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CHAPTER 9

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER DEATH?

Rita Astuti

Anthropologists, starting with Hertz, have claimed death as their object of study. They have been able to do so by transforming death from a purely biological into a pre-eminently social phenomenon. As Byron Good (1994: 2) has noted in the context of a discussion of illness and disease that equally applies to death, this transformation was deeply counter-intuitive and required a strong act of consciousness because, like death, illness and disease appeared so evidently and uncompromisingly biological.

With the possible exception of the Hadza and other immediate-return hunter and gatherer groups (Woodburn 1982), ordinary people all around the world appear to be capable of this same strong act of consciousness. They, too, transcend the reality of biological death by routinely transforming lifeless, stiff, cold corpses into sentient ancestors, wilful ghosts, possessing spirits, pure souls, or their equivalents, all of whom defy the biological constraints that impinge on human social life and on human creativity.

In his comprehensive analysis of the processes through which humans transcend the discontinuity of their finite existence, Bloch (1982, 1986, 1992) has given us an account of how this transformation is accomplished in ritual. In this paper, I want to ask how it is enacted in people's minds. Ann-Christine Taylor (1993) has brilliantly described the hard mental work that the Jivaro are expected to undertake when someone dies. In order for the dead to be transformed into spirits, the living must forget their faces. And so, people work at painstakingly dis-remembering the dead, as they chant graphic descriptions of the decomposition process in an attempt to erase the familiar faces from their minds.

Although the Jivaro may be unique¹ in their explicit emphasis on the *mental* work that is required to give the dead a new existence, we can assume that everywhere the transformation of corpse into ancestor, ghost, spirit or whatever, will have to take place as much in people's minds as it does on the burning pyre, under ground, in the sky, and so on. Quite simply, for the dead to survive people must keep them alive *in their minds*. The research I have undertaken amongst the Vezo of Madagascar is an attempt to look closely at how this is done.

Arguably, most people around the world will have cause to reflect on what might happen after death, as they will also have cause to reflect on the other existential questions that are addressed in this volume. As anthropologists, we may gain access to such reflections by witnessing moments in which our informants explicitly engage in philosophical speculations of the sort described by Bloch (2001) for the Zafimaniry; or we might choose to infer our informants' existential conundrums and their attempted solutions from their mythopraxis (e.g. Lambek, this volume); from their life histories (e.g. Carsten, this volume); from their committed efforts to understand how the world works (e.g. Keller, this volume); and so on.

The strategy I shall adopt in this paper is markedly different, though complementary, to those adopted by the other contributors. While I shall start with two ethnographically based accounts of what Vezo adults say about the continuing existence of a person's spirit after death and what they say about the brutal finality of death as they handle the corpse of a close relative, the core of my investigation is based on the results of a simple experimental design that records the judgments that Vezo people make when they are asked very specific hypothetical questions about what happens after death to a person's heart, eyes, ears, memory, vision, sensation, knowledge, emotion, and so on. This methodology is intended to reveal the way people apply their knowledge about the consequences of death to make novel inferences (for example, now that such-and-such a person is dead, do his eyes work; can he hear people's voices? does he remember the location of his house?), rather than to elicit previously articulated beliefs in the afterlife that people would offer in answer to more open-ended questions such as: 'what happens after death?'

The choice of this methodology is motivated by the long-standing realization in anthropology that what finds its way into language provides only limited cues to people's thought and knowledge (e.g. Firth 1985: 37), and by previous research in Madagascar on people's understanding of the process of biological inheritance that found a significant discrepancy between what Vezo adults say and the knowledge they deploy when they are invited to make novel predictions about the resemblance between parents and their offspring (Astuti 2001; Astuti, in press; Astuti, Solomon and Carey 2004). As we shall see, the significance of this methodological approach in the present case is that it affords a detailed and nuanced picture of how exactly, in which contexts and how frequently the dead find a place to survive in the minds of their living descendants.

THE FIRST ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT:

THE SURVIVAL OF THE *ANGATSE*

During a sombre conversation with my adoptive Vezo father near the end of my last visit, he told me that when he dies – which he anticipated would happen soon – I will not need to listen into my mobile phone or to look at my computer to receive the news of his death. Instead, he will visit me in a dream. This will be the sign that he is dead. He clearly liked the idea that he would be able to travel from Betania, where he lived and would be buried, all the way to the other side of the world to convey the news to me. Smiling, he observed that we were having a ‘real’ conversation on precisely the topic I had come to ask all those questions about. Having studied so hard, I surely knew what he was talking about, didn’t I?

