such a radical annihilating stance towards Rampy is not that the task was in itself ecologically unsound, but that its narrative context did not make the representations of the survival of Rampy's mental properties relevant to them.

This hypothesis generates a straightforward empirical question: can a manipulation in the way the task is designed – specifically, a change of the narrative context in which the questions are asked – change the distribution of participants' discontinuity judgments? To pursue this question, I recruited a new group of 23 Vezo adults aged between 19 and 71 years (mean = 35 years) and asked them to listen to a different narrative about a different fictional character called Rapeto. They heard that Rapeto had lots of children and grandchildren who, on the day he died, were with him inside his house. Now that he is dead, his children and grandchildren often dream about him. Rapeto's family has built the cement cross for him, and they are happy because the work was well accomplished. The questions about Rapeto were identical to those about Rampy, but instead of being introduced by the statement that Rampy is now dead, they were introduced by the statement that Rapeto is now over at the tombs.

Of course, whatever difference we might find between the participants who heard the Rampy narrative (from now on referred to as the Corpse narrative) and those who heard the Rapeto narrative (from now on referred to as the Tomb narrative) could be caused by a cohort effect. Given the many variables that could potentially affect the way people reason in the task (including, perhaps, how recently they lost a close relative or have had a vivid dream about a dead relation), it is clearly impossible to control for everything. However, in recruiting participants, efforts were made to control for age, gender, education, and church attendance, making sure that the profile of the participants in the Corpse and Tomb conditions were as far as possible matched. Therefore, although it is impossible to entirely rule out a cohort effect, it is reasonable to suggest that if participants in the Tomb condition are found to respond differently from those in the Corpse condition, this is because of the different narrative contexts they were presented with.

We can think of the new Tomb narrative as a form of priming, intended to bring to the attention of the participants the ritual contexts in which the representations of the deceased's enduring mental properties are likely to be most relevant.⁶ As it happens, the priming proved remarkably effective in that participants in the Tomb condition were less likely to give discontinuity judgments than their counterparts in the Corpse condition. In particular, the percentage of participants who judged that all mental faculties cease at death went down from 43 to 13.

To sum up: the brief evocation of the contexts in which the living work for the dead to honour and appease them had the critical effect of strengthening the distribution of the belief that a person's mental faculties survive after death. This means that Vezo adults are more or less likely to embrace this belief depending on the context that gives it relevance. The difference between the responses to the Corpse and the Tomb narratives suggest that Vezo adults do not believe that the deceased's mental faculties survive after death in the abstract, but when their attention is on tombs that have to be built, on dreams that have to be interpreted, on illnesses that have to be explained and resolved. By implication, this finding suggests that, depending on context, Vezo can summon up different, even contrary representations of what happens to people

6 To refer to the Rapeto narrative as a form of priming is not entirely correct because it implies that the Rampy narrative does not prime participants. Both narratives are in fact a form of priming in so far as they draw participants' attention to different aspects (i.e., organic versus ritual) of the dying process. Nonetheless, the developmental data I present below suggest that the understanding of death as the end of both bodily and mental functions emerges before the understanding of death as the end of bodily functions and the preservation of mental functions. There are thus reasons to believe that the Rampy narrative primes a more intuitive construal of death than the Rapeto narrative, and this justifies its use as a baseline to assess the effect of the priming of the Rapeto narrative.

after death, a point that I have discussed more fully elsewhere (Astuti, 2005) and to which I shall return later.

But there is yet another qualification that needs to be made. In both the Corpse and the Tomb conditions, the number of discontinuity judgments given by those participants who judged that the deceased would retain at least some mental properties ranged all the way between 0 (all properties remain viable) and 6 (only one property remains viable). This means that there was remarkably little agreement about the exact functions that the deceased would retain – for some, it was hearing, for others it was knowing one's wife name and remembering the location of one's house, for others still it was all of the above plus feeling hungry, and so on.

