

*Ancestral Encounters in Highland  
Madagascar: Material Signs and  
Traces of the Dead*

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In *Ancestral Encounters in Highland Madagascar*, Zoë Crossland offers a richly layered analysis of Madagascar's present and past landscapes. Her aim is to provide the reader with an understanding of how material elements of the highland landscape worked as a complex and dynamic system of signs. Throughout the book, the author weaves a narrative of how material culture was used in the active engagement and encounters between the living and the ancestors of the Madagascar people. These encounters were ever changing as connections between past ancestors and the living were continuously realigned based on the conditions of history. As Crossland's analysis demonstrates, the loss of place-based ancestral lineages was often situated in terms of relationships to privilege and power.

The book is formally organized with an introduction followed by six chapters of detailed analysis involving living people and material signs of the dead. The introduction outlines the method and theory guiding Crossland's analysis of the Madagascar landscape. Charles Sanders Peirce's 19th-century writings on semiotics provide the central underpinning for the analysis that follows. Peirce's emphasis on the importance of materiality is used as the framework for interrogating material culture from primarily the late 18th through 19th centuries.

In the first chapter Crossland uses the burning of the Queen's Palace in the 1990s and its subsequent association as a place of the dead as an example of the long history of fires and their relationship to ancestral history. The author elaborates on the contexts of fire in that it is necessary for life but can be a powerful and unpredictable force guided by the desires of the ancestors. Crossland introduces Peirce's idea of the interpretant to help explain disparate reactions to fire and how signs are formed over time based on these interpretants. This example of how signs form through practice is a theme that unfolds throughout the remaining chapters.

The second and third chapters explore the interpretation of material culture situated in space. Of particular interest are the ways that the spaces of Highland Madagascar are understood or confused when encountered. Chapter 2 discusses the arrival of the London Missionary Society (LMS) in the 1820s. In analyzing the missionary interpretation of the material signs of Madagascar, Crossland states that understanding the changing meanings in the landscape is "not a question of trying to find material signatures of belief but rather of exploring the semiotic space within which belief was constructed" (p. 57).

While the LMS saw the mission as a vehicle for conversion to Christianity, Radama, the ruler of the State of Imerina, saw the mission as a tool for solidifying the state. Missionaries actively promoted the desecration of ancestral sites as a demonstration of the power of Christianity over local beliefs. Missionaries also recognized the important elements of house organization without fully realizing the implications of that organization. House organization was guided by

cosmology whereby the cardinal directions were strictly managed, such as the northeast corner being the space of the ancestors. The LMS missionaries misunderstood the significance of this ordering. On balance the LMS was successful because they were able to fill the role of ritual specialists within a context useful to the goals of Radama.

In chapter 3, Crossland explores the importance of the flow of sacred blessings or *basina*. Through this chapter the author demonstrates the significance of *basina* as a sign system that was enacted through practice. The exchange of silver coins allowed *basina* to flow, but this use was again misunderstood by the LMS. Much of the chapter describes how Radama used the specific placement and construction of mission schools throughout the *fanjakana* (state) to consolidate power and the flow of *basina* through the missionaries.

Chapter 4 explores the rein of Radama's father Andrianampoinimerina who consolidated Imerina beginning in the late 18th century. In this chapter, the author explains how Andrianampoinimerina reconfigured kinship relations to extend and solidify his rule over territories. One method he used was to form alliances with some families and sell others into slavery, thus severing the ancestral ties of the latter. The author stresses the power of enslavement to radically alter and rewrite ancestral history. Andrianampoinimerina also made and reworked history through the placement of standing stones throughout the landscape.

The various meanings surrounding standing stones, which exist throughout Madagascar, are taken up in chapter 5. Crossland uses a sample of stones located in the town of Betafo to explore their role in encounters between past

and present actors. The author describes how various stones were erected for different reasons. For example, *orimbato* were placed in a locale to mark where the authority of the kingdom was made visible. Other standing stones provided protection or were erected in memory of the dead relating to traditions of marking tombs and burial places. In broad context, the standing stones marked places that drew people and ancestral spirits together. The author also illustrates the importance of stones in marking the marketplace and emphasizes how disrupting the marketplace could result in the penalty of enslavement.

The final chapter of the book considers the western frontier of Imerina and its disintegration during the second half of the 19th century. The abandonment of this region by the late 19th century created a separation between those who left and their ancestral tombs. This rift created a dangerous "Zone Rouge" where the original inhabitants or *vazimba* lived. *Vazimba* tombs were clouded with uncertainty because of their lack of connection with living descendants. Crossland's analysis of this dangerous zone of uncertainty gets to the heart of the study's task of explaining how the ancestral past is continually negotiated in the present.

*Ancestral Encounters in Highland Madagascar* is a beautifully written semiotic analysis of the Madagascar landscape. Crossland's account is refreshingly difficult to characterize and compartmentalize within typical archaeological analyses. This volume will be a valuable source for those interested in the application of semiotic theory to landscape analyses. In a broader sense the book is a towering contribution to historical archaeology and timely understanding of the devastating effects of being severed from ancestral histories, as in

the case of slavery. Unfortunately, this review admittedly fails to capture the many subtleties of Crossland's thoughtful semiotic analysis and exquisitely crafted prose. The richness of Crossland's interpretations of Madagascar's

landscape cannot be fully appreciated without reading this book, which is highly recommended.

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