I did. He was drawing on the idea that when a person dies, his ‘spirit’ – known as *fanahy* up to the moment of death – permanently departs from the body. In such a disembodied, ghostly form, the spirit of a dead person – now known as *angatse* – can travel where his body could not, even as far as London. However, without a body, the *angatse* is invisible (*tsy hita maso*), and moves around like wind (*tsioky*). To be seen by living people, it must enter their dreams, where it appears together with its original body, just as it was when the person was alive.

In a sense, it is somewhat misleading to say that the spirit of the dead enters the dream of the living, since these dreams are more like encounters between fellow spirits. During sleep, the *fanahy* of living people temporarily detaches itself from the body and wanders until waking time.² If one’s *fanahy* 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 *fanahy*’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.

Adults report that they only dream about the *angatse* of their dead relatives, although I have come across a few instances in which the visitation was made by close friends who had recently died. All dreams that involve dead people are bad and frightening because they bring the dead too close to the living. But since one is only accountable to one's dead relatives, only dreams that involve *them* are actually dangerous.

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.³ 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 and prevent further illness or death. Other dreams are less obvious. For example, one night I had a short dream in which I saw the face of a dead woman I had met 15 years earlier during my

first period of fieldwork. At the time of my most recent visit, her daughter – one of my sisters-in-law – was very ill. As she wasted away, most people agreed that the most likely reason for her illness was that her mother was angered by the fact that after so many years her children had yet to honour her by giving her a cement cross (cf. Astuti 1994, 1995). On my part, fearing that my sister-in-law might have TB, I convinced her to visit a clinic, where, unfortunately, my fears were confirmed. The night after committing myself to pay for the taxi fare to get her daily to the dispensary to take the necessary medications, I dreamt the face of her dead mother. Her piercing eyes just stared at me, until I woke up, startled. First thing in the morning, I told my sister-in-law and her husband about my dream. Her interpretation was that this was not a bad dream, and that her mother was probably thanking me for taking care of her.⁴ Her husband agreed and said that I should not fear because, according to his thinking, mine was not a bad dream (notably, they never claimed that it was a *good* dream). We decided that no action was needed.

Many dreams become known only after they have caused illness or death. This is typically the case of children's dreams. Adults are adamant that their children do not understand anything about what happens to people after death. This is considered a good thing, because it means that children are spared dangerous thoughts that are too difficult for them and that could render them vulnerable to the visitations of their dead relatives. Their ignorance, however, does not give them full protection, and so children routinely fall ill, following a dream initiated by an angry *angaste*. Given their lack of wisdom and understanding, children are not expected to recognize the significance of these dreams, nor are they expected to remember or to recount them – indeed, they may be so young that they do not even know how to speak. But if children get ill and their illness persists and defies treatment with western medicines,

parents will approach a diviner and will ask him to look into the cause of their child's illness. It will then be revealed that the child is sick because of a dream in which the *angatse* 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 and what actions must be taken to appease the *angatse* and restore the child's health.⁵

Either directly or through the mediation of a diviner, dreams are, thus, the channel through which the dead communicate with the living: in dreams, the dead can be seen with their original body form, they can talk and be heard, they can move and be seen, they can touch and be felt.⁶ On their part, when the living wish (or are forced) to communicate with the dead – for example, to ask them to protect one child who is going on a school trip and another one who is sitting his exams; to neutralize the difficult words spoken by a father to his son and to lift the anger from their hearts so that they can successfully complete the construction of their new canoe; to inform them that the new canoe is being launched; to respond to a dream in which complaints were made and food was requested; to inform them that my son and I had arrived or were about to leave – they gather at an appropriate time and location, they talk to invisible listeners, and they make offerings to invisible consumers.

THE SECOND ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT:

WHEN ONE'S DEAD, ONE'S DEAD

On the afternoon of Saturday 22 May 2004, after only three days of illness, *tompokovavy*⁷ died. She was 37 years old and a mother of two. She lived in Lovobe, the next Vezo village south of where I lived with her older sister Korsia. Although I was not as close to the deceased as I am to Korsia, my closeness to Korsia meant that

I was involved in the funeral in a way that I had never experienced before – a way that I am not sure I would have voluntarily chosen for myself.