The overall distribution of participants' judgments, therefore, not only suggests that the belief in the survival of the *angitse* is deployed contextually, but also that it is appropriated by different people to compose very personal and idiosyncratic representations of what happens after death. This variability in people's representations of the afterlife was even more apparent in the course of the informal conversations that were sparked by the death interviews. For example, several people puzzled over the question of how exactly the dead manage to eat, drink or smoke what is offered to them. Some speculated that the dead feed by inhaling the smell and extracting the flavour from the food. Evidence for this is that, as they claimed, the meat that is distributed after slaughtering a cow that is being offered to dead people does not taste the same as the meat that one buys at the market for family consumption; the first type of meat is reportedly tasteless because all its flavour has been consumed by dead people's feasting *angitse*. Others were more tentative and rather unsure, wondering how dead people could possibly eat – since they don't have a body, they surely don't have a mouth! Maybe, all that happens is that they see the living throwing the morsels of food (which are likely to be eaten by passer-by animals) and that is all they care about – to be remembered and to be shown respect. The most radical position was that offering food or drinks or cigarettes to dead people makes no sense at all: has anybody ever tried to stuff food in the mouth of a dead person, or to get a corpse to puff a cigarette? The only reason people bother to cook meat and rice and to light the tobacco is that for a long, long time this has been the Malagasy way of doing things. In truth, what really happens is that the food is eaten by the living and the tobacco just goes to waste. As for the dead, well, the dead are just dead.

Apart from the variability in how they made sense of specific aspects of the *angitse*'s existence, people also clearly demonstrated to have very different degrees of interest in, and to have reached very different levels of elaboration of, the belief that a dead person's *angitse* survives after death. Some of my interlocutors were indifferent,

even sceptical novices, while others were committed experts. Most strikingly, adults differed in the degree of sophistication with which they puzzled over difficult questions, some of which I brought up and others which they had themselves considered and tried to answer: for example, is dreaming about a dead person in any way similar to being possessed by a spirit? Can a dead person appear simultaneously in different people's dreams? Can one dream about dead people one has never met? How exactly do *angaste* make people ill? Are dreams a necessary vehicle for their interventions? Are there ways of resisting these dreams? Do babies have *angaste*? Do animals?

Although difficult to quantify, some of this variation had to do with age, with older people (aged roughly 40 and above) being predictably more inclined to explain points of detail, to recount poignant personal experiences or to speculate about aspects of the relationship between the living and the dead that they did not fully grasp. 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). Younger adults (aged roughly 40 and below) tended to be less interested, to give more cursory and standardized answers to my questions, or to dismiss them altogether.

To illustrate: I never managed to get any of the younger people to seriously engage with the question of whether animals have *angaste*. The almost automatic answer they all produced was that they had never heard of anybody being visited in a dream by an animal – a patently absurd scenario! Admittedly, not many of the older people had much to say either about this topic, apart from pointing out that since animals do not talk, it is hard to know what might be going on with them. But in one case, a very old man took my question at heart and, having pondered over it in his mind, he suggested that *if* animals have a *fanaby* – and he guessed that some animals, like whales or dolphins, might – then when they die their *angaste* will probably wander around, just like the *angaste* of dead people. His insight was that the *angaste* of a dead animal is not going to appear in the dream of a human (as implied by the younger people), but in the dreams of its own children, whom it will miss very much. He was sure that mother-dolphins and mother-whales are capable of feeling something for their offspring, because they stubbornly look for them if they get separated. But he conceded that we shall never know whether dolphins and whales have dreams! Throughout the conversation, I felt that this old man was taking me to a level of understanding of what *angaste* are all about that was not to be matched by anyone else. Perhaps the reason for his sophistication is that, being the head (*bazomanga*) of his ancestral group, he dreams about his dead forebears almost every night. Understandably, the issue of what it means and what it feels to be an *angaste* is likely to be on his mind quite a lot.

There are two points I wish to draw out of these ethnographic observations. The first one is that the specific content and degree of elaboration of the belief that something survives after death varies greatly, between younger and older adults but also between one individual and the next. To be meaningful, the attribution to the Vezo of the belief in the survival of the *angatse* must take this variability into account. The second, related point is that if people are so inclined – and not everyone is – they can easily spend a lifetime trying to understand better and more. Both of these points raise the question of how this process of understanding might get started and how it might develop.

Developmental insights

As reviewed by Harris and Giménez (2005), developmental psychologists of different theoretical inclinations have had a sustained interest in children's understanding of, and emotional reaction to death. Only recently, however, they have begun to integrate the study of children's increasingly sophisticated understanding of death as a biological phenomenon (e.g., Slaughter, Jaakola & Carey, 1999; Jaakola & Slaughter, 2002; Slaughter & Lyons, 2003), with the study of children's beliefs in the afterlife (e.g., Bering & Bjorklund, 2004; Bering, Hernandez-Blasi & Bjorklund, 2005; Harris & Giménez, 2005). My investigation of how Vezo children come to believe that dead people remain an active presence in their lives has been inspired by this new line of research, particularly by Paul Harris's insights into children's ability to imagine outcomes beyond the realm of possibility (Harris, 2000).

As a first exploration into Vezo children's understanding of the consequences of death, I recruited three groups of Vezo children – 18 5-year olds,⁷ 16 7-year olds,⁸ and 28 9- to 17-year olds⁹ – and asked them to take part in the Corpse task. A few changes in the basic design were introduced in an attempt to make the procedure as accessible

7 Mean age = 5 years 9 months; range = 5 years 6 months to 6 years 6 months. I made several attempts to work with younger children, aged 4 to 5, using a protocol similar to the one designed by Barrett & Behne (2005), which involved acting out the death of a toy-mouse which falls prey to a toy-cat. Unfortunately, I was unable to overcome children's shyness and their remarkable ability to remain silent, even when the questions were asked, in my absence, by a Vezo experimenter or by one of the children's own parents (the main problem, in this case, was that the parent had no patience for the child's "silliness" and prompted them to give the "right" answer).

8 Mean age = 7 years 1 month; range = 6 years 9 months to 7 years 7 months.

9 Mean age = 13 years and 3 months; range = 8 years and 11 months to 17 years and 2 months.

as possible to the youngest children.¹⁰ Irrespective of age, though, all the children were asked the same 14 questions about Rampy's bodily and mental properties that were used with adults.

The overall developmental trajectory that can be derived from the distribution of children's answers is as follows: 5-year olds made a random assessment of the consequences of death on either bodily or mental functions, and gave no evidence of understanding the consequences of death on either a person's bodily or mental functions.¹¹ By the age of 7, children reliably gave more discontinuity than continuity judgments, and did so for both bodily and mental functions. Conversely, if they judged that something survives, they were as likely to do so for bodily as for mental functions. Between the age of 9 and 17, children began to entertain the notion that, while the body most definitely perishes and rots away, some limited aspects of the deceased's mental life are preserved. This is shown by the fact that they were less likely to give discontinuity judgments for mental than for bodily properties. However, when we compare these older children with adults, we find that their endorsement of the belief that Rampy's mental life continues after death was somewhat weaker: first, the number of 9- to 17-year olds who gave only discontinuity judgments for mental properties was larger than the number of adults; second, those children who gave some continuity judgments tended to grant Rampy fewer mental properties than adults.¹²

This developmental progression suggests that the idea that the deceased's mental functions are preserved after death emerges only after children have consolidated their

10 The 5- and 7-year olds were not told a story but were shown a drawing of a man called Rampy. After an initial warm-up session in which they were asked several questions about the drawing (e.g., is Rampy standing or sitting, are his trousers red or brown), children were told that Rampy had recently died, and they were shown a new drawing of the man lying flat on a bed, with a white cloth tied around his jaw. The 9- to 17-year olds were told the same narrative that was used with adults. While the story was narrated, they were shown the same drawings of live and dead Rampy that were used with the younger children, as this helped focus their attention.

11 The test questions were randomly interspersed with 5 control questions about factual details in the drawing the children were looking at (e.g., is there a bucket under the bed?) The few children who failed to answer the control questions correctly were excluded from the study, as their failure suggested that they were not engaged with the task and/or were unable to cope with the test setting. By implication, we can assume that the answers to the test questions by those children who correctly answered the control questions reflect a genuine lack of understanding of what happens after death.