Tompokovavy died in the town of Morondava, where she had been taken on Thursday to be looked after by a private doctor she trusted (despite the fact that he had failed to save the life of her newborn baby, who had died only five months earlier). The doctor administered several different injections, and prescribed several bottles of intravenous drips and a concoction of pills and syrups (which were later buried alongside the coffin). On Friday she seemed to get better, but by Saturday morning she was vomiting, she was shivering, she was speaking nonsense, and then she died. Her death was announced on the local radio, so the family back in Lovobe knew almost immediately what had happened. By late afternoon the body, wrapped up in a blanket and laid out on an improvised stretcher, had made its first river crossing from Morondava to the beach of Betania. Escorted by a large crowd of villagers, it was taken south to the second river crossing. On the other side, a fire had been lit where Lovobe villagers were waiting for the arrival of the corpse.

The Lovobe river is vast and that night it was very rough. The stretcher was precariously put on board the small canoe that shuttles people back and forth during the day. I was invited to be the first one to cross, together with my son. We were asked to hold on tight to the stretcher to prevent the body from falling off. Propelled by a dinky sail and by the paddling of two strong men, we eventually got to the other side. We were soaked, as was the corpse. The stretcher was offloaded onto the beach amidst a dramatic surge of wailing by the women who were waiting for us. The attention soon turned to me and to my son. We were told to go near the fire to get warm and dry ourselves while we waited for the rest of the crowd to cross over. I told the women that *tompokovavy* was also wet, that a corner of her blanket had dipped

into the water, and I suggested that, perhaps, we should move her, too, close to the fire. One of the women looked at me with a mixture of incredulity and sympathy and she told me not to worry myself, that my sister could no longer feel cold or hot, and that it no longer made any difference to her whether she was wet or dry. A bit reproachfully, the woman told me to worry about my son instead, as he was playing with the fire and was set to burn himself.

After entering her mother's sister's house that night, *tompokovavy* was taken off the stretcher and was laid onto the planks of the bed. She was, however, left wrapped up in her wet blanket, because her family has a taboo against washing corpses after sunset. Thus, we washed and dressed her first thing the next morning. Before we started, the mother, who had spent the night in the house with her dead daughter, was asked to leave, for it was decided that witnessing the procedure would be too much for her. After forcing her out of the house, the doors were shut, leaving inside three senior women, Korsia and myself. We unwrapped and undressed the body. Using a perfumed soap and water from a bucket, we soaped and rinsed it, first one side and then the other. The water was cold, and in the chill of an early winter morning, our hands soon got icy. While Korsia rinsed off the last traces of soap, with an obsessiveness that held her pain at bay, I stepped back from the bed and I rubbed my hands vigorously. The old woman who was standing next to me offered the matter-of-fact comment that we could have heated up the water but that, stiff as she was, *tompokovavy* would not have felt the difference.

Once she was dressed in her best skirt and silky blouse – which, after much pulling and stretching, we had to cut along the back – we undid her elaborately patterned braids and combed her hair. Since the comb has to be disposed of with the corpse, we were given a half-broken comb of really poor quality. To get it through

tompokovavy's thick mane, the hair had to be yanked. The woman who held the head against the pull, remarked that for this one time it did not matter if Korsia – who was doing the yanking – had a heavy hand,⁸ since her sister could no longer feel any pain.

After arranging her hair into two simple braids, which helped to keep the collar of the blouse in position, we were ready to lay out the two embroidered sheets that Korsia keeps at the bottom of her trunk, ready for this use. As we moved the body to slip the bottom sheet under it, we realized that we had forgotten to put on *tompokovavy*'s favourite bra. Korsia was upset, because her sister never left the village without a bra. But the effort of re-negotiating the blouse, the braids and the collar was judged too much by the older women. They told Korsia that it would be just fine to put the bra alongside the body, together with the other items of clothing (a few sarongs, a blanket, a Benetton jumper) we were going to pack inside the coffin. One of the women added that, in any case, *tompokovavy* would not exactly need a bra where she was going, for, although she had big breasts, she would have no chance to swing them around. This observation cut the discussion short.