12 I have compared the test results of 7-year olds, 9- to 17-year olds and adults despite the fact that, as explained above, their test conditions were not identical. The reason the comparison remains valid is that all three age groups were prompted to focus on Rampy's dead body, whether by visual or verbal means, or both. The comparison would be invalidated if there were reasons to believe that 7-year olds would have given less discontinuity judgments for mental properties had they heard the Rampy narrative, or that adults' judgments would have been affected by the presentation of the line drawing of Rampy's dead body. Both of these eventualities seem highly unlikely.

biological understanding of the consequences of death: that when a living organism dies, the functions that made life possible and that were sustained by life come to an abrupt end. Vezo children have at their disposal massive and readily available empirical evidence to support the construction of this view of the consequences of death – corpses that rot, do not move, do not speak, do not look, do not wake up, and are put away under the sand. As graphically put by a 9 years old boy: “the body goes bad, the skin is all decomposing and inside the tummy is full of worms ...and in the head there are all sorts of animals that go inside it, and there is nothing that they [dead people] need and they can’t hear anything.” Against this early-emerging assessment of the annihilating consequences of death, the realization that some sensory, cognitive and emotional faculties survive after death appears to *grow* with age. This finding converges with that of Harris and Giménez (2005), and contradicts the claim put forward by Bering and his collaborators that young children have a natural disposition to make these attributions (i.e., to assume that faculties such as feeling, thinking, and knowing continue after death), a disposition which *weakens* with age as children learn to construe death as biological process (see Bering & Bjorklund 2004; Bering, Hernández-Blasi & Bjorklund, 2005; Bering, in press).¹³

Undoubtedly, anthropologists are likely to find it self-evident that Vezo children gradually acquire supernatural beliefs about the ancestors. This is because they tend to assume that children *learn* beliefs in magic, spirits, or gods (see Mead 1932 for an illustration). However, the developmental data presented here suggest that Vezo children successfully acquire supernatural beliefs about the ancestors only once they have understood the biological consequences of death. Arguably, children do not need to understand that death brings to an end an organism’s vital functions to learn to attribute all the relevant mental properties to dead people (e.g., knowing, remembering, feeling nostalgic, etc.) Indeed, ignorance of the biological consequences of death could facilitate children’s assimilation of their elders’ representations of the afterlife. But the results of this study suggest that Vezo children construct their understanding of the properties of the ancestors on their knowledge, not on their ignorance, of the biological consequences of death. And this suggests that *learning* about the ancestors is a much more complicated process than anthropologists tend to imagine. In this case, it would seem that instead of learning about the ancestors by learning about the

13 See Harris & Giménez, 2005 and Astuti & Harris, in preparation, for the suggestion that the difference in the findings might be due to differences in design, specifically the fact that Harris & Giménez and Astuti & Harris use a story that involves the death of a person, whereas Bering and colleagues use a story that involves the death of a puppet-mouse.

ancestors (the standard anthropological model of cultural transmission), children may be learning about the ancestors in very unlikely places and at unlikely times, as when they play with small animals, pulling a lizard's leg or squashing a frog's head, and watching their "toys" die.

Granted that children first understand that death entails annihilation, they will eventually grow into the belief that death does not entirely extinguish the person. We must therefore ask what drives and sustains this growth.¹⁴ If it is true that Vezo children have much evidence that supports the realization that death extinguishes every aspect of the person, it is equally true that they have plenty of evidence that supports the opposite realization that something of the deceased survives after death. Like the Kwaio children beautifully described by Keesing (1982: 30-39), it is hard to imagine how Vezo children could escape the conclusion that the dead are a wilful and "lively" presence among the living, as they witness the monologues that elders direct at dead but clearly wanting interlocutors, or they share in the offerings of meat and rice given to them, or they suffer the illnesses, enjoy the recoveries or mourn the deaths that are caused by this or that angry *angatse*.