I was not entirely surprised by the comments that were uttered around the body of *tompokovavy*, because I had heard similar statements towards the end of other funerals I had attended. Typically, when the time comes to remove the body from the house to take it to the cemetery, the people most closely related to the deceased – the mother, the husband, the children – are likely to protest, to ask for more time, to cling to the body. It is the job of older, wiser people to remind them that the deceased no longer feels or hears anything, and that it does not make any sense to keep the body in the village since it will not come back to life but will, rather, just go on to stink (Astuti 1995: 114-5). The gist of these more ritualised exhortations is clearly the same as that of the comments about *tompokovavy* – as the old, wise people say: ‘when one’s dead,

one's dead'. And yet the remarks about *tompokovavy* had a different depth to them, as they captured the personal, practical and emotional struggle involved in handling a lifeless, stiff, cold body. These remarks were a quiet and poignant commentary on the reality of biological death.

Each of these two ethnographic accounts provides a compelling answer to the question of what happens after death. The answers, however, are notably and predictably different: one account delivers the answer that the deceased will continue to want, to feel cold and hungry, and to judge the conduct of living relatives; the other account delivers the answer that after death the person ceases to be a sentient being. In other words, the two accounts manifestly contradict each other.

The lack of consistency and systematic rigour in people's beliefs has been reported in a variety of ethnographic contexts (e.g. Leinhardt 1961 on Dinka religion; Leach 1967 on Australian Aborigines' and Trobrianders' procreation beliefs; Parry 1982 on Hindu understandings of death and regeneration; Luhrmann 1989 on magic and witchcraft in London; Stringer 1996 on Christians in Manchester; Bennett 1999 on Manchester elderly women's competing rationalist and supernatural narratives about the afterlife; Saler 2005 on Wayú religion), perhaps most emphatically in the case of Melanesian cosmologies. In that context, the claim was made that anthropologists have tended to over-systematize their informants' religious beliefs and to disregard the fact that, far too often, people have only a fragmentary understanding of the nature of the supernatural entities they address in ritual, or of the cosmological principles that give meaning to the symbols they use (Brunton 1980). The lively debate that ensued (Juillerat, Strathern, Brunton, Gell 1980; Jorgense, Johnson 1981; Morris 1982; Juillerat 1992; cf. also Barth 1987) focused on whether anthropologists can legitimately go beyond the limited (and often secretly guarded) exegesis provided by

their informants to produce their own analytical models of indigenous cosmologies. As noted by Whitehouse (2000: 81-8) in his critical assessment of this debate, there is an important distinction to be drawn here between analytical models that occupy the minds of the anthropologists (such as Gell's 1975 sociological interpretation of the Umeda fertility ritual) and the representations that are distributed in the minds of their informants; anthropologists run into problems when they assume *a priori* that their analytical models have psychological reality for their informants.

One possible strategy to avoid such problems is to engage systematically in the study of the mental representations that are held by one's informants and, whenever they are found to be contradictory (as seems to be the case with Vezo representations of what happens after death), to give a detailed account of how exactly they are held simultaneously in people's minds and of how (if at all) they get articulated with one another. This is what I aim to do in what remains of this paper.

The ethnographic evidence I have presented above suggests two (non mutually exclusive) ways in which the two contradictory accounts of what happens after death might get articulated in people's minds: on the one hand, the two accounts could be articulated through the ontological distinction between two separate components of the person, one that perishes – the body – and one that survives – the *angatse*; on the other hand, they could get articulated through a contextualisation, such that each account is relevant to different contexts of action.

The experimental study I am about to describe aimed to explore both of these dimensions by inviting Vezo adults to reason about the consequences of death in response to different narrative contexts. The protocol I used was originally designed by developmental psychologists Paul Harris and Marta Giménez (2005) to investigate Spanish children's understanding of death and the afterlife. I adapted it and used it, in

the first instance, to interview 23 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 a 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 fourteen 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 (e.g. now that Rampy is dead does he hear people talk? Does he feel hunger?), emotional (e.g. does he miss his children?) and cognitive functions (e.g. does he know his wife's name? Does he remember where his house is?). For ease of exposition, in what follows I shall refer to the properties that target body parts and bodily processes as 'bodily properties', and the properties that target sensory, emotional and cognitive functions as 'mental properties'.⁹

There are three points that are worth making before proceeding with the analysis of participants' responses. The first one is that inevitably the discrimination between 'bodily' and 'mental' that is afforded by the English language captures only imperfectly the discrimination between 'what pertains to the body' (*mikasky ny vatanteña*) and 'what pertains to the mind/spirit' (*mikasky ny sainteña; mikasky ny fanahinteña*) that is afforded by the Vezo language. Such are the limits of translation. Nonetheless, the point of this particular exercise is not to accurately translate words from one language into another, but to map conceptual discriminations that may, or may not, be drawn by Vezo adults (for a discussion of the problems involved in concept diagnosis, cf. Astuti, Solomon and Carey 2005: 16-18). Ultimately, whether a

conceptual discrimination between what pertains to the body and what pertains to the mind/spirit is made by Vezo adults can only be decided by inviting them to reason inferentially about such properties. The protocol I used was designed with this aim in mind.

The second point is a simple matter of clarification. 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.

The third and final point is that, given the nature of this publication, I shall not present the statistical analyses that back up the claims I shall be making about the significance of certain discriminations made by my Vezo informants. Interested readers should refer to Astuti and Harris (submitted) where such analyses are presented in full.

The first, and most striking, result is that participants gave an overwhelming majority of discontinuity judgments (80% overall).¹⁰ This underscores the saliency of the ethnographic account that says 'when one's dead one's dead' in guiding people's reasoning about what happens after death. However, in line with the other ethnographic account I presented above (that says that the body rots but the spirit survives), participants were on average significantly more likely to give discontinuity judgments for the 7 bodily processes (mean number = 6.6) than for the 7 mental

processes (mean number = 4.7). In other words, they differentiated between bodily processes that cease at death and sensory, emotional and cognitive processes that continue after death.

Nonetheless, an equally striking finding was that just under half of the participants (43%) gave discontinuity judgments for *all* the mental processes they were questioned about. They reasoned, in other words, that death entirely extinguishes the person and they left no space in their minds for the survival of the *angatse*. To justify their stand, they typically invoked the deadness of the corpse: the fact that Rampy's body will rot, that he will be buried under the ground, that he has no means of seeing, hearing or thinking because his head will soon be full of worms, and so on and so forth.

The fact that so many people in this study did not seem to embrace the idea that the deceased preserves at least some mental capacities is somewhat surprising, since participation in rituals that address the surviving spirits of the dead is nearly universal. This observation raises the following empirical question: could a manipulation in the way the task is designed – specifically, a change of the narrative context in which the continuity/discontinuity questions are asked – decrease the number of discontinuity judgments and curb participants' annihilating stance? The reason this question is worth asking is that if we were to find a way of shifting people's judgments from discontinuity (all properties cease to function) to continuity (some properties remain viable) we would come closer to understanding the mechanism that keeps the dead alive in people's minds.

To pursue this question, I asked a new group of 23 adults aged between 19 and 71 years (mean = 35 years) to listen to a different narrative about a different fictional character, called Rapeto. He 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