If this is the kind of evidence that fuels children's emerging awareness that something of the person survives after death, we might expect that children, like adults, will be more likely to bring to mind the belief that people's mental functions are not entirely extinguished by death when they are invited to think about tombs, crosses and the work that the living perform for their dead relatives to keep them happy. To explore this possibility, I invited a new group of 28 9- to 17 year olds¹⁵ to listen to the same Tomb narrative that was used with adults.¹⁶ Like adults, the children in the Tomb condition gave far less discontinuity judgments than the children in the Deceased condition. Thus, when primed to think about tombs and crosses, the majority of children judged that life continues after death. Such a dramatic effect confirms that, at least from the age of 9, Vezo children are well attuned with the ritual practices that concern the afterlife and that, from these practices, they infer that something of the person survives after death.

14 Developmental psychologist Paul Bloom (2004: 207) has argued that "belief in an afterlife is a natural consequence of our [i.e., members of the species *Homo Sapiens*] intuitive Cartesian perspective." My data do not bear on the hypothesis that humans are natural dualists, but they suggest that the conversion of dualism into a belief in the afterlife is not automatic and does not come for free. Hence the question of what sustains it and makes it grow.

15 Mean age = 12 years and 11 months; range = 9 years and 3 months.

16 Children in the Tomb condition were shown a drawing of live Rapeto and a drawing of his tomb and the cross bearing his name.

Note, however, that the early emerging representation of death as the annihilation of the organism will never be discarded, as revealed by the fact that in the Corpse condition older children and adults alike were more likely than in the Tomb condition to reason that all comes to a halt when a person dies. In other words, in the course of development apparently incompatible representations come to co-exist in people's minds. Such co-existence raises a further question for a future investigation, namely whether these representations can be distinguished in terms of the cognitive demands that they impose on their users. Following Barrett's distinction between basic and "theologically correct" concepts (1999), or Sperber's distinction between intuitive and reflective beliefs (1997), one could test whether, in a cognitively demanding task where people are forced to reason quickly and on-the-fly (for example, a memory task), participants might only have access to the earlier, more basic representation of death as annihilation. This would indicate that bringing to mind the idea that the *angatse* of dead people survive the rotting of their bodies requires some effort, a certain amount of conscious reflection, and the mobilization of one's "theologically correct" and explicitly held reflective beliefs.

Conclusion

My investigation has challenged what at first sight seemed like a reasonable inference, based on sound ethnographic evidence: that Vezo believe in the survival of the *angatse*. The studies I have undertaken with Vezo adults and children have exposed several reasons why this attribution of belief needs to be significantly qualified. First, the belief is not held universally; second, the belief that some mental properties of the person survive after death is interpreted, understood, and elaborated in a great variety of ways by different people. And finally, and most significantly, Vezo believe in the survival of the *angatse* in some contexts and they do not believe in the survival of the *angatse* in other contexts. This does not make their belief in the power of the ancestors any less compelling, when it is believed; but it shows that the belief in the power of the ancestors is best approached in terms of when and where it is deployed, rather than in terms of whether it is held.

Where does this leave the anthropological study of belief? How do we know what our informants believe? It has become commonplace for anthropologists to warn about the ambiguities of the word 'belief' and the cultural specificity of the concept this word refers to. Such warnings seem to suggest that we have no way of finding out what goes on in the heads of our informants, and that therefore we are better off not trying. What I have shown here is that such pessimism is misplaced. The task is arduous and

we shall never succeed completely. But we can move forward. Thanks to the studies described in this article, I feel we know *more* about what the Vezo “believe” than we did before. I trust that the reader will feel the same.

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze beliefs in afterlife among the Vezo of Madagascar. This analysis purports to be an empirical investigation by means of a combination of ethnography and the experimental methods of developmental psychology. The conclusion challenges the unqualified idea that Vezo believe in the survival of a person's spirit after death. Research shows that the belief is not held universally and it is interpreted and elaborated in a great variety of ways by different people. In addition, Vezo believe in the survival after death of a person's spirit in some contexts but not in others. This does not make belief in the power of the ancestors any less compelling, but it shows that such belief is best approached contextually, in terms of when and where it is deployed rather than in terms of whether it is held.