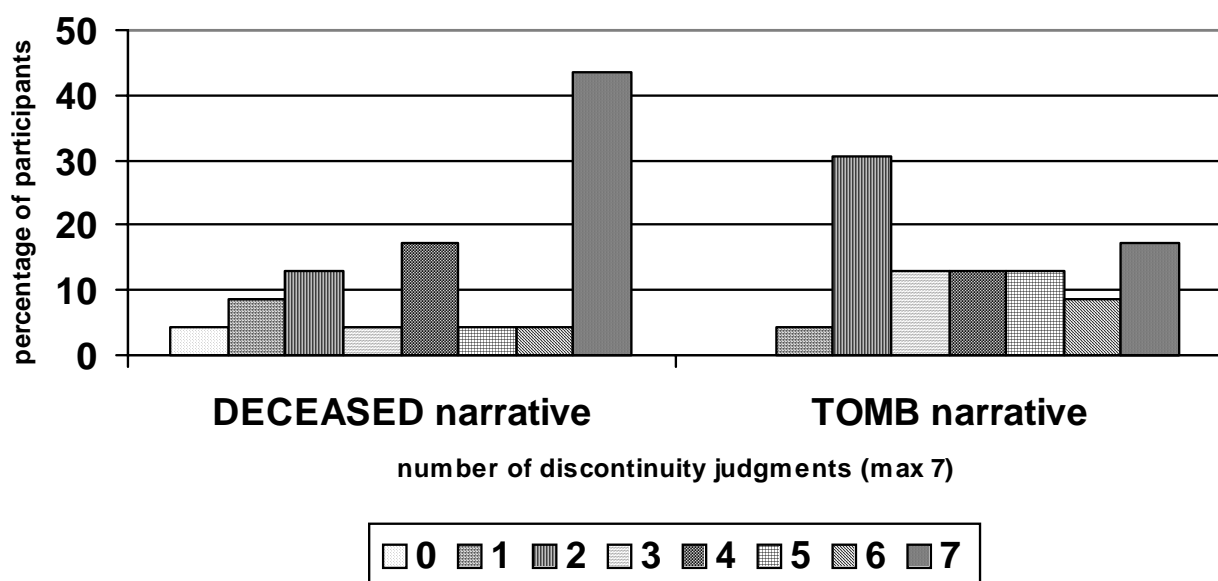
grandchildren often dream about him. Rapeto's family has built the cement cross for him – the major ritual that Vezo undertake to remember and honour the dead (Astuti 1994, 1995) – and they are happy because the work was well accomplished. The questions about Rapeto were identical to those about Rampy, but instead of being introduced by: 'Now that Rampy is dead...', they were introduced by: 'Now that Rapeto is over there at the tombs...'. From now on, I shall refer to the first narrative about Rampy as the Deceased narrative and to the second narrative about Rapeto as the Tomb narrative.

Before discussing the results produced by this contextual manipulation, I should explain why I recruited a new group of participants to respond to the Tomb narrative rather than approaching the same participants who had responded to the Deceased narrative (in other words, why I opted for a comparison across rather than within subjects). The reason was pragmatic. Consider that I had to approach wise and respected elders and ask them, with a straight face, whether they thought that once Rampy is dead his legs move or his heart beats. As I had already experienced when conducting another study (Astuti et al. 2004: 30), the main challenge consists in overcoming people's suspicion that, by asking far too obvious questions to which she already knows the answer, the experimenter is wasting their time and denying them their due respect. My long-standing relationship with the villagers meant that I could pre-empt their concern and reassure them that my questions were not intended to fool them, but were, rather, a genuine attempt on my part to learn what people think about a topic as difficult as death. My interlocutors typically responded by reassuring me that they would never doubt my good intentions. Having established that I trusted them as good teachers and that they trusted my genuine desire to learn, the death interview could proceed, and did so smoothly. I felt nonetheless that it would have

been difficult to motivate a second interview. For the contextual manipulation to yield meaningful results, it could not be explained to participants, and this would have meant approaching them again with seemingly identical questions for no apparently good reason. I, thus, decided to settle for a design that did not allow a, perhaps more desirable, within subject comparison, but which did, however, safeguard the trust of my informants.

Let me now present the results. Just like the participants who heard the Deceased narrative, those who heard the Tomb narrative overwhelmingly gave discontinuity judgments (73% overall), and they also differentiated between bodily (mean number = 6.2) and mental processes (mean number = 4). However, participants in the Tomb condition were different in one respect, in that they were significantly less likely to give discontinuity judgments for mental properties than their counterparts in the Deceased condition.¹¹ The overall shift in the distribution of judgments is captured in Figure 9.1, which shows the percentage of participants that gave each of the possible numbers of discontinuity judgements (from 0 to 7) for mental properties in either the Deceased or the Tomb condition. To be noted is the definite shift away from the skewed distribution in the direction of discontinuity judgments for mental properties in the Deceased condition to a much flatter distribution in the Tomb condition (the percentage of participants who judged that all mental faculties cease at death went down from 43 to 13).

Figure 9.1 Distribution of discontinuity judgments for mental properties by narrative



There are two possible interpretations for this result. The interesting one, which I shall pursue, is that the effect was produced by context. The uninteresting one is that the difference was driven by a cohort effect – that is, the participants recruited in the two tasks were taken from two different populations (for example, younger people in one study, older people in the other). Given the many variables that could 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 difficult to control for everything. However, in recruiting participants, I did my best to control for age, gender, education, and church attendance, making sure that the profile of the two groups was, as far as possible, homogenous. Therefore, although I am aware that it is impossible to entirely rule out the possibility of a cohort effect and that therefore one has to proceed with some caution, I shall proceed nonetheless and suggest that it was the different priming I gave participants in the two experimental conditions (Deceased *versus* Tomb narrative) that caused them to give different responses to my questions.

In other words, my interpretation is that the brief evocation of the contexts in which the living work for the dead to honour and appease them was enough to reduce the likelihood that participants would reason that the deceased is mentally inert and totally extinguished.

This finding reminds me of a comment made by Evans-Pritchard about the fact that his Azande informants used to casually hang their baskets on the ancestral shrines, and that it was only during religious ceremonies that the shrines became more than convenient pegs. He concluded – against Levi-Bruhl who, in this context, was his polemical target – that ‘mystical thought is a function of a particular situation’ (Evans-Pritchard 1934: 27, quoted in Lukes 1982: 269). In other words, that context affects thought.

Now, Evans-Pritchard was interested in using context to rescue practical thought from the claim that primitive people are trapped in mystical ‘never land’. My emphasis is slightly different, as I intend to use the effect of context that I have captured with my data to expose *both* the fragility of people’s ‘mystical’ representations of life after death *and* the strength of the contexts that manage to sustain them.

The first part of the argument goes like this: if it is true that a simple manipulation of narrative context manages to shift people into a different frame of mind, as shown by the different inferences they make, it might also be the case that the frame of mind they have shifted into is easily lost, if the context changes. I want to illustrate this point with a piece of ethnographic evidence.

When the head of my adoptive family addresses the dead, he always ends his whispered monologues by stating loud and clearly: ‘It’s over, and there is *not* going to be a reply!’ Every time, the people around him laugh at the joke as they get up to

stretch their legs and drink what is left of the rum. But what exactly is the joke? The humour, I suppose, lies in imagining what would happen if one were to expect a reply from dead people, as one does when one talks with living interlocutors: one would wait, and wait, and wait! In other words, people laugh because, as the ritual setting draws to a close, they shift out of the frame of mind that has sustained the one-way conversation with the dead and they come to recognize the slight absurdity of what they are doing. Indeed, my father's joke is probably intended to encourage and mark that shift, as he brackets off the always potentially dangerous one-way conversation with his dead forebears from ordinary two-way conversations with his living friends and relatives. The point I wish to stress is that it takes just a simple joke to break the spell and to call up one's knowledge that the dead can't hear or see or feel cold or, indeed, give a reply.

The experimental and ethnographic evidence I have just presented suggests that people's representations of the continuing mental life of the deceased are highly dependent on context. I recognize that this sensitivity to context probably means that people's tendency to attribute enduring properties to the deceased could be boosted by manipulating the narrative context of the death interview even further. For example, if instead of being about a stranger, such as Rapeto, the narrative could have been about a deceased person close to the participants – a deceased husband or a daughter who had recently passed away – perhaps respondents would have given more continuity judgments than they did in the Tomb condition. Nonetheless, what I wish to emphasize here is the converse point, namely that there are times and places when the dead are *not* kept alive in people's minds, as shown by the pattern of responses to the Deceased narrative. This, I submit, reveals a certain fragility in people's

representations of the afterlife – to go back to Byron Good, a fragility in the ‘act of consciousness’ with which the Vezo de-naturalise death.

Arguably, the source of this fragility is the fact that death – as Lambek (this volume) puts it – is even more patent than birth. This is probably why, in the course of development, Vezo children come to understand that death is the end of sentient life much earlier than they understand how the spirit of the dead might manage to live on. This is not the place to present the studies I did with children (cf. Astuti and Harris, submitted), but I shall just mention that by age 7 Vezo children demonstrate a pretty solid biological understanding of both animal and human death which, as we have seen, is not discarded in adult life. It takes children a further 10 years to slowly build up a representation of what happens after death, which entails the survival of the spirit and the attribution of appropriate properties to it. Developmentally, the representation of the continuing mental life of the dead is a slow construction which emerges from the realistic appreciation that – in the words of a 9 year old boy – when one is dead ‘the body goes bad, the skin is all decomposing and inside the tummy is full of worms’. This ontogenetic perspective might explain why the early understanding of death as the end of all sentient life continues to act as a default, a default that can only successfully be challenged and overcome in certain limited contexts.

Interestingly, I found evidence that during the course of development children come up with exciting, sometimes frightening, and highly idiosyncratic understandings of what kind of entities *angatse* are, of why adults offer food to the dead, of why they ask for their blessing, and so on (cf. Astuti, in preparation). And this takes me to the second part of my argument about the strength of the contexts that sustain the existence of the dead in people’s minds.

One striking aspect of the distribution of judgments across both versions of the task (Deceased and Tomb condition) is that, as shown in Figure 9.1, 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’s name and remembering the location of one’s house, for others still it was all of the above plus feeling hungry, and so on. In other words, there was great variation in the way people represented to themselves the details of what happens after death.

Although not entirely surprising – Vezo adults pointed out that, being themselves still alive, they cannot fully understand how *angatse* do things and what their mode of existence actually is – this variation is worth commenting on. Let me give an example. In the open-ended discussions that followed the more structured death interviews, several adults puzzled over the question of how exactly the *angatse* of dead people manage to eat, drink or smoke what is offered to them. Some speculated that *angatse* feed by inhaling the smell and extracting the flavour from the food. Evidence for this, they claim, is that 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 feasting *angaste*. Others were more tentative and rather unsure, wondering how *angatse* could possibly eat – since they don’t have a body, surely they 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.¹²

Note, however, that this endemic difference of opinion does not stop people – children included, who have a whole different set of ideas about how the *angitse* feed (cf. Astuti, in preparation) – from coming together and actually offering food, rum and tobacco to the dead. When this has to happen, the focus is on performing the correct actions, on using the correct utensils, on saying the correct words on the right day and at the right time. The fact that different participants bring very different personal interpretations of what they are doing does not interfere with the smooth orchestration of the offering.

This is a remarkable achievement, based on what Bloch (2005) calls ‘deference’. As people gather to get things done, they are likely to stop speculating how the dead are going to eat the rice or smoke the tobacco or listen to the invocation or, even, whether they are going to reply. Instead, they defer to whomever it was that, a very long time ago, originated this way of doing things and they just align themselves with it.

And so long as *this* happens, the dead will continue to find a space to live on in the minds of their living descendants.

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NOTES

1. The claim here is that the Jivaro may be unique in this respect among non-professionals. It is evident that the mental work of mourning is crucial to professional psychoanalysts and psychotherapists.
2. Because one's spirit is detached from the body, being asleep is like being dead. 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, causing that person to die.
3. Dreams about a friend are recounted to the friend's relatives in case they wish to interpret the dream as a warning to them
4. They were not troubled by what, to me, seemed a contradiction, namely that the mother was making her daughter ill and at the same time she was thanking me for providing medical care for her.
5. In their diagnostic practice, diviners often reach into the dreams of adults as well as

into those of children. Even if adults remember and recount their dreams, they may fail to give the correct interpretation. For example, they may decide that a particular encounter was not a bad dream and that no action was needed. For several months, nothing happens, but when the person suddenly falls ill and no effective cure is found, the diviner will see the forgotten dream, the patient will remember it, and the appropriate action will be taken.

6. This is important because touch is one of the most direct ways in which dead people can inflict pain and illness on their living descendants
7. The term *tompokovavy*, literally ‘my female master’, is used to refer to the deceased in order to avoid mentioning her name as sign of respect.
8. Literally, ‘hot’ hand (*tana mafana*). Whether one is slaughtering an animal, combing hair, giving a massage, a cool hand is good and a hot hand is bad (e.g. a cool hand causes the animal to die straight away, a hot hand causes the animal to struggle).
9. 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.
10. Statistical analyses of the data presented here are available in Astuti and Harris, submitted.
11. Cf. Astuti and Harris (submitted) where we show that this difference is statistically significant.
12. Keller (2005: 171 ff.) notes that in their radical rejection of ancestral customs, Seventh Day Adventists in Madagascar emphasize the absurdity of believing that a pile of rotting bones might actually eat or drink what is offered to them in sacrifice. They, too,

invoke the refrain: 'dead is dead'.

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